

Pastor John Bronson

The title for today’s message is “Support Roles”. I gave you a lovely example of a support role this morning. In my addlepatated brain I forgot to send the power point you are about to hopefully enjoy. Because the soundmen always check up on me ahead of me they saw that I hadn’t sent it. Blessed be the man who supports another! We spent a great deal of time on Paul’s list of qualifications for elders. But elders are not the only leaders or officers mentioned in the New Testament for the church. If you continue in chapter 3 of 1 Timothy you will see that after discussing the elders he moves right into some discussion of the deacons. We are going to look at them today, but only a little. This is what Paul has to say.

*(3:8) “Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. (3:9) They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. (3:10) And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. (3:11) Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. (3:12) Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. (3:13) “For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.*

*(3:14) “I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, (3:15) if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth. (3:16) Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believe on in the world, taken up in glory.”*

Thus wrote Paul to Timothy his protégé. Having gone so extensively into the qualification for elders I don’t propose to do the same thing for deacons and their wives except to say that the qualifications are virtually the same except for their ability to teach. When Paul says deacons are to be tested, which he does, we might wonder why he didn’t mention the same thing regarding elders and what that test might be. As regards elders, I think simply giving the list of qualifications implies being tested to meet them. Elders were recognized as men worthy of respect and exercising directive counsel as well as a degree of rule in virtually all ancient and tribal societies. Deacons however appear as a new category of leadership. Testing would help to establish the standing of the office in the life of the church as well as being an inquiry as to whether or not the candidates have the needed qualities, especially if they were fully grounded in the Word of God. As with the elders that information would be gained through knowing those who knew them, that is, knowing their reputation.

Timothy was Paul’s understudy, traveling with Paul for a number of years before he became pastor of the Ephesian church. The pattern of handing off the necessary elements for spiritual or pastoral leadership is given actually in 2 Timothy 2:1-2. This is what Paul writes there to Timothy in the second letter. *“You, then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.”* Often that passage is looked to and we see that there are at least [four] generations of those who are trained in the things of God. That becomes a pattern for the church itself. Timothy was to look for faithful men as prospective elders who were themselves able to teach the next generation down.

If we look to Acts 6 as something of a model for the office of deacon, those men were selected by the congregation at large for a variety of qualities. These are what there were: Luke wrote in Acts 6:3,

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*“Brothers pick out from among you seven men of good repute full of the Spirit and of wisdom whom we will appoint to this duty.”* What was it that they had to evidence in their lives? They had to have an evident love of the Lord Jesus Christ, and they needed to have maturity in the Spirit: *“...filled with the Spirit and wisdom...”* It is often said about deacons, wrongly, that their duty was to “wait on tables.” I want you to have a clear understanding of what this meant when they were asked to “wait on tables.” The reality is that they were asked to ensure the fair distribution of charitable resources in the face of prejudice by some of the congregation against others. That is hardly a matter of waiting upon tables. How many are familiar with prejudice? One of the shocks of my life was when I was the pastor of a wonderful church in Denver. [It was] magnificent, fully saved, glorious good old Norwegians and Swedes. As I got to know these men better and better over time, I became their friend. When I became their friend their language loosened. And when their tongues were loosened, they revealed qualities of their character which left me dismayed.

What was prejudice like in the ancient church? If we know anything of the iron grip of ethnic, racial or any other kind of prejudice on the soul, and in this case the prejudice was sufficient to prompt some Christians to deprive the widows of other Christians of what they needed to eat. Therefore we ask the question, how much wisdom and how much inner strength did these deacons need in order to ensure the just distribution of charitable offerings amongst those who were a part of the church? I have been reading a book and in this book the author makes a very frequently made error. He says that the first days of the church were idyllic; they led the ideal life of Christians and they all shared everything together freely with one another. Well that lasted about four weeks! No one who reads the New Testament with eye for the real condition of the church can possibly entertain the illusion that all of these newly minted Christians were somehow magnificently relieved of the normal errors, faults, failings, troubles, sins of humanity. They were not. Virtually every letter that Paul writes was to correct some horrible mistake, internal squabbling and entertainment within the body of Christ. Lord preserve us from such innocence!

Paul writes to Timothy that those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence for the faith that is in Christ Jesus. Beloved, good service earns a good reputation, a good standing in the eyes of those who are served and in the eyes of the church. Nothing brings confidence in the Lord like relying on Him in the course of serving others. Do you want to know God’s will for your life? Would you like to grow in grace and truth? Would you like to have clear sense of God’s purpose for you? Commit yourself to serve. Just commit to serve. Find a ministry, sign up, “Put me to work!” Will you fail? Yes, sure you will. You will stumble, you will bang around, and then if support roles are real, someone will come along side of you and say, “Let me help you navigate through the tough times of loving the unlovely people that God sends us to take care of. Ah! Peter puts it this way, (1 Peter 4:1-2) *“Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God.”* What we read elsewhere in the New Testament regarding the deep-rootedness of sin rules out the possibility that Peter was saying the readiness to suffer for goodness leaves the soul utterly clean and pure, sinless. But such readiness to serve is surely a corrective and can be in itself a sinless act of devotion to the Lord and then in love to those who are served. Do want to know how to love? Do you want to know how to love people? Sign up for a ministry. Commit yourself and start bruising your knuckles against the reality of human failings. When you can love people who disappoint you, you have learned how to love. If every time

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you are disappointed you have to run away, then you still need to discover something about the comforting and sustaining power of the Holy Spirit. You do know how they treated Jesus? You do recall? Jesus said, “If they did it to me, they will do it to you. Expect it.

As you reflect a little on what we are told in Acts and then again what Paul has to say regarding deacons, I think it is pretty clear that Paul considered that being a deacon was not a formality. They are expected to serve and to do so in such a way that they will be growing in their reliance on the Holy Spirit. Elsewhere Paul says – Acts 14:22 – *“That through many tribulations we must – if you are looking in your Bible you should underline or circle or highlight or do whatever you can with the word “must”. He says, “...through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.”* Why is it we must suffer? It is very easy reason why we must suffer. It is because we are sinners and it is the intention of the Holy Spirit God to progressively to cut that sin out of us; usually that is a painful process. If we are disobedient or faithless children we can be sure our heavenly Father will subject us to one form of discipline or another. Hebrews 12 says that explicitly. “Don’t get upset about being disciplined, for everybody whom God loves, He disciplines.” Parents should remember that. If you love your child you discipline your child. If you don’t love your child... Let me turn that around: If you don’t discipline your child... If we are disobedient all of us expect, we know we are going to get in trouble. We understand that intuitively. However, what we don’t always necessarily going in is that if we are obedient and faithful brothers and sisters in the Lord we will love those whom we serve and love renders the heart vulnerable to suffering on behalf of the beloved. So ask yourself the question: How many people do I love? Then ask yourself the question, “How many of them have disappointed me?” Then ask the question, “How often have I wept in the night because those whom I love haven’t...?”

Jesus made this statement. He said to His disciples, *“I have a new commandment for you; you are to love one another...”* It didn’t stop there; *“...as I have loved you.”* One of the most powerful, the most poignant scenes I believe in the New Testament is that of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. He is praying to His Father. We are told that He falls on the ground and He is sweating and weeping as drops of blood. Normally and correctly we understand that what He is grappling with is the horror of Himself as one perfectly holy taking upon Himself all of the filth of our sin and dying for it. That is a horrible prospect for He would come under the wrath of His Holy Father. But I wonder if amidst His tears Jesus was not weeping for His own disciples, every single one of whom had abandoned Him?

Whether as elders or deacons those who serve within the body of Christ as representatives of Jesus Himself are not only to take what they do with the utmost seriousness – last week we spent quite a bit of time on the Greek word “semnetetos”, meaning seriousness or dignity – not only must we do what we do with the utmost seriousness, but we must do it with the readiness to suffer for and with those whom we serve. There cannot be a comfortable distance established between the server and the served. Paul sums it up perfectly in 1 Corinthians 13 where he says whatever you do, no matter the degree of your excellence in doing it, it must be done in love or nothing happens. This is our calling in Christ. In this case the words of Paul to the Philippians at 2:12-13 take on their full force of meaning. There Paul says to those wonderful Christians in Philippi, *“Therefore my beloved as you have always obeyed so now not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you both to will and to work for His good pleasure.”* When we become the servants of God, on behalf of others it is the love and truth of God that works through us to affect their lives. What do you think happens to a soul still distorted by sin when the light

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and power of the Holy Spirit begins to move through that soul and touch the lives of others? Do you think something happens to the servers soul? I think so. Indeed I believe that is the intention of God. God wants us to be changed as we serve. That is exactly what He wants, so that we increasingly take on the character of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Unfolding the broader scriptural significance or meaning of these brief words of Paul to Timothy should help us to grasp the meaning of chapter three verses 14-16. Notice what Paul says,

*“I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.”*

Too often I fear we are inclined to think of service in the church as light duty compared to the real work in life, which is how we earn our keep. With all respect to the challenges which such work brings, often enough challenges to our spiritual commitments, viewing the work of elders and deacons, at times little more than honorary positions, is a serious mistake. That such a thought would even arise indicates how greatly the church has drifted away from understanding the true and proper character of God’s purpose and calling. Beloved if the church is on the side-lines of modern life, and it is on the sidelines of modern life and not on the front lines of spiritual warfare and good works, it is first of all because Christians have forgotten the full sweep of the purposes of God. What is the church supposed to be doing? I fear we have become, if not confused at least severely limited in understanding God’s purposes in sending His Son incarnate as Jesus, born of David’s line. We rightly say that He came to save sinners. Jesus died to save sinners: true. We rightly celebrate this salvation including our forgiveness in the courts of heaven. I hope that all of us at one time or another to come deliberately by prayer into the presence of the Living God and say, “Thank you Father that I am able to come into Your presence because by the grace that You have made available to me through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ I am not now held guilty by You, but I am able to come into the throne room of God. Wow! That doesn’t mean much to us now perhaps, but it will in the last day, it will. In the last day we will probably fall on our faces and crawl into the presence of God, so amazed will we be at His grace to us.

We also rightly celebrate our adoption into the eternal or never-dying family of God. One of the challenges we all face is [illustrated by looking] into the face of the person next to you and know that you are going to be living with them forever! There is something to think about. If you want a really interesting treat and a study in the grace of God come to the class after the sermon today and watch Frank and me argue, because he so much he doesn’t understand yet that I happen to know! So we celebrate our adoption into the eternal family of God. We also celebrate at perhaps a deeper level of wonder that fact that we have received the Holy Spirit in our lives. These are all the purpose of God. We have received the Holy Spirit and we also have received God’s purpose that we would be His witness in the world on behalf of the purpose for which He sent His Son.

But this is not all. We also have some awareness, I believe, that God has sent His Son to secure a people for Himself. This is why our adoption is eternal. We are being drawn out of the larger mass of humanity to become those who are named as the people of God: remarkable. We shall be His people and He shall be our God. We also have some awareness, although I think now thing begin to get a bit fuzzy, that we are called to be part of the kingdom and the rule of God upon the face of the earth, now both as a foreshadowing of the kingdom of God’s righteousness to come and also as a challenge to the unrighteousness and evil presently in the world. With this, at this point I believe that many inwardly

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begin to shrug the shoulder and assume these are matters for other people to puzzle out, not for me particularly. I believe at this point we begin to have at least an intuitive sense that pursuing such lines of thinking is going to get us into trouble with the powers that be and the way things are. And may I say it will get us into trouble with the powers that be and the way things are. We are repeatedly told in the New Testament that we will get into trouble. And it has been repeatedly demonstrated in history that we do get into trouble when we carry the faith outside the walls of the church and the safe places of our private lives and into the public square. But it is just here that we begin to see how it is that the church is called out as the assembly of the faithful and functions as the pillar and support or buttress of the church. It is when we live the Word that the power of the Word is demonstrate in the world.

I have mentioned before and I believe we know this, that no Christian in ancient Rome died because they claimed Jesus as their personal savior. The emperor did not give a hoot toot about who you claimed to be your savior. It was absolutely irrelevant to him. But he wanted to know who you worshipped as Lord. Who was in charge of your life? Who determined your priorities? Where did your ultimate loyalties lie? If you would not say, “Caesar is lord,” you died.

The disastrous place to which the United States has come in its idolatrous fixation on the autonomy of man expressed as the ability and the right to define our own future and to determine our own nature as if we are in truth self-created and answerable to nothing and no one other than ourselves is a sad testimony to the failure of Christians in America to effectively function as the pillar and support of the truth.

John’s first letter, 1 John 3:8, makes this comment: *“Whoever makes a practice of sinning, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.”* Ah! Who are we? In this room, who are we? What is our right definition? We are the body of Christ. Why is Christ here upon the face of the earth? John says we are here to destroy the works of the devil. If we put this alongside Paul’s words in Timothy in 1 Timothy 3:13-15, we come up with this. *“I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that if I delay you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth...”* and has been called into being by God’s Son, *“...to destroy the works of the devil.”* The church exists to destroy the works of the devil.

God desires that the church will respond to the works of the devil wherever they are found, seeking to undo them. What does that mean: [it is] to correct [those works of the devil], to set people from their binding or enslaving power, to silence the fear of death which they are designed to instill, to draw out their poison so that life can flourish and so on.

If you know anything about the history of Christianity you know [the following]: you begin at this point to understand the pervasive impulse which is found amongst Christians to educate the ignorant, heal the sick, give counsel to the lost, the confused, the depressed and the despairing, to dress the naked, to provide housing to the homeless, to defend the oppressed and the marginalized and so on. What are those actions about? They are undoing what the devil has brought to pass in breaking and enslaving people. We set them free. Too often when we remember the great revivals of the past we overlook the extensive increase in what are rightly called good works carried out by highly motivate and deeply convicted Christians. It is as the fires of revival cool that not only does the church cease to

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present Jesus Christ as the only viable alternative to the way of death, but the church also begins to draw away from the good works by which the works of the devil are undone. So the church gradually shrinks and shrinks so that she lives out her spiritual life all inside her spiritual walls and so she ignores the power of the prince of the air who rules over every aspect of society.

Paul says two things in his statement about how one ought to behave in the household of God. He says that first it is to be a pillar and buttress of the truth. Secondly he refers to the mystery of godliness. In the New Testament “mystery” refers to revealed truth. Almost always that truth is the gospel and that truth centers on the Son of God either in His person, incarnate as Jesus, or His work, including His three years of teaching and miracles and what He accomplished on the cross and by His resurrection. Paul refers to godliness. Godliness is not “god-likeness”. As one study put it, it is love for God and the desire to do what pleases Him. At heart, therefore, godliness is a relational rather than a moral quality. However this does not take moral character off the table as irrelevant. On the contrary now our moral character is recognized as one of the primary expressions of our love for God. Why do you not do the things you know you shouldn’t? Is it because you want to be good, or is it because you know it will break the Lord’s heart if you do? So the next time you entertain you know is not right, invite the Holy Spirit [who is present] with you and see how it goes.

This is why Paul was concerned to instruct Timothy and the Ephesian church in how to behave. Paul wants the Ephesians to love God. No higher compliment could possibly be paid to a local congregation than if it had the reputation that those people love God. Because by definition if you love God you will hate evil. You cannot do both of those at the same time.

The first behavior which Paul addressed if you go back to the first chapter is false teaching in 1 Timothy. The Gospel is good news. Stated differently, the Gospel is good truth. Jesus described Himself as the way the truth and the life. The Holy Spirit is repeatedly called the Spirit of Truth. Jesus said that for those who would abide in His Word the truth would set them free, and that freedom is compromised at best at [potentially] altogether lost if false teaching supplants the truth. In the context of John’s Gospel chapter 8 we understand that “to abide” is equivalent to “walking” or “living” in faith. This is a personal relationship of trust in God’s forgiving and empowering love. When taken up by faith, truth is not something you simply know, truth is something you do.

This is where we return to Paul’s concern for behavior. We are called to behave in or as a part of the church as those who have taken up the truth of God by faith. We act on it and in harmony with it. This is where enter into and engage in those support roles. Paul intends to clarify matters when he writes out the mystery of godliness. *“He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.”* What is godliness? Godliness is first of all a love for God. The godly person loves the Lord and wants to bless the Lord at all times. It is true that the godly person strives to take on the attributes of God, more precisely the attributes of Jesus the incarnate Son of God, but it is critical to distinguish in this context between the desire to be like God by taking on His moral character, and the desire to be “little gods” which has to do with taking on God’s powers. There is an almost primeval desire in the human heart to be god-like in this sense. This was the hook by which Satan trapped Eve, tricking her into eating the forbidden fruit. In Genesis 3:4 we are told that the serpent said to the woman, *“You will not surely die, for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”* In

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the sad progression of the fallen heart and rebellious mind, this has become the terrible illusion that we can decide for ourselves what is good and what is evil. More precisely [it is that] we do not need to rely on or pay attention to God.

How well do you know the moral teaching of the Word of God? How much do you care about knowing it? We live in a country that has made up its mind that it is going to recreate moral standards according to its judgment. You know that, I know that. Our nation today is saying that many things that mankind has said are evil for thousands of years are no longer evil. You know that, I know that. Our culture is giving permission to every citizen in this nation to indulge the flesh in a whole variety of ways. You know that, I know that. What are we doing about it? The issue is very simple: how much do we love God? The power of God is revealed in the world when you and I live out the teachings of the Word. That becomes the buttress and the support of the truth. Today the truth is scarcely seen. What are we going to do about it?

Please pray with me: Father in heaven, You have called us to be Your people. You have said, “I will be your God.” You have set before us not only the living sacrifice of Your Son Jesus, but the life of perfection, sinless, that He lived. You have shown us in Him what it means to serve with a suffering love on behalf of those who are served. You have given to us Your Word, Your Spirit, and Father the brothers and sisters in the Lord. You have gathered us together that we might support one another, standing fast. We want to love You. You love us. We desperately need Your help. We know, our Father, You are quite ready to give it if we will humbly ask. We pray in Jesus. Amen