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**A0508 -- Feb. 20, 2005 – 3 John 11-14 –Forms of Church Government**

By way of review John is writing in response to a letter he received from some traveling ministers (v. 3). The report had good news and bad news. First, the good news was a man named Gaius, possibly a convert by way of John's teaching (vv. 1, 4). The report said that Gaius was a faithful, loving Christian who showed hospitality to these traveling ministers (vv. 5-6) who were orthodox and received their support only from Christians (v. 7). Second, the bad news was a man named Diotrephes (vv. 9-10), an elder in Gaius' church who rejected a previous letter from the apostles, attempted a *coup de tat* on Christ's position as head of the Church, unjustly accused the apostles with wicked words, and not satisfied with this, he himself does not receive the brethren, and he forbids those who desire to show them hospitality and excommunicates them from the church.

That brings us to v. 11 where we are encouraged to imitate the good rather than the evil. But before we run through the rest of these verses let's recap the importance of Diotrephes evil example. Diotrephes is the first known example of an elder who was exercising authority over the other elders who were passive. He was domineering, prideful, and lusted after power. He was not the *pastor* of the church because this office is unknown in the New Testament. But what Diotrephes did as an elder led to the rise of the "Monarchical Bishop" in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries. This form of church government put one "bishop" or "elder" over a group of elders. Often this took the form of one man over all the elders of all the churches in a large region (e.g. Ignatius - Bishop of Antioch). This is very dangerous. As history attests this led to the creation of new terminology that divided the church leaders from the congregation ("clergy"/"laity", "bishops" [which is actually just another term for elder], "priests" [all believers are priests but this term came to mean a special class person who can absolve sin], even "vicar [substitute] of Christ", and "Pope"). The separation was so great that the clergy became its own society; a society that did not engage in secular business or marriage. This is what is known as Hierarchical Church Government. This was the danger of allowing Diotrephes to continue to trample the people. John says that if he

comes to this little church he will call attention to his deeds, that is, he will bring this up and take care of it because it's a problem.

By the fourth century this Hierarchy became entrenched because Constantine merged Church and State. Rome became a so-called Christian nation. One day you were just a Roman citizen the next Constantine announced that you were a Christian. A state controlled church is by definition Hierarchical and by definition crushes the people. It is a center of power lust and pride. This form of Church government lasted until the Protestant Reformation when Luther, Calvin, and others said, "No more! We will not lay down to Church authority. We are subject to God's authority. Both these men fought the Papacy till the day they died because they believed the Scriptures and the Scriptures say Christ has first place in the Church, not vicars, not Pope's, not Bishops, not Priests, but Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ alone. He is our head and we are His body." It is out of this Protestant Reformation that modern forms of Church Government developed. At last the Church was out from under the umbrella of a harsh, unjust, and dangerous system.

## MODERN FORMS OF CHURCH GOVERNMENT

There are three I will mention: 1) Hierarchical, this system which we've already looked at substantially still exists today (e.g. Methodist (least), Episcopal (moderate), and Roman Catholic (extreme). 2) Congregational (e.g. some Baptist) and 3) Federal (e.g. Presbyterian, Reformed, Independent Bible Churches).

## CONGREGATIONAL GOVERNMENT

*This form of government locates ultimate authority in the members of the local church. The members often delegate responsibility to a group of leaders so that every member does not vote on every decision. But when they do vote all members have one vote. This form of government is autonomous, that is it is not connected to any other individual or organization above it except Christ the Head. Some aspects of Congregationalism have biblical support. For example, the congregation did have involvement in some of the choices that were made in the early church. First, the nomination of deacons in Acts 6.*

**Acts 6:2-6** <sup>2</sup> So the twelve [apostolic elders] summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. <sup>3</sup> "Therefore, brethren, select [choose, nominate] from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we [apostles

acting as elders] may put in charge of [appoint to] this task. <sup>4</sup> "But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." <sup>5</sup> The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. <sup>6</sup> And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them.

This is what we call a Practice of the early church. We also find what we call Precepts in the NT Epistles. Precepts are commands that must be followed but Practices are examples that we may follow but do not have to follow. I have various opinions on which Practices we should follow in the NT Scriptures. In this case I think we should follow them. This is because I think the Apostles were wiser than I am and whether I understand why they involved the congregation in this decision or not is not really the issue. They had good reason. I suggest that there are at least two reasons the apostles involved the whole congregation in this decision. 1) Verse 4 indicates that they did not want to take the time to choose the deacons. 2) Verse 1 indicates that whoever is chosen needs to be widely known among the church body as individuals that will not discriminate. A third reason they may have involved the congregation but that is not in this context is to let the congregation have a voice in some matters. But it is important to note that the apostles, who were serving as the elders of the church, were the one's who actually put in charge, or appointed the chosen men (v. 3). What would have happened if one of the seven men nominated by the congregation was not approved of by the apostolic elders? Presumably such a person would not have been allowed to serve in this capacity.

Secondly, the whole congregation was involved in selecting missionaries to travel with Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15:22

**Acts 15:22** <sup>22</sup> Then it seemed good to the apostles [itinerant] and the elders [local]<sup>i</sup>, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas-- Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren,

So, it seems that there are two Practices of the early church which involved the entire church congregation; 1) nominating deacons and 2) choosing of missionaries to support or send out.

So, Congregationalism has some biblical support in the area of two decisions. But it must be remembered that these are Practices and not Precepts. If they were Precepts then we

would have to follow them. Since they are Practices we are at liberty to either follow them or not. At present this church does not follow these Precepts but we have the liberty to do so if led by the Spirit to do so.

However, much of Congregationalism does not have biblical support. For example, they do not have a plurality of deacons and elders. Most often they have the office of pastor, which is unknown in the NT, and deacons. This is out of step with the word of God which teaches a plurality of elders and deacons (1 Tim 3; Phil 1:1). Some people argue for this type of government on the basis of the priesthood of the believer. Since all Christians are indwelt by the Spirit of God and all are priests then all should be involved in making the decisions for the church. The problems with this are two-fold. 1) While all believers are *indwelt* by the Spirit not all are *filled* by the Spirit. That's an important distinction. To be *filled* with the Spirit is to be *controlled* by the Spirit. What if carnal or immature believers show up just to make a vote to kick out the one pastoring and teaching? Is that really a good idea? 2) Most who hold that all should vote because all Christians are indwelt by the Spirit do not let children who are believers vote? So, they have a contradiction in their argument. Further, the Bible never says all Christians should make the decisions. It just doesn't say that.

## FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

In this form of government the individuals in the church give up their authority to a group of elders in the church. In the Presbyterian and Reformed churches, since they are connected to a denomination, they give up some of their autonomy to the higher organizational structure. In Independent Bible Churches, like this one, federalism is limited to the local church and is not connected to any higher organization structure but Christ is pure Head. Local autonomous churches are the biblical norm.

Federalism uses Hebrews 13:17 to show that responsibility was located in the leaders of the church and not in every member.

**Hebrews 13:17** Obey your leaders and submit *to them*, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account [notice the responsibility of the leaders. If you're not a leader then you don't have to give an account for this. What do you have to give an account for? Whether you willingly obeyed and submitted to the leaders in your church!]. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.

Members are enjoined to obey and submit to their leaders. To be sure, leadership is not dictatorship. Leadership is leadership and the members are responsible to this leadership. And leadership should be a joyful experience. But it is only joyful if the flock lets them fulfill their responsibilities with joy and not with grief. If you cause the leadership grief then it is unprofitable for you. You are just making things worse for yourself and others.

Who are the leaders in the church? This refers to the “elders”. How are the elders put into office? Acts 14:23 and Titus 1:5 show clearly that elders are appointed to office.

**Acts 14:23** <sup>23</sup> When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

Here we have the apostles who were serving in the office of elder appointing elders. There is no congregational involvement in this decision. This decision needs to be made solely by the mature elders in the church.

**Titus 1:5** <sup>5</sup> For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you,

Here we have Titus doing the appointing of elders. After the apostles passed away the mature men of the church appointed the elders. In a local church once this system is put in place the church becomes self-propagating as elders appoint other elders.

Finally, what is the biblical form of church government? Although a pure Federal Church government is biblical, it seems to me that it is best to have a blend/hybrid between Congregational and Federal government, limited to the local level. I would make seven points: 1) There should be a plurality of elders (Acts 14:23; 20:17, 28-30; 1 Tim 3:1-7). 2) An elder is appointed to the office by other elders (Acts 14:23; Tit 1:5). 3) There should be a plurality of deacons (Acts 6:1-6; Phil 1:1). 3) A deacon is nominated by the congregation and appointed by the elders (Acts 6:1-6; 1 Tim 3:8-13). 4) The congregation was and should be involved in choosing missionaries (Acts 15:22). In this case the whole church should be of one mind (Acts 15:25).

As per responsibilities, 5) the elders should shepherd/pastor the flock of God, should exercise oversight voluntarily, according to the will of God, not for gain but with eagerness, not in a lording/dictatorial fashion, but as good examples to the flock so that they will receive the unfading crown of glory (1 Pt 5:1-4). 6) The deacons responsibilities are

decided by the elders. Whatever the elders delegate to the deacons is their responsibility (Acts 6:1-6). 7) The congregations responsibility is to obey and submit to their leaders so that the elders work will be a joy (Heb 13:17).

#### D. Commendation of Demetrius (11-12)

**<sup>11</sup> Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good. The one who does good is of God; the one who does evil has not seen God. <sup>12</sup> Demetrius has received a good testimony from everyone, and from the truth itself; and we add our testimony, and you know that our testimony is true.**

**Beloved**, once more, the tone of the letter is gentle as he addresses **Gaius**. This is where John encourages **Gaius** to **not imitate what is evil, but what is good**. **Gaius** has a choice to follow his previous actions of faith and love or to fold under the pressure of **Diotrephes** and become a partaker of **evil**. Is **Gaius** going to be a pacifist or an activist? With the harsh threats of **Diotrephes** it would not be easy to stand up for **what is good**. But that is the only way a Christian can live and remain in good standing with God. This is why John says, **the one who does good is of God; the one who does evil has not seen God**. This is the key verse that shows that John the **elder** is none other than John the apostle who wrote 1<sup>st</sup> John as well. In fact, these two phrases come from **1 John 3:10b** and **3:6**. First, what does John mean when he says **the one who does good is of God**? Does he simply mean **the one who does good is a believer**? No, that's not what he is talking about. This book never says the evil example, **Diotrephes** is not a genuine believer. He probably is a believer, and most likely an elder in the church! What this phrase means is that good actions find their source in God. To be of God is to have one's actions sourced in God. This is identical to John's meaning in 1 John 3:10b where he said, "*anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother.*" I want you to notice two things about this verse. First of all it says **anyone**. This means "anyone", believer or unbeliever. If a believer or an unbeliever **does not practice righteousness** that action **is not of God**. No unrighteous act finds its source in God. So, a believer or an unbeliever can be said to be **not of God**. Second, **the one who does not love his brother** is **not of God** either. So, you see here that a believer **who does not love his brother** at some point in time can be said to be **not of God**. So, that's what John is talking about over in 3 John when he says **the one who does good is of God**. I'll tell you right now that all **good** is sourced in God and all evil is sourced in the Evil One, Satan. All our actions find as their ultimate source either God or Satan. God is always the ultimate source of good and Satan is always the ultimate source of evil. This does not remove responsibility. Humans are the responsible source for their own evil acts and that is why John is commanding

**Gaius to not imitate what is evil, but what is good.** Now, what about the end of v. 11, **the one who does evil has not seen God**. Does this mean the person **who does evil** is not a believer? No, it means nothing of the sort in John's writings. Once again, turn back to 1 John 3:6. "*No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him.*" A couple of observations here as well. First of all, notice the abiding terminology. Whenever you see this you better know the context is genuine believers. The point John is making is that whenever you as a Christian are **abiding in Christ** you are not sinning. Abiding and sinning are opposites. It's a contradiction to say you're abiding at the same time your sinning. You're doing one or the other but never both at the same time. Notice the phrase that follows and describes the one who is not abiding. **No one who literally is sinning**, not simply the **one who sins**. We all sin, but this is a present participle. Here it means "the one who is presently sinning right now". That's the one John says has not **seen Him or known Him**. This doesn't mean that the person really isn't a believer. All believers still sin (1 John 1:8). But what it means is that when you do sin you are blind to the things of God. You don't see Him properly, you don't see Him as He is. Isn't that what happens when we sin. We don't see God or know God properly. That's what John is talking about here and that's what John is talking about in 3 John 11. If **Gaius** does good then God will be the ultimate source of his actions. But if he does evil then **Gaius** has been blinded to the things of God. God would not be involved in leaving His traveling ministers without help. God provides all our needs and He often uses willing Christians as his vessels of grace and mercy. **Gaius** could be the instrument through which that 1st century help came. Will you do the good? Will you be the instrument God designed you to be? That was the challenge for **Gaius** and that is the challenge for us today; to do the good even when the pressure to do evil is weighing heavy against us and when we can't see any benefit for ourselves.

In light of this, if **Gaius** will keep his eyes on God then he will support the **good** man **Demetrius**. **Demetrius has a good testimony**. In fact he has three witnesses in his corner. 1) Everyone who knows him says he is a solid Christian. 2) The truth itself testifies to him. This means that **Demetrius** teaches the word of God. He is orthodox and the truth always testifies to those who testify of the truth! 3) The apostles add their testimony which carries apostolic authority. The apostles knew **Demetrius** personally and since an apostle is a divine messenger who speaks with the authority of God himself then their witness is true. In the OT it was required by law that you have two or three witnesses in a court of law. Here John gives three witnesses to **Demetrius**, everyone who knows him, the truth, and the apostles. This is a strong **commendation** to the man **Demetrius**. **Gaius** better provide hospitality to this man when he comes because he is a man of God. And whenever we are faithful to the children of God we are being faithful to God Himself. The fact that this short letter has been preserved for us indicates that **Gaius** was faithful when **Demetrius** arrived.

The letter went to **Gaius** and it's preservation depended on what he did with the letter. Had he done the evil thing he likely would have destroyed the letter. But the same Spirit who inspired the letter was able to move **Gaius** to do the good! In conclusion, the farewell in vv. 13-14.

### III. Farewell (13-14)

**<sup>13</sup> I had many things to write to you, but I am not willing to write *them* to you with pen and ink; <sup>14</sup> but I hope to see you shortly, and we will speak face to face. Peace be to you. The friends greet you. Greet the friends by name.**

There is more that John could write but he **hopes to see him shortly**. The only matter that needed to be addressed immediately was the sending of **Demetrius** and the encouragement to do the good thing by providing him with support. Everything else can wait until they **speak face to face**. Literally "mouth to mouth". Notice that John personally penned this letter with pen and ink from which copies were made and preserved for us today.

It would be interesting to know *if* and *how* John handled **Diotrephes** when he arrived. But God did not find it necessary to reveal. Yet this epistle is highly important in that it gives us a glimpse of a church that had fallen under the powerful sway of one man. This shows us the importance of having a plurality of elders and deacons in the church. One-man leadership can be deeply flawed, if not in the way **Diotrephes** was flawed, then in other equally bad ways. In our time, I personally, and probably many of you have personally, seen the devastating effects on a church when a single, preeminent leader falls into immorality. Good men can fall! That's why we need a plurality of elders!

John signs off with the words **peace to you. The friends greet you. Greet the friends by name**. This farewell is telling. **peace** is direct toward **Gaius** even in the midst of the threat, **Diotrephes**. The **friends** who are with John **greet Gaius** personally and ask him to **greet the friends by name**. They do not ask **Gaius** to greet the entire church. This would cause strife because then **Diotrephes** would know that the apostles had contacted **Gaius** rather than himself. This would only stir up more dissension and the apostle John wanted to wait until he personally came to set that matter straight. Therefore, **Gaius** is to **greet only the friends**. **The friends** are clearly those who are in good standing with the apostles and respect their authority. These would not be blabbermouths or gossips, but others like **Gaius**, faithful, loving, and respectful toward one another.

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<sup>i</sup> In the early development of the Church the apostles originally functioned as the elders. Acts 1:8 began to be fulfilled when the gospel moved out of Jerusalem to Samaritans in Acts 8 and to Gentiles in Acts 10. At this point (cf. Acts 11:30) the apostles took a more itinerant role, moving outside of Jerusalem into these areas. To replace their functions in Jerusalem they appointed elders who were more local (Acts 11:30). As they moved from city to city they appointed elders to carry on ministry (cf. Acts 14:23).

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