

The Necessity of the Biblical Model

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the commandment of God our Saviour, and Lord Jesus Christ, which is our hope; Unto Timothy, my own son in the faith: Grace, mercy, and peace, from God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord. As I besought thee to abide still at Ephesus, when I went into Macedonia, that thou mightest charge some that they teach no other doctrine, Neither give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which minister questions, rather than godly edifying which is in faith: so do.? (1Ti 1:1-4)

Typically Paul begins his letters with "by the will of God" or other similar terms. The appearance of the word "commandment" in First Timothy calls our attention to an exception to the Pauline rule. Why would Paul deviate from his normal introduction? In other letters the exception seems to have purpose. For example, the abruptness of Paul's introduction in the Galatian letter immediately alerts us that Paul feels a high intensity toward the erring Galatians due to their error. Reading the first few verses of that letter, we fully expect the terseness that follows.

Although Paul will develop his letter around quite positive issues, if, as many commentators believe, a primary purpose in this letter is to confront a growing error in the Ephesian church through Timothy's ministry there, we should expect that Paul will communicate through Timothy the urgency of his concern. If confronting error at Ephesus is in the forefront of Paul's mind as he writes, we should expect Timothy to share this letter with the church, so Paul will make sure that the church knows both the gravity of his concern and the necessity of the principles that he affirms to Timothy.

Our human nature easily imposes judgments onto others if they do not apply to us. If we interpret a situation or mandate of conduct as directly applicable to us, especially when it is corrective of our present conduct, we quickly lose our objectivity and seek alternatives to relieve our obligation. This is precisely the objective we see when we hear someone seek to rationalize non-compliance with Paul's qualifications for church office in this letter, particularly a church leader whose life is to match the qualifications set forth in this letter. Paul establishes immediately in his introduction that the things that he will present in this letter are "commandments" from the Lord, not merely the highest ideals toward which we should strive. Since the qualifications for either the office of deacon or elder (minister) command such prominence in this letter, we must assume that the character, qualifications, and personal discipline of church leaders constituted a significant part of the Ephesian problem that Timothy was to correct. Gordon Fee makes this point convincingly.[1] I would add to Fee's assessment that Paul obviously sees wise and qualified church leaders as a major insulator against and antidote to error within the local church community. People naturally look to leaders and tend to follow their examples. A compromising leadership will cultivate a compromising church membership. A leader who does not practice the qualifications of his office will foster a casual attitude among church members that they need not follow the Biblical commandments that apply to them with any more faithfulness than their leaders practice within their assignment.

As an elder and pastor, I am confronted and convicted by these qualifications often. I wish that I could say that I have always complied with every mandate set forth by Paul in the qualifications for church office. I believe in them and in their applicability to me and to others who hold church office today. As we who hold church office become aware of deficiencies in our personal lives, we are compelled by this letter to one of two courses. 1) We must take immediate steps to correct our errant conduct and ensure that the people in the church know that we take our position and qualifications seriously. 2) We

should exhibit sufficient respect for the Biblical qualifications of our office to step down from the office and beg the church's forgiveness for our failure. The gravity of these qualifications cannot be compromised without grave consequences to the church. We must live with the obvious truth that Paul introduced this letter with this clear qualification; what he wrote was a commandment from God, not merely his opinion or idealized recommendations. Often the family of a church officer may disqualify him from office as readily as his personal conduct. Paul observes a parallel in these qualifications between the way a church leader deals with the less-than-ideal problems in his family and the way he deals with problems in the church that he serves. If he does not earn his family's respect for his position, his qualifications (and theirs as his family), and his responsibilities, he cannot expect the church that he serves to respect him in his office. If he fails to lead his family by godly and convincing example, he will predictably fail in leading the church by example. If he is inclined to passively ignore problems in his family till they go plummeting out of control, he will likely do the same with problems in the church. If, when he finally reacts to problems in his family, he does so with anger and harshness, he will almost certainly do the same in his church office. All of these failures are public and damaging to both him and to the church that he is charged with serving.

Before leaving this personal note, I need to cover one additional area of concern. Writing to the errant Corinthian church, Paul established a pattern of ministry that lies at the core of every man's success or failure in ministry. (Since the word translated "ministry" applies to both the office of deacon and pastor-teacher, I include both in this observation.) "For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake" (2Co 4:5). No church leader can remain effective if he becomes the center of attention or controversy. Forethought, not afterthought, must guide his judgment and conduct. The minute he allows himself to become the focal point he has lost his ability to teach and to lead the church objectively. This principle must control his clarity in teaching and his lifestyle in leading the church. Ministry is not about the man who ministers. He is "your servant," not your lord. His role is to serve, not ensure that his will and preferences prevail in church decisions. The Biblical model of leadership by example, not by compulsion or intimidation (the "bully pulpit" concept that our nation's politicians occasionally mention), is perhaps the most difficult, but it is also the safest to ensure fulfillment of the church's Biblical mission. The Lord Jesus Christ leads by personal authority and commandment. However, we are to lead by example under His direction, indeed under His "commandment".

We often use "soundness" to refer to a person's theological or doctrinal purity. This word appears several times in the pastoral letters. Consistently the word is translated from the Greek root for our English word "hygiene." It refers to good health. The New Testament model of soundness applies equally to our personal conduct, including in this case the unique conduct of those who hold church offices of leadership, and to our doctrinal or theological posture. Bad health habits will inevitably lead to disease and to a compromised physical body. The same principle applies to a church body. Bad health, be it in the area of personal conduct, conduct of church officers, or theological perspective, predicts a spiritually sick, diseased, and weakened church whose survival, much less prosperity, is questionable. I will make the case throughout this series that all three areas of a church's culture must follow the New Testament "commandment" in order to legitimately qualify as "sound," healthy and hygienic, in the spiritual framework of a godly church.

The high marks that I set here both convict and challenge me as well as each of you. Although we must first assess our personal conduct against these "commandments," we must never allow our humanity to compromise the objective. Indeed, I must confess that I have not at all times lived up to the Biblical qualifications for my office. How did I respond? I tried to face the conviction of conscience and work to remedy the deficiency, not alter the New Testament qualifications to accommodate my failures. I hope to perpetuate refinement in my conduct as long as I live.

With conviction and determination, I pray that this series will nudge each of us toward a more faithful and conscientious development of the New Testament model in our personal lives.

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