

1 Timothy 12**1 Timothy 5:17-25****April 28, 2013****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

Tonight is another of those sermons devoted to a text that deals with nuts and bolts issues of only occasional interest to Christians. They are important issues, to be sure -- the Bible doesn't talk about unimportant things -- but they are not where most of us live and breathe day by day. But our reverence for the Word of God is proved also by the attention we pay to instructions God saw fit to enclose in his book that seem somewhat removed from our ordinary life. We are *not*, after all, the measure of all things. And some of our interests need to be raised above the level of our own personal affairs and fixed on the fortunes of the church as a whole, which, Paul has already reminded us, is a "pillar and buttress of the truth." Sooner or later *everything* we are taught in the Bible will prove to be very important.

Among his instructions to Timothy about "how one ought to behave in the household of God" (3:15) Paul spoke of the need to respect differences in age and sex, and the special obligation of the church toward her widows, and about the order of widowed church workers. He now turns to the church's elders and how they are to be treated. Having already spoken of their qualifications in 3:1-7 he moves on to discuss their remuneration, their discipline, should it be necessary, and their ordination. [Stott, 135]

Text Comment

v.17 As I mentioned to you when we were considering 4:10 there is a question as to whether the Greek adverb *malista*, here and usually translated "especially," might be better translated "that is" or "namely." In such a case the elders who would be worthy of a double honor would be those who labor in preaching and teaching. The "double honor," as the next verse makes clear, and as the use of "honor" in v. 3 also indicates, is financial remuneration. But Chrysostom pointed out long ago that this verse and the next not only require the church to pay its ministers but requires the ministers to work very hard, so as to be worthy of the pay. [In Mounce, 310]

Now, as you may know, and as I have mentioned previously in other contexts, this is *the* text to which advocates of the so-called "two-office view" of Presbyterian church government appeal. The two offices, in that view, are elder and deacon and the single office of elder is then divided into ruling elders and teaching elders by merely practical considerations such as gifts, education, opportunity, and the like. There are a good many PCA men who think the two-office scheme -- the parity of ruling elder and teaching elder, nomenclature that originated in this very verse -- to be of great importance and

there are certainly some of them who push the envelope in that direction (ruling elders who administer the sacraments and so forth).

There is first a question about whether this text says anything at all about that, which, if it doesn't would be fatal to the theory, as this is its chief support. In 3:2 Paul said that an elder, a presbyter must be able to teach. A great many of our Reformed authorities have argued as a result that Paul is talking there and here in 5:17 only of the officers we would call pastors or preachers. That is, the men we call ruling elders are something else and Paul doesn't talk about them at all in First Timothy at all. There is a lot to be said for that interpretation. [Mounce, 307-309] Almost all the Reformers held this view, so did the Westminster divines.

On the other hand, even if we take the term "presbyters" or "elders" in 5:17 to refer to both rulers and preachers, which it certainly does sometimes in the Bible, and that preachers are here distinguished from rulers by the fact that they qualify to make their living from their work, it still doesn't prove the two-office view, or come close to proving it.

1. The OT also had an office of ruler, of elder, but it was a separate office from that of the priesthood. In that sense church government in the ancient epoch was three-office, not two-office (though, to be sure, that "three" is an anachronism as there was as yet no diaconate). If the term is defined by biblical usage, the elder does not hold the same office as a preacher or pastor. The Israelite and later Jewish elder had no standing as a minister of the Word and sacrament.
2. On the other hand, the term "elder" is also used in the Bible as an embrasive term for all church leaders, both rulers and preachers. So it was in Judaism. In the Gospels and in Jewish materials the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of the Jews, is referred to as the "elders of the people," though it was composed of both lay rulers, i.e. elders proper, and priests. No one thought that being a lay ruler made a man a priest, even though the term "elder", in some cases and for some purposes, might be applied to both.
3. And so in its early Christian usage. The apostles Peter and John also refer to themselves as "elders," but, obviously, while being an apostle made one an elder, being an elder did not make a man an apostle! The generic term "elder" can mean either any church leader, or a preacher, or a lay ruler. But there is precious little evidence that anyone in the apostolic age or in the age that followed thought that lay rulers held the same office as did preachers and pastors and there is a great deal of evidence that they did not.

The two-office view found fertile soil in the American south in the years before and after the Civil War. Whether is actually taught in the Bible is another question entirely. Fact is,

the Christian church in virtually all its major manifestations, from the beginning to the present day, has been three-office in its understanding of the Christian ministry -- call it what you will: pastorate or priesthood -- that is, it has seen the ministry as a separate calling, position and status with distinct functions and responsibilities. Even our PCA *Book of Church Order*, supposedly a manual of two-office church government, is, at all critical points, a three-office document, treating the ministry as a separate office with separate privileges and responsibilities.

It was true in the OT as well that the priesthood, or the ministry of Word and worship, was a man's life work. In 2 Chron. 31:4 we read that the priests were supported by the offerings of the people "so that they might give themselves to the Law of the Lord."

- v.18 This is a verse, as you can imagine, dear to every pastor's heart! But its importance lies not only in the point being made at the moment -- that churches should support their pastors financially -- but that Paul should cite a piece of OT case law as still in force in the new epoch. Actually this happens a good many times in the NT and is proof, if proof were needed, that the law of God, even its details, was not cancelled when the church moved into the new epoch established by Christ and his apostles. There were many changes of form, to be sure, but the principles enshrined in those laws are eternal, rooted as they are in the nature of God. By the way, Paul cites the same verse to make the same point in 1 Cor. 9:9-11.

The second citation, "The laborer deserves his wages," is actually a statement of the Lord Jesus from Luke 10:7, some indication that the Lord's teaching as we have it in the Gospels was well known among the Gentiles by the time Paul wrote his letter to Timothy, whether or not the Gospel of Luke itself was circulating by then.

An elder is not to be a lover of money (as Paul said in 3:3), but the work of the ministry of the Word is important and demands a man who does it conscientiously. So to be paid is his due. Christians have often fretted about this, thinking that a man who is getting paid for such holy work will have divided motives. Some groups, like the Brethren, have, in part for this reason, declined to have full-time ministers and have left the preaching and pastoring to laymen, usually with predictable results. But Presbyterians have had another problem, of so professionalizing the ministry that young men have been tempted to enter it because it is a respected and well-paid profession, in some cases better paid than other professions. As so often in the bible, some need to attend to 3:3; others to 5:17!

- v.19 But what of an elder or, perhaps especially, a preacher, who does not perform his duties acceptably, alas a situation that has occurred far too often in Christian history? First Paul

explains what is to be done when an elder is accused; then what is to be done if he is found guilty.

No charge is even to be received unless it is substantiated by two or three witnesses; the two or three indicating that the testimony must be plausible and weighty. Not just two or three yahoos, in other words! The reason for this is that ministers are particularly susceptible to slander. People who don't like a minister's teaching can smear his reputation beyond recovery. As Calvin reminds us "None are more exposed to insults than godly teachers." However well they perform their duties, Calvin says, "they never avoid a thousand criticisms." [Calvin, 263] Calvin points out that ministers, one of whose tasks is to preach to people about their sins, are inevitably going to be criticized and that this is one of the Devil's ploys to undermine the authority of the Word of God itself.

May I say that obedience to this apostolic commandment would render the blogosphere mostly mute! You'll note that this counsel is not very different from what the Lord gave us in Matt. 18: first a single Christian, then two or three will confront the sinning brother. Only then is the matter taken to the church, which in context means to the elders of the church.

- v.20 On the other hand, if the sin is actually proved, the man is to be rebuked publicly. No doubt, if the rebuke didn't work, more severe punishment would follow. The "all" is a reference to the whole church; the "rest" is likely a reference to the remaining elders. [Mounce, 312, 314] There is to be no favoritism; ministers looking out for other ministers. I know a man who as a practicing minister in another PCA presbytery had an affair. It was largely covered up in his presbytery, there was not so much as a public rebuke, and we learned nothing about it when he came here. He left us a few years later and subsequently had another affair, was deposed and, alas, finally excommunicated. We can't help but wonder now if the man's ministry, which came to nothing, was without the Lord's blessing because he had never had to face the music with regard to his first grave sin.

Nothing is more destructive of holiness and good order in the church than sinful ministers who get away with their sins. In many respects this is the story of the Protestant mainline churches. They have been destroyed by ministers who have sinned overtly and unrepentantly and have been kept in their offices, teaching their people to do the same.

So both concerns must be kept in view. As Augustine remarked long ago: "Here is a dilemma which often occurs: if you punish a man, you may ruin him. If you leave him unpunished, you may ruin another. I admit that I make mistakes in this matter every day." [Letters, no. 195; cited in ACCS, IX, 205]

- v.22 In the most solemn terms Paul now invokes his own apostolic authority, the present God and his angels, to command Timothy to treat elders in the way he has described: neither going beyond the evidence nor falling short of it.

One important and sensible way of avoiding future problems, of course, is not to rush to ordination, but to make sure that the man in question is both qualified and spiritually and emotionally ready to assume the responsibilities of the office. If ordination is given to hastily, Timothy will find that he has a share in the sins the minister later commits because, as we all know, the only solution to a great many problems in life is not to have gotten into them in the first place.

- v.23 Why the remark about wine, since it doesn't have any obvious connection with what goes before or what follows? Some think that the command to keep himself pure prompted Paul to add an aside, "Keep yourself fit," knowing that Timothy had a somewhat delicate constitution. Others think Paul means to ensure that Timothy doesn't misunderstand what "keep yourself pure" means. It doesn't mean the asceticism being taught by the false teachers in Ephesus. Finally some think that the false teachers, ascetics in some ways, drank wine to excess (hence the statement that elders must not be drunkards in 3:3) and that Timothy had responded, as a godly man might, by refusing to drink at all, even to the point of damaging his health.
- v.25 These statements complete Paul's advice to Timothy about judging the conduct of elders. We know so little of another person's life; we are so often surprised by the evil they do or the good they do. It takes time to take the measure of a person. Some sins are known immediately, but others not for many years and good deeds, while they are often obvious, are not always known until later. Be cautious in your judgment of others is the point. Discernment is required along with fairness, impartiality and firmness.

Timothy was in a rough spot. He was a younger man, expected to enforce Paul's dictates on a sometimes unwilling congregation in which at least some of its leadership, men older than he, had been complicit in welcoming false teaching in the church. The situation, as all such situations will be, was tense. Undoubtedly there were accusations flying in both directions and, knowing what we know about people caught up in controversy, not everyone, perhaps hardly anyone was careful to get his facts straight before opening his mouth. Underlying resentments surfaced under the guise of doctrinal issues, as also happens. Everyone was arguing for only the highest motives, or so they said. And Timothy had to sort all of this out. And so Paul commands his young assistant to take very great care of his motives, to be sure that he is not prejudging a case, and that he is not to allow his personal biases to affect his judgment. He must be scrupulously fair or it won't matter whether he is proven to be right in the end. All anyone will

remember is the injustice of the process. [Mounce, 316] Timothy is to be cautious in accusing and bold in rebuking, just what we are taught everywhere else in the Bible about the exercise of discipline in the church. [White in Stott, 139]

Now in our tradition we are well used to hearing that it necessary to expose the false teacher and the man or woman living a rebellious life. Hardly controversial in our church, though you might be surprised how infrequently it is actually done. Like it or not, such situations come up. They always have, they always will until the church is entirely in heaven. It is a melancholy fact that even in the age of the apostles, the age of miracles, the church was so often embarrassed by the failures of her own people, by dissension caused by differences in doctrine or behavior, only some of which were of any great importance. One might have thought that in that early day everyone in the church would know what the gospel was, love it, and refuse to budge from it; know what the Christian life was and aspire to live it in love and holiness. But the Devil -- mentioned just before this paragraph in v. 14 -- was hardly willing for *that* to happen. What better way to discredit the new movement than to reveal its followers to be as petty and small-minded as everyone else. The Lord had prayed, in his great High Priestly Prayer, that his people might be one so that the world might know that the Father had sent him into the world. Fat chance if Christians were always at one another's throats or if they couldn't themselves agree what their message actually was!

To be sure, the Christians did in great numbers live lives of love, of willing sacrifice, of honesty and industry, and of true goodness, so much that the world could not help but take notice. But it has not always been so and wasn't always so even then, in what we might have thought would have been the church's honeymoon. It is demoralizing and nothing so weakens the church's witness as her repeated failures to remain faithful to the Lord in her teaching, her living, and in her love one for another, the very things Paul is talking about here with respect to the leadership of the church.

Whatever may be the reasons why God allows this disgraceful behavior among his children, the question for us is what to do about it when we must face such divisions and disagreements. Now Paul has already said, in effect, that any teaching in the church must be judged according to the unchanging standard of the Word of God. Standards of conduct must remain those taught in the law of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ. There will be no changing of these.

We are, alas, all too well aware of how often and how completely *that* apostolic rule has been violated. We have many so-called churches of Christ that have, just as Israel in the ancient epoch, exchanged the revelation of God for the conventional opinions of the surrounding culture. Much as Paul valued and worked for unity, as often as he taught, as he did the Corinthians, "that there should be no divisions among you," (1 Cor. 1:10), there is no doubt that he was picking a fight in Ephesus by writing First Timothy. He had sent his young assistant there to stamp out the

rebellion underway there against the apostolic teaching and to give the congregation a shake and remind them that while the Christian life might be very hard, it wasn't complicated: one had only to obey God's commandments, to love God and one's neighbor after the imitation of Jesus Christ. But under the influence of these teachers the Christians in Ephesus, at least some of them, were repudiating fundamental principles and practicing what Paul, channeling J. Gresham Machen, would say wasn't Christianity at all, but a completely different religion. In First Timothy Paul was doing what the Lord's brother Jude would tell all Christians to do: "contend for the faith once and for all delivered to the saints."

But, of course, it isn't always actually false doctrine that is being taught. Sometimes it is just teaching that is somewhat different concerning this matter or that. Some say it is bad teaching, even heresy, and ought to be stamped out; other faithful men, also learned in the Scriptures and committed to the authority of the Word of God, say it is actually teaching true to the Bible and needs to be heeded by the church. Or the problem is with a Christian's behavior. Some of the time something is going on in a Christian's life that is sinful, and not sinful only -- for we are all sinning all the time -- but scandalous, serious, and destructive of a Christian's reputation. But again sometimes one man's sin is another man's Christian liberty. To address the real-life situations created by such situations we have been given in the Bible a procedure by which to get to the bottom of a matter, to make a sound judgment, and to take appropriate action. We call this *church discipline*. From Deuteronomy to Matthew, from to 1 Corinthians to 1 Timothy, from the Letters of John to Revelation we are taught, now here, now there, what to do when someone raises a question about a person's doctrine or his or her life.

What we have here in 1 Timothy 5 concerns elders in particular, but the principles are the same we find everywhere else. But what I want to draw to your attention tonight is Paul's concern that contrary interests be faithfully served *at one and the same time*. You don't need to be told, I'm sure, that it is precisely the failure to do both things at once that has so bedeviled the church through the ages, has so discredited her in the eyes of the world, and has so divided us from one another. Sometimes, as in the inquisition, the church leaps to a conclusion and does whatever is required, including torturing the alleged heretic, to extract a confession. At other times the sin is obvious, known to all, but there is no rebuke, public or otherwise; indeed, often there is praise and eventually imitation.

As C.S. Spurgeon rightly warned his generation:

"Trimming now, and debasing doctrine now, will affect children yet unborn, generation after generation." [In Pike, ii, 327]

I wonder how many people will be in hell because they were raised in churches that a generation or two before were faithful, gospel preaching and gospel living congregations, but had, through

the neglect of Paul's counsel here, become enemies of real faith in Jesus and a real Christian life. The number I fear will be very large.

We can and do fall off on either side: an unconcern to make sure of the facts and to weigh them in faithfulness to the Word of God and Christian charity and we become censorious and divisive, on the one hand; or we are guilty of unwillingness to confront open rebellion against the Word of God on the other.

We tend to worry about the latter failure more than the former, but that may be because we were never unjustly treated by a church court or caught up in the maw of such a controversy. My father was deposed from the ministry of the Presbyterian Church USA in the late 1940s for having written a letter to a man in another denomination -- a copy of which was taken without permission from his personal files, files which were stored in the basement of the First Presbyterian Church in Gainesville, Texas while he was serving in Europe during the Second World War -- a letter that expressed his great concern about the doctrinal declension in the church, a concern that had been expressed by thousands of PCUSA ministers by that time, and in which he expressed the possibility of leaving that denomination. It was hardly a unique sentiment, even in that Presbytery, that had some very conservative Dallas Seminary professors among its membership. He had taken no act against the church, hadn't made any plans to remove himself or his congregation from that denomination -- indeed, he had not left the PCUSA but entered the army and gone to war -- but he was deposed because he had told others that he didn't approve of the direction the church was taking. His was no noble sacrifice so far as he was concerned. The PCUSA was the church of his ancestors. His father was a well-known PCUSA minister and evangelist. His brother, the founder of Young Life, was a PCUSA minister. His other brothers were elders in their respective PCUSA congregations. It was humiliating, unnerving, and for a young father with two little girls, it meant the loss of their home and his income.

The men who did that to him were Presbyterian elders who, had you told them that in a generation their church would be celebrating the welcoming of practicing homosexuals into its ministry, they would have laughed in your face. But, of course, that is where they have gone, following the culture in lockstep as Israel did in the days of the prophets. They threw out a faithful man and kept the unfaithful, precisely the reverse of what Paul told them to do here in 1 Timothy 5.

This sort of thing happens; more than you know. Men are accused of crimes they did not commit or that are not crimes at all according to the Word of God. It has happened in our Presbyterian Church in America. The problem, of course, is in our hearts. Our pride, our jealousy, our need to be right, make us confident critics of everyone but ourselves. Isaac Watts put it very helpfully this way:

“A dogmatical spirit inclines a man to be censorious of his neighbors. Every one of his opinions appears to him written, as it were, with sunbeams, and he grows angry that his neighbors do not see it in the same light. He is tempted to disdain his [neighbors] as men of low and dark understanding because they do not believe what he does.” [*Improvement of the Mind*, 27]

John Newton makes the same point more simply:

“There is a principle of self which disposes us to despise those who differ from us.”
[*Letters*, pb. ed., 102-104]

The sort of thing we have been through recently in the PCA has been repeated in virtually every Reformed church at one time or another. The Christian Reformed Church had its Jansen case in the early 1920s, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church its Gordon Clark case in the 1940s, and so on. Looking back on the history of those cases virtually every sane reader of the record now cringes and asks how these men could have been so stupid. It is so obvious that in all of these cases that there was an almost willful failure to be fair to the accused and that prejudice and bias and personality had poisoned the church's brotherhood. Dumb, dumb, dumb! Paul told us what to do: “do nothing from partiality,” but Christians have repeatedly and defiantly ignored him. And that is one reason for the embarrassing fact that there are virtually as many churches as there are Christian opinions! No wonder the world doesn't take us seriously! We preach love but often can't get past even some minor disagreement and seem to take relish in devouring one another. It has happened far too often and has been a failing of far too many even great men -- Jerome, Samuel Rutherford, Augustus Toplady, John Wesley, and Cornelius Van Til come to mind -- for us not to fear committing the same sin ourselves.

To be sure, the other error happens as often if not more so: a sinner is excused in his sin, allowed to continue in it, and to recruit others to it. History has furnished us with countless examples of this failure and its horrific consequences for Christian faith and life. Usually the errors are dressed up very beautifully or seem to be motivated by concerns that virtually any Christian can share. Michael Servetus, the arch-heretic of the Reformation -- you remember, the one who was hunted by Roman Catholics and Protestants alike, but, alas, was burned at the stake in Calvin's Geneva -- I say Servetus jettisoned the doctrine of the Trinity because he thought it was preventing the Muslims and Jews in his native Spain from converting to Christianity. Heretics often have a kind of good-will that is beguiling to Christians. As the great theologian, Debbie Boone, once sang, “It can't be wrong when it feels so right.” We're supposed to be smarter than that! We know the devil disguises himself as an angel of light.

So what will it be? Not one, not the other; not fairness *or* stern judgment. Any unbeliever can manage that! But both together? *That* takes grace, a large heart, spiritual maturity, and practiced judgment. They said of Augustine as a controversialist that he was “suaviter in modo, fortiter in re,” gentle in manner, but firm in substance. Can you be that as a Christian? Isn’t that the way the Lord Christ is with you? He is gentle; he will not snuff out the smoldering wick, he wants the best for you; but he never relaxes his standards either.

Alexander Whyte once said that if we can’t handle disagreement and controversy with clean, all-men-loving hearts, we ought to leave all of that to better men than we are. So, whether we are private Christians or elders charged with the exercise of church discipline, let it be our unflinching determination that everyone will be judged fairly and without prejudice, that none of us will pass judgment until a group of wise, learned, experienced men are fully persuaded of a serious error, and, at the same time, that we will remain loyal forever to the gospel of Christ and the law of God and will not tolerate anyone who calls himself a Christian but proves himself unwilling to share that loyalty with us.

This may not be a sermon that seems immediately relevant to you. But the time will come and when it comes you will hold your life and the life of your children in your hands. You can’t have God as your father unless the church is your mother, and if she proves an unfaithful mother -- either by infidelity or constant bickering and back-biting -- you will not flourish as a Christian and your children will not be Christians at all. How’s that for relevant!