

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
Commentary by Michael Sigler
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Relational Advice for a Healthy Church

1 Timothy 5:1-8, 17-22

Key verse: “Whoever does not provide for relatives, and especially for family members, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (1 Timothy 5:8).

When it comes to human relationships, there are no perfect churches just as there are no perfect families. Yet, God evidently considers relationships in the church as of great importance, for God inspired the writers of Scripture to instruct believers on how to build and maintain healthy relationships in the church.

1 Timothy 5 is one of many such passages.

Here Paul begins with advice on how believers should treat each other across the generations. Today many churches are the poorer because members fail to bridge the gaps that divide us generationally. For example, disagreement on worship styles, ministry priorities, and other issues can become wedges that divide churches between younger and older members. The truth is churches need the enthusiasm, energy, and innovation of the young as well as the wisdom, experience, and discernment of older believers. So, Paul’s advice works for churches today as it did in the first century:

“Do not speak harshly to an older man, but speak to him as to a father, to younger men as brothers, to older women as mothers, to younger women as sisters—with absolute purity” (vv. 1-2).

In New Testament times, *widows* were especially vulnerable because there were no life insurance policies, pension plans, or government assistance. Verses 3-8 gave instructions on how the church was to care for its members who were widows and could not provide for themselves. The church was to care for widows who (1) had no family to care for them (vv. 3-4) and (2) for widows who had no resources or help other than their hope in God (vv. 5-6).

Our culture is different today, but God’s love and concern for those who cannot help themselves—the widowed, the orphaned, the poor—has not changed. A relationally healthy church will do all it can to love and help such people, starting with those who are a part of our own church.

As a part of Paul’s advice on the care of widows, he gives a strong word on the duty Christians have to provide and care for their own families: “And whoever does

not provide for relatives, and especially for family members, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (v. 8).

Continuing on the subject of relationships in the church, in verses 17-22 Paul deals with how church members ought to treat pastors and church leaders. Paul’s counsel could be summarized as follows: 1. Pastors and church leaders should be treated with respect and honor, and the church should pay them an adequate salary (vv. 17-18). 2. The reputations and credibility of pastors and church leaders must not be torn down by gossip, slander, and false “accusation” (vv. 19-20). 3. The church should not ordain pastors and church leaders hastily. They should be trained and proven first (v. 22).

Underlying these verses and many others in the Bible is an understanding that the mission of the church is too important to neglect the development and maintenance of healthy relationships. Sometimes that will mean correcting error and confronting sin, especially that which tears down relationships in Christ’s body, the Church....

Mildred Fister’s beauty parlor in Jefferson, Iowa, has an unusual policy. Mildred refuses to allow *gossip* in her parlor. John Carlson, a columnist for the Des Moines Register newspaper, commented: *This is a beauty parlor, for goodness’ sake, one of those places women come to say things—loving, kind, unkind, and, sure, maybe downright nasty—about their friends and neighbors—whether it’s true or not. It’s as basic in a beauty parlor as a blow dry. Isn’t it?*

“Not here,” Mildred says. There is absolutely no talking about other people in Mildred Fister’s shop. Talk about you and yours if you like...but in the mean time, no gossip.

At least Mildred doesn’t have to worry about keeping secrets. She knows secrets because she’s a friend to everybody who comes in the place. They know she can be trusted.

“Sometimes people don’t have anybody to talk to,” she said. “So they confide in me. They tell me things about themselves. They know I’ll never repeat what they say.”

That’s better than gossip. It’s called friendship.

If such a climate of respect, trust, and friendship can be honored in a beauty parlor, how much more should it be developed and maintained in the Church!

(Contact Michael at msigler@fumcfwb.com.)