

‘HOW TO CHOOSE CHURCH LEADERS’

1 Timothy 5:21-25

Dr John Crocker. Crossroads Church, Albert Lea, MN. July 17-18, 2010

Some things are best left alone. If you meddle with them, you might make matters worse.

Television journalist Eric Sevareid once said, *The chief cause of problems is solutions.* You may create problems if you try to fix something that doesn't need fixing.

No doubt you've heard the aphorism, *If it aint broke, don't fix it.* Advocates of change urge instead, *If it aint broke, break it!*

- But sometimes doing nothing may cause more harm than taking unnecessary action.

You can err either way, by acting when it's not necessary or not acting when it is necessary.

Major George B. McClellan was briefly the general-in-chief of the Union forces during the civil war. He erred on the side of caution; doing nothing lest he make a serious mistake. President Lincoln wrote to him: *My dear McClellan, if you don't want to use the Army, I should like to borrow it for a while. Respectfully, A. Lincoln.*

Someone said that *throughout history the most debilitating human ailment has been cold feet.*

Wisdom is knowing when to leave well enough alone and when to take action.

- In the church it is not a good policy to leave well enough alone. That's because "well enough" is a myth. The church of our Lord Jesus Christ has a determined enemy, the devil. He works through deceit, and he is relentless in his efforts to corrupt and destroy Christ's church.

This is not spiritual paranoia. It's reality.

The Apostle Paul warned of dangers from the outside and dangers arising inside the church (Acts 20:29-30).

- The church at Ephesus was under spiritual attack.

It was Paul's practice to go back and visit the churches he had established to make sure they were standing firm in the Christian faith.

He had trained Timothy to deal with problems that arose in the churches. (vis 1 Corinthians 4:17)

That's why Paul had urged Timothy to stay at the church in Ephesus.

- A sure way to destroy a church, and reduce it to a lifeless religious relic is to nudge people away from God's truth.

Certain people in the church at Ephesus presumed to be teachers of doctrine. But they distorted the gospel of Jesus Christ upon which Paul had founded the church some 10 years earlier.

These false teachers were trying to get the church members to agree with them and to follow their teaching.

That's why the first thing Paul says to Timothy in this letter, right after his opening greeting, is *Timothy, make those false teachers stop it!*

1:3 *'As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer.'*

A few years ago a woman in San Francisco prepared a spaghetti dinner for herself and her two daughters. She had found some good looking mushrooms on a walk the previous day. She thought she'd improve the marinara sauce by adding the mushrooms. They happened to be the most poisonous mushrooms in North America. All three almost died, and one of the daughters needed an emergency liver transplant.

The damage to a church is deadly when people mess with God's recipe—the gospel of Jesus Christ.

- One of the most common practices in churches today is people presuming to speak for God. I've been amazed at the preposterous claptrap people attribute to God.

They usually start out by saying, *The Lord told me.*

Like the fellow who told a girl he was sweet on that the Lord had told him to marry her. She gave the wise response, *Well then, I'm sure you'll be willing to wait until the Lord tells me too!*

Nobody knows how many times people have tried to make God their accomplice in getting out of an unpleasant marriage.

Genuine Christians are committed to God's will, not trying to get God to do our will.

- The "Great Imperative" for every true church of our Lord Jesus Christ is to guard the Word of God and not let the gospel be defiled by any man-made notions.

Again and again in this letter to Pastor Timothy Paul emphasizes that a church needs the strong, steady influence of mature, godly Christians who won't let the church drift from God's word to accommodate people's fickle tastes and preferences.

'Although I hope to come to you soon, I am writing you these instructions so that, if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth.' (3:14, 15)

- Last Sunday we saw how the Apostle Paul dealt with the sobering matter of disciplining any church leader who persists in sin.

In our text today he insists that God's rules apply to everyone without exception.

21. *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.*

22. *Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, and do not share in the sins of others. Keep yourself pure.*

23. *Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses.*

24. *The sins of some men are obvious, reaching the place of judgment ahead of them; the sins of others trail behind them.*

25. *In the same way, good deeds are obvious, and even those that are not cannot be hidden.*

Timothy was by nature reticent to confront or to be assertive.

Notice the emphatic language of verse 21. This is a command, not a suggestion. The apostle was ordering his young associate to be bold and firm:

This is essentially what Paul is saying: *'Timothy, I have never been more serious about anything in my life. Church leadership is not a popularity contest. The eternal destiny of people is at stake. Hold to the standards for church leaders without compromise.'*

- Should you be concerned about this today--about who the congregation listens to and who influences Christ's church? Oh yes!

This is not something best left alone.

There is no other entity or agency in the world that God has entrusted with the only truth that can rescue people from the power of sin and from eternal ruin

It's the gospel of Jesus Christ, the good news of forgiveness and eternal life by repentance and faith in Jesus Christ alone. Nobody must be allowed to mess with it.

God has entrusted the truth of his salvation to his church.

- If a church turns away from the priority of God's Word and flouts God's commands, at best it becomes just a respectable, sterile religious monument.

The spiritual leaders of a church—the elders and pastors—must protect God's flock from anyone whose teaching or influence might try to lead God's people astray.

In 1 Timothy 5:21-25 the Apostle Paul gives us clear-cut guidelines for the selection of spiritual leaders in a church.

1. Be fair
2. Beware

I. BE FAIR IN THEIR SELECTION. 1 Timothy 5:21, 22

Be fair. No one gets preferential treatment in Christ's church

No one has greater prestige than others in God's sight.

A few months ago I sat in a waiting room and I picked up a magazine produced by a Christian organization with a very prominent leader. As I flipped through the pages I was struck by the number of full-page pictures of this leader, and the unabashed listing of all the awards and honors he had received. Every picture was in a setting of opulence. I scanned the articles to look for any mention of the love and grace of God, the atoning sacrifice of Christ and the power of the gospel—and it wasn't there.

The religious celebrity was prominent, and Christ was practically invisible. It was all about prestige.

I remembered the saying, *'Prestige is the decoration conferred on mediocrity by ignorance.'*--Eric Amble.

- In the community of God's people there is One who has prestige; we have only one favorite to whom we show partiality, and that is Jesus Christ.

21. *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.*

22. *Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, and do not share in the sins of others. Keep yourself pure.*

The laying on of hands was a ritual of ordination (1 Timothy 4:14; 2 Timothy 1:7)

Paul warned Timothy not to be in a hurry when selecting church leaders. Unqualified people as leaders are easy pushovers for the devil to use.

- *'Do not share in the sins of others. Keep yourself pure'*

If Timothy ordained an elder he became responsible for that elder's leadership in the church.

A few years ago I served on a board with a retired VP of Human Resources for the 3M Company in Minneapolis. I recall him saying on one occasion as we discussed a personnel issue: *'You can delegate authority but not responsibility.'*

Paul writes: *'Timothy, when you appoint leaders in the church, you delegate to them authority under Christ to teach and influence God's people. If they are not qualified, not godly, not pure, you will be held responsible before God.'*

If Timothy compromised the standards for the selection of spiritual leaders in the church (Chapter 3), he would be responsible for any damage they might inflict upon Christ's church. Timothy would share in their sin and pollute himself by lowering biblical standards.

- It's hard to be fair when you feel that you owe certain people something because of a favor they've done for you.

A short while ago I met with a pastor who had been my colleague in ministry for several years. He and I had literally travelled around the world together on multiple occasions on missions teaching ministries. He had just started a restoration ministry in a church that had declined precipitously in attendance and in just about every way over the past few years.

He told me how he and the elders dealt with a man who had a lot of power in the church because people were beholden to him. He was a controller, and people felt they owed him something. So he always got his way.

Timothy and the other leaders in the church at Ephesus had to guard against becoming beholden to anyone.

In the sight of God and Jesus Christ they were to lead without partiality (21).

Throughout history this has been a problem for pastors and elders who accept favors from prominent people, who then expect the pastor to adopt their particular agenda.

- Now we come to verse 23.

23. *Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses.*

Timothy had some kind of stomach problem. Maybe Paul had overheard his abdominal rumblings and dealt with his distress on their missionary journeys together.

Because of the context, I think Timothy's health problems may have been aggravated by stress.

I doubt it was an ulcer, because as far as I know wine doesn't help an ulcer.

There is no doubt that Timothy was in a stressful situation.

We don't know exactly what precipitated Timothy's gastric discomforts.

The water at Ephesus was probably not very potable.

Wine helped to settle the stomach and prevent dysentery.

If Paul were writing this to Timothy today, he might say, *Timothy, don't drink the water there. Get bottled water. And for Pete's sake get a prescription from your doctor for your stomach.*

- Some Christians have struggled with this passage over the years. They detest the notion that the Apostle Paul might actually promote the consumption of alcohol.

This is a *health issue*, not a *sobriety issue* or a *spiritual issue*.

Paul is recommending wine as a *medicine*, not as a *beverage*.

- Maybe the false teachers in the church advocated asceticism as essential to pleasing God—abstaining from various foods and drink.

The Apostle Paul had to deal with that issue in his letters to the Romans (chapter 14) and the Corinthians (1 Cor. 8)

This has been an issue among some Christians for many years.

Billy Sunday was a baseball player with the team that became the Chicago Cubs. After he retired from baseball in the late 1800's he became a flamboyant evangelist and a leading advocate of prohibition. He said, *I'm trying to make America so dry that a man must be primed before he can spit, and I'm going to fight the liquor business till hell freezes over, and then I'll put on ice skates and fight it some more.*

Billy Sunday made it a Christian issue.

- Maybe Timothy had stopped using wine to avoid giving offense to certain people, and as a result he became weakened by the collywobbles.

The Bible does not command total abstinence from alcoholic beverages, but it roundly condemns drunkenness.

- Alcohol is a serious social issue, but only drunkenness is a spiritual issue.

Wisdom says there's a boatload of dangers related to the consumption of alcoholic beverages. Be careful.

- What does this have to do with the importance of being fair and impartial in choosing church leaders? Being fair often demands intestinal fortitude.

Pardon my slang, but this translates well today. Paul says to Timothy, *It takes guts to do some of the things you have to do to protect the church from unqualified leadership. You've got to be strong. Deal with your health problem!*

II. BEWARE OF FIRST IMPRESSIONS. 1 Tim. 5:24, 25

Don't make snap judgments about people.

24. *The sins of some men are obvious, reaching the place of judgment ahead of them; the sins of others trail behind them.*

25. *In the same way, good deeds are obvious, and even those that are not cannot be hidden.*

I couldn't count the number of times I have been excited about someone's suitability for a key role in the church, only to see a little later that he/she doesn't have the necessary maturity in the Christian faith.

The *Peter Principle*, defined about 40 years ago by Dr. Laurence J. Peter, states that in a bureaucracy people tend to rise to their level of incompetence. Employees tend to be promoted one level higher than where they were most competent. They reach a position in the company in which they are no longer competent. Work is accomplished by people who have not yet reached their level of incompetence.

- But the church is not a bureaucracy; it is a spiritual body.

Nevertheless, the *Peter Principle* applies. We must make sure people are not placed into positions of spiritual leadership above their level of spiritual maturity.

People can be unbelievably gullible in spiritual matters.

Whether from fear or ignorance, they set aside their critical faculties and swallow absurd notions.

Poet Laureate Gwendolyn Brooks (Pulitzer Prize for Poetry 1950) advised graduates in a 1995 Commencement Address: *'Be careful what you swallow. Chew.'*

My son and his family have a dog, a Pug. Our son grilled some fine steaks while we were visiting a while ago. We enjoyed it immensely. That dog stared longingly at our indulgence, so as a treat we gave the dog some bits of steak. The dog just gulped them down without chewing.

People chew because they need to; dogs only when they have to.

People who are not yet strong in the Christian faith will swallow dangerous lies, without chewing.

- The harm caused in a church by unqualified, ungodly people getting into leadership roles can be devastating.

So Paul gives this important warning to Timothy: *Some people have a reputation of sin that precedes them. But with others, you won't know about it until later. They make a good first impression. But afterward it will be evident what they are like and what they are up to.'* (v.24)

- There is the real danger of choosing unworthy people as leaders.

Just because people are persuasive, organized and seem to know where they're going, doesn't mean they're right.

In the gospels we read about Jesus casting a legion of demons out of a man. Then the demons took over a herd of pigs that got spooked and ran into the lake and drowned themselves. Gadarene Swine Law: (Mk.5:11-13):

'Just because the group is in formation, doesn't mean it is on the right course.'

Many a church has been led into a spiritual wasteland by a confident group of people with convincing arguments.

- There's also the danger of overlooking the worthy.

Many of the finest pastors and elders and other church leaders are not the people you'd be impressed by at first.

They quietly serve the Lord, using their God-given gifts.

But Paul says in verse 25, after a while people notice. Their godliness and gifts cannot be hidden.

Some the wisest and godliest church leaders emerge out of relative obscurity—at first they just blend into the beige background. But then God makes sure they don't remain hidden.

- Either way, beware of first impressions. Don't anoint some too quickly or overlook others.

Crossroads Church is precious to God. This is the flock of Christ our Lord, our Chief Shepherd.

Those who become spiritual leaders have the responsibility to shepherd Christ's church.

Be fair in the selection of spiritual leaders. There is no room for favoritism, for judging people by worldly criteria.

Beware of first impressions—jumping to conclusions about potential candidates for leadership.

Paul impressed this upon Timothy: *I have never been more serious about anything. So much is at stake.*