

“FOR NOBLE PURPOSES”

2 Timothy 2:14-21 (p. 1156)

The New Testament book we call 2 Timothy is quite possibly the final letter, at least on record, ever written by the Apostle Paul. At the time, Paul’s protégé, a young man named Timothy, was pastor of the church in Ephesus. You may recall from Paul’s first letter to Timothy that the primary problem in the Ephesian church had to do with certain men who were causing divisions in the Body with their warped teaching. And evidently the problem was persistent, because in this second letter Paul reminds Timothy to avoid the “*godless chatter*” and “*foolish and stupid arguments*” that these men were engaged in.

In fact, his advice to Timothy on how to deal with their distorted teaching was simple and direct. In vs. 15 he wrote: “*Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.*” According to Paul, the best defense against stupid theology is good theology. He told Timothy, in effect, “*Don’t let yourself be sucked into their pointless arguments. That is an exercise in futility. Just live a life that is faithful to what you know to be true; people will see the difference.*” That was his advice.

The problem of pointless arguments presents itself perennially. This time it’s “*The DaVinci Code.*” Dan Brown can raise the pointless question of whether Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene. It makes for good box office – it will make a lot of money. But what’s the point? It doesn’t edify; it doesn’t help anyone. And in the end it will undoubtedly prove to be another one of those “foolish and stupid arguments.” I say that because the film ends with Tom Hanks saying to one of Jesus’ alleged progeny, “*What matters is that you believe.*” It doesn’t matter that something is true or false. The only thing that matters is that you believe. Oh, really? A lot of people really believed in Adolf Hitler. Such were the “foolish and stupid arguments” that Pastor Timothy had to put up with.

But then something rather interesting happens. It’s as though Paul anticipated Timothy reading up to this point, laying the letter in his lap, and muttering, “*Alright, Paul. I understand what you’re saying, and it makes good sense. What doesn’t make sense to me is why God would allow men like Hymenaeus and Philetus in the church in the first place! Those two are a constant pain. The folks here in this church would be far better off if they had never shown up!*”

Have you ever felt that way about the church – or rather, about certain people in the church? More importantly, perhaps I should ask: Has anyone ever

been given cause to feel that way about you? It almost seems as though Paul had anticipated this very question. Because right here he interrupts his own instructions with a little parable. In verses 20, sandwiched in between his warnings about the wise and unwise use of words, Paul inserts a little portrait of the church. What I find intriguing about this picture is that, unlike his image of the church in Ephesians 5 (in which he describes the Church as the *“bride of Christ, radiant... without stain or wrinkle, or blemish...”*) Here, however, the image is – well, it’s mundane, it’s down-home.

It’s as though Paul were saying to this young pastor, *“Timothy, when you think about the church (when you think of all those characters who make up the Body of Christ) I want you to imagine a large house.”* And being a large house, we can assume that the family there can afford the best. Yet even in such a house you will find all sorts of utensils. Some will be beautifully crafted gold or silver ware – the sort of dishes that are only used on special occasions. Others, however, will be of the “everyday” sort. And being made of wood or pottery, they’re the kind of vessels that have probably been knocking around for years. Perhaps they’re kept for sentimental value. In most kitchens there always seem to be one or two mismatched dishes that simply refuse to break. And so engaging this image, Paul writes to Timothy: *“In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay; some are for noble purposes and some for ignoble.”*

Now, if Paul intended this as a picture of the church (and I believe he did), then what are we to make of it? Well, perhaps we should begin by noting that, even though the church is the earthly body of Christ (the first visible evidence of what the kingdom of God is going to look like) this body, nevertheless, is made up of all sorts of “articles” that serve all sorts of “purposes” – some of them “noble” and some of them “ignoble.” Just as is the case in a large house, so in the church of Jesus Christ you will find all sorts of people. That’s just the way it is; so you might as well learn to live with it.

Paul’s image here reminds me of Jesus’ parable in Matthew 13 about the wheat and the tares. The kingdom of God, Jesus said, is like this: In God’s field you’ll find wheat; but you will also find weeds that look deceptively like wheat. Now, you’ll remember that, in that parable, the farmer’s instruction to his servants was this: *“Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters (what to do).”* Jesus reminds us that it is the Lord who decides which is worth keeping. By implication the same is true in this picture of the church as a household. The master of the house reserves the right to decide which vessels he will value. That decision is simply not our prerogative as his vessels. Which raises another aspect of Paul’s image.

He seems to be forcing us to look at our prejudices. Think about it. Don't we presume (and for what we think are good reasons) that certain vessels are fit only for certain purposes? I mean, you wouldn't use a lead crystal bowl for kitty litter, would you? A galvanized garbage pail is hardly a suitable container from which to serve the soup course (that is, of course, unless you're in the Army). In the same way, in the church we assume that certain utensils are either appropriate or inappropriate. For example, we wouldn't serve Holy Communion in a coffee mug. It just wouldn't be proper.

Now, inanimate vessels are one thing. But Paul is talking here about something infinitely more important. He's talking about human vessels – vessels that are capable of carrying either the grace of God or garbage. But unless we exercise great care and spiritual discernment, we can damage some of those vessels, do some serious violence to members of the body of Christ – and doing it all in the name of propriety.

You will see that kind of violence happening wherever people have decided that certain “types” of human vessels could be considered either acceptable or unacceptable in the church. As a little exercise, in silence and in the solitude of your own heart before God, consider if any of the following statements reflect your own attitude:

- *Women cannot be effective pastors in the local church.* (Nothing personal. They just don't have what it takes.)
- *Ex-convicts who claim to be “born again” ought not to be trusted.* (How can we be sure they're not just doing another “con” job?)
- *Too many single adults in a church (especially those who've been divorced) can compromise its family values.* (No offense, but we think it's important to be seen as a “family-oriented” church.)

I offer those statements as starters. I'm sure you can make your own list of ways in which the church has at times, to its shame, made itself remarkably unwelcoming. But the fact remains that it takes all sorts of people to make the church. And that is true for at least two reasons. First, it takes all sorts of people to make the church because in a very practical sense, all sorts of people will inevitably find their way into any voluntary organization – including the church. Any group that allows more than one member is inviting diversity. You can't get away from it; so you had better learn to cope with it.

But there's a second, and far more important reason why it takes all sorts of people to make the church; and that is because that is how our Lord intends his church to be. We are diverse by God's design; and when we deny that truth we're denying God's will. Look around you this morning. Jesus has called you and me, as different as we are in temperament and experience and gifts and skin color, and age, to be his body. And were it not for our differences, our diversity, the church

would be robbed of the sensitivity and compassion and understanding that belong to those who confess that we have all sinned in our different ways, and yet we have found forgiveness and new life together in one Lord and Savior.

I want to be clear about this. When I say that the church is diverse by God's design, I am not suggesting that the church ought to condone deliberate, continuing sin – to say in the name of “inclusiveness” that it really doesn't matter what you do with your life. It matters dearly. What you and I do with our lives cost Jesus his life. But what I am saying, when I tell you that the church is diverse by God's design, is that we need to be ready and willing to embrace every person who comes here looking for wholeness and a new life – whoever they are. That is the kind of inclusiveness that I believe God intends for his church.

Think about the alcohol or drug abusers who are desperately trying to deal responsibly with their condition. Are we going to shut them out? Or think about the divorced persons or single moms who, on top of their sense of failure, may be trying hard to do the job of two parents by themselves. Do we give them a cool reception? Or think about the person who has flunked out or has lost his job, and is trying to piece his life together. Is he welcome and made to feel worthwhile? Maybe it's the man or woman who has had an affair, and who is wrestling with the guilt of knowing that they have betrayed both God and their family. Is there room in the fellowship for such people? I pray God there is.

Paul said to Timothy: *“In a large house there are articles... some for noble purposes and some for ignoble.”* But then he added this amazing grace note in verse 21. He wrote: *“If a man cleanses himself from the latter, he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work.”* Did you catch that? Paul said that, if he determines to clean up his life, he will (not “might” but “will”) be God's instrument for noble purposes... ready to be used by God for any good work.

Please, whatever you do, don't leave here today without letting that truth settle deep in your heart. If you're inclined to think that somebody is a lost cause, if you've decided they just don't fit your idea of one of God's chosen vessels, remember this. God alone knows those vessels that, even though they may be currently being used for ignoble purposes, he is going to end up using them for noble ones. I know that's true. Because if God can take me as I was and make of me a useful vessel for his good purposes, he can do it for anyone.

I believe that Paul was talking to every last one of us when he told Timothy that in the church you're going to have to deal with all sorts of people, including some who you don't think have any business being there. So his advice to Timothy and to us is this: *“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who doesn't need to be ashamed, and who correctly handles the word of truth.”* Do that and God will be able to use you for his good purposes.

And as for those other human “vessels” – leave it to God to decide how he is going to use them.

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