

## The Travesty of Truth-Tyrants

9 I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, does not receive us. 10 Therefore, if I come, I will call to mind his deeds which he does, prating against us with malicious words. And not content with that, he himself does not receive the brethren, and forbids those who wish to, putting *them* out of the church. 11 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. 12 Demetrius has a *good* testimony from all, and from the truth itself. And we also bear witness, and you know that our testimony is true.

In our journey through 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> John, we've learned many things about truth and love. We've seen how they need each other, and are really a part of each other. Real love is true, it loves truly, according to what is true. Truth is loving, comes from love and leads to love. When we have truthless love or loveless truth, we really don't have either truth or love left anymore, only a warped version of the original.

Third John deals with the question of truth divorced from love, truth which becomes mere ideology, mere propaganda, but something other than love for God and love for one another is being sought. Diotrephes is the Bible's example of this, a man who appeared to be orthodox in truth, but heteroprax in action and heteropath in love. He was what we could call: a truth-tyrant.

Now the title truth-tyrant might sound jarring. After all, truth is good, and essential, and precious. A tyrant is a cruel and oppressive ruler, someone who uses power or authority in an unreasonable, unfair, or unpredictable way. How could we ever wed the words *truth* and *tyrant*? Well, it should be jarring to us to put them together, because that is exactly the experience of people who have come across, or been influenced by, or been pastored, by a truth-tyrant. There is a jarring contradiction. On the one hand, there appears to be truth: good doctrine, and disciplined thinking, and good preaching. But on the other hand there is a tyrant: a leader who rules with unkindness, cruelty, malice, and petty politics. If you experience this, it is a strange push-pull kind of relationship. You are pulled and drawn by the good teaching and pure truth, but you are repelled and pushed away by meanness and harshness and deliberate attacks on others. That push-pull experience is very hard to resolve and understand, especially as a young Christian. When someone seems so expert in the truth, you expect it to automatically make him expert in love and human relationships. If he preaches about love, then you expect him to practice it. Unfortunately, it doesn't always work out that way.

Instead you will find many, many instances of the truth tyrant: the one who teaches the truth with his lips, and then undermines it with how he leads and exercises authority. These are Christian leaders of some sort: teachers, preachers, elders, deacons, authors, public speakers, who tick all the boxes of sound doctrine, cross their t's and dot their i's impeccably when it comes to truth, but in their behaviour as leaders, they are tyrants. They cannot tolerate criticism, they flame their critics, they are paranoid about opposition, and basically operate as bullies hiding behind a pulpit, or a microphone, or a camera or keyboard.

The Diotrophes Syndrome is the man who is not governed by love of God, the church, or his neighbour, but claims that he is a warrior for truth. Divorced from love, truth loses its humanness, and becomes abstract ideas to be defended as ends in themselves. Truth becomes ideology.

And so he becomes the ultimate example of truth without love: of the traintracks without the train. He is the opposite of being sentimental and pretending there is fellowship where there isn't. The Diotrophes truth tyrant is brutal and denies there is fellowship where there is.

That's the substance of John's critique of Diotrephes. Verse 9: Diotrephes does not receive us. Verse 10, Diotrephes does not receive the brethren. Diotrephes would not recognise John as a fellow Christian, and read his letters in church. Diotrephes would not show hospitality to fellow Christians, he would not financially support these travelling preachers, he would not extend Christian love.

His was the all-or-nothing approach to the truth and fellowship. His was the tribal approach to fellowship.

But as you can tell by John writing the letter, Gaius may have been uncertain about that. It is the mark of a godly man that he is more ready to grant the benefit of the doubt, and submit, and trust. There is nothing godly about being chronically cynical, skeptical and self-righteously independent. To quote Jesus, even the publicans do the same! It is the mark of a regenerate heart that it is learning to love authority, believe all things, hope all things. And Gaius probably kept granting Diotrephes the benefit of the doubt. Maybe he said to himself, Diotrephes preaches the truth, and he has no tolerance for error, and he seems really jealous to protect the church from error. But at the same time, his behaviour just seemed so obviously unChristian.

This is where John's description of the truth-tyrant really helps. If you keep your eye only on the truth preached, then a man could get away with almost any kind of scandalous behaviour in the church. But if you widen the focus and look at how he leads, how he treats others, how he treats his opponents, you will then see the whole picture. And then, as John says to Gaius in verse 11: don't imitate what is evil.

Perhaps you will find yourself in a situation or know someone who is, where you want to trust and submit to what seems like good teaching, but then there are things that bother you. How do you know if you are really dealing with a truth-tyrant or with a personality difference that might rub you the wrong way? When are you really dealing with a Diotrephes, where you need to part ways, and when is it something less sinister? John described Diotrephes' behaviour in three ways. You could call these the three marks of the truth tyrant.

## **I. The Truth Tyrant Subjugates and Dominates Other Christians**

who loves to have the preeminence among them,

The first mark of Diotrephes was that he loved to have the preeminence among them. This is actually just one word in the original language: *philoproteuo* – to love firstness. He wanted to be first. In what sense? He wished to be the ultimate leader. He wanted to be in the leading position, with all the final control and honour that comes with that.

Diotrephes had fallen into a trap which pride will entice almost every human leader into: that when I believe I'm right, I must make sure I control everything. I must insist upon making the final decision, and being involved in every decision. But subtly, one's pride in enjoying the attention, enjoying being relied upon, looked up to, submitted to. And before you know it, a man who is supposedly crusading for the truth is making sure he controls everything. His insecure and ungodly approach to authority led to his white-knuckled grip on power, and had turned church life into a miserable soap-opera of power and personality politics. This is one of the reasons why 1 Timothy 3:6 tells us that someone who is to be called as pastor should not be a new believer, a new convert.

6 not a novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the *same* condemnation as the devil. (1 Tim. 3:6)

A Christian needs time to work through his own pride and the evil of his own heart before he becomes responsible for others. Paul warns that if a new convert is made a leader, the

accompanying pride will nearly always lead to a fall, and the fall may be one of becoming a manipulative and abusive leader. Because once he is in that position, if his immaturity leads him to a puffed up sense of his position, he will be blind to it, and there is nothing worse than immature self-righteousness crusading for the wrong causes.

What does seeking ultimate control look like? When someone seeks ultimate power then look out for a few things.

First, he will not share leadership. Biblically, leadership in the church should be shared. Leadership in a church should never be centralised and pooled in one man. He is bound to either collapse under the pressure, or resort to insecure and reactive approaches that will undermine the ministry. Leaders should surround themselves with mature men with whom they take counsel.

Now that doesn't mean that a church is unbiblical if or when it has one pastor. Some people believe that a church is only rightly ordered if it has multiple elders. But in the first place, multiple elders are never commanded in Scripture, they are described, which means its permissible to have several pastors, but not prescribed. But you are not unbiblical when you have one pastor and several deacons. Nor is it unbiblical for a church to have a senior pastor among associate pastors. Every church will have leaders among leaders and a first among equals. Whether you have multiple so-called 'lay elders' or whether you have pastor and deacons, the important thing is that leadership is genuinely shared. The real question is, how does your leadership operate? Are decisions made by a group of godly men? Are their decisions open and transparent to the body of Christ? Are there real checks and balances in the church's constitution to prevent abuses of power? If there really is one man making every decision and controlling everything in the church, and doing what he wants, you have a problem. You have a man who is not sharing leadership. He might be sharing tasks, and dishing them out, but if he is not training men to lead, and bringing strong men and strong personalities into the circle of leadership he is probably not sharing leadership. Leadership is lonely, but it is never meant to be solitary. Truth-tyrants never share leadership.

Second, he is not under authority. By God's call, leaders have real authority. But this authority is not what we call a *fiat* authority. Fiat authority is an authority that says, "This must happen simply because I say so". I decide and it happens. And if anyone questions, I just raise my voice a little louder, and throw more power at the problem. Fiat authority is not really under any authority. It just expects and demands submission. But biblical authority in a church is always under the authority of Scripture. If a decision is made, it can be shown to the congregation that the decision came from God's Word, and was grounded in sound wisdom. In other words, real spiritual leadership is persuasive, and not coercive. It submits to God's Word, and then calls on others to submit to the same authority. Truth tyrants throw power at the problem. Spiritual authority is ultimately a teaching authority, not a personality authority.

What a marked difference between Diotrephes and John the Baptist. When John the Baptist's influence began to fade, and his status in Israel began to be overshadowed by Jesus, John's disciples complained. They were alarmed that Jesus was baptising and getting more disciples than John. John corrected his disciples by explaining that his role was like that of a best man at a wedding. It was not for him to seek to be the groom and to gain the focus. His role was to support Messiah on his day.

29 "He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled. 30 "He must increase, but I *must* decrease. (Jn. 3:29-30)

Truth tyrants reveal themselves because of their desire for firstness, for control. They don't share leadership, and they are not under authority.

## II. The Truth Tyrant Slanders those Who Disagree

10 Therefore, if I come, I will call to mind his deeds which he does, prating against us with malicious words.

Word had obviously got back to John of what Diotrephes was doing. Diotrephes was prating against John and others with malicious words. What does this mean? The word prating translates a Greek word                   It means to talk nonsense about someone else, to try to disparage another with false charges or untrue statements. It actually comes from the word meaning to bubble up. The idea is empty, groundless talk, that just bubbles out of this speaker. What bubbled out of Diotrephes? Malicious words. Words that were lies or half-truths, intended to smear, slander others.

Really, what could the man have been saying about the apostle John? Not that John was sinless, but we imagine that by the end of John's life, there probably was very little obvious sin you could really point a finger at in John's life. So where did Diotrephes get all his material? It just shows you that a truth-tyrant doesn't always deal in truth when it comes to the people he doesn't like. When he is dealing with people outside his tribe, outside his fellowship, outside of his fans, supporters and sycophants, he doesn't mind distorting, exaggerating, or shading the truth.

It is a very serious thing to be a teacher of others. James 3 even tells us to be very cautious about doing it. My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment. (Jas. 3:1).

What we say about others from the pulpit, or in some public teaching capacity had better be true, and completely true, or we become guilty of breaking the ninth commandment: bearing false witness against another.

Truth tyrants confuse people because they denounce false doctrine and then denounce the people they don't like all in one breath. And because it is right to name and expose false doctrine and apostates, perhaps it then is okay to speak evil of other Christians from the pulpit.

No it isn't. Slander is slander, no matter who does it and in what context. A truth tyrant uses his pulpit or his microphone, his books, his platform to unfairly and unkindly denounce real Christians. Now we've already seen in this series that we are supposed to do a truth triage, and understand where the differences lie. We should be able to say why something is an error, how serious an error, and where it leads. But the truth-tyrant does not merely point out the error, he claims to know their motives, and denounces them as false shepherds, deliberately deceiving. He brings up gossipy innuendos that place a question mark over someone's character and life.

We call this a bully-pulpit. The man gets to answer his critics without facing them face-to-face, gets to have the last word in every conversation, gets to trounce and trump everyone who disagrees with him.

A bully-pulpit is a painful thing to have to live under. Instead of getting fed from God's Word every week, you get a diet of denouncing opponents, smearing one's critics, vindicating himself, justifying his own actions.

But in the end, such a man is nothing less than what the Bible calls a reviler. A reviler is someone who abuses the characters and reputations of others with his words. 1 Corinthians 5:11 tells us not to have fellowship with a so-called brother who is a reviler. 1 Corinthians 6:10 tells us that a reviler will not see the kingdom of God.

One of the signs that you are dealing with truth and love is that the treatment of errors is even-handed, fair, and treated with the severity that they deserve. Not everyone needs to be excoriated with warnings of impending destruction. Moreover, love means you treat your neighbour the way

you wish to be treated.

### **III. The Truth Tyrant Shuns the Disloyal**

And not content with that, he himself does not receive the brethren, and forbids those who wish to, putting *them* out of the church.

Diotrephes was not content to simply refuse fellowship with John, and speak evil of John from the pulpit. Diotrephes took it further. He hunted down those who still fellowshiped with John, and stopped them from doing so. Perhaps he persuaded some to just submit to his tribe. But for those who didn't, he put them out the church. He illegitimately used church discipline to purge out those people who he felt had loyalties that threatened him.

It wasn't only that he broke fellowship with John. It was that he broke fellowship with those who wouldn't break fellowship with John. This is what we call second or third degree separation. You don't just separate from evil or false teaching. You must separate from those who won't separate from those, who won't separate from evil and false teaching. It is guilt by association, and usually, it is just more tribalism.

Now it is not wrong to separate from professing believers, or even to put them out of the church in certain circumstances. Here is a short list.

When a believer is him in scandalous sin, as in 1 Corinthians 5, we are to put him out the church, and not eat with them.

When a believer is guilty of a personal trespass that is unresolved, as in Matthew 18, we are to follow a procedure of witnesses, and then involving the church, and then putting him out the church.

When a believer walks in a disorderly fashion and abandons apostolic doctrine, as in 2 Thessalonians 3, we must withdraw from him, have no company with him, and admonish him.

When a believer becomes guilty of divisiveness and factiousness, as in Titus 3, we are to warn him twice and then reject him.

Now that shows that there are biblical and legitimate reasons to put people out the church. But notice, all of those are grounded on the authority of God's Word, and will not be done on the fiat authority of one leader.

But here we had a man who excommunicated and shunned people who fellowshiped with people he didn't like. He turned the church into the kind of politics seen under the most repressive political systems. Dissidents are denounced, informers sniff out the dissidents, those not with the party line are traitors to be exposed, exiled, purged out, loyalists are praised. When churches turn into these kind of sideshows, surely Satan must laugh with pleasure.

When truth and love are in balance, there will be times that genuine trouble-makers and divisive people need to be put out the church. But it will not be the petty personal war of one man. It will follow a biblical process, and be fair. It might not be liked or enjoyed by everyone, but it will clearly be grounded in Scripture. A truth-tyrant is at work when people are put out and shunned not for biblical offences but for personal disloyalty, for not showing all the signs of being a loyal tribe member.

Truth-tyrants want ultimate control, they slander their opponents, and they purge out those they deem disloyal. John must remind Gaius that this behaviour is itself evil, and therefore disloyal to the truth. Imitating this kind of leadership would not be loyal to the truth.

11 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.

John seems to be suggesting that Diotrephes is probably not saved. That's an awful thing to face: that your spiritual leader may not actually be born again. But here is the test: he who does good is of God, he who does evil has not seen God. If he acts with loveless truth, then you had best find another spiritual home.

Taken together, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> John give us the perfect symmetry between truth and love. The Christian life is both in perfect balance. John wants this church, and us, to know that there is no contradiction between love and truth. You don't need to accept loveless truth, or truthless love. Love in the truth. Speak the truth in love.