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Church Relationships, Part 2

Part of growing up is discovering that the world is not always the way we were led to believe in our youth. For example, many a football coach has encouraged his players by telling them that developing good habits will pay off in the future with friends, teachers, employers, etc.

My football coach encouraged us to always reply with “Yes sir!” Well, three months later when I received a physical at the Fitzsimmons Army Medical Center, the sergeant in charge at the audiologist department summoned me, and I gave an automatic; and hearty, “Yes sir!” To which he shockingly commanded me, “Don’t call me sir, I work for a living!”

I was shocked! I thought that responding with a “Yes sir!” would pay off in the future; evidently not here! Later I learned that there is a relational gap between enlisted men and

officers in the military.

And just as this gap between enlisted men and officers exists, there was a relationship gap in Thessalonica between the leadership and the members of the church. The Church in Thessalonica was young, not much older than a year. With its youth came many problems which Timothy shared with Paul when the young apprentice joined the Apostle in Corinth (1 Thessalonians 3:6). They were experiencing severe persecution, 1 Thessalonians 2:14. Some in the church were misbehaving, 1 Thessalonians 5:14. Others were refraining from working, 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-12. And to top it all off, there was rebellion on the part of the body with the leadership, 1 Thessalonians 4:8.

All these problems were compounded because the church obviously was led by inexperienced leaders; at best, they were a year old in Christ! Because they were novices, these leaders exercised their authority in a tactless fashion (that is the suggestion of many commentators!) They attempted to put things right, but their manner cultivated opposition. The result was broken and unhealthy relationships; relationships filled with anger, hurt feelings, and a growing rift between the leadership and the rest of the church.

When it comes to the leadership, God's people must appreciate the calling that rests upon the life of church leaders.

1 Thessalonians 5:12a, "But we request of you, brethren [the word here is NOT a command, BUT an appeal, and so serves as a beautiful example of the relationship that ought to exist in the body between ministers and those ministered to!], that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction."

Paul is talking about the elders in the church. They alone have the joint calling of

1. Diligent labor,
2. Taking charge of the well-being of the body, and
3. Instruction.¹

So what is the calling of the church body as the leaders fulfill their calling? The calling of the body is to "appreciate" the leaders!

The word rendered "appreciate" in the original is NOT what we might expect. It is the Greek word, οἶδα [*oída*], which throughout the Bible is translated in reference to knowing. Recall, the Bible uses primarily two words to denote "knowing."

1. γινώσκω (*ginōskō*) is a *relational term* used in reference to an ongoing, growing relationship with another person (cf. Genesis 4:1; John 17:3).
2. οἶδα (*oída*), in contrast, speaks of a *fullness of knowledge*. The word is NOT a relational knowing and so NOT a progressive one. Rather, it speaks of a mastery of knowing and so references a completeness of knowledge. And so for example

when Christ speaks of the Gentiles praying to their deities He said, “Therefore do not be like them; for your Father knows [completely] what you need, before you ask Him” (Matthew 6:8). Christ’s point is that God has *complete knowledge of our needs* so we don’t have to keep asking over and over and over the way a pagan might pray to their false god! Paul wrote, “And we know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who practice such things” (Romans 2:2). The “knowing” referenced here is not something you progress in; you either know it or you don’t. When a person is lost in sin we *know completely* that they are under the Judgment of God. Hence, Paul used the word οἶδα (*oida*).

If you asked someone in Paul’s day, “Did you *know* that 2 + 2 = 4?” The word you would use is οἶδα (*oida*) for this is something we can know completely. But if you asked, “Do you *know* why God gave you this gift?” the word you would use is γινώσκω (*ginōskō*)- because the knowledge here is something gleaned over a life-time and beyond, and so speaks of a growing apprehension!

In light of this distinction, what is the call here? It is to οἶδα (*oida*), to “*know completely* those who diligently labor among us”! How is this possible? How could any man know *with mastery* anyone else (much less themselves, cf. Jeremiah 17:9)? While they can’t know with mastery another individual, they can know with mastery the charge and so the calling/job to which a leader has been commissioned by Christ! In this regard notice, the call is for the body of Christ to “*appreciate THEM*” which lays emphasis on the men holding the office rather than the office itself!

The idea to “*appreciate*” the high calling, the responsibility, and the work involved in the call of being a leader of God’s people also takes into account that these men are also sinners. Again the focus is upon the man holding the office and appreciating the overwhelming given to them as shepherds of the sheep!

The Fifth Commandment teaches us that housed in any interaction with authority is the element of respect for that office. It is because of this we have high expectations for all in leadership. And it is because of this that there is so much pain involved when we are let down by a leader. And this is where the Thessalonians were! Clearly they did not like what the leadership in the body was doing. And this led to their judgmental observations and criticism (which was a serious thing on account of the “*peace of Christ,*” cf. Ephesians 3:3). Paul’s response was to say, “*Before you start griping and complaining about the leadership in your church, walk in their shoes! Appreciate the charge with which they have been yoked!*”

In this discussion we must remember that any elder at his best is at best just a sheep who himself is prone to wander! The Apostle Paul recognized this truth:

1 Corinthians 15:9, “For I am the least of the apostles, who am not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.”

This was Paul’s life-long bane as a Christian. He knew that he had hurt the body of Christ.

Now as he grew, you might expect that he would get over this, but he didn't. Instead it just got worse.

Ephesians 3:8, "To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ."

Paul went from being the "least of the apostles" to being the "very least of all saints." What? Paul didn't understand grace and forgiveness? No! Look at his writings; he clearly understood grace. But here is the thing, one cannot be in ministry long before you start seeing the gaps that exist between your theology and your practice. And that was Paul. In fact, notice his self-perception toward the end of his life (now having walked with Christ for 30 plus years):

1 Timothy 1:15, "It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost *of all*."

How is it that Paul was so negative about himself? He lived in honesty before the Lord!

Romans 7:18-19, "For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the wishing is present in me, but the doing of the good *is not*. For the good that I wish, I do not do; but I practice the very evil that I do not wish."

There is no candy-coating it; man at his best at best is a man and that a sinful one! As much as Paul ministered to the body of Christ, the apostle was always mindful of his own inabilities and weaknesses! And that is why, after some time in the ministry, Paul concluded this:

2 Corinthians 4:7, "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves."

Do you know what an earthen vessel is? It is what you use to relieve yourself in the middle of the night! It was a vessel that held human waste! When Paul thought of himself as an elder/preacher/apostle, he thought of a bed pan! That is what an elder is at his best! And yet it from these men that the congregation looks for infallibility, perfect counsel, availability, and unconditional compassion, etc.

The irony of the ministry is that the entire church body is stranded in quicksand on account of sin. The minister is no more able to lift you out the quicksand than he is to lift himself out of the quicksand. We are all stuck in the quicksand!

There is no way for a church leader to lift another individual out of a quicksand that he himself is stuck in. The only thing that an elder can do to help another is to point them to the One and only One who isn't stuck in the quicksand; the Lord Jesus Christ!

The Chief Shepherd has placed in each and every congregation sheep to point the other sheep to the Chief Shepherd! For a church to be healthy, we must acknowledge this! In

fact, our failure to acknowledge this has led to a culture of compromise and sin amongst church leaders. This very sad scenario that has occurred many times in our day.

When a church leader is struggling with temptation, many churches fail to recognize that the leaders are just sheep who are susceptible to sin, the man remains quiet and so struggles alone. He cannot tell another church leader lest they kick him out of office. And he suffers in silence! In time his struggle blossoms into a mind/heart that is transfixed on sin; soon he begins to make allowances and compromises and before long, he commits sin.

The biblical defense God gives us for temptation is the very thing the church deprives the elder of when we insist on their infallibility, perfection, and sinlessness.

Hebrews 3:12-13, "Take care, brethren, lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is *still* called 'Today,' lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin."

If this is the biblical path to victory over temptation, do you see that in our failure to acknowledge the sinfulness of those in leadership has created an environment of compromise and failure; the very things we hope to avoid in not acknowledging the weakness and sinfulness of a church leader? And yet, this is but part of it. If we acknowledge the sinfulness of any and all leadership, we must also confess that an elder at his best at best is a sinful man besought by weakness, inability, and insecurity. Listen once again to Paul's lamentation:

1 Corinthians 15:9, "For I am the least of the apostles, who am not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God."

It is easy to look upon this passage as nothing more than a pious statement. We are talking here about an Apostle of our Lord who had a walk with Christ so incredible that he is considered the best this world had to offer him to be as nothing "in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ" (Philippians 3:8)!

Yet that is to make Paul into a super-hero! The man who wrote this passage truly was a man fraught with weakness and insecurity. Think of it! Prior to his conversion, Paul unleashed a severe persecution against the body of Christ which resulted in the torture and death of many (cf. Acts 8:3; 22:4; 26:11)! But then the Lord redeemed him and commissioned him to minister to the very ones he had just ravished! It indeed would be hard to encourage the women and children who were widowed and orphaned on account of his folly, not to shrink back, but to trust God to provide for their needs! No doubt that is why Paul in part prayed many times for boldness in the preaching of the word of God (Ephesians 6:19-20)!

Elders at their best are sinful men besought by weaknesses, inability and insecurities. Because this is the case, and barring the possibility that a congregation has elected a

wicked man to fill the office of shepherd, when an elder:

- Doesn't follow up on a struggle.
- Offends.
- Let's you down.
- Preaches a sermon that isn't compassionate enough.

Remember, these things are not intentional! Rather they reflect the reality that God has charged sheep to be His shepherds!

- Do you struggle with boldness? Elders do too!
- Are you inhibited from ministry because you fear what people might think? Elders do too!
- Are there times where your heart is so cold and your godliness so tarnished that you don't want to read the word of God? That is exactly how elders feel, yet even at these times the elders must preach the word!
- Does it hurt when people reject your attempts at ministry? That is where the elders live.
- At times do you want to shrink back from ministry, service, and fellowship because you think people don't care? That is a page out of every elder's playbook!

The difference between a church leader and the body of Christ is NOT the quality of their walks OR the nature of their sin, BUT responsibility! That is it!

When it comes to healthy church relationships, God's people must appreciate the calling that rests upon the life of a church leader. Thus, God's people must love their leaders.

1 Thessalonians 5:13, "And that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work..."

For such a short verse this says much when it comes to the relationship that ought to exist between a church body and its leadership.

- That you esteem them: ἡγέομαι (*hēgeomai*); the word speaks of how a person views the world and is translated as "think," "regard," "believe."² So when it comes to how you view an elder, we are called to
- Esteem them [think upon them] very highly: ὑπερεκπερισσοῦ (*huperekperissou*); the word for "very highly" has been called a "triple intensive" as it is a compound term made up of three words. Accordingly, the word speaks of super-abundance and could be translated as, "beyond exceeding abundance"! It is the word used in John 10:10 where Christ talks about having "abundant" life! And so when we think about a church leader, we are to think, how? Get this, with super-abounding love.
- That you esteem them very highly in love: this is an important qualification. Paul is NOT talking about reverence or the fawning over church leaders that at times has occurred in churches.

It is said of the deacons of the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London, in which Spurgeon preached, that they would throw their coats in a puddle before Spurgeon to protect him from getting his feet wet when he walked. This is not what this verse is teaching. Notice, that the word “in love” is placed in the text to gauge how the body of Christ is to “esteem highly” their leaders. So how ought they to do this? They are to think upon them with super-abounding love! That is the idea! Gordon Fee illustrates this further:

Those who labor among them are to be held ‘in the highest regard,’ which does not mean, as often has happened in later times in the church, to ‘exalt’ them in some way. The leaders are protected from any form of people’s ‘fawning’ over them by the modifier ‘in love,’ which eliminates the option of thinking more highly of their leaders than they Christianly ought to. (Fee, 2009, p. 209)

The basis on which the body is to labor at greatly loving their leader’s s NOT on account of any inherent trait in the elder; in fact, it has nothing to do with the elder himself. RATHER, notice the text, “And that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work...” This speaks NOT of the amount of their work, BUT *the nature* of their work; the fact they that have been charged with tending the flock of God! Christ asked us to think about the worth of our souls:

Matthew 16:26, “For what will a man be profited, if he gains the whole world, and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?”

There is nothing more important than our soul! Because this is the case, our value-system as Christians will be completely opposite those in the world. Behold that which will rank as one of the more important things to a Christian:

Proverbs 20:15, “There is gold, and an abundance of jewels; but the lips of knowledge are a more precious thing.”

Many lives have been ruined on account of the desire for money. This is not just an Old Testament concept:

1 Timothy 6:9, “But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction.”

Our world has witnessed countless thousands of men and women who will do almost anything for money. And yet from the perspective of the kingdom, we all would agree that there are many things more important than money. In fact, through the eyes of the redeemed, anything that encourages us in our walk with Christ is more precious than all the gold in the world. The point of the proverb, “There is gold, and an abundance of jewels; but the lips of knowledge are a more precious thing.”

The bottom line, the work of an elder is “equipping the saints for the work of service to the building up of the body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12) This equipping takes “By speaking the truth in love...” (Ephesians 4:15), a truth which ought to be more precious to us than gold! It is because of this that we ought to have a high amount of love for our leaders; their job is to encourage us to love, know, and serve our Lord and Savior!

This is why Paul says that the body of Christ must love their leaders!

You say, *“But I’m not a lovey-dovey kind of person.”* Paul here is NOT talking about your feelings. Honestly, you may not like an elder, BUT you are called to love him. Love first and foremost is an action, not a feeling. Biblical love speaks of a determined act of the will that always results in determined acts of self-giving regardless of the person involved or the resulting consequences. Paul is not teaching about how we should feel toward a church leader but about how we should act toward them.

Slander, ill-will, presumptions, grumbling, and criticisms are common things that elders endure. Wickedness, plotting, scheming, slipping things past the body, advocating spousal abuse, being a woman hater, siding with the woman against the man, purposefully ignoring people, making non-Christians feel uncomfortable, upsetting individuals, etc., are things that many elders are accused of by others in the body of Christ.

Most of these accusations are not made in the spirit of love, because they are not made to the elder, but are made to others about the elders. The Bible teaches us that if you have something against another person, if you have a complaint, love says you go to that person. You don’t resort to gossip or slander. You don’t embellish the facts to give a better story. Again, you are NOT called to like the elders of a church, BUT you most certainly are called to treat them with super-abounding love, love that goes beyond the needful! Always keep in mind the important exhortation Paul gave to the Philippians when he spoke of the spat occurring between Euodia and Syntyche:

Philippians 4:8, *“Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things.”*

We’ve said it before, if you focus on the bad in another person in the body of Christ, it won’t take long before you find enough fodder to hate the individual; we are all sinners! Accordingly, it behooves us- especially in conflict- to meditate upon that which in the other individual is “...true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, and of good repute!”

That is the idea when it comes to the body of Christ’s relationship with their leaders! They must work at maintaining an exceedingly high level of love for them. Leon Morris comments:

Leaders can never do their best work when they are subject to carping criticism from those who should be their followers. Good leaders need good followers.

(Morris, 2009, p. 101)

Works Cited

- Fee, G. D. (2009). *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians (The New International Commentary on the New Testament)*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
- Morris, L. L. (2009). *1 and 2 Thessalonians Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

End Note(s)

¹ The threefold description is preceded by a common article which indicates that Paul has in mind here one ministry, not three.

² G. L. Green wrote, "Some have suggested that the principal verb of the sentence (*hēgeisthai*) means 'to respect' or 'to esteem,' but the word never appears with this sense in biblical literature, and this meaning is extremely rare in the wider body of Greek literature. The verb normally signifies 'to think' or 'to consider' (2 Cor. 9:5; Philippians 2:25; 3:8; 2 Pet. 1:13), a definition that is most likely conveyed in the present verse." (*The letters to the Thessalonians*, p. 250)