

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: 3 John 5-14

Sermon Title: "Knowing Who Is in Charge" (Christ the King Sunday)

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA

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Most of us know who the big characters are in the Bible. I can mention the name Moses, and y'all know who I am talking about, because he is a big guy in the Old Testament. I can mention Jacob and Joseph, and you know them as important characters as well. David, Solomon, Isaiah, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Jesus.

But who is Diotre-phas? What does he have to do with the Bible? We don't know who this guy is. My computer didn't know who Diotre-phas was. There was a red line drawn underneath his name, and when I right-clicked it, the options Diagraphs and Dystrophies appeared. I had to make my computer learn the name of Diotre-phas.

Let's paint a little picture.¹ John, a direct disciple of Jesus Christ, has been writing letters to small churches that meet in homes. New Christians could not meet in the Jewish synagogues, so they created home churches in which people could learn and

¹ I took much of this picture from Gary M. Burge, *The NIV Application Commentary: Letters of John*, cf. 245-248.

worship. These fresh churches experience birth pains like any new Christian does: There is the way society wants them to live, and they still think they could live that way; but John tells them that God has an alternative life which is more fulfilling, blessed and perfected. John sends these new Christians at least two letters that describe how to love God and love neighbor, and thus grow as a stronger fellowship of disciples.

But the churches not only feel the outside pressures of their society telling them to sin all they want, but also feel internal pressures among their leaders. One of these leaders is Diotre-phas. He is the leader of one of these home churches. He steps forward and rejects the letters of John. He rejects John and his helpers having anything to do with his particular home church. Diotre-phas has denounced John publicly, spreading rumors about his character. He has even been so bold as to stop other church members from other home churches from welcoming John or his helpers, if they ever show up. It says in 3 John 10, that anyone who takes John's side on any spiritual matter will be thrown out of the church.

For some reason Diotre-phas has it out for John. He asserts himself as somebody who knows better than John, even though he is a direct disciple of

Christ. Maybe Diotre-phas doesn't like John, because at one point John wrote about false prophets that infiltrate the church and steal people away from God. They spout their own theology, which has nothing to do with God. They influence people to look up to them, not look up to God. Some people like to be seen and heard – they like to have their own posse following them around. Diotre-phas may have his own posse, his own entourage, and he doesn't want John coming in and messing it up.

Maybe Diotre-phas is one of those church leaders who wants to take over the church as its bishop. During the early period of the disciples, elder-bishops emerged who could oversee certain congregations in their areas. They could stand in as spokesmen for the disciples, and they could lead people in the study of Scripture and worship of God. But some of these elder-bishops liked being independent from the other churches. They wanted to exercise authority over their flocks, and tell them what to believe and do. Diotre-phas may be one of those elder-bishops who covets control, who loves to have people accepting his every word.

Last week we talked about authority. Authority is good, when it comes to Jesus Christ. We need Christ

as the authority, the power, the influence over us. The Pharisees, scribes, and chief priests stuck their fingers in Jesus' face and asked, "Who do you think you are to have the authority to turn the temple of God upside-down?" The religious leaders thought they were the owners of God's temple, when in fact God is the owner. The same applies to these smaller home churches that were cropping up left and right. God had complete ownership, complete influence over each of those churches. The leaders, whether they called themselves elder-bishops or not, were managers of what God owned. They were still Christ's disciples.

Diotre-phanes didn't see it this way. He stuck his finger in John's face and said, "Who do you think you are, coming in here and invading what is rightfully mine?" For all we know, the church met in Diotre-phanes's house, so he might have felt he had extra right to rule over that church. Funny thing is, that home was never his to begin with. God gave him the means to live there, so his house belonged to God. Diotre-phanes's life was never his, because God gave him the chance to breathe. His very life belonged exclusively to God. And that church would not have existed without Jesus Christ, God's only Son, so God had every right over that home church and its leaders and its members. Diotre-phanes didn't have one leg to stand on.

It would have been better for him to stop fighting, take a knee, and submit his will to the will of the Father.

I have known churches that had patriarchs or matriarchs ruling over the congregations, directing the next steps the members ought to take. A patriarch of a church usually is a founding member of the church, or the man who has been a member for the longest period of time. A matriarch is the same, but in female form (naturally). Without their approval, ministry could not happen. The members would rather listen to them and not the pastor, not even pray to God for what they should do next. They followed the matriarch or patriarch mainly because they didn't want to upset that elderly person. I have known churches in which people had to meet with these patriarchs or matriarchs for their approval, and they weren't Elders on Session or members of any committee.

There was once an older gentleman of a particular church who was in charge of the Building and Grounds Committee. He was the Building and Grounds Committee. He had absolute rule over how the grass was mowed, how the building was preserved, how the sanctuary and Sunday Schools looked, and how the parking lot was maintained. If you wanted to

hold a gathering in the fellowship hall, you had to run it by him. If you wanted to paint some wall or decorate some room, he had to know about it.

Churches might be ruled by families who have the most members in church. Large families might throw their weight around, and force the church to stay as it is or go in whatever direction they want. There was once a family that dictated what sort of lessons the church would use in Sunday School. If that family did not agree with the theology, they threw out that material. They accepted only that which they thought was the true word of God, according to their tastes. You can only guess who taught most of those Sunday School classes and Bible studies.

I am proud to announce that we don't have that kind of nonsense going on here. Not one person nor a group of people rules over the Sunday School, the Life Groups, or even the Building and Grounds Committee, except the Lord Jesus Christ. We do not have a patriarch or matriarch who sits on a golden throne and commands their subjects how we ought to learn and worship. We do have patriarchs and matriarchs, older adults among us who have contributed to the work of our church. They are prayerful – they are faithful. They still contribute to the ministry God

wants us to carry out in this community, and we see their examples and learn from them.

We will not find a Diotre-phes here. We won't allow it. We all know who is in charge of this church. We know who the Head is, Jesus Christ. We have ruling members in our church, known as Elders. We have a teaching elder, who is me. We may oversee the basic operations of the church, but we don't assume charge and then do as we please. Our leadership does not arise by anything we have done. Leadership is given by God. God has called us as Elders and Pastor. God gives us certain responsibilities to oversee, and God entrusts us to make sure the kingdom of God is served. We too have to be constantly prayerful and open to what the will of God is, and we have to constantly trust that God gives us all we need to make his will a reality.

Each one of us may oversee a specific ministry in the church. That ministry may involve music and worship, or it may involve Christian education or fellowship or mission. We might take charge of a certain project such as the Food Pantry or Kids' Club or Youth Group or the Christmas program. We might teach a certain Life Group or Sunday School, using a booklet that discusses the Bible or daily struggles we

face. Whatever it is, we don't approach those situations, thinking we can act like Diotre-phes. If a project is going to get done, it is done for the Lord. If a lesson is going to be taught, it is for the Lord. We work together as teacher and class to read, understand, and carry out what God's word says. A Christmas program or a special fellowship event is not carried out to boost our own egos. Success or failure is not measured by our high standards. All we do is a success, if the word of God is touching at least one person. If something we do or say makes one person think a little more about God, then it is successful to the glory of God.

No matter where we find ourselves in our church, we know God is in charge. We understand that all things were created by God through Christ. The Holy Spirit gives us this understanding. Everything is created for Christ: our ideas, our programs and projects, our ministries and mission, our leadership and service, and our very bodies. Christ is the head of it all.

Diotre-phes never got this. We never discover if he ever got it, if his home church ever got out of the deep pit he had dug for them. For all we know his church failed, and Diotre-phes was left with nothing. Thank

goodness there was Gaius and his home church, and Demetrius and his home church.² These were elders-bishops that John wrote to, and we find that they loved the truth of God. They loved to hear what John and his followers had to say. On their own they loved learning more about God and his ministries. Those home churches flourished, grew healthier every day, and generously shared the good news of God with anyone who wanted to hear.

They knew who was in charge. We know who is in charge, and by that understanding we grow stronger every day. We glorify God in the power and influence he holds, and our community flourishes.

² Cf. 3 John 1-4, 12.

Assurance of Pardon

“For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him.” Friends, believe the good news: In Christ you and I are forgiven. Thanks be to God.