

Order in the Church! (1 Timothy 5)

The first problem the early church faced was also a modern one: A group of church members was neglected by the ministering staff (Acts 6). I once heard a certain pastor described as “a man who is invisible during the week and incomprehensible on Sunday.” Again, somebody in his congregation was feeling neglected.

Then Paul instructed Timothy how to minister to specific groups in his church.

The Older Members (5:1–2)

Paul admonished Timothy to minister to the various kinds of people in the church, and not to show partiality (1 Tim. 5:21). Since Timothy was a younger man, he might be tempted to ignore the older members, so Paul urged him to love and serve all of the people, regardless of their ages. The church is a family: Treat the older members like your mother and father, and the younger members like your brothers and sisters.

The Old Widows (5:3–10)

From the beginning of its ministry, the church had a concern for believing widows (Acts 6:1; 9:39). Of course, the nation of Israel had sought to care for widows; and God had given special legislation to protect them (Deut. 10:18; 24:17; Isa. 1:17). God’s special care for the widows is a recurring theme in Scripture (Deut. 14:29; Ps. 94:6; Mal. 3:5). It was only right that the local church show compassion to these women who were in need.

However, the church must be careful not to waste its resources on people who really are not in need. Whether we like to admit it or not, there are individuals and entire families who “milk” local churches, while they themselves refuse to work or to use their own resources wisely. As long as they can get handouts from the church, why bother to go to work?

Paul listed the qualifications a widow must meet if she is to be supported by the church.

Without human support (vv. 5a, 8, “desolate”). If a widow had relatives, they should care for her so that the church might use its money to care for others who have no help. If her own children

were dead, then her grandchildren (the KJV translates them “nephews” in 1 Tim. 5:4) should accept the responsibility. When you recall that society in that day did not have the kind of institutions we have today—pensions, Social Security, retirement homes, and so forth—you can see how important family care really was. Of course, the presence of such institutions today does not relieve any family of its loving obligations. “Honor thy father and thy mother” is still in the Bible (Ex. 20:12; Eph. 6:1–3).

Suppose a relative is unwilling to help support his loved one? “He ... is worse than an unbeliever!” was Paul’s judgment (1 Tim. 5:8 NIV; also see v. 16). A missionary friend of mine, now with the Lord, came home from the field to care for her sick and elderly parents. She was severely criticized by some of her associates (“We should love God more than father and mother!”), but she remained faithful to the end. Then she returned to the field for years of fruitful service, knowing she had obeyed God. After all, we love God by loving His people, and He has a special concern for the elderly, the widows, and the orphans.

A believer with a faithful testimony (vv. 5b–7). The church could not care for all the widows in the city, but it should care for believers who are a part of the fellowship. We should “do good unto all ... especially unto them who are of the household of faith” (Gal. 6:10). A widow the church helps should not be a self-indulgent person, seeking pleasure, but a godly woman who hopes in God and has a ministry of intercession and prayer. See Luke 2:36–37 for an example of a godly widow.

It has been my experience in three different pastorates that godly widows are “spiritual powerhouses” in the church. They are the backbone of the prayer meetings. They give themselves to visitation, and they swell the ranks of teachers in the Sunday school. It has also been my experience that, if a widow is not godly, she can be a great problem to the church. She will demand attention, complain about what the younger people do, and often “hang on the telephone” and gossip. (Of course, it is not really “gossip.” She only wants her friends to be able to “pray more intelligently” about these matters!) Paul made it clear (1 Tim. 5:7) that church-helped widows must be “blameless”—irreproachable.

At least sixty years old (v. 9a). A woman of this age was not likely to get remarried in that day, though sixty is not considered that “old” today. Perhaps the verb “taken into the number” gives us a clue. It literally means “to be enrolled and put on the

list.” The word was used for the enrollment of soldiers. The early church had an official list of the names of qualified widows, and we get the impression that these “enlisted” women ministered to the congregation in various ways. (Remember Dorcas and her widow friends, Acts 9:36–43?) Paul probably would have told us if they had been officially ordained as deaconesses.

A good marriage record (v. 9b). We have met this same requirement before, for bishops (1 Tim. 3:2) and for deacons (1 Tim. 3:12). The implication is that the widow was not a divorced woman. Since younger widows were advised to remarry (1 Tim. 5:14), this stipulation cannot refer to a woman who had a temporary second marriage after the death of her husband. Faithfulness to one’s marriage vows is very important in the eyes of God.

A witness of good works (v. 10). If a person is faithfully serving God, the light will shine and others will see it and glorify God (Matt. 5:16). “Brought up children” can refer either to a widow’s own children or the reference may be to orphans who needed a home. If it refers to her own children, then they would have to have died; otherwise the church would not support her. It is likely that the reference here is to the practice of rescuing abandoned children and raising them to know the Lord.

Hospitality is another factor, for this was an important ministry in those days when travel was dangerous and safe places to sleep were scarce. The washing of feet does not refer to a special ritual, but to the common practice of washing a guest’s feet when he arrived in the home (Luke 7:44). It was not beneath this woman’s dignity to take the place of a humble servant.

“Relieved the afflicted” could cover many kinds of ministry to the needy: feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, encouraging the sorrowing, and so forth. Every pastor gives thanks for godly women who minister to the material and physical needs in the church. These widows were cared for by the church, but they, in turn, helped to care for the church.

The Younger Widows (5:11–16)

The younger widows would technically be women under sixty years of age, but no doubt Paul had much younger women in mind. It was not likely that a fifty-nine-year-old woman would “bear children” if she remarried (1 Tim. 5:14)! The dangers of travel, the ravages of disease, war, and a host of

other things could rob a young wife of her husband. But Paul forbade Timothy to enroll the younger widows and put them under the care of the church.

The reasons for refusing them (vv. 11–14a). Because of their age, younger widows are naturally attracted to men and want to marry again. What is so bad about that? Paul seemed to imply (1 Tim. 5:12) that each of the widows enrolled pledged herself to remain a widow and serve the Lord in the church. This pledge must not be interpreted as a “vow of celibacy,” nor should we look on this group of ministering widows as a “special monastic order.” There seemed to be an agreement between the widows and the church that they would remain widows and serve the Lord.

There is another possible interpretation: These younger widows, if supported by the church, would have opportunities to “live it up” and find other husbands, most likely unbelievers. By marrying unbelievers, they would be casting off their first faith. However, I prefer the first explanation.

Paul does make it clear (1 Tim. 5:13) that younger widows, if cared for by the church, would have time on their hands and get involved in sinful activities. They would get in the habit of being idle instead of being useful. They would gad about from house to house and indulge in gossip and be busybodies. There is a definite connection between idleness and sin.

Paul warned Timothy against using the “charity” ministry of the church to encourage people to be idle. The church certainly ought to assist those who really need help, but it must not subsidize sin. As a pastor, I have had to make decisions in these matters, and sometimes it is not easy.

Requirements for younger widows (vv. 14b–16). Moving from the negative, Paul listed the positive things he wanted the younger widows to do to be accepted and approved in the church. He wanted the younger widows to marry and have families. While not every person is supposed to get married, marriage is natural for most people who have been married before. Why remain in lonely widowhood if there was yet opportunity for a husband and a family? Of course, all of this would have to be “in the Lord” (1 Cor. 7:39).

“Be fruitful and multiply” was God’s mandate to our first parents (Gen. 1:28), so the normal result of marriage is a family. Those today who refuse to have children because of the “awfulness of the times” should check out how

difficult the times were in Paul's day! If Christians do not have children and raise them to live for God, who will?

"Guide the house" (1 Tim. 5:14) literally means "rule the house." The wife should manage the affairs of the household, and her husband should trust her to do so (Prov. 31:10–31). Of course, marriage is a partnership, but each partner has a special sphere of responsibility. Few men can do in a home what a woman can do. Whenever my wife was ill or caring for our babies, and I had to manage some of the affairs of the home, I discovered quickly that I was out of my sphere of ministry!

The result of all this is a good testimony that silences the accusers. Satan (the adversary) is always alert to an opportunity to invade and destroy a Christian home. The word *occasion* is a military term that means "a base of operations." A Christian wife who is not doing her job at home gives Satan a beachhead for his operations, and the results are tragic. While there are times when a Christian wife and mother may have to work outside the home, it must not destroy her ministry in the home. The wife who works simply to get luxuries may discover too late that she has lost some necessities. It may be all right to have what money can buy if you do not lose what money cannot buy.

How Christian wives and mothers manage their homes can be a testimony to those outside the church. Just as a pastor is to have a good reputation with outsiders (1 Tim. 3:7), and the servants are not to bring reproach on God's Word (1 Tim. 6:1), so the wives are to have a good witness. Women may not be able to be elders of the church, but they can minister for the Lord right in their own homes. (See Titus 2:4–5 for an additional emphasis on this vital ministry.)

Paul then summarized the principle of each family caring for the needs of its own members (1 Tim. 5:16). Paul did not tell them how these widows should be relieved—giving them a regular dole, taking them into a home, giving them employment, and so forth. Each local assembly would have to decide this according to the needs of individual cases.

How does this principle apply to Christians today? Certainly we must honor our parents and grandparents and seek to provide for them if they have needs. Not every Christian family is able to take in another member, and not every widow wants to live with her children. Where there is sickness or handicap, professional care is necessary, and perhaps

this cannot be given in a home. Each family must decide what God's will is in the matter, and no decision is easy. The important thing is that believers show love and concern and do all they can to help each other.

Church Officers (5:17–25)

The instructions in this section deal primarily with the elders, but the principles also apply to a pastor's relationship with any officer in his church. It is a wonderful thing when the elders and deacons (and other officers) work together in harmony and love. It is tragic when a pastor tries to become a spiritual dictator (1 Peter 5:3), or when an officer tries to be a preeminent "big shot" (3 John 9–10).

Apparently Timothy was having some problems with the elders of the church at Ephesus. He was a young man and still had much to learn. Ephesus was not an easy place to minister. Furthermore, Timothy had followed Paul as overseer of the church, and Paul would not be an easy man to follow! Paul's farewell address to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20) shows how hard he had worked and how faithful he had been, and how much the elders loved Paul (Acts 20:36–38). In spite of the fact that Paul had personally sent Timothy to Ephesus, the young man was having a hard time.

This situation may be the reason for Paul's instruction about wine (1 Tim. 5:23). Did Timothy have stomach trouble? Was he ill because of his many responsibilities and problems? Or had he tried to follow the ideas of some ascetics (1 Tim. 4:1–5), only to discover that his diet was making him worse instead of better? We do not know the answers to all these questions; we can only read between the lines. It is worth noting that Paul's mention of wine here is not an endorsement of the entire alcohol industry. Using wine for medicinal reasons is not an encouragement for social drinking. As we have seen, though the Bible does not demand total abstinence, it does denounce drunkenness.

Paul counseled Timothy in his relationship to the elders by discussing three topics:

Paying the elders (vv. 17–18). In the early church, instead of one pastor, several elders ministered to the people. These men would devote themselves full-time to the work of the Lord, and therefore, they deserved some kind of remuneration. In most congregations today, the elders are laymen who have other vocations, but who assist in the work

of the church. Usually the pastoral staff are the only full-time workers in the church. (Of course, there are also secretaries, custodians, and so forth, but Paul was not writing about them.)

There were two kinds of elders in the church: ruling elders who supervised the work of the congregation, and teaching elders, who taught the Word of God. These elders were chosen from the congregation on the basis of God's call, the Spirit's equipping, and the witness and work of the men themselves. After they were chosen, they were ordained and set apart for this ministry (Acts 14:23; 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5).

The local church needs both ruling and teaching. The Spirit gives the gifts of "helps" and "governments" to the church (1 Cor. 12:28). If a church is not organized, there will be wasted effort, money, and opportunities. If spiritually minded leaders do not supervise the various ministries of the local church, there will be chaos instead of order. However, this supervision must not be dictatorial. You do not manage the work of a local church in the same manner as you do a grocery store or a manufacturing plant. While a church should follow good business principles, it is not a business. The ruthless way some church leaders have pushed people around is a disgrace to the gospel.

But ruling without teaching would accomplish very little. The local church grows through the ministry of the Word of God (Eph. 4:11ff.). You cannot rule over babies! Unless the believers are fed, cleansed, and strengthened by the Word, they will be weak and useless and will only create problems.

Paul told Timothy to be sure that the leaders were paid adequately, on the basis of their ministries. He quoted an Old Testament law to prove his point (Deut. 25:4). (The best commentary on this is 1 Cor. 9:7–14.) Then Paul added a statement from our Lord Jesus Christ: "The laborer deserves his wages" (Luke 10:7 NIV). This was a common saying in that day, but Paul equated the words of Christ with Old Testament Scripture!

If pastors are faithful in feeding and leading the people, then the church ought to be faithful and pay them adequately. "Double honor" (1 Tim. 5:17) can be translated "generous pay." (The word honor is used as in "honorarium.") It is God's plan that the needs of His servants be met by their local churches, and He will bless churches that are faithful to His servants. If a church is not faithful, and its pastor's

needs are not met, it is a poor testimony; and God has ways of dealing with the situation. He can provide through other means, but then the church misses the blessing; or He may move His servant elsewhere.

The other side of the coin is this: A pastor must never minister simply to earn money (see 1 Tim. 3:3). To "negotiate" with churches, or to canvass around looking for a place with a bigger salary, is not in the will of God. Nor is it right for a pastor to bring into his sermons his own financial needs, hoping to arouse some support from the finance committee!

Disciplining the elders (vv. 19–21). Church discipline usually goes to one of two extremes. Either there is no discipline at all, and the church languishes because of disobedience and sin, or the church officers become evangelical policemen who hold a kangaroo court and violate many of the Bible's spiritual principles.

The disciplining of church members is explained in Matthew 18:15–18; Romans 16:17–18; 1 Corinthians 5; 2 Corinthians 2:6–11; Galatians 6:1–3; 2 Thessalonians 3:6–16; 2 Timothy 2:23–26; Titus 3:10; and 2 John 9–11.

Paul in this passage (1 Tim. 5:19–21) discussed the disciplining of church leaders. It is sad when a church member must be disciplined, but it is even sadder when a spiritual leader fails and must be disciplined, for leaders, when they fall, have a way of affecting others.

The purpose of discipline is restoration, not revenge. Our purpose must be to save the offender, not to drive him away. Our attitude must be one of love and tenderness (Gal. 6:1–3). In fact, the verb restore that Paul used in Galatians 6:1 means "to set a broken bone." Think of the patience and tenderness involved in that procedure!

Paul's first caution to Timothy was to be sure of his facts, and the way to do that is to have witnesses (1 Tim. 5:19). This principle is also stated in Deuteronomy 19:15; Matthew 18:16; and 2 Corinthians 13:1. I think a dual application of the principle is suggested here. First, those who make any accusation against a pastor must be able to support it with witnesses. Rumor and suspicion are not adequate grounds for discipline. Second, when an accusation is made, witnesses ought to be present. In other words, the accused has the right to face his accuser in the presence of witnesses.

A church member approached me at a church dinner one evening and began to accuse me of ruining the church. She had all sorts of miscellaneous bits of gossip, none of which was true. As soon as she started her tirade, I asked two of the officers standing nearby to witness what she was saying. Of course, she immediately stopped talking and marched defiantly away.

It is sad when churches disobey the Word and listen to rumors, lies, and gossip. Many a godly pastor has been defeated in his life and ministry in this way, and some have even resigned from the ministry. “Where there’s smoke, there’s fire” may be a good slogan for a volunteer fire department, but it does not apply to local churches. “Where there’s smoke, there’s fire” could possibly mean that somebody’s tongue has been “set on fire of hell” (James 3:6)!

Paul’s second caution was that Timothy do everything openly and aboveboard. The under-the-counter politics of city hall have no place in a church. “In secret have I said nothing,” said Jesus (John 18:20). If an officer is guilty, then he should be rebuked before all the other leaders (1 Tim. 5:20). He should be given opportunity to repent, and if he does he should be forgiven (2 Cor. 2:6–11). Once he is forgiven, the matter is settled and should never be brought up again.

Paul’s third caution (1 Tim. 5:21) is that Timothy obey the Word no matter what his personal feelings might be. He should act without prejudice against or partiality for the accused officer. There are no seniority rights in a local church; each member has the same standing before God and His Word. To show either prejudice or partiality is to make the situation even worse.

Selecting and ordaining the elders (vv. 22–25). Only God knows the hearts of everyone (Acts 1:24). The church needs spiritual wisdom and guidance in selecting its officers. It is dangerous to impulsively place a new Christian or a new church member in a place of spiritual responsibility. Some people’s sins are clearly seen; others are able to cover their sins, though their sins pursue them (1 Tim. 5:24). The good works of dedicated believers ought to be evident, even though they do not serve in order to be seen by people (1 Tim. 5:25).

In other words, the church must carefully investigate the lives of potential leaders to make sure that there is nothing seriously wrong. To ordain elders with sin in their lives is to partake of those

sins! If simply saying goodbye (God be with you) to a heretic makes us partakers of his evil deeds (2 John 10–11), then how much guiltier are we if we ordain people whose lives are not right with God?

No pastor or church member is perfect, but that should not hinder us from striving for perfection. The ministry of a local church rises and falls with its leadership. Godly leadership means God’s blessing, and that is what we want and need.

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