

## Godly Conduct in Church

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**These things write I unto thee, hoping to come unto thee shortly: But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth. {1Ti 3:14-15}**

Occasionally, both in things that we prohibit and things that we promote in the church's activities, we raise the question of Biblical silence. How do we make decisions when the Bible doesn't speak to a certain issue? Although this counsel is seldom followed, the safest practice is to follow Scripture in both areas. If Scripture is silent, perhaps we should be silent. If Scripture speaks out, perhaps we should also speak out. I must admit that I am inherently suspicious when people too freely claim Biblical silence regarding their ideas. Perhaps they examine the Scriptures with an intentional blindfold on their minds. They want the Bible to be silent, so they carefully filter out any possible reference they find to the question. In 2Ti 3:16-17 Paul specifically stated that Scripture "thoroughly" furnishes the man of God to every good work. Could it be that silence indicates that God isn't as concerned about an issue, pro or con, as we? Could it also be that we should look into those areas of convenient "silence" that we claim regarding various issues to be sure that we haven't intentionally overlooked specific teachings that might conflict with our personal preference?

What drives our decisions regarding faith and practice, what we believe and how we conduct ourselves, as a church? Do we look around at our sister churches and the way they do things, viewing their varied conduct as something of a cafeteria menu from which we may freely pick and choose at our personal taste? Biblical churches may well manifest a certain amount of variation in practices while remaining within the limits set by Scripture. We certainly see significant variations between the churches mentioned and-to some extent-described in the New Testament. The question is not whether churches may vary, but what we consider to be our basis for our own choices in our church. What do we consider to be an acceptable and respected source of authority for our choices?

Paul goes over significant issues in the "pastoral" epistles, his letters to Timothy and Titus. He indicates in our passage for this chapter his expectation that his letter will inform Timothy regarding acceptable conduct in the church.

I believe the most significant point that Paul makes in this lesson relates to the identity and ownership of the church. It does not belong to the pastor, the deacons, or their families. In fact it does not belong to the collective membership. A pastor and deacons, along with their entire families, may agree and make a recommendation to the church. They may be dreadfully wrong. A church may vote unanimously in its business meeting on a certain issue-not a dissenting vote-and yet be wrong. Our whole attitude of molding church conduct by our personal preferences apart from Scripture reveals too much neglect of this primary truth. At the end of the day it is the Lord's church, not ours. More importantly, we have before us a fairly direct statement by Paul that his writing to Timothy covered the major areas that Timothy needed to pursue with this staggering church.

We might protest that Paul's words focus only on Timothy, the ministry or pastor of a local church. Although Timothy served in a unique role with the church at Ephesus, representative of and directed by an apostle himself, the role of leadership that falls on pastors and deacons must consider Paul's writings as specifically aimed at them and instructive to their personal conduct. It has been my observation over nearly half a century of active ministry that a church typically follows its leadership, though not always. If you examine the attitudes of a church's leadership, you will typically discover the dominant attitude of the membership. When the leadership is not united, pastor and deacons not agreeing on various issues, you will see a confused church. People may try to follow their leadership, but they keep seeing mixed signals and don't know which way to go. On this basis I believe that a church's pastor

and deacons should regularly get together and discuss various issues that involve the church's activities and needs. Neither pastor nor deacons should ever propose ideas to the membership until they have thoroughly discussed them and agreed on them among themselves.

An equally significant description of the Biblical church that Paul describes in this lesson appears in the words "pillar and ground of the truth." "Ground" refers to the footing or foundation of a building. "Pillar" refers to the huge columns that rise from the foundation to support the upper structure of the building. Every church that considers itself truly one of the Lord's churches should never forget this description of its role. It must stand securely and factually on the foundation of the teachings of Christ and the apostles in the New Testament (never adding any other variables to that posture). How can a people represent themselves as the foundation of the truth when they do not personally embrace and follow the simple description of a New Testament church? How can they advocate Scripture alone if they introduce and defend beliefs or practices that the New Testament does not support? Our practice must validate our claim to be the "ground" of the truth.

The next descriptive point, "pillar," structurally extends the solid stability of the foundation to the upper reaches of the structure. You could build a straw house on a solid granite foundation, and the first strong wind would blow it away. The upper structure of the building must be compatible with the foundation-and be connected with it through the pillars that are strategically erected throughout the structure. Many churches hold to good ideas. Their leaders reasonably know what they believe, but they refuse to implement a pattern of conduct that extends the clarity of their faith to every member in the church body. Despite standing on a strong foundation, they allow a house of straw to grow around them without assuming any responsibility for the problem. A church's leadership should prayerfully examine Scripture for truth itself. Next they should work to find ways to inform and equip every member with that information. A pillar of sandstone is no more stable than a foundation of sand. Neither will stand up under the pressures of test and time.

A major strategy to equip a church's membership as a strong "pillar" of truth is for the church's leadership to consistently and faithfully hold to Scripture alone as the premise for any and everything that they recommend or advocate to the church. Nurture within every member the solid and informative character of Scripture to inform and to equip our Christian conduct, both as individuals and as churches. Avoid whenever possible ever playing the "Scripture is silent" song to those who inquire.

I believe that it is equally important for a church's leaders to approach their interpretation of Scripture with great care. A loose, mystical, sentimental, or allegorical interpretation that is not well supported by the passage and its context will rapidly weaken the members' confidence in Scripture. One of the most dangerous compliments a preacher can receive after a sermon is "Wow! I would never have seen those points in that passage." If our interpretation and application are too fanciful or far-fetched, we may entertain our folks delightfully, but not edify them at all. To borrow Paul's building analogy, we may become more of an outdoor theater than a stately building with a solid foundation and functional pillars. An outdoor theater is great for entertainment in good weather, but we need a solid and secure building to protect us in life's storms.

We live in a cultural era of "cafeteria Christianity." If you dislike your church's views or practices, don't bother working constructively within the culture to grow it stronger in Biblical foundations. Just pick up and move to another church, but don't be surprised if they have even greater problems than the church you left. Often we see the sad results of this mindset in people around us. They are constantly looking for the "greener grass" of the ideal church, but they are also constantly reflecting disappointment at their failure to find true contentment and satisfactory answers to their spiritual hunger. The Lord's church is not about satisfying "my needs and desires," but rather it is about us conforming our lives to the wise instruction of Scripture so that we glorify God in our "bodies and spirits which are his". {1Co 6:20} May the Lord of His church help us to grow closer to Him.

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