

Power Struggle



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Isa. 14:13, 14; Mark 9:35; 1 Cor. 12:7–31; 1 Corinthians 13; Phil. 2:3; 3 John; Rev. 14:6.*

Memory Text: “Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good. He who does good is of God, but he who does evil has not seen God” (3 John 11, NKJV).

Power struggles come in various forms. Whether over the rulership of empires, over companies, or even over religious position and authority, the fight for control can be ugly, even violent. In a real sense, the great controversy in heaven began with a power struggle—Satan seeking the position and authority that belonged only to Jesus, the Creator, and not to a creature. Unfortunately, even in the church that same spirit can be manifested.

Third John, the final letter in this series, deals with a power struggle in one of the early churches. On one side are the apostle John, Gaius, and Demetrius. On the other side is Diotrephes, who is trying to establish his supremacy. A power struggle in a local church? Certainly as Christians today, we don't face anything similar, do we?

The Week at a Glance: To whom did John write this letter? What do we know about Gaius and his character that could be of value for ourselves? What kind of power struggle was going on in the church?

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 26.*

The Elder and Gaius (3 John 1–4, 13–15)

This is one of the few letters in the New Testament (along with Philemon, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus) that are addressed to an individual person, not to a congregation.

Interestingly enough, John refers to himself here as an elder (3 John 1). But John was an apostle, not a local church elder, so why did he do that? There are a number of possible reasons, some of which do not necessarily exclude each other: (1) The title *elder* may refer to position, age, or both. In the case of John, the latter use seems to be probable. (2) By using the title *elder*, John indicates that the letter is not just a letter to a friend but an official communication. (3) The title points to respect and authority, which were due its holder. (4) In 1 Peter 5:1 Peter addresses the elders and calls himself their *fellow elder*, although he is an apostle. John may be following this usage. (5) The use of *elder* by John may point to his humility and collegiality, which differ widely from the attitude of Diotrephes.

What do we learn about Gaius in 3 John 1–4?

John must have had a good relationship with Gaius. He calls him *beloved* and tells him that he truly loves him. Three times derivatives of the words *to love* are used in verses 1 and 2 to describe John's relation to Gaius.

How do we understand what it means, as Christians, to love each other? How do we show that love? See 1 Corinthians 13.

John rejoices that Gaius is walking in the truth; he mentions that twice in verses 3 and 4 and says that even brothers who had met Gaius were praising his wonderful Christian attitude and lifestyle. John, on his part, longs to meet Gaius soon and talk to him personally. The greetings to and from Gaius show that there was a larger circle of believers who were acquainted with him and who supported him.

Go over 1 Corinthians 13. How well do you manifest the principles that Paul talks about there? In what areas do you do fairly well; in what areas could and should you improve?

The Lesson in Brief

▶ **Key Text:** *3 John 11*

▶ **The Student Will:**

Know: Recognize and support the leadership of the church.

Feel: Be willing to use our resources to support the church.

Do: Be a good example for those around us.

▶ **Lesson Outline:**

I. Know: Respecting Leaders

A Make a chart listing how John refers to Gaius and Diotrephes. What does it tell you about the power struggle in the local church?

B What leadership qualities does John see as important? Note that some are implied from his description of Diotrephes.

C Reflect on our church organization. How does this safeguard against personality cults and power struggles?

II. Feel: Willing Sacrifice

A In contrast to 2 John, here in 3 John the church members are called to support traveling evangelists. How can we foster a spirit of giving and supporting the work and mission of the church?

B The church requires consistent support. How is faithfulness cultivated and developed in the life of the individual and in the church?

III. Do: Be a Good Example

A Based on John's example in 3 John, what practical principles can we draw for dealing with leaders who have gone in a wrong direction?

B Brainstorm factors that prevent us from imitating what is good. Share positive steps to ensure that we are a good example to those around us.

▶ **Summary:** Leadership crises have been in the church since John's time. We are called to support the leadership and be a good example to those around us.

Gaius and His Ministry to the Church

(3 John 5–8)

Read 3 John 5–8 and paraphrase what John is saying. What important lesson is here for us?

In his second letter John had addressed the issue of hospitality and had warned against being hospitable to traveling missionaries who were teaching heresy. True believers cannot support antichrists. In 3 John the apostle comes back to the issue of hospitality. And here he stresses that some traveling missionaries needed help. They were preaching the gospel for free but needed a place to stay overnight and some food. Unlike the heretical missionaries John had already dealt with, these missionaries were people dedicated to God in all respects.

Gaius had supported them and had shown hospitality toward them. The missionaries were quite impressed and had mentioned Gaius favorably in church.

What we see here deals not just with hospitality, not just with giving someone a place to sleep for the night, but with the whole principle of support for the work of ministry and missions. John is thankful that Gaius had treated these people as he has. It shows his openness and willingness to give of himself for the work of spreading the gospel. In this sense, Gaius should be an example to all of us. The Lord has chosen us, as believers, to spread this truth to the whole world.

Read Revelation 14:6. Who is that angel, and how broad and wide is his mission?

As Christians in general and Adventists in particular, we must be aware of our calling to support the work of spreading the gospel everywhere in the world. Whatever our position, whatever our role, we all can have a part to play.

How involved are you in helping to spread the truths we have been given? What more could you do? How much of your own time, money, and pleasure would you be willing to give up for the sake of helping others hear the good news of Jesus Christ and the promise of His return?

Learning Cycle

► STEP 1—Motivate

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Only as we acknowledge the headship of Jesus—in our lives and in the church—can we hope to free ourselves from self and serve God as we were meant to.

Just for Teachers: *Third John is the shortest book in the Bible, but it deals with issues that touch every congregation within every culture: integrity of leadership, difficult personalities, and organizing the church to focus more effectively on mission. Introduce these themes to your class as you prepare for an in-depth look at this power struggle in the early Christian church.*

History is littered with the wreckage of hundreds of failed experiments in creating “utopia”—the ideal human community. In 1893, 238 adults and children sailed from Sydney, Australia, to establish a utopian colony in Paraguay known as “New Australia.” Their dreams of a simple, harmonious existence, based on shared assets and work, dissolved within a few years. The tipping point was disagreement over allowing alcohol. A small group broke away and established another colony nearby. Before long, quarrels about money and leadership ended this community too.—http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Australia.

Throughout the centuries, the failure of every utopian dream has had one thing in common: human nature.

Ask the class to think about their own faith community—their church family. The word *family* implies more than just a strong bond of faith and purpose that connects each of us as part of the body of Christ. It also implies the disagreements, misunderstandings, and personality clashes that are an inevitable part of family life. The book of 3 John graphically illustrates that how we deal with these difficulties determines whether our church family will be damaged or healthy, mired in internal disputes or focused outward on mission.

► STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: *The question of rightful authority within the church has caused disagreement, debate, and schism for more than two thousand years. Explore with the class how the incident recorded*

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Diotrephes (3 John 9, 10)

“Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, ‘If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all’ ”
(Mark 9:35, NIV).

What important Christian principle is found in this verse? More important, how can we learn to follow it ourselves?

After having pointed to Gaius and his ministry, John is now ready to tackle the problem with Diotrephes, the leader of the church to which Gaius belonged. This man was, obviously, a source of many problems, and John is determined to deal with him at the right time.

Read 3 John 9, 10. What was the problem with this man? From the little information we have, in what ways was he going completely against what it means to be a Christian? See also Isa. 14:13, 14; Matt. 12:37; 18:3–6; Phil. 2:3.

Whoever this Diotrephes was, he was a problem. Church members were being pushed aside or even disfellowshipped for showing basic Christian courtesy to others. But this was not all. Probably Diotrephes was trying to establish himself as the only leader of the congregation or at least as the one in control. He may have confused lust of power with zeal for the gospel. Arrogantly he rejected the authority of the apostle John and others; Diotrephes even went further and slandered John.

This was a dangerous development, because it sounds as if Diotrephes wanted to be independent from those who were overseeing the church on a larger scale. Such an attitude had the potential to dramatically change the nature of the church and the role church members would play in the church.

Might there not be a bit of Diotrephes in all of us? Look at yourself. Are you greedy for power? Do you speak out against those you don't like? Most important, are you making the sad mistake of automatically assuming that what is best for you personally is best for the church as a whole?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

in 3 John helps us better understand issues of leadership and authority within today's church.

Bible Commentary

I. Why “Housekeeping” Matters *(Review 3 John with the class.)*

Why was 3 John included in the biblical canon? On the surface it is merely a personal “housekeeping” letter. It deals with a specific situation in an unidentified Christian community and is not addressed to the broader church. What wider purpose could this text possibly have?

Consider This: In 2004, more than five hundred Christian pastors were asked about the biggest source of conflict in their congregation. Eighty-five percent listed power relations—“control”—as a leading cause of conflict, while matters of doctrine or cultural issues ranked much lower.—<http://www.ctlibrary.com/le/2004/fall/6.25.html>.

What is John’s great concern underlying all these “housekeeping” matters? Is it that this dispute is obstructing the work of evangelists he has sent out? Why does the significance of this short book lie in its suggestion that mission is the primary purpose of the Christian church—a task that requires a congregation to “get its house in order” before it truly can be effective?

II. Dealing With Human Nature *(Review Luke 22:3–6 with the class.)*

Third John focuses on interplay of personalities. Ask the class to identify the main “characters” in this book and discuss the personality traits they seem to display. Which of these characteristics sound familiar to you today? Can you think of other instances in Scripture in which conflict, power plays, or personal ambition impeded the mission of God’s people? *(See, for example, Num. 16:1–3, Luke 22:3–6, Acts 6:1, 1 Cor. 1:11–17.)* How can we foster the spirit of Gaius and Demetrius within our own lives?

Consider This: Third John reminds us that the church is made up of ordinary people who bring different personalities, experiences, hurts, and hopes into the body of Christ. Discuss whether or not it is correct to portray the early Christian church as an ideal faith community.

III. An Independent Church? *(Review 1 Corinthians 1:10 with the class.)*

Discuss whether or not a congregation effectively can go it alone—as Diotrephes obviously intended—without accountability or external direction.

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Bearing Witness About Demetrius

Read 3 John 11. Why would John write this when he did? What important point is he making here, especially given the context, that of warning about a church leader who was acting contrary to the principles of Christ?

Verse 11 is a transitional statement. It builds a bridge between what John has said about Diotrophes and what he is going to say about Demetrius. Evil has a representative, and this is Diotrophes. The arrogant and ambitious leader clearly is identified as belonging to that which is evil. On the other hand, a good example for Gaius to follow is Demetrius.

What do we know about Demetrius? 3 John 12.

There is another Demetrius in Acts 19:23–29. He was the silversmith who was responsible for the riot in Ephesus when Paul preached the gospel there. Nothing in the text indicates that this is the same person.

Demetrius was a Gentile Christian. Demetrius supported the apostle John and may have been one of his associates and one of the traveling missionaries. John may have wanted him to be present when he planned to confront Diotrophes.

Perhaps the most important principle we can take away from this one verse about Demetrius has to do with the power of influence. Read the verse again. Who was able to testify about the “faithfulness” of Demetrius? It came from many directions. The point is that if we are living a Christian life, if we are faithful, others will know. Others can bear witness and testimony to it. And most important, others can be influenced by it. In the end, one way or another, our life, our existence, sends a message, and that message can be a positive or a negative influence. This doesn’t mean we are perfect, this doesn’t mean we don’t make mistakes, this doesn’t mean we don’t have room to improve. It means, instead, that others are watching us, others are listening to us, and others are influenced by us. The question is, What kind of witness do we bear?

Imagine someone giving a report about you and your Christian behavior. What would that person write, and why? Dwell on the implications of your answer.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

What are the dangers? What is Jesus' vision for His followers? (See *John 17:11, 21–23; 1 Cor. 1:10; Eph. 4:2–6.*)

IV. An Independent Church?

Consider these two extracts from page 2 of the 2005 Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual:

“Resolved that the highest authority under God among Seventh-day Adventists is found in the will of the body of that people, as expressed in the decisions of the General Conference [session]”—General Conference Session, 1877.

“The church of Christ is in constant peril. Satan is seeking to destroy the people of God, and one man's mind, one man's judgment, is not sufficient to be trusted. Christ would have His followers brought together in church capacity, observing order, having rules and discipline, and all subject one to another, esteeming others better than themselves.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, p. 445.

Discuss: What do these quotes suggest about authority within the Adventist Church? How do church structure and established decision-making procedures help or hinder the church in its mission? Give examples.

► STEP 3—Apply**Thought Question:**

The disputed leadership described in 3 John raises the question, does a Christian community need a leader? If, as Peter says, we all share in the “royal priesthood” of believers (*1 Pet. 2:9*), then why should we set aside certain individuals for greater responsibility and authority within our local churches? (See *Eph. 4:11–13; Heb. 13:7, 17.*)

Activity: The Paradox of “Christian Leadership”

Consider the following proposition:

“The very drive that propels some [Christian] leaders toward extraordinary levels of achievement is a drive that often keeps expanding even after reasonable goals and objectives have been achieved.”—Gordon MacDonald

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Leadership Crisis in the Early Church

Thus, from what we have seen, there was a leadership crisis in at least one of John's churches. According to this letter, the problem here concerned not so much theology but rather personal ambition and a change in how churches were governed. However, often when a conflict begins, it involves some issues and later moves on to others. So here, too, the doctrines of the church may have been affected in the long run.

We noticed a certain kind of power struggle and some desire for independence. This is found today in the idea of congregationalism, in which local churches try to be completely independent from any governing church body and rather strike out on their own. This is not the New Testament model.

Instead, all believers are the people and body of Christ. All believers are also part of the royal priesthood (*1 Pet. 2:9*). All have received spiritual gifts, which are necessary for the church (*1 Cor. 12:7–31*). A distinction between laity and clergy is foreign to the New Testament. However, God has called some persons to leadership positions in the church and has gifted them. These persons should be respected. Leaders are not infallible and should not pretend to be. In some cases there even may be justified reasons for complaints (*1 Tim. 5:19*). If the leader must be confronted, it should be done carefully and lovingly.

Leaders must indeed lead, but they also need to be shepherds, and, most of all, they need to be examples for the rest of the body of Christ. Qualifications for leaders are listed in both the Old and New Testaments. The terms *overseers* and *elders* are still used interchangeably in the New Testament (*Acts 20:17, 28*), although this changed dramatically in church history when a strict hierarchy was created and the church became more or less identical with the so-called clergy.

What can we learn from the following texts about how the church is to be governed? *Mark 10:42–44; Acts 6:1–7; 15:6, 22–25; 1 Tim. 4:14; James 5:14.*

The New Testament is opposed to chaos and anarchy in the church. Leadership is mentioned for the local level, as well as the universal church. However, Jesus Himself stressed that leadership in the church/churches must be servant leadership. Local churches were governed by a group of elders rather than by one person only. Decisions were made by involving the entire church or representatives of the church.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

(<http://www.christianitytoday.com/leaders/newsletters/2006/cln61106.html>).

Divide the class into two groups. Ask one group to compile a list of characteristics necessary for a successful leader of a large business.

Provide the second group with the following texts and ask them to compile a list of what, in Christ's view, characterizes a successful church leader: Mark 10:42–44; John 13:13–15; 2 Corinthians 1:24; 1 Thessalonians 2:7–11; 1 Peter 5:2, 3.

Bring both groups together. Discuss both lists. What are the key similarities and differences? Is Christ's vision of leadership realistic? What safeguards could help protect church leaders from the pride and ambition of Diotrephes?

► STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Challenge your class to internalize what they have learned so that the lessons of 3 John will help govern their relationships with others within the body of Christ.

It is sometimes easy to forget that Christ is our true Leader, a role that often is assigned to the pastor, elder, youth leader, worship leader, or chair of the church board (*see Eph. 1:22, 23; Col. 1:18*). Any person who holds a position of responsibility or influence within the church is only a “care-taker” on behalf of Christ. And it is only by acknowledging the headship of Christ—in our churches and in our lives—that we can hope to free ourselves from ego and ambition and become useful in mission.

This week, set aside some time for:

- 1 Self-examination: Do my attitudes and behavior within the church reflect more the mission focus of Gaius or the self-centeredness of Diotrephes?
- 2 Action: Determine what specific steps I can take to improve relationships within my church family and help develop a spirit of cooperation and shared purpose.
- 3 Commitment: Reflect on Paul's prayer for the church at Ephesus (*Eph. 3:14–21*). As a member of the body of Christ, claim Paul's words for yourself and for your church. Ask the Holy Spirit to govern your words and actions when interacting with fellow believers and recommit yourself to the mission of sharing Christ with the world.

Further Study: Read the following passages on church governance/leadership: *John 13:1–12; Eph. 4:11–16; 1 Thess. 5:12, 13; 1 Tim. 1:3, 4; 4:13; 5:22; Titus 1–3; 1 Pet. 5:1–4.*

“Those who are inclined to regard their individual judgment as supreme are in grave peril. It is Satan’s studied effort to separate such ones from those who are channels of light, through whom God has wrought to build up and extend His work in the earth. To neglect or despise those whom God has appointed to bear the responsibilities of leadership in connection with the advancement of the truth is to reject the means that He has ordained for the help, encouragement, and strength of His people.”—Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, p. 444.

“God has not set any kingly power in the Seventh-day Adventist Church to control the whole body or to control any branch of the work. He has not provided that the burden of leadership shall rest upon a few men. Responsibilities are distributed among a large number of competent men.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 8, p. 236.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Think about power and how power is used. When is power a good thing, when is it a bad thing, and how do we know the difference?
- 2 What Christians in your local church could be held up as role models? What about them is admirable? At the same time, what dangers arise when looking toward any sinner as a role model?
- 3 Have you ever been greatly disappointed by someone you regarded as a role model? What lessons did you learn from this that could be of value to others? How can we learn from the good example of others and yet be protected from disappointment if they fail?
- 4 How should a church react when it has a problem in leadership itself? How can it strike the right balance in dealing with the problem firmly, while at the same time showing the grace and mercy of Christ?
- 5 Outside of Jesus Himself, which Bible character is your favorite role model, and why? In class, share your answers with each other and see what you can learn.