

3 JOHN 9-12

THE “CHURCH BOSS”

“I have written something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority. So if I come, I will bring up what he is doing, talking wicked nonsense against us. And not content with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers, and also stops those who want to and puts them out of the church.

“Beloved, do not imitate evil but imitate good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God. Demetrius has received a good testimony from everyone, and from the truth itself. We also add our testimony, and you know that our testimony is true.”¹

Dead for almost two millennia, Diotrephes nevertheless lives! He holds membership within many congregations, wreaking havoc within the vineyard of the Lord, destroying the work of God and hindering the advance of the divine Kingdom. Who is Diotrephes? He (and just as often “she”) is the “church boss” who controls the life of the church. Though he would deny the charge, the church boss has displaced the Head of the Body. He is a usurper, a pretender to the throne of the assembly, who has shoved the Master to an inferior position so that he can reign.

I have met Diotrephes, just as you have, if you have been among the churches of our Lord for any length of time. Diotrephes is easily identified because he has embraced reprehensible attitudes and performed detestable deeds that violate church polity. Above all else, he viewed membership in the church as one would treat membership in a civic club. Thus, the church of the Living God is reduced to a personal, and petty, fiefdom.

Before we actually examine the implications of the text, it will prove helpful for us to clarify one textual matter. Many people assume that Gaius is a member of a particular congregation and that Diotrephes is a member of the same congregation. They assume that Gaius is a church member, and that Diotrephes holds some church office, perhaps as a tyrannical deacon or elder. However, the church mentioned in our text does not appear to be the same church that is mentioned in verse six. It seems likely that John, the Elder, belongs to, or perhaps pastors, the church mentioned in verse six, which is distinct from the congregations to which either Diotrephes or Gaius belong.

While it is not apparent in my translation, John used the third person pronoun in this ninth verse. For instance, one translation reads, “I wrote something to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first among them, does not acknowledge us.”² It is unlikely that the churches John referred to in verses six and nine were the same church. Had they been the same congregation, the writer would not have used the third person pronoun to refer to the other members of the congregation. If Gaius was a member of the same church, it would have been more natural to use a second person pronoun (“Diotrephes, who loves to be first *among you*”). Thus, it seems reasonable to conclude that Gaius belongs to, or provides oversight for, one local congregation while Diotrephes is in another congregation—a church known to Gaius but to which he does not belong.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

² **NET Bible** (Biblical Studies Press, 2006)

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What appears obvious, and is the focus of our study at this time, is that Diotrephes is a church bully. He controls the church, regulating who is welcome and who is unwelcome. He is less concerned with doctrinal integrity than he is with personal control. John warns against such attitudes and his warning merits closer examination if we will honour God. Join me, then, in learning about the “church boss,” so that none of us fall into the trap of either attempting to exert personal control over the congregation of the Lord, and so that we will resist every attempt to manipulate the people of God.

DIAGNOSIS OF A CHURCH BOSS — “Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority.” Would you not imagine that one of the Twelve would merit respect among the churches? Would you not imagine that when an Apostle appointed by the Master spoke, church leaders would heed what he said? Apparently that was not the case for Diotrephes, the church boss.

While there is no continuing office of Apostle, among the early churches we readily imagine the Apostles who were appointed by the Master were respected because of that appointment. Those who were Apostles had not only known the Master in the days of His flesh, but they had been personally selected by Him to be with Him, and also that they might preach and exercise authority over demons [see MARK 3:13-15].

This raises a sufficiently important point that I am compelled to point out some truths that may be neglected in this day. To be an Apostle, one must have been appointed to the office by the Master [MATTHEW 10:1-14; 1 TIMOTHY 2:7]. Though from earliest days some appointed themselves to be apostles, the Risen Master identifies them as false and instructs the churches to test all who make such claims [REVELATION 2:2]. Those who were true Apostles were not only appointed by the Master Himself, but they understood that they were servants to His people [see 2 PETER 1:1]. In the pages of the New Testament, those identified as having been appointed by Christ to serve His people (teachers, shepherds, evangelists, prophets, and especially apostles [see EPHESIANS 4:9 ff.]) always exhibit a servant’s heart. Those few whom we meet in Scripture that exalt themselves, lording it over the people of God, either have never received divine appointment, or they have departed the position to which they were assigned.

Listen to the words that Peter wrote in his first letter to believers of the Diaspora. “I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble’” [1 PETER 5:1-5].

Certain individuals other than the Twelve are identified as apostles in the Word [e.g. James, the brother of our Lord, GALATIANS 1:19; Titus and others, 2 CORINTHIANS 8:23; etc.], however, only the Twelve can properly be spoken of as Apostles appointed by Christ. In every other instance, those who are called apostles in the Greek text are appointed by the churches. Titus and the unnamed brothers from the churches sent to the Corinthians are called messengers [2 CORINTHIANS 8:23 (*apóstoloi*)]. Likewise, Epaphroditus is called a messenger (*apóstolon*) of the church at Philippi [PHILIPPIANS 2:25].

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Therefore, the Word reveals that the churches of our Lord may appoint messengers; but Christ alone can appoint Apostles. As an aside, of greater importance than is generally practised among the churches bearing Christ's Name, no congregation can appoint a delegate to an assembly, convention, conference or fellowship of churches, for the authority God has vested in the congregation cannot be delegated. The churches may appoint messengers who may convey the mind of the congregation to a deliberative assembly, but no church can appoint a delegate without denying the authority of the congregation. It is more than mere semantics to exercise care in identifying and clarifying the role of those appointed to represent the interests of the congregation.

In light of this excursus from the text, you can understand the horror with which this brief letter from John was met among the churches when it was first read. Here was an individual, from his actions self-appointed to be a church boss who was now running roughshod over the congregation in which he held membership. Despite his rudeness and tyrannical spirit, it is a mark of an Apostle that John does not rail against him or threaten him with expulsion from the church. John simply says that he will expose him, bringing up his wicked nonsense.

This again raises a significant matter that demands comment. Because Diotrephes was acting contrary to what would be expected of an elder, or even of a church member, it would be necessary for him to be exposed. However, John would not act harshly. Take careful note how in verses nine and ten that it is Diotrephes who refuses to acknowledge the authority of an Apostle, and not an Apostle who doubts the authority of the elder. Moreover, it is Diotrephes who is attempting to put out of the congregation those who welcome the missionaries, and not an Apostle who is putting the rouge elder out of the assembly. This is at variance with the practise of the churches of this day.

To be certain, when an elder acts contrary to the will of the Master, the elder is to be held accountable, but it is foolish to stumble into the trap of this dying world and threaten one whom Christ has appointed. If he was hired, then he may be fired. However, if he is appointed by God to his position, then the One who appointed him is responsible to remove him. This is contrary to the general situation that prevails in this present world as individuals exalt themselves to control the congregation. Such people imagine that they hire and fire preachers. However, all they can find are people willing to prostitute themselves for a salary. One who is appointed by God will remain at the post until God removes him. The elder whom God appoints is dependent upon God to care for him, and does not depend upon mere mortals for his sustenance.

A wicked heart lies behind the creation of the church boss. He expresses attitudes better identified with this fallen world than with the exalted position we enjoy as children of the Living God. In a narrower sense, the church boss is the logical conclusion of the error that is commonly held among professed Christians that sees the congregation as an organisation rather than understanding that the church of the Lord is the Body of Christ.

If the church is an organisation, then it must be joined; if it is the Body of Christ, then we must be added to the congregation. If the church is an organisation, then it is possible for individuals to climb to positions of power and rule over the organisation; if this is the Body of Christ, then Christ Jesus is the Head and He appoints whom He wills to provide oversight. If the church is an organisation, then it can be manipulated to produce the outcome her rulers' desire; if the congregation is the Body of Christ, then she responds to the mind of the Spirit exercised through the members of the Body.

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As a church boss, Diotrephes had grown arrogant. This was revealed through John's descriptive phrase that Diotrephes "likes to put himself first." Perhaps Diotrephes imagined that he alone is capable of controlling the church. Perhaps he imagined that his expertise is all that will "save" the church from error. Consequently, he ignored John's previous written communication [verse 9a] and refused to acknowledge the apostolic authority which John would have wielded [verse 9b]. Not only that, he exercised absolute control over the lives of the members of the congregation, debarring them from showing hospitality to itinerating missionaries and even putting some of them out of the congregation because they had failed to obey him [verse 10].

I have pastored among the churches of our Lord for almost four decades now, observing the situation from the trenches. Elders can act as church bosses, but the more frequent condition prevailing among the churches appears to be illicit rule exercised by individuals who though never having received divine appointment assume power through default. Among the churches, as is true in the world at large, power hates a vacuum. When those appointed to exercise oversight fail to act decisively, you may be assured that someone will seize power. This is the condition Solomon addressed when he wrote, "There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, as it were an error proceeding from the ruler: folly is set in many high places, and the rich sit in a low place. I have seen slaves on horses, and princes walking on the ground like slaves" [ECCLESIASTES 10:5-7].

This is the same condition addressed when he wrote:

"Under three things the earth trembles;
under four it cannot bear up:
a slave when he becomes king,
and a fool when he is filled with food."

[PROVERBS 30:21, 22]

He also addressed this matter in this another of the proverbs, when he wrote:

"It is not fitting for a fool to live in luxury,
much less for a slave to rule over princes."

[PROVERBS 19:10]

The rise of a church boss frequently results from a form of church governance that has become common within evangelicalism, though it has no clear warrant from Scripture. Many churches, especially Baptist churches, imagine that democracy is the biblical model of church polity. Nothing appears to be further from the truth. While congregationalism appears to be common among New Testament churches, fifty percent plus one does not dictate truth, nor does a plurality of voters make a matter ethical.

In a bid to satisfy governmental dicta, churches have generally adopted a form of church polity that mirrors the form of government that is practised provincially and federally. Consequently, because we have adopted the model presented by the world, we must also accept the weaknesses inherent in that form of governance among our churches as strong individuals arise to exert their will over the congregation. Thus, power brokers employ intrigue, collusion and manipulation to compel the church to do their will.

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I witnessed the subtle seduction of a good man who was enticed to leave the path of righteousness in order to have power over a congregation. This young man had proved to be a blessing to many people. Trained as an engineer, he evidenced a call to full-time service among the churches and prepared himself by attending a solid, reputable seminary. He was adamant that he wanted to serve under me for his internship; and he was a blessing in his service before the Lord and among the people of God.

After graduation from seminary, he sought neither a position among the churches nor did he return to his profession as an engineer, choosing instead to turn to the world of finance, where he was modestly successful. In the course of time, the congregation to which he belonged sought me out at his insistence, asking that I assist them. They had grown spiritually stagnant, but they wanted to again be spiritually vibrant. I agreed to assist them. Almost immediately God began to bless mightily within the congregation. Souls were being saved and the building was beginning to fill.

Some within the congregation were distraught, however, because they realised that they were losing influence and power. The growing number of “new Christians” were seen as a threat rather than a blessing. After all, they didn’t show proper deference to the power brokers; they didn’t know how the church did business. A series of events led to confrontation with the leadership of the congregation. I sought the assistance of this young man who had once pursued the Lord so avidly. Since he had once been a blessing in the work of the Lord, I reasoned that he would again bless the people of God.

When he was approached, he declined to help, responding that he wanted to work in the shadows, to “make things happen behind the scenes.” Further conversation clarified that he wanted to be a power broker. Though he didn’t say he wanted to be a “power broker,” he was clear that he wanted “to make things happen.” Today, he is a power broker, pulling strings in the background of a declining congregation. The church no longer prospers, souls are no longer saved, there is no growth, but he pulls the strings. He now controls the work of God, and the Spirit of God has long since departed. “Ichabod” has been written across the front of the church, for the Spirit of God departed.

Tragically, I’ve witnessed precisely such power cliques at work throughout the years of my service before the Lord. It is so commonplace that it is the exception when a congregation is found in which the people are consulted to seek the face of the Lord in order to discover what His will might be. How much easier, we imagine, to have a vote, to get fifty percent to agree with us, and then do what we want to do! How impotent is the congregation that succumbs to such worldly thinking! How much less godly is the church that falls into this wicked trap of letting the few run matters!

DISCLOSURE OF A CHURCH BOSS — “I will bring up what he is doing, talking wicked nonsense against us. And not content with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers, and also stops those who want to and puts them out of the church.” John makes no threat. In fact, it is not even certain from his words that he will visit Diotrephes’ church. However, should he do so, the aged Apostle says that he will expose the actions of the church boss.

John specifically states the charges that he will bring against Diotrephes. Diotrephes is engaged in spreading unjustified charges against the Apostle, and he uses evil words to do so. Therefore, he is malicious and slanderous, actions that dishonour the Master and demonstrate that the one spreading such evil is surrendered at that moment to evil. Again, John will point out that Diotrephes refuses to welcome the missionaries into the congregation. Moreover, John will point out that Diotrephes hinders others within the assembly who do want to receive the itinerating missionaries. Finally, Diotrephes has expelled those who want to aid the missionaries, and quite obviously maintains the threat to continue putting out of the assembly any who act contrary to his will. Whether Diotrephes usurped authority to expel these individuals himself or whether he instigated collective action against them is immaterial—the result was the same.

It is a tragic fact that power brokers frequently employ slander against those who threaten them. In order to maintain power, they use rumour and innuendo. They would never sully a righteous individual's reputation by saying they were evil, but if they make a sly suggestion here or arch their eyebrow just so as they speak ... well, you get the message. You will recall that God speaks in harsh terms of such evil, however.

Moses commanded the people of God, “You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people” [**LEVITICUS 19:16**]. When God calls His people into judgement, He brings this serious charge against them:

“You give your mouth free rein for evil,
and your tongue frames deceit.
You sit and speak against your brother;
you slander your own mother's son.”

[**PSALM 50:19, 20**]

When Paul details the conditions of a terminal society, among the morally degraded acts he details is slander [**ROMANS 1:30**]. This is his description of the last days. “In the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power” [**2 TIMOTHY 3:1-5**].

For this reason, believers are taught to rid themselves of all slanderous speech. “You must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth” [**COLOSSIANS 3:8**; see also **EPHESIANS 4:31**]. Again, we are commanded in the Word, “Put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander” [**1 PETER 2:1**]. Slander is not a tool to be employed by the godly. It is cowardly speech that demonstrates the wickedness of the heart of the one speaking thusly. Moreover, the one who receives a slanderous report participates in the evil of the one bearing such an evil tale. This must not be tolerated among the people of God if they will please the Master.

The congregation of the Lord must be a welcoming community. I do not mean to imply that we must have no distinctions in the truths we hold dear, but we must not permit ourselves to become so exclusive that we cease to welcome others who love the Lord as we do. We are taught in the Word that “God has blended together the body, giving greater honour to the lesser member, so that there may be no division in the body, but the members may have mutual concern for one another” [**1 CORINTHIANS 12:24, 25**].³ There must be no “division,” no schism.

It was the lack of welcoming fellow believers that brought the strong censure of the Apostle to this congregation. “In the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions (schisms) among you. And I believe it in part, for there must be factions (heresies) among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognised” [**1 CORINTHIANS 11:18, 19**]. Anyone who introduces attitudes resulting in artificial boundaries within the congregation must be recognised as evil. While there must be a distinction between the holy and the profane, there must be no lines drawn to exclude those who bear the imprimatur of the cross.

The leaders of the congregation must encourage initiative rather than hindering service. Moreover, they must never become overbearing or harsh in their treatment of the flock. Elders must indeed exercise oversight, but they must avoid domineering over those in their charge, for they are to be examples to the flock [see **1 PETER 5:2, 3**]. Those who lead the people of God must not be combative [see **1 TIMOTHY 3:3; TITUS 1:7**].

Exposure by the light is the surest way to rid a congregation of evil. Evil prospers in darkness; light drives evil deeds away from the life of the people of God. On the Gulf Coast of Texas, a very large cockroach seems ubiquitous. The Death Head Cockroach, *Blaberus Cranifer*, is commonly found in every house, regardless of the social status of the occupants and independent of the housekeeping skills of the people living there. The presence of these pests make it necessary to treat houses with insecticides on an ongoing quarterly basis. Failure to spray organophosphates ensure that the pests will multiply until they reach scourge populations. You seldom see these massive creatures during the day. At night, however, when all is still in the house, strange scurrying noises can be heard in almost every house. If you switch on the light, you witness these critters moving at warp speed to the darkened corners. Vermin prefer to work in the dark; light, however, light banishes such critters, compelling them to flee to their own darkened element.

The same is true for those spiritual vermin that sap the life from the churches. Like termites that destroy the foundations of a house, the spiritual destroyers weaken the structure of a congregation, and contaminate the healthful nourishment that is presented for the members of the Body. While evil is ubiquitous due to the fallen nature of mankind, the immediate means of addressing all evil is to flood the assembly with light. Openness and transparency go a long way toward ridding a congregation of evil; and shining the light of the Word of God on the practises of the assembly ensure that evil cannot gain a purchase.

³ **NET Bible**, op. cit.

DENUNCIATION OF A CHURCH BOSS — “Beloved, do not imitate evil but imitate good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God. Demetrius has received a good testimony from everyone, and from the truth itself. We also add our testimony, and you know that our testimony is true.” John is clearly referring to Diotrephes’ behaviour when he warns, “Do not imitate evil.” Gaius is cautioned against adopting the attitude or imitating the actions of Diotrephes. Rather, he is urged to do what is right.

John introduces a new name in this portion of the letter. Demetrius is obviously one of the members of the missionary band—perhaps even leader of the group. Demetrius is apparently well known throughout the Christian communities, for John says he “has received a good testimony from everyone.” Added to this is the fact that he has openly walked in the truth, living by that which is taught. He is both an advocate of and an adherent to the truth. John adds his own statement of certification to this fact.

Thus, we now have a complete picture. Itinerating missionaries had come to churches that were situated close to one another. Diotrephes, pastoring one of the congregations, not only had refused to receive the missionaries, but had actually put out of the congregation members of the assembly who showed hospitality to these travelling servants. Gaius was apparently confused as to how he should respond. Perhaps he had previously held Diotrephes in high esteem, but now he found his actions harsh and contrary to sound doctrine. Somehow, word had reached the Apostle John that Gaius was struggling to determine whether to emulate Diotrephes or whether he should be generous in his receipt of fellow servants of the Master.

In this letter, John specifically condemns Diotrephes as an ecclesiastical bully and commends Demetrius as an example of the believers. The Apostle makes a clear statement of his position so that Gaius need not be confused.

I want to focus on one aspect of John’s words to Gaius. Scope in on verse eleven: “Beloved, do not imitate evil but imitate good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God.” I am well aware of the tendency of Christians to react with anger when they are confronted or censured, often flinging out the challenge, “How dare you judge me!” But John’s statement is asyndetic in order to add emphasis! With this strong statement, John is calling into question the reality of Diotrephes’ faith!

Throughout his writings, John presents a theme that is neglected in this day—behaviour is an indication of genuine faith. What you say you believe is important, but it has no validity without a life conformed to righteousness. Think of some of the instances where this theme is seen in John’s writings. Here is a strong statement that cannot be misconstrued. John writes, “No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him” [1 JOHN 3:6].

Again, the Apostle makes it evident that one who is born from above is changed by the grace God has extended when he writes, “By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother” [1 JOHN 3:10].

Later, in this same letter, John urges Christians to remember that the new birth is transforming. He boldly avers, “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God” [1 JOHN 4:7].

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Before we leave the Johannine letters, look at one further verse. “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen” [1 JOHN 4:20].

Finally, consider the dark assessment provided in the third chapter of John’s Gospel. “God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgement: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.” Now, focus in particular on the next two verses. “For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God” [JOHN 3:17-21].

An old saying says your life speaks so loudly that I cannot hear what you are saying. It is certainly applicable to individuals whom many wish to label “backsliders.” In many instances, dare I say in most instances, those identified as backsliders are lost! They were never saved. That is the reason they act as they do. By the same token, the church boss may just be lost. How dreadful the thought that an individual could be religious, standing in the presence of sound preaching from the Word, and yet be lost. However, the action of power brokers belies any claim they may make to the salvation of the Lord. John’s use of the strong statement that the one who does evil has not seen God is equivalent to saying that this one is not a Christian.

God has permitted me to see a surprising number of church bosses throughout the years of my service among the churches of our Lord. Many continue to wield power among the churches, and like a one-horned billy goat they push the churches around. However, I have witnessed the demise of a number of such individuals throughout the course of my service. In their death, there was no evidence of contrition, of repentance. As I review the lives of some such bosses who flit through my memory, I recall that I found scant evidence of their relationship to the Master in life, and with their death there was even less evidence that they had ever known the grace of God.

How dark is the statement which Job speaks!

“There are those who rebel against the light,
who are not acquainted with its ways,
and do not stay in its paths.”

[JOB 24:13]

How dreadful the implication of his words for those who have deceived their own hearts!

But I am convinced of better things of you. I believe by the grace of our Lord that you will do those things that glorify His Name. You will do this because you have believed the message of life. If you have not received that message, I urge you to let this be the day that you come to life in the Beloved Son of God. He took your sin upon Himself, receiving in His own body the judgement that you deserved. Then, He rose from the grave to ensure that you shall have a right standing before the Father.

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The Word calls you, saying, “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ believing in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved. It is with the heart that one believes and is made right with God, and with the mouth that one confesses and is saved.” That passage concludes with the promise of God that, “Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord shall be saved” [**ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13**].⁴

I pray you are a Christian. I pray that you know the grace of God in Christ the Lord. And I pray that your life reveals the transforming power of this glorious Saviour. Amen.

⁴ Free translation provided by the author