Despite the fact that our knowledge of Diotrephes is confined to what is said of him in 3 John 9–10, he has been regarded as of great importance because he provides us with a glimpse into the development of early Christianity at the end of the first century. The attempts to place him in his proper context have resulted in quite diverse interpretations of what is said about him.\(^1\)

A traditional interpretation, represented by Theodor Zahn, held that Diotrephes was an autocratic bishop who had the power of excommunication (v. 10, ἐκ τῆς ἐκκλησίας ἐκβάλει).\(^2\) What Diotrephes is accused of, according to this interpretation, is not that he does not have the authority to excommunicate, but that he employs it in an imperious and ruinous manner.

Adolf Harnack saw the chief importance of 3 John in the information it affords us with regard to the development of church organization in Asia Minor.\(^3\) On the one hand is the Elder who exercises great influence over the churches in the region, using his traveling emissaries as a means of control over them. On the other is Diotrephes, who, with the majority of his church, rejects the authority of the Elder by refusing to receive his emissaries. This Harnack regards as evidence of the consolidation of individual churches and the rejection of the old provincial mission organization. Diotrephes, according to this interpretation, is the first monarchical bishop whose name we know.

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More recently the tendency has been to find theological motives for Diotrephes’s actions. Walter Bauer placed Diotrephes in the struggle between “orthodoxy” and “heresy,” making him a representative of the latter. On this understanding, Diotrephes takes the same action against the emissaries of the Elder that the latter in 2 John 10–11 had prescribed against docetists. Ernst Käsemann is also convinced that the issue between the Elder and Diotrephes was not merely personal or a matter of church organization, but in fact theological. However, he stands Bauer’s theory on its head: Diotrephes was theologically traditional, the Elder innovative. This is proven for him by the fact that the Elder does not accuse Diotrephes of heresy, which one would have expected him to do had Diotrephes been heretical. He further suggests that Diotrephes had excommunicated the Elder, and that his authority was therefore recognized by Diotrephes’s church and by the Elder, who had formerly been a member of it.

In the absence of unambiguous information that can serve as a control, the temptation is always to fit Diotrephes into a preconceived scheme, and none of these interpretations successfully resists it. Given the paucity of information about Diotrephes, the most that can be claimed for any of these theories by their proponents is that they may be probable. Acknowledging that we are limited to probabilities, I suggest that we attempt to understand Diotrephes in light of the main subject of 3 John, which is the extension of hospitality to fellow Christians. That is the point at issue, and by examining what is said of Diotrephes from the perspective of the practice in the New Testament, we may hope to attain some clarity on his actions.

**Patterns of Early Christian Hospitality**

The practice of private hospitality was widely recognized as a virtue in antiquity, but may have declined as such in the pagan world of the first century AD. The mobility which characterized the period brought with it

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