1 Timothy 5

Series: “Tim Bits”

Sermon: “Who are you Helping?”

One thing that seems to me to be particularly universal, is that new converts to a religion, any religion, tend to take their new found faith more zealously than those that were raised in a given tradition. Clare Boothe Luce, well known playwright and wife of the publisher of Time Magazine, is a good example of this. Mrs. Luce became a Roman Catholic in midlife, and had all the enthusiasm of a recent convert.

President Eisenhower appointed her as ambassador to Italy, and while she was there, the story goes, a reporter once spied her in earnest conversation with Pope Pius XII. The reporter who witnessed this thought that a conversation between the Pope, and an Ambassador, might have enormous news value, so he drifted closer to try and eavesdrop. When he finally maneuvered himself into earshot, the first words he heard were those from His Holiness saying in accented English, “But you don’t understand, Mrs. Luce. I already am a Catholic.”

(A Treasury of Humour, p. 349)

In the Ephesian church there were clearly newer converts. And I am wondering if perhaps some of the internal squabbles that were occurring, arose out of the new converts’ zealousness for their faith. I am sure that in their excitement to serve Jesus, and to tell others about their new faith, they stumbled over theological points; and maybe these were the same folks who were most prone to being influenced by the false teachers we’ve been talking about in Ephesus.

Recent, zealous, on fire believers: sound like a wonderful thing, but there is a strange dynamic that happens in established churches that maybe you have noticed. Sometimes, those new, dynamic believers, ruffle the feathers of those brothers and sisters who have been a part of the fellowship for a while. I suspect that those of us who have been in the fellowship for a while, need to apologize to our newer brethren for seeming to want to douse your fire.

We apologize for our grumpy looks when you are enthusiastically singing. We apologize for our resistance to your ideas. Frankly, we elder brothers and sisters don’t want the boat rocked, and please don’t suggest we head into unfamiliar and treacherous waters. We like our comfortable little church. Our favorite phrase may be, “We’ve always done it that way.” I share this with you, because when I read 1 Timothy 5 at first, I wasn’t all that sure what I should do with this text. There are a number of subjects here we could explore, like the treatment of widows, or treatment of minister/elders etc. Verse 17 is particularly tempting for a pastor.

Yet, as I reflected on the passage, something soon began to merge in my heart and mind. As Paul is writing to Timothy about these important subjects, I get a sense that Paul is most concerned not about evangelism, or the discipline of new converts, but rather those who are the old guard. Those believers who have been a part of the Ephesian church for some time now. Don’t get me wrong, these instructions are valuable for every believer, new or more experienced.

So why would I suggest this? Just look at some of the things Paul writes about. These are practical day to day matters, but more than that, some of it reads like a manual on manners.

Paul talks about how to discern who is a true widow, and as part of this, he accuses some younger widows of being idle gossipers. I don’t know why he picks them out specifically, but something has clearly happened in the church. Paul then goes on to infer that some elders are not getting enough financial support. Then Paul reflects on how people who have complaints about the elders or preachers are to handle those complaints.

I have noticed that new converts, for the most part, do not worry about such matters. I guess they do from time to time, but they are too busy learning about their new faith, and relishing in their new relationship with Jesus. Satan is always trying to derail us, and new converts are particularly vulnerable. So he sows seeds of doubt, and creates anxiety over whether God really loves them.

Notice further that a lot of this chapter has to do with money. How do we decide which widows get money? Do we pay our elder/minister enough? Who is worthy of our support? Frankly, this is talk that emerges out of established congregations. Don’t get me wrong, it’s prudent to care about these matters, I am just pointing out who Paul is concerned about. Over time, the zeal of our faith, is often replaced by a focus on the practical matters of administration.

Now Paul is not at all suggesting that these practical matters are not important, nor am I. I am merely wondering if our love of the practical, cannot be married to our joy of following Jesus. I wonder this because for many of us, I do not think it is, and I place myself in that camp. The reality is that the practical matters of administering a church family can steal our joy; they can down right exhaust us. Terry and I say almost every week, “It’s Monday!”

Almost every Monday is when the practical matters of our fellowship come home to roost. The phone rings more on Monday than any other day. Contractors often show up on Mondays. Our tenants discover problems in the building, and report it on Monday. But every day has its share of stuff. Mundane, practical stuff. Meetings, people looking for handouts, replacing light bulbs and toilet paper, and so much more come to us. It is just how it is. I get it; its life.

It’s no wonder Paul says to drink some wine. Consider further what matters garner our most attention at a church meeting. Again practical matters. Or how about this little experience. Now I understand the need for rules for governance. In most Baptist churches there is reference made to following Robert’s Rules of Order, for any meeting. Makes practical sense, but it can also be a joy stealer.

I have been in meetings over the years when a group is very excited about some project. Momentum is through the roof, and ideas are pouring forth. Everyone’s eyes are glistening at the prospect of something grand in the Kingdom of God. Then it happens. Some well-meaning soul will say, “But we haven’t got quorum, or no one moved and seconded that motion.” Again, rules are important, but what a buzz-kill.

Tony Campolo tells the following story from his life about this very subject. *“I was just 21 years old when I became the pastor of Chesterfield Baptist Church in Chesterfield, New Jersey. I was so young and so excited about the opportunity that when the pulpit committee interviewed me, I didn’t ask enough questions or learn all the things about the church that I should have.*

*I was still in seminary when I took that pastorate and I used to serve the congregation with all the time and energy that I could muster every weekend and at least one day during the week. It was an hour and half commute, back and forth, form church to the seminary, so I couldn’t be there all the time.*

*One day the professor who taught the course I was taking in pastoral care told our class that, the following week, we were to bring a copy of the constitution of the church we were serving or attending.*

*We were Baptists and every Baptist church develops its own constitution and bylaws. Our professor wanted us to see that, because Baptists believe in the autonomy of the local church, the constitutions would be different from each other. The following weekend, I asked George Longstreet, the elderly farmer who was the chair of our Deacons, where I could locate a copy of the constitution.*

*I realized I had never seen one. I told George I needed to have a copy of the constitution for one of my classes. “You know, there might be a copy of a church constitution around here somewhere,” George answered. “I think we might be able to find you one. Give me a few days and by Wednesday night when you come for prayer meeting, I think I can have one for you.” Surprised by his answer, I asked, “You mean you don’t have a church constitution right at hand? How do you run this church if you don’t have a constitution or bylaw?*

*How do you do things according to Robert’s Rules of Order?” “Bylaws, constitutions, rules of order-Tony, they are for people who don’t trust each other. In this little church we trust each other.” I thought for a moment, and then I said, “George, don’t bother getting me a copy of the church constitution. I want to go back and tell the class what you just told me. I wish more churches lived by grace rather than by law.”* (Stories to Feed Your Soul, p.51-52)

Again, I state for the record, I am not espousing that we get rid of rules or constitutions, rather I am trying to understand what was going on in Ephesus that made these rules necessary, or why they are necessary for us. Why did anyone need to be told how to show respect, or care for those in poverty, or to care for their leaders? Why was there even a need for a complaint mechanism? I have concluded that when you do not live by grace, you need rules?

But rules suck the joy out of us. They become an end in themselves. This is what Jesus encountered time and time again with the Pharisees. They knew the law, or rules, but they were a joyless bunch. They tithed, regarded the Sabbath, and all the other rules, but they ignored the poor, and chastised Jesus who did the joyful work of healing on the Sabbath. John chapter 9 is a great example of this joy stealing.

Here we find a man born blind, that is blind from birth. Everyone in the city knew he was blind from birth. Unable to work, he does all that he can do, he sits and begs. The disciples ask Jesus the joyless question. “Whose sin caused the blindness, the man or his parents”? Yes, some Pharisees actually believed a fetus could sin. Jesus then goes on to heal the man. How glorious is that? How exciting? And what does the religious establishment do?

Instead of celebrating this great miracle, they question the formerly blind man’s integrity, and cast evil dispersions on Jesus’ motive to heal him. How sad. How ridiculous, but how prevalent it still is.

Rules! How about this? Let us say we have before us a very contentious issue (for some here that is not a big stretch of the imagination). Further, let’s say we have a meeting to talk about this important issue, and after some thorough debate, a vote is taken and 51% are in favour of the proposal. Robert’s rules of Order say it passes, and it does; but is anyone really happy. The goal of the fellowship is always consensus.

We say all the time, “the majority rules”. No, only Jesus rules in the church. The rules may say the proposal passes, but what does grace say? The Ephesians were not the only church in need of rules. Paul wrote instructions to every church he planted, or visited. I am particularly mindful of his first letter to Corinth, which is full of instructions on all kinds of things. After spending twelve chapters addressing church issues, and giving rules, Paul shifts gears.

Speaking about rules he writes in 1 Cor. 12:31, “First, however, let me tell you about something else that is better than any of them!” Then he goes on to talk about what? Love. Love is the only rule that matters. If you do not care for your widows, and your elders because you love them, then no wonder you need rules. We have thousands of laws in this country because we cannot treat each other with love.

We are always looking for loopholes, instead of treating others as we would like to be treated. Anarchy occurs in the absence of law we say, but it also happens in the absence of love. If we are not a church governed by grace and love, no amount of legislation or constitutions is going to bring us much joy.

William Barclay has recorded one of my favourite stories, about a group of soldiers during World War II who had lost a friend in battle and wanted to give their fallen friend a decent burial. So they found a church with a graveyard behind it, surrounded by a white picket fence. They found the parish priest and asked if their friend could be buried in the church graveyard. “Was he Catholic?” the priest asked. “No he was not,” answered the soldiers.

“I’m sorry, then, “said the priest. “Our graveyard is reserved for members of the holy church. But you can bury your friend outside the fence. I will see that the gravesite is cared for.” “Thank you, Father,” said the soldiers, and they proceeded to bury their friend just outside the graveyard on the other side of the fence. When the war ended and before the soldiers returned home, they decided to visit the gravesite of their friend.

They remembered the location of the church-and the grave, just outside the fence. They searched and searched but could not find the grave. Finally, they went to the priest to inquire as to its location. ‘Sir, we cannot find our friends grace,” said the soldiers to the priest. “Well,” answered the priest. “After you buried your fallen friend, it just didn’t seem right that he should be buried there outside the fence.” “So you moved his grave?” asked the soldiers. “No,” the priest replied, “I moved the fence.” (More Hot Illustrations, p.91)

No one is moved by stories of people following the rules. No one has ever been inspired to be selfless or generous because of rules. No one likes to leave a church fellowship where they experience grace, but hordes leave when following the rules is the focus of the church’s life and ministry. The most rewarding relationships in life are not governed by rules, but by love and grace.

So we could ask ourselves who we are helping, or who we are supporting. Who is benefiting from our generosity. Good Questions, but really not the questions we should be asking ourselves. The more critical question to ask ourselves is why are we helping. What is our motivation? Is it out of obligations or rules or out of love and grace. Like the Apostle Paul states in 1 Corinthians 12 the latter is the more excellent way.