

Loved and Loving: John's Epistles ***Power Struggle***

Lesson #13 for September 26, 2009

Scriptures: Isaiah 14:13,14; Mark 9:35; 1 Corinthians 12:7-31; 1 Corinthians 13; Philippians 2:3; 3 John; Revelation 14:6.

1. We know that the Bible talks about many major controversies, especially the great controversy that began in heaven and necessitated the coming of Christ to this earth. But there are also many smaller controversies mentioned in Scripture. This short letter written by the elderly apostle John focuses on a conflict which arose in a local church between John, other church leaders, and a local church leader who wished to be in control in his local congregation. It was written at a time when it could mean a death penalty to be known as a Christian.
2. The letter is addressed to someone by the name of Gaius. John wished him good health and was thankful that he was well in spirit, faithful to the truth, and always living in the truth. (3 John 1-4) Imagine having that kind of testimony about you written by one of the original apostles! How would you feel after receiving this letter? How do you think Gaius felt?
3. But, the central core issue in this book is the power struggle between church leadership at the highest levels including the apostle John, Gaius, and another church leader Demetrius about whom we know almost nothing versus Diotrephes who seemed to be desiring to take control of the local church. Does that sound at all familiar? Have you ever been in a church where there was any kind of power struggle?
4. This is one of only five books in the Bible addressed to individual people. (The others are Philemon, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus) There are many things about this letter which we are not fully aware of. What exactly was John's relationship to that church and those individuals? Where was this disputed church located? What was the background of Gaius, Demetrius, and Diotrephes? John appeared to be writing in his official position as a church leader. At this time John was the only one of the disciples still living. Referring to himself as an elder was probably for the purpose of establishing his authority. However, there is no indication that John was just trying to exercise his own authority!
5. Do we have any hints about how John first met Gaius or Demetrius or how long he had known those gentlemen? What did John know about Diotrephes prior to the incidents that led to this book? We need to do a lot of "reading between the lines."
6. Read 3 John. If Diotrephes had been acting according to 1 Corinthians 13, would this letter have ever been written? Notice that John had already written a letter to this group. Doesn't this book sound absolutely up-to-date! To what extent is "political correctness" the order of the day in our churches?
7. Would our course today in church, in Sabbath School, and in our individual lives be correctly described as "walking in the truth"?
8. How does God expect us to relate to church leaders in our day? Our church organization has exceeded 16 million members. Very few of the members have had any contact at all with top church leadership. Do these church leaders clearly understand and represent the church membership? Do church leaders ever do things individually or collectively that seem wrong to you? Have you ever met a young or perhaps even an older church official who seemed to be more concerned about his own political future than about the good of the members of the church as a whole? Diotrephes seems to have taken it as his challenge to cut the local congregation away from all the rest of the church establishment. He did not want to accept traveling missionaries, and he did not want to accept the authority of higher church leaders. He even tried to prevent other church members from accepting and housing traveling missionaries. Once

again, we are asked to consider what should be the role of hospitality in the Christian church?

9. Even in good solid conservative Christian groups such as the Seventh-day Adventist Church, there are leaders who sometimes go wrong. How should we relate to leaders who are clearly moving in the wrong direction? How can we be respectful but disagree if they are going in the wrong direction?
10. Read 3 John 5-8. Clearly, Gaius was doing what he could to support the church organization. He was receiving traveling missionaries, providing them meals, providing them a place to stay, and then helping them on their way. He did that even when they were strangers, and he realized the possible risk to himself and his entire family. Surely, the Holy Spirit was guiding and blessing in that work. Remember that Gaius lived in a day when one could be killed for being identified as a Christian. How do the principles that he manifested apply in our day when Christianity is considered to be the major religion of our country?
11. Read Revelation 14:6. Who are those “angels” who are giving messages? And what is their work? We are the ones who carry these three messages! What needs to happen to get the world to pay attention to these three messages?
12. Do we consider the work of finishing the gospel to be our first work? How much of our leisure time, even work time, are we willing to sacrifice to spread the gospel? Are we willing to share of our means? One recent campmeeting speaker said that each of us should stop being just a church member and become a missionary!
13. Why are power struggles so common even within Christian churches? The first power struggle started right in the most holy place of the heavenly sanctuary. Satan wanted more power and a larger share of the glory and responsibility of running the universe. Is it true that those who were/are seeking more power for themselves were/are following Satan’s example? Who has the authority to decide the boundaries of rightful leadership?
14. Read 3 John 9,10. What do we know about Diotrephes? Jesus Himself gave us a true example of humility on many occasions. (Mark 9:35; John 13) If all true Christian leaders exercised humility, love, and service toward their followers and church members, would there ever be a problem with leadership in the church? If our church leaders were more humble, would the “politicians” in the church walk all over them? Church leaders cannot just be “doormats”! Were the apostles acting like doormats? What about the humble leader, Moses? Look at the leadership of Nehemiah! Nehemiah managed to get the wall around Jerusalem finished in 52 days! That is leadership! Nehemiah had previously had a very “cushy” job. He was the king’s wine-taster! (Nehemiah 2:1)
15. In our passage for today, Diotrephes was proud, selfish, and not willing to listen to advice. Does that sound like Satan’s characteristics before his fall? Perhaps in an earlier day, Diotrephes had worked hard to build up the church. He may have thought that he had zeal for the gospel. But apparently at some point, his zeal for the gospel had turned into a lust for power! At the point when this letter was written, he apparently believed that his opinions were superior to all others! Do we ever make that mistake? Do we speak out boldly against anyone who does not agree with us?
16. Strictly speaking, this short letter seems to be dealing with a small-scale power struggle in the local church. Why do you suppose this one page document ended up in the Scriptures? Is this a case of airing the church’s dirty laundry? Do you find important principles in this letter that apply repeatedly down through Christian history?
17. Do you know of any individuals in your church community who could fit the descriptions of Demetrius or even perhaps Diotrephes? Is this story being repeated in our churches today? Do you feel fully supportive of what is happening in your church to the point that you are comfortable inviting others to attend your Sabbath school class or your church? Why? Or, why not? The

pastor cannot make the church grow all by himself. Does this little book suggest that things in the early years of the church were really not that much different than they are today? Why is it that in some churches only certain people ever seem to be asked to lead out? Should our church take groups that attack us to court and sue them?

18. What are the dangers of a church “going it alone”? Does every local church need a larger church organization? Why? Or, why not? If the day should come when your views are considered heretical and you are thrown out the church, what will you do? Demetrius was commended for imitating the good and fighting against evil. He was told that such people belong to God. Apparently other church members and leaders had had experience with Demetrius. John stated that everyone spoke well of him. (3 John 12)
19. There are a number of passages in Scripture speaking about Christian unity. Perhaps the most important one is Christ’s prayer just before His experience in Gethsemane. (John 17; compare also 1 Corinthians 1:10; Ephesians 4:2-6) When spiritual gifts are discussed, it is recognized that not every church member is the same or gifted the same. But the gifts are supposed to be leading all of us together toward unity. Does that inevitably lead to the conclusion that the worldwide church organization acting in conference every five years will automatically do what God wants them to do? What would happen if all our church leaders disappeared or perhaps were arrested?
20. Does a local church group or even groups of churches need leaders? Would we be just as well off without someone to tell us what to do? Satan didn’t think he needed to have anyone tell him what to do!
21. Peter told us that all church members are supposed to be part of a royal priesthood. (1 Peter 2:9) Spiritual gifts are distributed to all. (1 Corinthians 12:7-31; Ephesians 4:11-16) Is there any place in the New Testament where a clear distinction is drawn between church leadership and the laity? What about Acts 6?
22. What is the difference in function between an overseer, an elder, a bishop, a cardinal, and a pope? Is it important for church organizations to have a hierarchy? How did God intend for the church to be governed? (Mark 10:42-44; Acts 6:1-7; 15:6, 22-25; 1 Timothy 4:14; James 5:14; 1 Corinthians 8 and 10; Romans 14)
23. Apparently God set up an organizational structure through His disciples. But Paul did not hesitate to speak out in opposition to some of their decisions when he believed that the Holy Spirit led him to do so! How would you know if you were to follow the example of Paul in opposing church leadership today? Would we need a direct revelation from the Holy Spirit? How might such a revelation come?
24. Those of us who believe in the “larger view” of the great controversy over God’s character and government realize that our views are shared by a relative minority of the Seventh-day Adventist Church members. Does holding a minority opinion make it wrong? Should the minority always accede to the wishes of the majority? Can we be assured that correct views—even if held by a minority—will eventually win out? How can we test and prove and expand our understanding of the great controversy model in the Seventh-day Adventist Church?

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