

"Words for Pastor and People" (Part 8)

This summer, I'm preaching through the New Testament letter of 1 Timothy. Today we begin chapter 5. "Do not speak harshly to an older man, but speak to him as to a father, to younger men as brothers, to older women as mothers, to younger women as sisters—with absolute purity" (1 Timothy 5:1-2). Paul is telling the young pastor Timothy how to treat various groups of people in the church. Sometimes people needed to be confronted or reprimanded. But if it's an older man who needs this, Timothy is to treat him as a father. He should treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters - in purity!

Isn't there practical wisdom in these words? A lot of problems in the church are the result of people not knowing how to relate well to one another, or not maintaining healthy boundaries! Young people may show a lack of respect for older people, or vice versa. Sometimes men and women can cross boundaries. For instance, a married person may begin to feel an attraction towards someone in the church, and this can lead to an affair. I had this happen in a small country church I served, and it was a mess. Keeping healthy boundaries, being considerate of others and how we relate to them, can go a long way in helping the church function smoothly!

The rest of today's Scripture deals with the place of *widows* in the church. In the first century, when the Apostle Paul was writing this, widows had no Social Security benefits, no pensions, no health insurance, no Medicare. Women then were not as free to pursue full time jobs or careers, so they depended on a husband for support. Many widows lived on the edge of survival.

In the Old Testament, Israel is often reminded of God's special concern for widows, and of Israel's responsibility to care for the widow. Exodus 22:22 says, "You shall not abuse any *widow* or orphan." Psalm 68:5 says, "Father of the fatherless and protector of *widows* is God in his holy habitation."

Let's continue on in 1 Timothy, chapter 5. "Honor widows who are really widows. If a widow has children or grandchildren, they should first learn their religious duty to their own family and make some repayment to their parents, for this is pleasing in God's sight. The real widow, left alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day, but the widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives. Give these commands as well, so that they may be above reproach" (1 Timothy 5:3-7). Paul instructs that if a widow has children, the children have a responsibility to the parent. The Church is not to assume responsibility for older people whose children were still alive and able to support them! The Church, then, as now, had limited resources to help people. The ancient world was pretty clear that it was the duty of children to support aged parents. This obligation to family is echoed in Paul's words. "And whoever does not provide for relatives, and especially for family members, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Timothy 5:8).

The letter continues: "Let a widow be put on the list if she is not less than sixty years old and has been married only once; she must be well attested for her good works, as one who has brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the saints' feet, helped the afflicted, and devoted herself to doing good in every way" (verses 9-10). The New Testament Church made up an official register of widows, and the requirements were strict for those "put on the list". They had to be at

least 60 years old. (That was really "old" then, when the life expectancy was much shorter). Widows had to be faithful to the marriage covenant, and be known for their good works, and service to others.

The next few verses are strange! "But refuse to put younger widows on the list, for when their sensual desires alienate them from Christ, they want to marry, and so they incur condemnation for having violated their first pledge. Besides that, they learn to be idle, gadding about from house to house, and they are not merely idle but also gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not say. So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, and manage their households, so as to give the adversary no occasion to revile us. For some have already turned away to follow Satan. If any believing woman has relatives who are widows, let her assist them; let the church not be burdened, so that it can assist those who are real widows" (verses 11-16).

Avoid putting younger women on this list. Why? The idea is this: A husband dies and his young wife is grieving. Perhaps on impulse, as a believer, she may vow never to marry again, and to dedicate her life to Christ and the church (in a sense to be "married" to the church). But later on, she may wish to marry - and it would be better if she had not made the vow in the first place to remain single or celibate. Also, apparently there was special danger that young widows back then would be idle, and wind up as gossips and busybodies. Paul's hope and desire is that younger widows will remarry (verse 14).

Well, by now you may be scratching your head and thinking, "What in the world does all of this have to do with us today?" Here are some thoughts.

We see that the church is meant to be a caring, supportive community. In the first century there were people in the Christian fellowship - namely, widows - with special needs, and the church rallied to help! The church is not meant to be just a collection of isolated individuals, living in their own silos, disconnected from one another, but a supportive, caring community.

Sometimes the church fails in this. Other times, it comes through with flying colors! In one congregation I served, a lady and her husband went on a youth retreat as chaperones. While cooking, she got scalded and burned with boiling water. Her health insurance did not cover a large portion of the medical bill. We sent a letter to members of the church and collected a good amount of money to help them through.

In many churches members will offer to drive someone to the doctor, or provide a meal when someone comes home from the hospital. Many churches have a discretionary fund where people in need can receive assistance. In every church I've served, church members have come to me and said, "Here's some money for (a person, or family). I know they're going through a hard time. Can you give them this, but I want it to be kept anonymous." These stories are multiplied thousands and thousands of times throughout the Body of Christ, where people in the church really do care about one another!

There's another way that today's scripture is relevant for the present time. *We see the church*

standing with the destitute and the powerless. Back then widows represented some of the most powerless, vulnerable people. In the Bible, God always stands on the side of the marginalized and oppressed. Often, in the Bible, the term used for these groups is "the poor" - that meant not just those who were *financially* poor, but people who had no voice, no power in the larger society - people who got lost in the shuffle or trampled upon.

Who are people today who have little voice or power? Who are the "widows and the orphans" of today? People who need the church to act on their behalf? Let me give several illustrations of where, I believe, this has happened. I read of a church in Fort Lauderdale, FL that's bursting at the seams with new members, a United Methodist Church, Christ Church. It was a church beginning to decline, but God turned it around. *How?* By recognizing that the people God treasures are the outcasts, the outsiders, the outlaws, the poor and needy. One day the pastor challenged the whole congregation to pray, "Lord, send us the people *no one else wants*. Lord, send us *Your* treasures, that we may treasure them as You would." According to the senior pastor, the church turned the corner when he stopped praying, "Lord, bless our creative ideas" and started praying, "Lord, help us to be a part of what *You* are blessing!"

Tony Campolo is a brilliant educator and scholar, a dynamic preacher who could command the pulpit of many an affluent congregation. Yet he has devoted his life to what he calls the "poorest of the poor" and he has become their voice. Many years ago he founded an organization called EAPE - Evangelical Association for the Promotion of Education. Over the span of those years they've established elementary and secondary schools, universities, adult and child literacy centers, tutoring programs, AIDS hospices, urban youth ministries, summer camps, and long-term Christian service programs in Haiti and the Dominican Republic, Africa, Canada, and throughout the U.S. They've helped many people develop skills so that they can become productive and self-supporting. Tony Campolo *lives* a commitment to the poor and needy by his modest lifestyle. In one of his sermons, I heard him tell how he drives an old car, and once his tires were so bald that while he was preaching, several men took his car and had a new set of tires put on and paid for.

The Church in the 1st century took care of widows; it stood with the powerless and vulnerable people of their day. God's concern for the needy was *their* concern.

An aside here: Very often when we talk about helping the needy, there's a reaction against that. Some say, "Yeah, but there are people who'll take advantage of your generosity. People who really aren't needy, but just moochers." That is true! And that's why the early church had to set up boundaries as to who would qualify for their assistance - they would help only *real* widows! I heard a presentation by someone from Water Street Ministries. They do a great work in providing for people's basic needs, but he told how they had to put limits on how much help they would give *any one person* - e.g. how long one can stay at the shelter. There would be people taking advantage of the help offered.

In one church I served we established a clothing bank. It was the vision of one of the ladies in the church. But I tried to warn her ahead of time that we needed to set up some rules and

limitations; some people will abuse your kindness. Sure enough, in one instance we had to notify the police, and forbid a few people from even coming on to the premises. One man, sort of a character and vagabond in that community, one day got some free clothing from the clothing bank, went right from the clothing room next door to the fellowship hall, where the senior center met each day, and tried to sell the clothing! So, you have to be cautious! But there *are* people who genuinely can use a helping hand, and the church is called to reach out to such people with Christian compassion and practical assistance.

One more truth for today that I see in the Scriptures we're looking at: *Children have a responsibility to older parents*. We see this in the verses in our text today. Children are to fulfill their religious duty to "make some repayment to their parents" (verse 4). "Whoever does not provide for relatives, and especially for family members, has denied the faith" (verse 8).

In previous generations, care for aged parents was done through the extended family. It was not unusual to have 3 or 4 generations living under the same roof - like *The Waltons*, of TV fame! Of course, there's been a shift in our society. There aren't very many homes where 3 generations are living under the same roof. Many older individuals and couples live in a retirement community, with a life-care arrangement. Not with their children. I've heard people say, "I don't want to be a burden to my children...", so they choose not to live with their children even if their children offer to take them in. Elderly folk with failing health are more likely to be put in a nursing home, rather than being cared for by their children.

How do we reconcile what Scripture says in 1 Timothy with what is happening with the care of the elderly in our society? It's a real issue for some of us! For instance, some have agonized over the decision whether or not to put a parent or both parents into a nursing home, or how best to care for an aging, or sick, parent. Let me share some observations on this matter.

Having 3 generations living under the same roof can be a problem. Early in my ministry, I preached on this passage from 1 Timothy. I said how some kids dump their parents in a nursing home, and argued that grown children should open their homes to aged parents. An older woman who lived with her daughter and family came out of church and said how much she liked the sermon. I found out later, however, in talking with her daughter, that there were problems. She told me that her aged mother was not very pleasant to live with! So my thoughts on this have changed over the years. When I was teenager, for a while, my grandmother lived in our home, and things got so bad she was asked to leave. I felt bad when she had to get an apartment by herself, but I could understand it was just not a good situation at our house.

For many people, putting their parents into a nursing home (often against their will), can be a gut-wrenching experience. It often produces tons of guilt. We went through this with Nancy's parents in the last few years of their life. We dealt with it with my dad. Dad was terminally ill. We wanted to bring him to our house and give him hospice care, but it didn't work out. He spent his last days at the Lebanon VA Hospital. That was hard to watch.

There is no pat answer to this dilemma. People's lifestyles are different today. In past years, it

was often the woman who cared for elderly parents or family members in the home, but many women are employed today outside the home.

Perhaps we can avoid 2 extremes. The first extreme is to put a parent into a nursing home, then just kind of forget about that parent. The children are just too busy doing their own stuff, and hardly ever visit.

An opposite extreme is that we become obsessed with guilt when a parent goes to a nursing home. Elisabeth Eliot is a beautiful Christian, an author, radio show host, widow of Jim Elliott, one of the missionaries killed some years ago in South America. In a book entitled *Forget Me Not, Loving God's Aging Children*, Elisabeth tells of the inward turmoil she experienced in having to put her mother into a nursing home. She wrote the book to encourage others struggling with this same decision.

Another way to look at this is to realize that, in many instances, placing an elderly parent in a facility where he or she can get proper medical care, and maintaining regular contact with that loved one, can be expressions of *love and compassion*.

The Church, too, can play a part, by visiting members in nearby nursing care facilities.

At its best, the church always cares for the "widows" of its generation: those who are the most vulnerable and needy both in and beyond our congregation.

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