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Item Type	Article
Authors	Ogereau, Julien M.
Publisher	Asia Pacific Theological Seminary
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Download date	2026-06-18 12:41:44
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/236707

APOSTOLIC AUTHORITY AND PASTORAL LEADERSHIP IN
THE JOHANNINE EPISTLES

By Julien M. Ogereau

Introduction

The critique that much of western ecclesiastical leadership has been somewhat negatively influenced by the secular world can hardly be considered a novel idea. And indeed many of our contemporaries, be it Pentecostals or Evangelicals, have decried the increasing corporatization of church leadership across nearly all denominations. Pastors and scholars such as John Piper, Eugene Peterson, Andrew Purves or Henri Nouwen,¹ to name only a few of the critics that I have encountered in my personal reading, have thus expressed their concern that the ever pressing need for contemporary relevance or ministry performance is causing modern ecclesiastical leadership to somewhat lose sight of its theological and biblical compass. We ought not be dismayed or offended by such criticism, for if there is one lesson we may learn from church history it is that leaders are always faced with the risk to misconstrue their identity and function,

¹ See J. Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals*; E.H. Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*; H.J.M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus, Reflections on Christian Leadership*; A. Purves, *The Crucifixion of Ministry*.

and abuse their calling and responsibility.

Although this is not the place for us to review in detail the nature and validity of these criticisms, it is nonetheless our contention that there exists a need for Pentecostal pastors and leaders to engage in a decisive, and incisive, self-introspection regarding that which informs our leadership ethos and practise, and to challenge those views that distort healthy models of leadership and misrepresent God. In particular, it is our deepest conviction that a proper understanding of leadership ought to be solidly grounded upon a theological foundation that is directly derived from scriptural principles, rather than upon an assortment of corporate and utilitarian ‘tips’ gleaned from the leadership paper-backs that fill the self-help sections of many of our Christian bookstores. This we owe to our Lord for the sake of the theological and scriptural integrity of the church, and this we owe to the people of God out of pastoral responsibility and concern.

Traditionally, however, such exegetical and theological enterprise seems to have mainly focused upon the Pauline corpus and on passages such as 1 Corinthians 1-4, Ephesians 5, or 1 Timothy 3, much to the detriment of the Johannine literature. Although there is much truth to be gleaned from Paul’s instructions to and interaction with the many churches he established, it is somewhat regrettable that the Johannines have been mostly neglected in this area. This is all the more unfortunate that, as our paper will hopefully reveal, the first, second and third epistles of John do provide us with some invaluable insight into the pastoral and leadership issues facing the Ephesian community and the way its leaders handled them. In particular, John’s

treatment of the insidious proto-Gnostic or Docetic controversy in 1 and 2 John, as well as his dealing with the overbearing leader Diotrephes in 3 John, gives us a most instructive glimpse into the nature of first-century apostolic authority and its utilization by the so-called elder John, whoever that John might have been.

In the following paper it will therefore be our intention to meticulously scrutinize these three epistles so as to draw some principles or guidelines that will be of particular significance and applicability to contemporary pastoral ministry. We shall attain this objective by combining a socio-historical approach to reconstruct the situation behind these documents, the *Sitz im Leben* if you will, with a traditional exegetical approach. It is our hope that upon careful investigation we will be able to demonstrate to the current audience that John, by wisely and lovingly taking responsibility for the spiritual care of the souls entrusted to him, epitomizes the humble, gentle and caring shepherd that ought to be the pastor of a Christian community. Yet at the same time, in hindsight we shall discover in the elder John quite an assertive and authoritative leader who does not shy away from his duty to oppose and refute those threatening the doctrinal, ethical and social integrity of the *ekklēsia*. We shall conclude that inasmuch as John seems to combine in a balanced manner his apostolic authority to protect and edify the community with a gentle and caring pastoral demeanour, he establishes a most admirable and legitimate model for contemporary pastoral leadership, one which every Pentecostal leader or minister ought to meditate upon and seek to emulate in principle and character.

Prolegomena

Before we proceed any further, however, it is important we address, or at least acknowledge, the issue that has perhaps been the most controversial in Johannine scholarship in recent years. I mean the question of authorship of course. As many of you are aware, I presume, there has been a resurgence of contestation as regards the true identity of the elder named John. Most recently, New Testament scholar Richard Bauckham, for instance, has been a major contender against the traditional position that John the son of Zebedee, one of the Twelve, is the true author of these documents.² Such scepticism about the authorship is hardly surprising given the complete anonymity of these epistles. For indeed, as Westcott once commented concerning 1 John, we are faced with the problem that the letter “has no address, no subscription; no name is contained in it of person or place: there is no direct trace of the author, no indication of any special destination.”³ In that regard 1 John is unique in the New Testament. As for 2 and 3 John, the only information they provide us is that it has been written by a certain πρεσβύτερος (cf., 2 Jn 1 & 3 Jn 1), a title which ought to be understood as indicating not only seniority in age, but also perhaps seniority in responsibility and authority over the local congregation, or group thereof. While the fact that this elder is not named is quite perplexing, it ought to be understood as implying that the recipients

² R. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 412-437.

³ B.F. Westcott quoted in L.M McDonald and S.E. Porter, *Early Christianity*, 547.

knew the author of the letters very well, as indeed his use of endearing terms such as *τεκνία, παιδιά* or *πατέρες* reveal,⁴ so that he did not need to formally identify himself. What is also important to note is the fact that, according to 1 John 1:1-2, this elder had been an immediate witness to the life, death and resurrection of Christ, and therefore represented a guardian and proclaimer of the early kerygmatic tradition. In other words, the elder was a man of first-class apostolic standing and authority, a leader whose influence was region-wide, as Irenaeus reports via Polycarp, the once bishop of Smyrna and former disciple of John.⁵ To our mind, these few details are actually of much greater significance than perhaps the current debate concerning the real identity of the elder John, for it implies that 1, 2, and 3 John bring us straight back to the early years of the apostolic tradition. In other words, the unsolvable issue of anonymity ought not to undermine our confidence in these documents since they constitute a genuine apostolic witness, one which we ought to be all the more eager to heed and learn from. And ultimately, whether or not one settles for Bauckham's hypothesis, which in many aspects I find very convincing myself, will actually bear very little implication upon our current investigation. Therefore, in the remainder of this paper we will simply follow the common tradition and assume the apostle John to be the elder and author of these three epistles, which were written to the Christian community in and around Ephesus towards the end of the first century.

A last prolegomenous question we need to address concerns

⁴ See 1 Jn 2:1, 12-14, 18, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4.

⁵ Cf., Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 2.22.5.

the relationship that exists between these three epistles. Although some have posited that 2 and 3 John could have been covering letters to the Fourth Gospel or 1 John that carried private notes, counsels or greetings, there is no convincing evidence that it was so. And even if it were so, in our opinion it would be of little consequence for our current study. What is more important to note, however, is the literary and historical unity of these epistles, which strongly suggests a single authorship, as has been widely accepted by most scholars, Bauckham included.⁶ Examining these letters together thus commands itself to us, for as one commentator put it, it is impossible to study the Johannine problem if any one of these writing is isolated from the other two.⁷ In the following paper, we shall therefore proceed by following the canonical order.

Heresy and Apostolic Response in 1 John

We may now begin our investigation of the first epistle of John. As we do so, our attention should not only focus upon the content of John's letter but also upon the way he exercised his apostolic leadership over the congregation. Admittedly, our knowledge of the controversy affecting this early Christian community is very limited. What appears certain however is that the situation had become so critical that the survival of the church itself was at stake. Indeed, a certain group of would-be disciples claiming to be inspired by the Holy Spirit had disrupted the community with a teaching contrary to that of

⁶ R. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 423.

⁷ See J.R.W. Stott, *The Epistles of John*, 26.

the elder, thereby causing dissention and leading some believers astray. And of course, both their teaching and behaviour stood as a blatant rejection of the elder's faithful apostolic witness and authority. We may gain further insight into the situation by discerning in the elder's refutations some of the arguments of these dissidents, which clearly challenged a traditional understanding of the Gospel at theological, ethical and social levels.⁸ His many appeals to the physical and fleshly reality of Jesus in 1:1-3; 4:2-3; and 5:6, suggest that these ψευδοπροφήται who had come out from the community itself had deceived some of the disciples into believing in a form of high, very high indeed, christology emphasizing the spiritual divinity of Christ to the point of immateriality.⁹ Inevitably, such Gnostic inclination that considered human incarnation inherently evil had shaken the disciples' assurance of salvation. Furthermore, as verses 6, 8 and 10 of chapter one suggest, their insidious teaching had incited believers to downplay the effects of sin and indulge in unethical behaviour. The repeated exhortations in 1:7, 2:7, 2:9-11, 3:10-14, 4:7, 4:11-12, and 4:20-21, also clearly indicate that they had undermined the imperative of Christ to love one another. This brief sample of internal evidence enables us to identify these secessionists, as Kruse calls them, with proponents of a late first-century form of Gnosticism and/or Cerinthian Docetism, a heretical teaching named after a certain Cerinthus who was a contemporary of John himself.¹⁰ Whether these opponents were

⁸ The three "if we say" formula in 1 John 1:6-10 clearly reveal some of these arguments John undertook to refute. He will continue to do so in 2:1 ff.

⁹ Cf., 1 Jn 2:19 & 4:1.

¹⁰ See Eusebius, 3.28.1-6, and Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 3.3.4 & 3.11.1.

Cerintus' disciples or unrelated Christians who had adopted his philosophy might unfortunately remain forever unclear. What is more important to our discussion however is to observe John's response to this situation as an apostle and elder of the community. What is perhaps most striking at first is the gentle touch and affectionate tone of his letter, which is very revealing of the tender, pastoral demeanour he adopted towards his disciples. Indeed, he seemed mainly concerned with preserving his 'dear' or 'little children' into the truth, joy and light of God.¹¹ Wanting to protect them from this satanic assault, he constantly comforted them and reassured them of the certainty of their salvation, if they remain in Christ, and sought to restore to the community her original joy, holiness and confidence in her eternal destiny.¹² This is beautifully illustrated for instance in the brief interlude in 2:12-14, in which he reminds them that their sins have been forgiven on account of his name, that they have come to know him who is from the beginning, or that they have overcome the evil one. Findlay therefore summarizes it well when he qualifies this letter as "a masterpiece in the art of edification."¹³

Yet, we ought not to think that the elder handled the dissidents with the same love, care and attention he showed his disciples, nor that he shunned employing his apostolic authority to rebuke them. Indeed, right from the onset he strongly reminded his audience of his unique apostolic status as one of the original witnesses who had beheld, heard and touched the Lord himself. In a sense, we

¹¹ 1 Jn 1:4, 6-8, 2:9, 3:18.

¹² 1 Jn 1:4, 2:1, 5:13.

¹³ Findlay quoted in J.R.W. Stott, *The Epistles of John*, 41.

must not fail to read or hear the prologue for what it really is: an ‘unapologetic *apologia*’ of his apostolic witness combined with a stern rebuke of the theological errors of his opponents. Such a strong stance was however justified in that his detractors had usurped his own authority and challenged the apostolic foundation on which the *ekklēsia* had initially been established. Consequently, the elder would not spare his rod but severely censured his detractors, successively accusing them of being some ἀντίχριστοι, since they do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, or some ψευδοπροφήται who speak by the inspiration of the evil one, lie and deny both the Father and the Son. Later in 2 John 7, he would reiterate his accusation against those he qualified of being πλάνος, that is, deceivers or seducers, who lead sheep astray. We must also be careful to note that John made no attempt whatsoever to reconcile with these ‘false brothers.’ Even more surprising, he did not even give them a chance to repent from their wicked ways and be restored to the community. Rather, he only pronounced their judgment, which ultimately signified their doom, and in 5:16 advised believers not to pray for them, perhaps because he doubted the efficacy of their prayers, as Stott judiciously notes.¹⁴ The separation between the true believers and these impostors was therefore to be total and irremediable, political correctness and religious openness notwithstanding. Then, in the remaining of the epistle, John set several assessments, traditionally presented by Robert Law as the doctrinal, moral, and social tests.¹⁵ These appear to have been designed

¹⁴ J.R.W. Stott, *The Epistles of John*, 187-190.

¹⁵ See J.R.W. Stott, *The Epistles of John*, 52-54, 103 & 128; and J.M. Boice, *The Epistles of John*, 14-15, 54-70, 82-94.

to help the church discern the true ‘sheep’ from the ‘goats,’ to echo Jesus’ parable in Matthew 25, or in John’s own words, to distinguish between the “children of God” and those that are “of the world.”¹⁶ Once again, we ought to appreciate how John allowed no middle ground, no compromise, but drew a clear line in the sand to separate those who truly belonged to the Ephesian *ekklēsia* from those who did not. At the same time, not content to “leverage pastoral authority as power anchored in a position,”¹⁷ as one critique noted, John empowered his disciples to exercise their own discernment by means of the anointing that they had received. Thus, in 4:1 he charged them to “test the spirits” themselves, for as Brown puts it, John understood that although “One cannot deny the Spirit,” “One must teach discernment and urge believers to weigh claims made in the voice of the Spirit.”¹⁸

To sum up, in light of our brief examination of this first epistle it is evident that the elder John proved to be a gentle and loving pastor, who in a sense did deserve his nickname of ‘apostle of love.’ Yet, at the same time this view of John as a gentle apostle ought to be nuanced by that of the authoritative leader that he was, a leader who in the like manner of Jesus himself, the good shepherd,¹⁹ did not hesitate to courageously stand across the gate of the sheepfold and protect his flock from the ravenous wolves and their treacherous heresies. In my opinion, it is such balanced perspective of leadership that ought to inform our understanding of the nature of true apostolic ministry. A

¹⁶ 1 Jn 3:1-2; 5:2; 4:5.

¹⁷ See G.M. Burge, “Letters of John,” in R.P. Martin and P.H. Davids, (eds.), *Dictionary of the Later New Testament*.

¹⁸ R.E. Brown, *Community of the Beloved Disciple*, 143.

¹⁹ Cf. Jn 10:1-18.

genuine and faithful apostolic leader is one who devotes himself sacrificially and wholeheartedly to his Christian community, while at the same time protects her from heretical teaching and maintains her in the long tradition of the apostolic witness regarding Jesus' humanity and divinity, his vicarious death and resurrection. The final question this epistle addresses us of course is whether an apostolic leader is the ecclesiastical entrepreneur our contemporary western culture has made him to be? Let us now turn our attention to 2 and 3 John to confirm whether our initial conclusions are consistent throughout the Johannines, and to see whether we cannot glean any more insight into first-century apostolic leadership.

Apostolic Oversight and Ecclesiastical Polity in 2 & 3 John

If we are to follow the received tradition that 2 and 3 John succeeded 1 John, then John's initial letter appears to have failed to resolve the theological controversy affecting the community in the first place. The situation actually grew worse as some of the secessionists began "traveling the circuit of the Johannine house churches in an attempt to spread both their teaching and their influence,"²⁰ as 2 John 10 indeed reveals. This insidious move by the dissenters now required a more radical approach and a new hand-written communication by the elder regarding the issue of hospitality towards itinerant missionaries. Admittedly, the brevity of this second letter and its lack of theological content could hardly be said to do justice to the gravity of the situation.

²⁰

T.F. Johnson, *New International Biblical Commentary*, 10.

What is more, the absence of a prologue asserting the apostolic authority of the sender somewhat leaves the impression that this time he is being more lenient or casual perhaps. Yet, we ought not to overlook the authoritative connotation of the title elder, a title which would not have failed to strongly remind the recipients of who actually bore the responsibility for the pastoral oversight of this congregation, that is, the elect lady and her children as she is symbolically referred to in verse 1. This then would have served to further strengthen the authoritativeness of his radical and unequivocal instruction in verses 10-11: these antichrists are to be shunned from the local community, he commands, by withholding both greeting and hospitality from them. It is important at this stage to ponder on the significance and severity of the elder's directive, which we ought not to read anachronistically. As we all know, in the first century hospitality constituted a most basic social duty to travelers, who could not rely on good infrastructures as most inns functioned as houses of disrepute. Consequently, any congregation would have been expected to extend hospitality to itinerant Christian teachers, as well as send them away with enough supplies and finances to support them in their travel. In this context then, *χαίρειν* actually meant much more than just a social formality or salutation, but as Howard Marshall explains, it represented "a positive expression of encouragement" conveying a sense of support and "solidarity."²¹ Thus the withholding of these two important social obligations, which for Christians had also strong spiritual connotations and implications, signified a most blatant rejection of these itinerant

²¹I.H. Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 74 & 76.

preachers, and in a sense evoked their censure and condemnation. Such exclusion from the Christian community appears all the more severe that in 1 John 1:3 the elder had elevated the Christian ideal of *koinonia* with God and each other as the ultimate goal of the Gospel. Far from being unnecessarily harsh however, this drastic measure constituted the most practical and effective way to protect the church, and to impair the ministry of these false-prophets by undermining their access to material and financial assistance. To summarize our very succinct survey of this second epistle and seemingly insignificant document, it is useful to reiterate that a good and faithful apostolic leader appears to be one who takes a strong and practical stand against spiritual impostors, so as to protect the *ekklēsia* and defend her theological integrity. Let us conclude our study of the Johannine epistles by turning to 3 John, a small but interesting letter in which the elder's dealing with a certain Diotrephes will prove very instructive.

Although we will never really know the historical outcome and reaction of the community to 2 John, a last epistle written to a certain Gaius reveals to us that the elder's resolution was not unanimously received and adopted. Indeed, for reasons unbeknownst to us, a certain Diotrephes, of whom nearly nothing is known, took the elder's imperative too far and categorically objected against offering any kind of hospitality to itinerant ministers, be it genuine preachers of the Gospel or so-called antichrists. As a result he evicted, or if we are to translate ἐκβάλλει in verse 10 literally, he 'threw out' of the congregation any member who had done so. The use of this cognate is not without reminding us of that used to describe Jesus' cleansing of

the temple in John 2:15, which clearly hints at the vigour with which Diotrephes proceeded. To add insult to injury, he maliciously disparaged the elder through foolish and evil slander and rejected his emissaries, which in the first-century world meant no less than literally shaming the elder and discarding his authority (cf. 3 Jn 9). As a “self-promoted demagogue” with obviously a very “dominant personality,”²² as F.F. Bruce puts it, or perhaps more simply as the patron of the church meeting in his own house, it is quite possible that Diotrephes actually sought to take advantage of the situation and had seized the executive control of the congregation. What is most interesting to note in any case is how the elder incriminated Diotrephes’ corrupt and selfish ambitions as the principal cause of the trouble. Our English translations hardly convey how the Greek construction ‘ὁ φιλοπρωτεύων αὐτῶν Διοτρήφης’ in verse 9 emphasises his egotistical character and love for prominence. If we are to follow Findlay who remarks that the name Diotrephes was rather rare and found mainly among the aristocracy, then such attitude is hardly surprising as it was so characteristic of the Roman high social classes.²³ Yet, within the assembly of the saints the elder was not to put up with any of this social competition for prominence and status that was so typical of the surrounding society. Instead, he was to come to publicly hold the culprit accountable for his evil behaviour and rebuke him accordingly, as ὑπομνήσκω in verse 10 suggests.²⁴ In the meantime, however, it

²² F.F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John*, 152.

²³ See Findlay quoted in J.R.W. Stott, *The Epistles of John*, 225

²⁴ I.H. Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, pp. 90-91, here suggests that a better translation of ὑπομνήσκω would be “to take up the matter,” implying a much more decisive leadership initiative by the elder such as censure and

seems as though he expected the community to govern itself autonomously and take the necessary action. On a slight tangent, what is also interesting for us to note here is the elder's intention to rush to "speak face to face" with Gaius,²⁵ or mouth to mouth as they would say in Greek, in order to resolve the conflict. This should certainly serve as a strong reminder to many of us, not least the writer, that in this day and age of fast-paced cyberspace communication pastoral concerns are always better dealt with face to face, through dignifying human contact and consideration. What is also important for us not to miss is the sense of urgency animating the elder, as is clearly expressed by the adverb εὐθέως in verse 14, which should forbid us to think that he remained somewhat distant, careless and passive in this matter. Instead, it is quite likely that he wrote to Gaius first to announce his visit, whose main purpose was to deal with Diotrephes' improper behaviour. What is perhaps most fundamental and relevant to our enquiry however is to recognise how the elder concluded his letter by contrasting Diotrephes, whose attitude and deeds were not to be imitated – notice μὴ μιμοῦ in verse 10; to Demetrius, most likely the carrier of the letter, who had been approved and commended by all and by the Lord himself. In so doing the elder elevated one as a model for Gaius to follow and lowered the other down as the antithesis of a good leader. Interestingly enough, despite the elder's opposition to Diotrephes' autocratic attitude, his leadership style was to later become in the second century characteristic of the so-called monarchical bishops, who would eventually preside single-handedly over the elders

repression.

²⁵ Cf., 3 Jn 14.

and entire congregations. Still, his disapproval of Diotrephes should constitute a sobering warning to any contemporary leader aspiring to become prominent or firmly in control of church affairs. As such, it represents a legitimate critique that is very much applicable to our current context in which it would seem that leadership charisma, personal talent, driven personality, or even sometimes private ambitions, can often be more determining to ministerial office or leadership position than genuine, Christ-like character and sound theological education. This of course ought not to be so, and if there is one lesson perhaps that Diotrephes should remind us of is that many who wish to be first will eventually be last,²⁶ and that God always brings the proud low, but exalts the humble.²⁷ To close this chapter on 3 John, let me invite each and everyone of us to ponder and reflect upon some of the penetrating and relevant questions Pentecostal scholar John Thomas addresses us: “Are there leaders in the church today who act in a fashion similar to Diotrephes?” “How widespread is this leadership model?” “How does it feel to be led by a leader like Diotrephes? In what ways does such leadership impair the ministry of the body?” Let me suggest that as pastors, leaders, ministry mentors and instructors, such questions are important and deserving of our careful consideration and attention.

²⁶ Cf., Matt 19:30.

²⁷ Cf., Lk 1:52.

Conclusion

To summarize our brief investigation of the Johannine epistles, let me reiterate how valuable these three letters are in providing us with significant insight into late first-century ecclesiastical polity. What is more, they prove to be precious documents in teaching us pastoral and leadership principles that are relevant and applicable to more contemporary situations. I would not dare to claim however that I have exhaustively answered all the questions regarding leadership in the Johannines. Far be it from the truth. I have offered you a mere glimpse of what is to be uncovered. I only wanted to whet our appetite and incite our curiosity to conduct further research in that area. From our careful examination we may nonetheless conclude that the Johannine epistles draw a vivid and compelling portrait of a true apostolic leader. A leader who, when his community is in spiritual disarray, upholds the truth of the Gospel and of the historical incarnation of Christ with the greatest determination, vigour and passion. A leader who strives to maintain the integrity of the church doctrinally, ethically and socially, and who seeks to strengthen the disciples' assurance of salvation, amidst fierce opposition and theological controversy. The portrait drawn from these epistles actually starkly contrasts with the image of the 'Son of Thunder' found in the Gospel of Mark – perhaps another clue to the question of authorship here. Rather, they reveal to us an exemplary, non-dictatorial

elder-pastor who wholeheartedly loved his disciples, taught them accurately and faithfully in the apostolic tradition, and exhorted them in the true Christian faith. As such, John embodies the good shepherd who, in the like-manner of Paul, wisely used his apostolic authority to edify the *ekklēsia* and protect God's flock from the treachery of the antichrists. A humble servant who is not seduced by the glitter of charismatic personality or resorts to power and politics to advance his own ambitions, but one who delves into the servant-nature of Jesus that he may effectively and faithfully serve his community. Without the shadow of a doubt, John the elder establishes a most remarkable leadership model that we, Pentecostal pastors and leaders alike, ought to follow and emulate in thought and action.

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