

Proper relationships

The words of Paul we study today are intimate, reflecting the idea of the church as family, establishing guidelines that remind us of the importance and value of each person,



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regardless of gender, social standing or age.

This passage builds on 1 Timothy 3:4-5: “They (pastors) should manage their household well... because if they don’t know how to manage their own household, how can they take care of God’s church?” (CEB). Understand that these guidelines are written in the context of first-century society, where gender roles were rigid and slavery was the norm.

I have heard this text quoted in our day as proof that God orders a servant role for blacks, and they cannot be expected to equal whites! Such an idea clashes with Paul’s concept of God’s grace and the value of all people in God’s creation. Put all of Paul’s writings concerning women and slaves together and you will find him more open and flexible than some of his modern interpreters.

Beyond the common ideas of Paul’s day, he is teaching respect and responsible living for everyone within the church family.

The small village and rural churches I first served taught me the concept of church as family, where some roles seemed rigid, but everyone was important and loved. Today’s text was one of my primary guides for pastoral ministry. The modern concepts of pastor as CEO, elders as a governing board of directors and the church as a corporation hinder the development of meaningful relationships and family.

We should not be surprised that contemporary trends are moving away from a corporate church model and instead focusing on relationships, small groups and ministries where

people can be individually involved and see their contributions making a difference.

Every church has numerous fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters and grandparents, each one a significant part of congregational life. We do not have slaves today, but these guidelines are easily applied to laborers and employers. Paul’s comments concerning the care of widows may be included because of specific problems in Ephesus.

Paul’s no-nonsense approach is that, first of all, families should take care of their own widows if they have the resources. If not, the church should become involved. He firmly confronts any widow who has adequate resources but still expects the church to take care of her (vv. 3-6).

Slaves are described as “under bondage,” not a positive description, and urged to do their job well. What must have sounded very strange to first-century ears was the idea that slaves “who have masters that are believers shouldn’t look down on them because they are “brothers”... “instead, they should serve them more faithfully, because the people who benefit from your good services are believers who are loved” (6:2).

I always shudder when reading these particular words, but I inevitably have a mental image of the early church gathered for the Lord’s Supper, with a slave serving his master the bread and cup, both equal before the cross if not equal in this fallen world!

Ever practical, Paul goes on to talk about the potential conflict of wealth within the church. I have known churches where a wealthy individual “influenced” key decisions and even made sure certain people were elected as leaders. I have also known wealthy people who never sought preferential treatment or attempted to manipulate the church.

Paul commends those who do not

Formations

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6:1-2, 17-19

see their wealth or success as God’s endorsement of their superiority, but affirm and encourage others to serve and lead. They are a “treasure” and lay “a good foundation for the future. That way they can take hold of what is truly life” (v. 19).

The United States has been through some difficult financial times in recent years but compared to the rest of the world we are wealthy. We place much value on success and wealth. The majority of Paul’s readers were poor compared to us. They struggled to grow in faith and reach out to a pagan world with the hope of Christ.

Social barriers were very rigid: male and female, free and slave, Jew or Gentile. The book of Acts is the dramatic story of the gospel breaking through all the cultural and religious barriers of that world. It makes sense that the church was like a family, a safe place where different kinds of people learned to love and trust one another through a common faith in Christ. A church family is like any family, with its tensions and challenges. Paul is telling us to love, respect and build our relationships on God’s grace.

We are all individuals. When we face grief, illness or hardship we should find comfort and hope in our church family. When have you filled the role of father, mother, brother or sister to someone in their time of need? How have you been a friend or helped a widow in the church? Whether you have much or little is not the issue. Your compassion, friendship, and love is the core of ministry. If the church is family, may we all live to make it a healthy family that honors Christ.

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