

Who was Diotrephes in the Bible?

Diotrephes is mentioned in one passage of the Bible, in the short letter of 3 John. In brief, Diotrephes was a self-seeking troublemaker in an unnamed local church in the first century. We know nothing of his background, other than he was probably a Gentile (his name means “nurtured by Jupiter”).

John wrote 3 John to his friend Gaius. Here is the passage mentioning Diotrephes: “I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will not welcome us. So when I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, spreading malicious nonsense about us. Not satisfied with that, he even refuses to welcome other believers. He also stops those who want to do so and puts them out of the church” (3 John 1:9-10).

In only two verses, we have the following statements made about Diotrephes: 1) he loves to be first; 2) he refuses to welcome the apostles into the church; 3) he maliciously spreads gossip about men of God; 4) he withholds hospitality from other believers; 5) he requires others to follow his poor example; and 6) he excommunicates anyone who crosses him.

From John’s description, we can assume that Diotrephes was a leader, or at least an influential member, in the local church where Gaius was a member. Diotrephes was clearly abusing his position of authority. For some reason he was jealous of the apostles and refused to allow them in his church. Instead of following the command for a pastor to be hospitable and “not quarrelsome” (2 Timothy 3:2-3), Diotrephes was inhospitable and pugnacious. Instead of seeking to be the servant of all (Mark 9:35), Diotrephes loved to be in charge.

John says that he is planning a visit to Gaius's church, and that, when he comes, he will publicly rebuke Diotrephes for his actions (3 John 1:10). The slander, the sectarianism, and the self-seeking would be dealt with. The apostle would not sweep such things under the rug.

On the other hand, John commends Gaius for showing hospitality to the itinerant preachers of the gospel who passed through his city (3 John 1:5-8). In fact, Diotrephes, with his inhospitable, self-serving attitude, could be considered the "anti-Gaius." John's admonition to Gaius to "not imitate what is evil" (3 John 1:11) is probably another way of saying "don't be like Diotrephes."

Those who, like Gaius, minister to preachers of the gospel honor God (3 John 1:6). Those who, like Diotrephes, refuse to aid the spread of God's Word are deserving of rebuke (3 John 1:10). The pastorate is no place for power-hungry, jealous, slanderous men who reject the apostles' teaching. "Rather, [a pastor] must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught" (Titus 1:8-9).