

We have been studying Paul's first letter to Timothy, a young man he met early in his missionary journeys in south-central Turkey, an able and committed young man, who had grown into a position of Church leadership in Ephesus. Paul writes to him in response to issues in the Church. There are two undercurrents running through Paul's letters, which is not unique to the church at Ephesus; all churches across the eastern Mediterranean faced these two issues.

First, emerging Churches were struggling for identity: were those attending these early churches, reformed Jews or enlightened Greeks?

In this struggle for identity, people who embraced the Gospel of Christ, found themselves separated from their families, and from their religious community and society. This was particularly traumatic for Jews. An elaborate and complex structure of laws and customs held together their families, their community and their society, and gave them a distinct identity in a world which behaved differently, which practiced idolatry, child sacrifice temple prostitution, and turned a blind eye to corruption, unfaithfulness and sexual deviancy.

The church had to address the concerns of those identifying with it: Should they continue to observe the laws and customs of their Jewish past? Should these laws and customs be imposed on those entering the church fellowship who were not Jews? What meaning, if any, did such rituals and practices have, in the faith to which Jesus Christ called them?

This continues to be a current problem. We have churches and denominations, new and from the historical past, who rely on obedience to laws, observing set rituals, using set liturgy in worship, and following traditional customs. None of these are *wrong*, but in every age, the Church has had to address the question, *Do these laws, rituals and traditions*

*contribute to our understanding of God? Do these laws, rituals and traditions contribute to our appreciation of the work of Christ on the Cross?, and Do these laws, rituals and traditions contribute to living life centred around the Gospel of Jesus Christ?* Identity was, and continues to be a significant issue in Church life, and it does not help when some Christian faith traditions are caricatured as *smells-and-bells* or *Holy Smoke, happy-clappy,* or *mumbo-jumbo*.

The Church at Ephesus struggled with a second significant problem. Ephesus was a prosperous port city where goods from the east and the west changed hands, handsome profits made, and much of it spent on living the “good” life, which wasn’t exactly what Felicity Kendall and Penelope Keith demonstrated in the mid-1970s.

Prosperity allowed society the luxury to indulge in self pleasure and entertainment. History tells us, when society prospers, people begin to indulge in things that can be destructive; changes in diet, changes in values of life and habits, and changes in ideas of what might be considered appropriate recreation, push the limits to border on the dangerous and destructive.

In a cursory look at the history of Christian missions, I find materially prosperous societies, when challenged and confronted by the Gospel of Jesus Christ, try to find ways of adapting the Gospel to suit their lifestyle. Perhaps more dangerous than fad diets, luxurious habits and extravagant entertainment, adapting the Gospel to accommodate a lifestyle, creates a fertile ground for false teachers to pervert the Gospel and God’s laws to cater to and pamper those who wish to preserve extravagant lifestyles (remember Robin Leach’s *champagne wishes and caviar dreams!*)

Paul knows from personal experience, problems created by the good life, and is also aware of the problems facing the Church at Ephesus.

Paul wants Timothy to have a practical framework to ward against false teachers, before he embarks on commenting on the problems at Ephesus: **teach** with authority, devote yourself to the **public reading** of Scripture (as was the practice in the Synagogue), **use God's gift** to you and do not neglect it, be **personally committed** to these things by practicing and immersing yourself in them, and keep a close watch on yourself (**be self-critical**) and your teaching.<sup>1</sup>

Having given Timothy this safety framework, Paul switches on the spotlight on three groups of people: widows,<sup>2</sup> elders<sup>3</sup> and masters<sup>4</sup>. It is most likely that these three groups of people were particularly vulnerable to false teachers, **at that time**. Mind you, widows, church leaders and Owners/Managers/Directors of business are, even today, the target of unscrupulous merchants using lies, deception and destruction as their tools of trade.

There is a progression in Paul's thoughts. He asks Timothy to instruct the church to, *Honour widows*, elders who rule well should be considered *worthy of double honour*, and masters (employers who are responsible for the well being of all in their employment) as being worthy of *all honour*.

Jewish laws protected the elderly. In their youth, they served society; now in their old age, they deserve honour. Paul instructs Timothy, *Teach the church not to speak harshly to an old man; speak instead, words of encouragement. Treat older men as you would a father, older women as*

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Timothy 4:11-16

<sup>2</sup> 1 Timothy 5:1-16

<sup>3</sup> 1 Timothy 5:17-25

<sup>4</sup> 1 Timothy 6:1-2

*mothers, younger men as brothers, and younger women as sisters*<sup>5</sup>. But always remember, the elderly are still family.

The family was the primary unit of society in God's law given to the Hebrew nation. *If everyone took care of their family, society takes care of itself*. Paul singles out the treatment of widows. At that time, and still in many countries around the world, a woman's identity was tied in with her husband's; when he died, she lost her identity. God recognised this inconsistency in society and provides for the care of widows. The Church should be proud of the fact, from its inception (Acts 6), it put the welfare of widows as one of its core concerns. Paul's advice to Timothy was to provide the church two important guidelines in looking after widows: first determine if they have families; second, look for godliness.

The first is simple - children, siblings, parents and others have a duty of care and a personal responsibility to look after their widowed relative. Should a widow not have **any** family, then it is the responsibility of the church to look after her.

But *godliness* is subjective. Paul says of widows who have lots of "free" time on their hands, if they go "*from house to house as gossips and busybodies saying what they should not*<sup>6</sup>, **I would have the younger widows remarry...**", this is his personal view and he is not offering it as *doctrine*, nor as a standard by which **ALL** churches should comply.

The second group on whom Paul switches on the spotlight, are the elders of the Church, who are also responsible for teaching and preaching. We at Botley Baptist don't follow the model of elders and deacons as some churches do, but it is a good and valid model.

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<sup>5</sup> 1 Timothy 5:1-2

<sup>6</sup> 1 Timothy 5:13

It is evident in this section of Paul's letter that the church in Ephesus had elders who worked hard at teaching the Word of God and preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ, who were also the subject of unsubstantiated charges. Individuals entrusted by the church to teach and preach the Gospel, were to be looked after by the Church. This involves remunerating them so that they will not be in need and be prone to corruption and improper lifestyles, protecting them from being charged or slandered without proper evidence, and discipline them when they step out of line.

The third group of people on whom Paul shines the spotlight are *Masters*, people who employ workmen and are, therefore, personally responsible and liable for their total well-being. Paul wants Timothy to teach workmen in employment, that their employers (Masters) are worthy of **all honour**. Giving our earthly Masters **all honour**, employees learn to give God all honour, who is Master of us all; employees also learn to respect and to forgive their human masters, of their faults in looking after them.

There are two "arenas" (domains, territories) which the enemy would like to destroy, which God would like to protect and keep honourable: the family and the church. These are battlegrounds where misunderstanding and misrepresentation, sometimes even blatant lies destroy relationships and set people against people.

Paul's counsel to Timothy centres around protecting these two sacred territories: the family and the Church.

The work of the church is three-fold: The **Ministry** of the church is first, to look after all its members appropriately, which involves teaching, healing and a life of prayer, **then** to safeguard its structure, its organisation, its systems, its administration, that these function properly

and efficiently for the glory of Christ, and are not abused, misused or exploited.

Finally, the **Mission** of the church is to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to find ways of making Him known, to those who do not know Him, and are unaware of His purpose of submitting Himself to the cross.

We are cautioned to be aware of false teachers whose mission is to divert us from the plan and purpose of God. Paul's instructions Timothy, to fend off and repel false teachers, are very valid for us today: **teach** with authority because the Word of God has authority; devote yourself to the **public reading** of Scripture (as practiced in Synagogues); **use God's gift** to you and do not neglect it; be **personally committed** to these things by practicing and immersing yourself in them, and keep a close watch on yourself (**be self-critical**) and your teaching.

In a few moments let's renew our commitment to the Gospel of Jesus Christ: as a church, to minister to people in our care, to safeguard the administration of the church from misuse and exploitation, and to share with others, that which we consider of great value to us, the good news that Jesus has restored us into fellowship with the Father, and it is not much longer now before we shall begin to spend eternity with Him.

**AMEN**