

Articles by John Rankin

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Diotrephes

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John Rankin

“I wrote unto the church; but Diotrephes ...” Here we are introduced to a man of a very different type to Gaius and Demetrius. His name, it is said, means “nourished by Jupiter.” Whatever this may signify, it is certain he did not derive his nourishment from a divine source (Col. 2:19). Assuming the place of an overseer without scriptural qualifications, he lords it over God’s heritage apparently under the plea of “standing for the truth”. The predominant thought in regard to Diotrephes is that of mis-rule in the assembly of God. Let us observe a few important features.

The Charge

The charge against him of mis-rule is made by the Apostle John himself, thus we notice:

Its sincerity. Neither malice nor jealousy on his part accounted for this outburst of indignation. The brethren had borne witness to him concerning the arrogance and overbearing attitude of Diotrephes in refusing them, thus John, governed by zeal for the Lord’s honor, feels compelled to speak out plainly and he does this in all sincerity and in truth.

Mr. John Rankin served the Lord for years in the British West Indies. More recently he has ministered throughout the United States and Canada. This message from his pen is most timely. It should be taken seriously by all; some quite unawares have acted as Diotrephes,

and others because of the love of power have ruled an assembly of God to its loss and detriment.

Its Severity. The “ambitious proceedings” of Diotrephes must be exposed as a warning to others, therefore his motives, feelings, words and deeds all come under the severest censure. His ebullitions of malignity may have been extolled as expressions of faithfulness by his followers, but to the Apostle they are the index and evidence of a greatly blemished character. The pride, haughtiness, and vindictiveness of Diotrephes merited the rebuke that John meant to administer when he would meet him.

Its Solemnity. Solemn indeed that a man should so act as to incur the displeasure of God. Revenging as he did his insulted pre-eminence upon true servants of the Gospel was an evil of great magnitude when we consider it in the light of the words of Christ: “He that receiveth you receiveth Me, and he that receiveth Me receiveth Him that sent Me” (Matt. 10:40). Diotrephes, therefore, must be made to realize that God knoweth the proud afar off and that he that exalteth himself shall be abased.

The Cause

The cause of mis-rule is obvious. It shows itself in Diotrephes in a threefold way.

First, in his love of pre-eminence. He is a man who will have the first place or none, a man who will “rule or ruin”. The only other place where the word pre-eminence occurs is Colossians 1:18 where concerning the Lord Jesus we read, “That in all things He might have the pre-eminence”.

Second, in his love of power. Preeminence is what Diotrephes seeks in order to exercise power over others. How unlike our blessed Lord who made Himself of no reputation; who came not to be ministered unto but to minister and to give His life a ransom for many.

“Diotrephes”, one has said, “is the father of a long line of sons.” At Rome there has been permanent Diotrephes in the office of the papacy. But there are other smaller continuators of Diotrephes who occupy no Vatican — priests, arrogating to themselves the priesthood, “do violence to conscience and interpose rudely between God and the soul”. Priests in this sense are called by different names. They are clad in different dresses; some in chasubles, some in frock coats, some in plain dress. “Down with priest-craft” is even the cry of many of them. The priest (who abjures the name) who is the master of religious small talk, and winds people, to his own ends, around his little finger by using them deftly, is often the modern edition of Diotrephes.

Third, in his love of praise. The man of pre-eminence and power cannot proceed far without human praise. Such a man loves the praise of men rather than the praise of God. Godly men like John may censure, but that curbs not his self-will so long as he is king in his own realm, or is the object of congratulation by the members of his own party, however small that party may be. The firmer he stands, the bolder he speaks, the sterner he acts toward those who refuse his mandate, the more he is hailed as a champion and trustworthy leader. Thrice happy are those who, like the beloved Apostle, recognize only the authority of our “One Lord”, even Christ. Haman is hanged when Mordecai is the man whom the king delighteth to honor. Diotrephes

sinks into oblivion when the Apostle is honored by the God of heaven; and all modern autocratic rulers in the assemblies of God, who by displacing Christ have put themselves upon the throne, will suffer loss while simple saints who have made it their sole aim to please the Lord will hear His “well done, good and faithful servant, enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.”

The Curse

The curse of mis-rule. Overseers in the execution of their work, which is at times arduous and perplexing, will ever find sufficient resources in God and the Word of His grace. “Take heed to yourselves” was Paul’s word to the elders at Ephesus. In addressing all we have suggested the importance of fellowship and unity of action in the affairs of the assembly. Would many troubles not be avoided if brethren engaging in this “good work” ever sought to act in fellowship one with another, and also in fellowship with the assembly of which they form part? The spirit developed in Diotrephes is easily fostered when there is “undue individuality of action.” Diotrephes acting in an arbitrary manner is guilty of at least three evils.

First, he dishonors God. The presence of God is not sought by this man; His word is not consulted, His will is of no importance. He even rejects or suppresses the letter the Apostle addressed to the church. In the scriptural sense of the term was he not a heretic? The word heretic is of Greek origin, the root idea of which is to “choose”. It is choosing for one’s self independently of other considerations. Heresy is “chosen opinions.” (Tertullian).

Second, he defames the servants of Christ. Professing perhaps to belong to no sect yet manifestly as sectarian as could be. One has spoken of him as an "ill-conditioned dog-in-the-manger who in his touchy self-importance thought he was somehow aggrieved by the Apostle's recommendation and sought to revenge his insulted pre-eminence upon innocent evangelists by refusing to receive them because he would not receive the Apostle."

The Apostle says "I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words." Terrible indeed is this picture! A railer in authority and no power in the church as a result of his overruling to deal with him or to put him in his right place! It is a sad truism. "One sinner destroyeth much good." To come in contact with such a self-conceited, overbearing, ambitious man, no godly person's reputation is safe, not even an Apostle's. By Diotrephes the holiest and humblest ambassadors of Christ are maligned and persecuted: and doubtless by his hypnotic influence others became his supporters until time would reveal his true motives and they had leisure to repent.

Third, he divides the assembly. What disorder and nerve-racking experiences! What sorrows and tears on the part of godly souls do we read behind the words, "And not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth them out of the church". Perhaps, saying as he does so, "The Lord be glorified" (Isa. 66).

Some there are who actuated by the Diotrephes spirit, having failed in their attempts to cast out the objects of their dislikes, have judged the assembly as unclean, and seceding therefrom have commenced what they call "a

clean thing." Such a company appearing to be loyal to the truth (what part of it?) may be recognized and built up by those of like mind, but does that mean it has God's approval? Is it not significant that even although the best of the Christians were cast out of that unknown assembly there is no hint given to Gaius to set up another table. The Apostle still acknowledged that company as "the church". He knew, as he tells us in the Book of the Revelation, that it was the Lord's prerogative alone to remove the candlestick, and until that became evident he would not venture to express any contrary judgment. John did no more than to assure Gaius of his purpose to deal according to the Apostolic power which he possessed with the offender. If men are truly subject to the Lordship of Christ, they will never, because they find they cannot have things all their own way, lay hold of something as an excuse to separate from their fellow-believers and start another meeting. When men adopt this procedure are they not but witnessing to their own weakness, and to their lack of confidence in God as well as to their lack of brotherly love and devotion to Christ, and furthermore to their lack of real regard for the testimony of God and for the salvation of the lost?

Spiritual Laughter

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God has given man His creature the faculty to laugh. Who can doubt this? More muscles are exercised in a good hearty laugh than in a frown or scowl. It is a calamity that through Adam who brought sin into the world, this capacity has been abused. False laughter frequently characterizes the unregenerate, the man who knows not God. The child of God although beset by sorrows incidental to a natural existence, can say with Paul, "As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing," because his joy is "in the Lord"; he knows what true laughter means. There is a dark side, of course, to this picture as well as a bright one.

Our purpose in this simple outline is to draw attention, without much comment, to what the Word of God has to say, first, about false laughter, and then, about true spiritual laughter. We shall notice three features of each.

False Laughter

Is hollow: This is apparent in the following Scriptures. It may be good for the reader to seek out these passages in the Bible: "Even in laughter the heart is sorrowful," "Sorrow is better than laughter," "I said of laughter, It is mad," "For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fool."

Is hateful: We can discern this in the quotations of various godly men. David said, "Our enemies laugh

among themselves." Nehemiah, perplexed about his foes complained, "They laughed us to scorn, and despised us." Hezekiah, thinking about the attitude of some towards God's servants, declared, "They laughed them to scorn, and mocked them."

When our Lord said about the twelve-year-old maid, "The damsel is not dead, but sleepeth," the people laughed Him to scorn. As the Master of death He stood in their midst, but before He spoke the life-giving word, He put the laughing ones in their right place, outside. Only those in sympathy with His loving heart and purpose were left to witness the miracle of His compassion and power.

Who can describe how keenly our Lord felt when on the cross, dying for our sins, He saw the awful callousness of the jeering crowds and heard their taunts? Looking up into the face of His Father God, He complained, "All they that see Me laugh Me to scorn." "When He suffered, He threatened not; but committed Himself to Him that judgeth righteously." What an example for us!

Is hurtful: When the wicked and the worldly are condemned by the testimony of the righteous, they may laugh at these godly ones until they are hurt. Was it not to the wicked that our Lord said, "Woe to you that laugh now, for ye shall mourn and weep." Speaking of this same class, James said, "Let your laughter be turned into mourning." Those who unite to rebel against God, to make sport of His beloved Son, to make light of the sin offering of Calvary, and to sneer at the things of God in general should remember that it is written, "He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision." Again, "Because I have called, and ye

refused;.. I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your fear cometh." Here it is solemnly true, He that laughs last, laughs best. "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap" (Gal. 6:7).

Gladly we turn to other scriptural portions which remind us of joyous laughter and its source.

True Laughter

Is happy: Joyous laughter in Sarah's case was not to make her happy but because she was happy. The reason was obvious, she held in her arms the son whom God had promised her. When the Lord first revealed to Abraham that Sarah was to have a child, she laughed within herself. The Lord heard that silent laugh, and asked Abraham, "Wherefore did Sarah laugh, ... Is there anything too hard for the Lord?" It was useless for Sarah to deny, saying "I laughed not." The Lord immediately declared, "Nay; but thou didst laugh." With this should be read from the New Testament that, "Through faith also Sarah ... was delivered of a child ... because she judged Him faithful who had promised."

Sarah learned that the divine promise was good and true. When all was fulfilled, she made the sublime statement, "God has made me to laugh, so that all that hear will laugh with me." The name given to this son of promise was Isaac, meaning laughter. All this comes very close to us for we read, "Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ" (Gal. 3:16). What a proof of the divine inspiration and accuracy of the Holy Scriptures, and that by the omission of one letter, "s". Since it is seed, singular, and not seeds, plural, the prophecy can only

refer to one for that seed is Christ. It is in Him alone that our redemption rests secure. We, therefore, rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory; we laugh with Sarah as she said we should.

Is hearty: This is suggested in Psalm 126:1, "When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing." Wherever there is true freedom, there is true laughter. This, of course, was nothing to some of the Chaldeans, we learn from Psalm 123:3-4. These had caused the captives to cry to God for mercy. "Our soul," cried they, "Is exceedingly filled with the scorning of those that are at ease." In Psalm 126, in contrast, we see that there were some who were deeply impressed by what they had witnessed, and spoke of Jehovah as a reality. "The Lord (Jehovah)," was their exclamation, "hath done great things for them." To which the recipients of divine grace replied, "The Lord (Jehovah), hath done great things for us whereof we are glad."

Is holy: This is the impression we gather from the words of Sarah to which we revert: "God," said she, indicating that her blessing was divine, "hath made," her blessing was also definite, "me," her blessing was likewise distinctive, "to laugh," for her blessing was delightful. This surely is language befitting the lips of every true believer in the Lord Jesus.

As one whom God was correcting, Job must have wondered at the words of Eliphaz, "At destruction and famine thou shalt laugh" (Job 5:22). Nevertheless, they were true. God would be his refuge and strength in time of trouble. The remainder of the speech of Eliphaz

declares, "Thou shalt know that thy tabernacle shall be in peace, and that thou shalt visit thy habitation, and shalt not sin." This provision for the believer's security, sanctity, and satisfaction has been found good in the experiences of those who have learned to put their confidence in a faithful God.