

RELATIONSHIPS IN THE CHURCH

Sometimes we jokingly say, “This world would be a good place to live if it wasn’t for the people who are here.” In our work environment, we sometimes conclude, “I could get my job done if these people would just quit coming to my office.” What we fail to realize is that life is about *interacting and dealing with others*. It is impractical to think we can be really independent and not need anyone else. The truth is that we are interdependent and these relationships are essential to a healthy society. If we try to be totally independent or totally dependent, then we have dysfunctionality and a breakdown in the social fabric.

If interactions and relationships with others are such critical considerations of daily living, then we should invest in learning how to relate to each other. We realize the importance of this on a national level. Our government makes alliances with certain other governments and we impose sanctions on some others. We treat some with “favored nation” status and we put others in a “not recognized” status. The same thing happens in the business world. Companies have interactions with each other and these vary from company to company. Criteria are established and protocols are set up that define the relationships. It is not surprising that the First Century Church leaders would need to define the criteria and protocols for relationships between members in the church. The precepts Paul passed on to Timothy and to the church at Ephesus involved both attitudes and actions.

Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity. 1 Timothy 5:1-2

The generation gap was “alive and well” two millennia ago. Timothy was the pastor of the church at Ephesus. Because he was relatively young, he was not readily accepted by all. Paul had addressed this general concern earlier in the letter when he said “Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity.” Paul recognized that each of us is perceived by others in different ways. The way we are perceived influences how we are heard. As a consequence of this reality, we must adjust the approach we use in addressing various people IF we want to be effective in what we do. Communication can be complicated because it is not only what we say but it depends on the tone of our voice and our posture (body language). Timothy would need to be aware of the total message he would communicate as he went about his pastoral duties.

How comfortable are we with the idea of the pastor reprimanding members of the congregation? Apparently, Paul thought the duties of a pastor included giving correction. His main concern was not IF but HOW such admonishments were to be given. I find it interesting that Paul used examples from a family situation as a model or a way to pattern all our interactions with church members. Based on the dysfunctionality of the family today, we might need to think of a different model. Many people treat perfect strangers with more respect and dignity than they do family members. We may have arrived at that unenviable situation that Paul predicted would happen -- some will be without natural affection. Paul’s appeal to Timothy is the same as Jesus’ command to His followers: We are to love one another even as He loved us.

From the early days of the church in Jerusalem, concerns among the people went beyond spiritual needs. The role of the deacon was instituted to deal with practical ministry needs among the members. The idea of a state or federally run welfare program was absent. The ability to earn financial support for a household was a man’s role usually. Women whose husbands had died were vulnerable. If a widow’s extended family could or would not provide for her, then she might find that her only means of sustenance would be to beg. The church at Ephesus had widows among the member and the church needed direction in how to care for their needs.

Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need. But if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God. 1 Timothy 5:3-4

Paul left no doubt that the main function of responsibility falls to the family. Churches have limited financial resources and priorities must be established so that the most critical needs can be addressed. Children and grandchildren have an obligation to care for family members. Many church members do not want to hear such teaching. They cannot remember their helpless condition when they were infants and their very survival depended on the selfless love and care provided by parents and grandparents. This is really a case where we can say we **owe** it to our parents and grandparents to provide for them when they are in need.

The widow who is really in need and left all alone puts her hope in God and continues night and day to pray and to ask God for help. But the widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives. 1 Timothy 5:5-6

Responsibility is a two-way street. Not only do families and churches have responsibility for their members, the members also have certain expectations which they are to fulfill. All of us have heard about or may personally know of situations where unscrupulous people will take advantage of the benevolence of others. We have no obligation to help those who would behave in such a manner.

Timothy needed to teach these principles in the church at Ephesus and to define specific criteria and consequence concerning such matters.

Give the people these instructions, too, so that no one may be open to blame. If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over sixty, has been faithful to her husband, and is well known for her good deeds, such as bringing up children, showing hospitality, washing the feet of the saints, helping those in trouble and devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds. As for younger widows, do not put them on such a list. For when their sensual desires overcome their dedication to Christ, they want to marry. Thus they bring judgment on themselves, because they have broken their first pledge. 1 Timothy 5:7-12

Paul had already addressed the general ideal of a family's responsibility to care for widows. The consequence of not meeting these obligations could be church disciplinary action. In the early church, those who denied the faith had to answer to the church for their actions.

From a practical standpoint, the church maintained a list of widows to whom assistance was provided. The basic starting criteria for being added to the list were items that many would consider to be reasonable expectations. The basic requirements were appropriate age and a reputation of good character. One reason for excluding younger widows was perhaps practicality due to limited financial resources of the church.

The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, "Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain," and "The worker deserves his wages." 1 Timothy 5:17-18

Paul began this discourse with the responsibility of pastors to church members. If responsibility is a two-way street, then the church members have responsibility to the pastors. All the elders were expected to lead, supervise, manage, and teach. Not all could carry out these duties equally well. Some spent more of their time in a role of preacher and teacher. Those who did well and concentrated on communicating the word of God to the church were to receive not only the recognition of respect due the office but also adequate financial remuneration

Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses. Those who sin are to

be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning. I charge you, in the sight of God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels, to keep these instructions without partiality, and to do nothing out of favoritism. 1 Timothy 5:19-21

Anytime we consider relationships and responsibilities we have to consider accountability. Though the elders were in positions of authority, they could not operate with impunity. Paul borrowed from the Mosaic law regarding the need for multiple witnesses when accusations were brought against a person. Since these men held positions of “public trust” in the church, then any who violated that trust were to be censured publicly.

The issue of treating people fairly should extend to all with whom we relate. This is especially true in the church but should go beyond to those outside the church. The validity of our witness hinges on how we are perceived to treat others.