

1 Timothy 5:17-22 "When a Church Takes the Word Seriously"***

Proposition: In 1 Timothy 5:17-22, we discover two evidences that a church is taking the Word seriously.

I. Evidence #1: It will show up in our attitude towards leadership (17-20).

- A. Honor those who handle the Word (17-18).
 - 1. The elders are to work hard in the Word.
 - 2. The church is to support this work.
- B. Don't malign those who model the Word (19).
 - 1. There's a wrong way to accuse an elder.
 - 2. There's a right way--the biblical way.
- C. Deal with those who violate the Word (20).
 - 1. Make sure it's a sin problem.
 - 2. If it is, deal with it publicly.

II. Evidence #2: It will show up in our approach to leadership (21-22).

- A. Guideline #1: Remember who's watching (21a).
- B. Guideline #2: There are no exceptions (21b).
- C. Guideline #3: Since the stakes are so high, exercise caution (22a).
- D. Guideline #4: Guard your own life (22b).

The Bottom Line: Let's resolve to do things by the Book.

- 1. Is knowing the Word a priority in my life?
- 2. Is living by the Word a priority in my life?
- 3. Is being this kind of a church a priority in my life?

Did you know that Joan of Arc was Noah's wife? No, this isn't some kind of joke. One in ten Americans think this French saint *was* Noah's spouse. That's according to a survey conducted by pollster George Barna. Amongst other things, the survey revealed that while most Americans have a Bible, for the most part, they're not very familiar with what's in it.

Here's another example. 59 percent told Barna that "the Bible is totally accurate in all its teachings." But on the other hand, less than 50 percent open the Bible in any given week, and even then most only skim a few verses. Ironically, the Bible is a best-seller every year, but many who buy it apparently don't read it very much.

And what's true of individuals is true of churches, too. It's easy to *say*, "Our church is serious about the Bible." But how can you tell if it really is?

1 Timothy 5 can help us. 1 Timothy 5 is a nuts-and-bolts kind of chapter. It's a practical section that addresses such matters as problem solving in the church, caring for widows, and dealing with church leaders.

Not flashy stuff, but down in the trenches kinds of things. Which is why a text like 1 Timothy 5 can be so helpful to us. You see, a church can claim to be a Word-centered church all it wants, but the proof is seen in the "trenches." That's especially true in the text before us today. I must warn you. This is not a popular text, particularly the second part of it. But it is a revealing text and a good text--for it's God's Word. In 1 Timothy 5:17-22, we discover two evidences that a church is taking the Word seriously.

I. Evidence #1: It will show up in our attitude towards leadership (17-20).

"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.' Do

***Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

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 others may take warning."

In any organization, leadership is critical. That's true in a church. Indeed, here's an evidence of a Word-centered church--it's attitude towards its leaders.

The leader of a large Christian organization once said to R. C. Sproul, "I hope when I die there will be at least five of my friends who will be able to sit through my funeral without looking at their watches."

Have you noticed in recent years how the attitude of society towards the "church leader" has soured. Quite frankly, the position of "pastor" is not esteemed much in our day. Why is that?

Amongst many factors, two reasons come to my mind. One is ministerial abuse--and the lack of appropriate church discipline in response to the abuse. Case in point: the televangelist scandals of the eighties. Abuse by ministers and a refusal by churches to practice verse 20 in dealing with the abuse have contributed to the apathy.

Secondly, there's simply a low view of authority in general these days. When was the last time you heard a child say, "When I grow up, I want to be a School Superintendent."? Or a High School principal? And time will tell how the recent events in Washington will contribute to the decline in society's estimation of "leaders" in general.

But the church is to be different. Like a city set on a hill, the church is to model for the world the way it should be. 1 Timothy 5 shows us how. We have three responsibilities according to verses 17-20.

A. Honor those who handle the Word (17-18). In verse 3, we're told to honor widows--and verses 4-16 explained how. Now in verse 17 the instruction is given to honor *presbuteroi*--elders.

Remember the context. Paul wrote this counsel to Timothy who was in Ephesus. Timothy wasn't the pastor of the church. The church already had elders in place. Timothy's an apostolic representative, a local church trouble-shooter. He's on assignment in Ephesus trying to help the church. His job is to show the church that a healthy church is one that takes the Word seriously, and that involves a proper attitude towards those who handle the Word.

Keep in mind that Timothy was dealing with the fallout of some *bad* leaders. *Bad* doesn't mean they weren't nice guys, but *bad* in the sense that they abandoned an absolute allegiance to the Word. Men like Hymenaeus and Alexander (1:20)--the ringleaders--and others referred to in 1:3-4 who had taught "false doctrines" and "devoted themselves to myths and endless genealogies." Apparently, these men had some kind of a teaching ministry in the church. But they went sour. And perhaps so did the attitude of the church towards leaders in general.

They needed this reminder, "The elders who direct the affairs of the church *well* are worthy of double honor." Yes, some leaders will abuse their authority from time to time--and they must be dealt with, as verse 20 explains. But don't forget, there are those who lead *well*, too. And they deserve honor.

There's a practical balance here. In correcting the abuse in the Ephesian church, Paul detailed a couple of principles in verses 17-18. Here's the first.

1. *The elders are to work hard in the Word.* Notice that "elders" is plural. In the NT, the terms elder, overseer (bishop in the KJV), and pastor basically refer to the same position (which is verified by the presence of all three titles used interchangeably in Acts 20:17, 28). Elder depicts his spiritual maturity, overseer refers to his authority, and pastor describes his function. He's a mature shepherd who leads and feeds the sheep.

But he's not to function alone. The text reads, "Let the *elders* that rule well (KJV)." The Bible doesn't endorse one-man rule by pastor-kings. The Scriptures present a shared leadership. A plurality of godly men, with different gifts and functions, are to work together in leading the congregation under the authority of God's Word.

The authority in the church is God. But we can't see God, can we, so how do we know His will? He has revealed His will. Where? In His Word. And in His Word He delegates authority to certain men whose task it is to teach His Word and lead His people.

Throughout the Scriptures we see God working through human instruments:

Psalm 78:70-72 "He chose David his servant and took him from the sheep pens; from tending the sheep he brought him to be the shepherd of his people Jacob, of Israel his inheritance. And David shepherded them with integrity of heart; with skillful hands he led them."

Jeremiah 3:15 "Then I will give you shepherds [KJV "pastors"] after my own heart, who will lead you with knowledge and understanding."

Hebrews 13:7, 17, 24 "Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith (7)." "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you (17)." "Greet all your leaders and all God's people (24)."

James 3:1 "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly."

1 Peter 5:1-4 "To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers--not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away."

So the Lord directs His church by delegating authority to a team of Scripturally-qualified men. What do the elders do? Paul says they "direct the affairs of the church." The Greek term *proistemi* means literally "to stand first," or "to rule." Elders are to lead, and as they do this well, the church is to honor them.

This is especially true for those elders who do what? "Whose work is preaching and teaching." I believe all elders are to lead by having a teaching ministry in the church (remember you don't need a classroom to teach God's Word). But some elders are gifted to devote themselves even more fully than the others to preaching and teaching God's Word. And those who do so *well* are worthy of double honor.

Think about that word "well" for a moment. There's a difference between doing something and doing it *well*. Former Notre Dame football coach Lou Holtz talked about the difference between being involved and being committed: "The kamikaze pilot that was able to fly 50 missions was involved--but never committed."

It's possible to be an elder who's involved, but not committed. What's the difference? The four letter word "work." *Kopiontes* in the Greek text. It means "to toil" or "labor" (as in the KJV). It's hard work to have a Word-centered ministry. Anybody can tell stories. But church leaders that God commends are those who work hard in the Word.

2. *The church is to support this work.* The KJV states: "Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honor." What is "honor?" The Greek term *timas* has

the idea of "value" or "respect." As we saw in verse 3 it can refer to financial support. The English word "honorarium" refers to money given to someone to honor them.

Paul quotes the Scriptures in verse 18 to explain the reason for such support. "For the Scripture saith, Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the grain [a quotation of Deut. 25:4]; and, The laborer is worthy of his reward [from Luke 10:7]."

An important sidelight: Paul quotes from both the OT and the NT and gives them equal authority.

Did you realize that in the Torah God gave instructions for the care of oxen? When threshing was done (this was before combines!), sheaves were placed on the threshing floor. Oxen were tethered to a post in the middle and made to march round and round on the grain (Barclay). They were left unmuzzled and free to eat as much as they wanted.

The second quotation comes from Luke 10 where Jesus sent out 72 disciples on a ministry trip. He told them the harvest is great (2), and to go, not taking any supplies with them (3-4). They were to stay in homes where they ministered (5-7), and while there, they were to eat and drink whatever was given to them (7). As Jesus explained, "The worker deserves his wages (7)." (see also 1 Cor. 9:7-14)

When we benefit from a teaching ministry, we are to support it. We're to be loyal to it. And in the church loyalty goes both ways. Out of loyalty to their people, elders are to work hard at teaching the Word. And the people, in turn, express loyalty by supporting that teaching ministry.

Here's an illustration about loyalty to leadership. The movie *Spartacus* was based on the story of a Roman gladiator who led an army of slaves in an uprising in 71 B.C. The slave army defeated the Romans twice, but finally, after a long siege were conquered by General Marcus Crassus.

In the movie, Crassus tells the thousand survivors in Spartacus's army, "You have been slaves. You will be slaves again. But you will be spared your rightful punishment of crucifixion by the mercy of the Roman legions. All you need to do is turn over to me the slave Spartacus, because we do not know him by sight."

After a long pause, Spartacus stands up and says, "I am Spartacus." But then the man next to him stepped forward and said, "I am Spartacus." And then the next slave spoke up, "No, I am Spartacus." Within a minute everyone in the army was on his feet. That's loyalty.

I'm thankful for the privilege of pastoring a church that's so gracious in supporting its pastors. You are an encouragement to me. Your support flows out of your desire to follow God's Word. Thank you.

God gives His church a second responsibility in verse 19.

B. Don't malign those who model the Word (19). "Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless its brought by two or three witnesses." Are church leaders perfect? Certainly not. They're sinners saved by grace just like the rest of the family. But there are two ways to accuse an elder...

1. *There's a wrong way to accuse an elder.* What's that? "Against an elder receive not an accusation *but* [NIV, *unless*] before two or three witnesses." Timothy was not to receive an accusation against an elder, nor was the church, unless what? It must be brought by two or three witnesses.

Notice *witnesses*. Not hear-say. Not by someone who blurts, "Well, I heard Pastor So-and-So did such-and-such!" No, the accusation must be substantiated by two or three *witnesses* or it's never to be mentioned. A witness is someone who can say, "Yes, I heard Elder So-and-So teach false teaching. I heard him say--quote: 'The resurrection has

already taken place'--end of quote (which is the example in 2 Tim. 2:18)." A witness can say, "I saw him come out of the building with another woman."

But remember, the accusation doesn't prove guilt--the "other woman" may have been his sister, for instance. But the accusation against an elder is not even to be made unless there are two or three witnesses.

Why not? So much damage is caused, not just personally but to churches, when unsubstantiated, solo accusations are allowed to be made publicly against a church leader. God has a better way.

2. *There's a right way--the biblical way.* It's not blurting for all the church to hear, "I've got a problem with Elder Jones! Let me tell you what he did." No. What must happen first? Matthew 18 says you need to go to Elder Jones one-on-one with your concern over his perceived sin (15). That may clear up the problem. If not, take one or two others along (16). If he repents, you have won your brother. If he doesn't, *then--and not until then--take it to the church (17).* That's the biblical way.

A true story might help. Warren Wiersbe shares (232), "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."

And then Wiersbe comments, "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)."

So responsibility #2 is--don't malign those who model the Word. And don't listen to someone who does. When you hear these words, "Did you hear what so and so did?" Say, "Have you talked to him about it? If not, God's Word forbids me to hear about it."

But what if the accusation *is* substantiated? Responsibility #3...

C. Deal with those who violate the Word (20). "Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning." Honor elders, but don't idolize them. They can sin, too. And if they do, deal with the problem by following two guidelines.

1. *Make sure it's a sin problem.* "Those who *sin* are to be rebuked." There must be sin involved. It's not a personal problem, "Well, I just don't like the way he does things!" Nor a perceived problem, "I wish he'd do things differently!" It must be a *sin problem*. Guideline #2...

2. *If it is, deal with it publicly.* "Rebuke *before all*," is how the KJV renders it. We're not talking about defamation of character. Rather, we're talking about an elder who has violated the standard he himself has taught. He needs to repent just like the rest of us.

Why deal with his sin publicly? Verse 20 explains, "So that others may take warning." Others--other elders, yes. But others in the congregation, too.

Church discipline is a great deterrent to sin in the church. Church discipline is for the good of the person in sin--the goal is his restoration. But it's also good for the church--it motivates us to be serious about holiness.

Beloved, a holy God didn't redeem us so we could deface Him through ungodly behavior. He didn't give His spotless Son as a sacrifice on a cruel cross so we could be

free to do our own thing. No, He bought us. We belong to Him. He gave us His Word so we'd know how to live for Him. And so we'd know what to do when we blow it.

J. Vernon McGee offers this counsel (75), "I believe that when a member of a church sins and it does not concern the congregation it should never be brought out in the open, nor should it be confessed publicly. However, when a leader of the church, an officer in the church, sins, and it has hurt the church, then I think it is time to call names."

I know the story of another church that faced the decision of disciplining one of its charter members, someone who had donated the land on which the church building sat, but was now living in unrepentant sin. Some said, "We can't discipline that person! It'll ruin the church." Others said, "We must obey God's Word." And they did. And God blessed.

So ministry is a two-edged sword (MacArthur, 222). Leaders who serve well are to be honored and protected from pot shots. But those who sin are to be rebuked publicly and removed. Is forgiveness possible? If he repents, certainly. But that doesn't mean he's automatically to be restored to ministry.

So how do you spot a church that takes the Word seriously? Here's one evidence--it will show up in our attitude towards leadership. Here's a second...

II. Evidence #2: It will show up in our approach to leadership (21-22).

The approach involves four guidelines.

A. Guideline #1: Remember who's watching (21a). "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."

This wouldn't be easy for timid Timothy. It's never easy to deal with a sinning brother. It's even harder if the brother is a leader. So we need to keep in mind who's watching. If we forget who's watching we might cave in to peer pressure and not respond biblically.

We need to remember that three invisible parties are watching: "I charge thee before *God*, and the *Lord Jesus Christ*, and the *elect angels*." What's true of those three parties? Those are the ones we're going to be with for eternity. So the question is, who do you want to please most--people who may pressure you for a few years here, or the Ones you'll be with for eternity? So remember who's watching.

B. Guideline #2: There are no exceptions (21b). "Keep these instructions without partiality." Never let personal feelings keep you from obeying God's Word.

"You don't expect me to confront Roger, do you? He's my friend." If he's your friend, here's your opportunity to help him God's way. "Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful (Prov. 27:6, KJV)."

"But he was my Sunday School teacher when I was a child. He helped me so much." But if he's living in sin, overlooking his behavior isn't helping him.

The text specifies, "Do nothing out of favoritism." There's to be no partiality. The standard applies to all. There's to be no lobbying in the church, no "you give me a break here, and I'll pay you back later." No preferential treatment. There must be no effort to protect those give the most, or serve the most, or who are the most gifted. No, it's not easy to rebuke sinning leaders. Yet God requires it He wants His church to be holy.

C. Guideline #3: Since the stakes are so high, exercise caution (22a). "Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, and do not share in the sins of others." "Laying on of hands" most likely refers to ordination, the placement of men into the ministry.

Don't be "hasty" in doing that, Paul says. Don't do it "suddenly," as the KJV puts it. The stakes are too high to put someone into a leadership position prematurely.

In fact, if a church practices hasty ordination, that is, if it places men into leadership without careful examination first, it's actually a partner in the sin problem if the leader falls. But how often churches do this! To fill a slot--"We have to have more deacons, don't we?!"--it lowers God's standard to fill a quota.

No, not a "novice," as we saw in 3:6, "lest he become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil."

Listen to J. Vernon McGee again, "Today we often develop what I call Alka-Seltzer Christians and Alka-Seltzer churches--it's all fizz, foam, and froth, a lot of emotion, and a lot of talk about love, love, love. It is important that love be displayed in a church, but it needs to be anchored in the Word of God."

Before a man becomes a church leader, make sure he's anchored in the Scriptures.

D. Guideline #4: Guard your own life (22b). "Keep yourself pure." Specifically, Paul seems to be saying, "Keep yourself pure by refusing to put unqualified men into leadership positions." But the command could be a general exhortation. The best thing Timothy could do for the church he served was this--keep himself pure.

Be a model, Timothy. Practice what you preach. Be pure.

Timothy had a choice to make. And so do we. I'm talking to Christians now, to those who've trusted Jesus Christ to be their Savior and Lord. And I'm talking to those who are committed to *this* church, who've been baptized and placed themselves under the authority of this local church. If you've never done that, I encourage you to consider the importance of both decisions--to trust Christ, and to identify with a local church.

But I'm talking now to those of you who've already made those two commitments. Here's the bottom line of today's text. There's a resolution we need to make...

The Bottom Line: Let's resolve to do things by the Book.

And to help us, I want each of us to contemplate three personal questions.

1. *Is knowing the Word a priority in my life?* If it is, I will carve out time on my schedule to read it, to memorize it, to gather with God's people and study it. Is that true of me? Is knowing the Word truly a priority in my life? Are there things that need to change to make it *more* of a priority? Are you willing to make those changes?

2. *Is living by the Word a priority in my life?* Am I willing to do whatever the Word of God asks me to do, no matter what? Be honest with yourself now. Perhaps you've never been baptized, yet you know the Bible calls you to this step of obedience. Maybe for you it's something else. Like raising your children according to God's Word. Or tithing. Or witnessing. Or going to reconcile with a brother. Is there something you know the Word of God is asking you to do, yet you've refused to do it? Are you willing to submit your life to God's Word today? Are you willing to make living the Word a priority in your life?

3. *Is being this kind of a church a priority in my life?* Do you want this church to be a Word-centered church? Are you willing to do whatever you can to make it happen, even some of the painful steps we've seen today? If so, to God be the glory! It's truly a beautiful thing when a church takes the Word seriously.