

"The tone of our truth-telling can build a wall or a bridge."

In 1850, Abraham Lincoln's step-brother, John D. Johnston, wrote to him and asked, yet again, for a loan so he could settle some debts. On previous occasions Lincoln simply gave Johnston the money. But this time Lincoln responded with a "tough love" letter that included a helpful proposal.

Dear Johnston:

Your request for eighty dollars I do not think it best to comply with now. At the various times when I have helped you a little you have said to me, "We can get along very well now"; but in a very short time I find you in the same difficulty again. Now, this can only happen by some defect in your conduct. What that defect is, I think I know. You are not lazy, and still you are an idler. I doubt whether, since I saw you, you have done a good whole day's work in any one day.... This habit of uselessly wasting time is the whole difficulty; it is vastly important to you, and still more so to your children, that you should break the habit

You are now in need of some money; and what I propose is, that you shall go to work, "tooth and nail," for somebody who will give you money for it and, to secure you a fair reward for your labor, I now promise you, that for every dollar you will, between this and the first of May, get for your own labor ... I will then give you one other dollar Now, if you will do this, you will be soon out of debt, and, what is better, you will have a habit that will keep you from getting in debt again. But, if I should now clear you out of debt, next year you would be just as deep in as ever.

Affectionately your brother,

A. Lincoln

"The tone of our truth-telling can build a wall or a bridge." How we tell the truth makes a difference in how that truth is received. ... If we understood

this (as Abraham Lincoln seemed to) ... perhaps you and I would see better results with the times we have had to confront someone.

Have you ever had a confrontation go badly...? ...Perhaps we all have.

Last week I told you how much I dislike confrontation... but as a pastor... there are times when it is necessary... and if I always avoid it... I will not be worth my weight in salt... as a pastor.

But guess what? When I said that (last week)... I'm sure that many of you picked up on the fact... that (as Christians)... there will be times that we all need to confront a person who is wrong. ... (And... unless you are a “pugnacious person” – always bristling for a fight)... you probably identified with me as I spoke of my own reluctance to confront... You know (don't you?)... that so much can go wrong...? Relationships are often demolished ... and your reputation gets ravaged... as the person goes around telling others how horrible you are – BECAUSE (unfortunately) this has HAPPENED TO YOU. ... [P A U S E] ...

Timothy had his own reluctance to confront. (I spoke of this last week from our passage.) ... (And) in our passage today... the Apostle Paul moves into some practical advice for Timothy about how to confront others. By now... my hope is that you are seeing your own need for Paul's instruction.

Today we will find in our passage some practical advice to improve our efforts... whenever we need to confront. ... From there... Paul moved to a particular situation (in 1st Timothy... chapter 5)... that Timothy faced in the church at Ephesus (where Paul had left him)... and it required Timothy to confront some people in the church. ... So (first) we will learn some practical things about how to confront... and (second) how the church

should help people who are in need. “Wherever there is a need... are we obligated... because we are Christians... to meet it...?” ... “What about those who would abuse our good will...?” (Yes. The first century church faced many of the same problems that we do.) ... So let’s get to our passage now...

1 Tim 5:1-2

The instructions are comprehensive... covering all four possible relationships: older men... younger men... older women... and younger women. The basic idea is to act toward the members of God’s family as you would toward your own family.

Giving the corrected one the **DIGNITY** of family relationship will go a long way in successful correction.

It is one thing to rebuke someone giving them dignity... and it is another to do it harshly. ... All vindictiveness and bitterness must be avoided.

Whenever confrontation is necessary... we need to have an attitude of wanting to help that person (*for the glory of God*)... and not with an attitude of superiority (which seeks *the glory of ourselves*.) ... [P A U S E] ...

Can I ask you to recall a confrontation that you were part of... that went badly... (just for a moment)...? ... Was there any hint of an attitude of superiority with the confrontation...? ... Was there a greater concern for God’s glory than establishing your own...? ... [P A U S E] ...

Paul said to treat an older man like a father. An elderly man is not about to listen to a younger one who comes to him with an air of disrespect. ... Likewise... Timothy was to treat an older woman as he would his mother...

and a young man as he would his brother... and a young woman as his sister. ... "The tone of our truth-telling can build a wall or a bridge."

(Now) we need to acknowledge that times are different... than when Paul wrote this letter to Timothy. Ancient cultures... (as immoral as they were)... nonetheless... thought of the family as a miniature kingdom... over which the patriarch presided as a just and wise king. ... And they offered their fathers the same dignity and submission - owed to a king!

Sadly for our day and time... many fathers do not manage their households with dignity... respect... and high honor... and children are not likely to offer it to their dad in return. So... the advice: "*appeal to him as a father*"... might not resonate in today's culture as well as it did in Timothy's. ... Perhaps we might adapt it (slightly) to say: "*appeal to him as a highly respected king, president, or prime minister.*"

Older men who are true Christian believers have more experience and wisdom in dealing with life. This is not to say they are always right - sometimes they are not! ... But they do have the wisdom of experience. Whenever they need to be confronted... they are not to be regarded... set aside... or treated as **useless**. They are to be treated as fathers... with affection... respect... and honor.

(Of course)... we all know that older men sometimes hold strong opinions and become set in their ways. ... They can become closed-minded to new ideas... ministries... and methods. ... The end result is sometimes tragic in a church... seen by: misbehavior... grumbling... complaining... unfair criticism... opposition... and church division. ... (But LISTEN!) ...what we

face will never be worse than what Timothy had to deal with... in confronting church elders who were false teachers! And Paul told him:

If an older man ever needs to be corrected... he is to be corrected and disciplined as a father - not as an enemy! ... Firm is acceptable... abrasive is forbidden.

When confronting a younger man... there is to be a sense of treating him as a peer - one who has a common upbringing. (In other words: there must not be any sense of superiority... once again.) Perhaps there might be a little less formality that you would give to a respected king... or president... (an older man who needs confronting.) ... But similarly... there cannot be any attitude of superiority. ... The same would be true for an older woman... and a younger woman. But there is more said about a younger woman. Another emphasis is made by Paul... for how male leadership in the church should treat a younger woman.

Extra caution must be exercised in approaching a young woman. Paul warns that it must be done “*in all purity*” (in verse 2). The reasons for this are obvious. Any impropriety on Timothy’s part would ruin his reputation and ministry. ... Christian men... especially pastors and others in leadership positions)... should never be alone with a female (other than their wife) in an enclosed room. ... This advice may seem legalistic... but lives and ministries have been destroyed merely by a false rumor. Christian leaders need to be “above reproach.”

What a rich store of relational wisdom Paul gives the church with its full span of age and gender. ... How beautiful is the church that has people who confront in love when it is necessary... treating one another as

fathers... mothers... brothers... and sisters. ... Such a graced family knows “*how people ought to conduct themselves in God’s household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth*” (3:15). Such graced conduct means that the gospel will go forth unhindered.

... ..

(Now) the next 14 verses here in chapter 5 of 1st Timothy... concern themselves with a situation that Timothy needed to confront. The instructions Paul just gave about confrontation... now need to be applied... to older men... older women... younger men... and younger women. Taking care of women who had lost their husbands... involved each of these age groups in the church. The church at Ephesus faced problems in their ministering to widows... and anyone who was perpetuating the problems in this important ministry... had to be confronted.

I am going to read all 14 verses at once. Some of it might sound a bit confusing... and not at all how a church should try to help a widow in need. We might think that ANY widow with need... no matter what her age is... and regardless of whether or not she has shown godliness all her life... OUGHT to be helped. One would think this would be especially true (in Paul’s day)...because they didn’t have Social Security... Government Welfare... or even property laws (like we do today.) If a husband died – his widow did not automatically become the possessor of his belongings. His wife and children were utterly helpless! (Well... let me read this... in it’s entirety... and then we’ll discuss it. Just don’t tune-out... if it keeps you scratching your head.)

1 Timothy 5:3-16

The opening instruction (v. 3) controls the thought of all 14 verses. ... The church must properly recognize its needy widows (literally, “real widows”). Proper recognition (“honor”) was to be expressed in practical support. ... But good stewardship of the church’s limited resources ...(AND) protection of its reputation... required the leadership to decide who the “real” widows in the church were... and whether other means of support were available.

This 1st Century Church in Ephesus... (it is clear)... had a system in place for taking care of it’s widows. But verses 4-8 show us that the system was being abused. ... Families of widows were not shouldering their responsibility... and this was placing financial strain on the church. ... (Then) certain younger widows... (who may have managed to get on the list)... were threatening the church’s reputation... by involvement with the false teaching and scandalous behavior. I am not confused by any of this. (These things seem easy enough to understand.)

But when Paul gives Timothy the solution to the abuses... it becomes very dicey. ... Paul indicates that only widows who are 60 years and older should be helped. ... Huh? ...Shouldn’t any widow in such a desperate situation be helped? ... Now... Paul does offer a reason why widows under the age of 60 should not be placed on the list... BUT that just makes it MORE confusing.

1 Timothy 5:11-15

Oh! O.K. ...Now that certainly clears it all up for us... (OR NOT!) ... Paul seems to have a low opinion (and unfair characterization) of younger women.

This week... as I was studying this passage... I studied a lot of commentaries... to see if I could find an answer to what Paul was saying – and why he said it. ... The only thing that I found... has some controversy among Bible scholars... and only three of the many commentaries that I read - even mentioned it. And one of them dismissed it (in a way that I thought was unfair.) ... I will tell you the answer that I found in just a moment... but I did want to make clear to you that most commentaries do not mention it... and one of the three that do... passes it off (dismissing it.)

Let me set this up with some understandings about the way we go about interpreting the Bible. ... When it comes to understanding Paul's letters... it is very much like listening to only one side of a telephone conversation. It is not on speaker-phone... so we cannot hear what is being said on the other end. What we read in Paul's letters is only Paul's answers to their concerns... problems... and questions ... and sometimes it isn't as clear as we would like for it to be... about what those matters are. As Paul answers a church's questions... or addresses their problem... we have to read his answers and try to put together what the situation is that he is dealing with. Like a good detective... we must assemble clues.

That is the case here. So here is what we know. ... We know that the Ephesian church had a list of widows. Widows on this list were to be honored - which included financial support. (The word Paul used is actually "*honorarium*." That is not "welfare" or "charity." It is compensation for some kind of effort.) In order to be put on this list (that is to receive an honorarium)... the widow had to meet some very stringent requirements... and there seems to be some sort of vow that they must never marry again.

Some of these widows in Ephesus had denied their vow and turned away from their commitment – which was an essential part of their faith.

In addition to the age requirement... and **not having any family member** who could take care of her... there was also these requirements:

- Having “brought up children”
- Having “shown hospitality to strangers”
- Having “washed the saints’ feet” (a mark of humility and godliness)
- Having “assisted those in distress”
- Having “devoted herself to every good work” (meaning that she didn’t wait for opportunities to do good deeds; she looked for and participated in them.)

That’s quite a list of qualifications! ... It’s certainly no less strict than the qualifications for an Elder or a Deacon. In fact... verse 9 states a qualification that is EXACTLY like one of the qualifications for an elder and a deacon. They must be a “one-woman type of man”... and she must be a **one-man kind of a woman** (having been devoted to her husband when he was alive.)

Now... why would Paul write about this list that involved compensation... and had such rigorous **conditions like these**...? They were given an honorarium – which means it wasn’t benevolence! Charitable-giving doesn’t demand such conditions. No. An honorarium is compensation for their service. ... Our church has a benevolent fund (which is charity) and there are never such qualifications and conditions.

So... here is what I am suggesting to you: This Ephesian church may have had a benevolent fund of their own... where (among other needs believers

had)... younger widows could be assisted... But that means of help... was not what Paul was addressing (here)... BECAUSE THAT WAS NOT WHAT WAS BEING ABUSED.

This non-charity... (this list of regularly paid servants to the church... this official “society of widows” who had to meet the same standards of an Elder or Deacon)... had some abuse going on... (And) through our one-way telephone conversation that Paul is having with Timothy... we are hearing Paul tell Timothy that he needed to do some confronting.

(You see...) I believe that this church had (at least) THREE official offices in the church: the office of elder... the office of deacon... and the office of widows (who ministered to those in the church with needs... from a unique perspective that came from their own suffering.) Perhaps they were a form of deaconesses.

You say: “*Pastor, is all of this just your guess work from clues in our passage? Is there (by any chance) other evidence?*” Yes. And this is what only three commentators brought out. ... Multiple writings from church history (about 100 years after Paul wrote this letter) mention a specific “office of widows.” We know that such an official office existed 100 years after Paul wrote this letter. (Over time it eventually disappeared.) ... But the commentator who dismissed it... simply said churches probably developed such an office... because of what Paul wrote here to Timothy. (But to me... that unfairly dismisses it – without due reason.) Why do we need to think that the church 100 years later formed this office... and not that the office (which was already in existence) had been passed down to them? (Believing the 1st Century Church had it... is the only solution by which I can make sense of our passage.)

Because of the clues in the passage... and the historical evidence that there was such an office... I can see why there were strict requirements. Now I can understand the problem of women making a vow to join the society... and then breaking it to get re-married. I can even understand why the age limit... and Paul's explanation for it. (He wasn't cruelly excluding YOUNGER widows from getting help. - They had just as much need.) ... But because 60 year olds have lived longer... have more stability... and therefore make better counselors and encouragers... they would be better qualified for such an office. ... They can assure others (from their own life-experiences)... that God can meet anyone's dire need. ... Suddenly the stringent qualifications make sense... and it explains why it was such a scandal (bringing such shame on the church) when a widow turned away and sought self-indulgence.

Let me explain what this term ("self-indulgence") means. It was a euphemism for sex. (The Bible frequently employs a euphemism to communicate something... apart from unsavory associations. "Self-indulgence" is a nicer way of saying "sex"... or how it is used here as "prostitution.") Again... let's look at this from the perspective of the 1st Century. When a woman lost her husband... she had nothing! It was a desperate situation. Many women felt they only had one option – if they wanted to survive. It was to become a prostitute. Many did.

Paul contrasts this choice with another option in verses 5 and 6...

1 Timothy 5:5-6

Only widows who didn't turn to prostitution – but turned to God in their desperation... could be put on the list for this office. Those who resorted to

the other decision were like the walking dead. Boy! That is graphic. They have no life anymore. And look (again) at verse 15.

1 Timothy 5:15

Paul seems to be harsh against those who had been put on the list (without being qualified)... and showed their character by returning to their former means of supporting themselves. What shame it brought onto the church! That explains why Paul was so harsh.

And perhaps it is more understandable why Timothy needed to confront the non-caring family members. (They didn't care that their relatives had to live as though they were dead - by having to resort to prostitution.) Confront these despicable family members Timothy! They are worse than an unbeliever! Confront (also) anyone who is abusing the system of the office of widows. Keep it from being further scandalized. Make sure that only properly qualified widows join this group.

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Now as we get ready to close our time in this passage... I would like to make one other application from it... about giving to meet the true needs of others. Whether or not you agree with my decision to believe that there was an office of the church – (the “office of widows”) ... this application still comes forth.

In order to meet the DIRE needs of these widows... there is no denying that the church had them meet qualifications... (**AND**) those in need had to render some kind of service to the church. (It is this last part that I want to talk a little more about. There is something practical here that I think

should be a part of our giving in order to help meet any need... that presents itself to us... as a church today.)

About three years before Shelly McKittrick passed away... she told me about a book that helped her tremendously at her work. As many of you know... she worked at the medical clinic with people who had financial needs. She told me the premise of the book and I got copies for all the elders. We went on a retreat where we prayed for our church – and we read this book together.

The premise of the book was that merely giving money to a person in need does not help them. Their biggest need... is to regain their lost dignity. If we don't address their biggest need (in addition to any immediate need for money)... we cannot expect them to fully recover. They will always be in need (financial and otherwise.) But if do address their need for a restored sense of personal value and dignity (instead of simply throwing money their way)... we can expect greater results.

I think that the 1st Century church at Ephesus had figured this out. That is why (I believe) they organized an office of widows – who served the church. These widows were given such a purpose and dignity in life by serving others... that they (even) took a vow to never re-marry... apparently (and I am guessing here)... so they could serve the church without distraction. (Paul had advised “singlehood” in 1 Cor 7... in order to serve without distraction.)

God may never lead us to develop any special office in the church for those we help. That isn't my point. But surely there must be some way we could work toward assisting those we financially help to also restore their

dignity. Perhaps we should develop a list of services they could do... that we would compensate them for... instead of merely throwing money their way. ... [P A U S E] ...

So here are two take-aways from today's passage (both of them are about keeping the dignity of others):

#1. "The tone of our truth-telling can build a wall or a bridge." How we tell the truth makes a difference in how that truth is received. Whenever we confront someone in the church we need to have an attitude of wanting to help that person (*for the glory of God*)... and not with an attitude of superiority (which seeks *the glory of ourselves*.)

#2. We ought to consider how we can restore (or keep) the sense of dignity – ALSO - in those (with need) that we try to help.