**Leaders and fellowship in the church** 12/11/23dkm

Read: Numbers 12, 1Thessalonians 5

Text: 1Thessalonians 5:12-15

Psalms: 75, 76:7-12, 133, 134a

If you look at the website for our church you will see it written that we are an organism not an organisation. What do we mean by organism, and what is the difference? A body, your body, is an organism. You have a head, hands, legs, and feet. The church is often referred to as the body of Christ. Christ is the head and we are all attached to the head, and through the head to each other. We are all dependant on each other, with no part being more important than any other. Only the church has such a structure. Every other ‘institution’ or ‘organisation’ has a person as the head, or is ruled by the people- it is either a dictatorship or a democracy. Many churches, particularly the Roman Catholic Church, have departed from this biblical model, calling the pope or some other man the head of the church, or allowing one person to become a dictator.

This said, we recognise that as a gathering of human beings there is need for order and organisation. The Bible recognises this need, and so we find the apostle Paul appointing elders in every church (Acts 14:23). Jesus himself appointed twelve of his followers ‘apostles’, men whom he taught and to whom he gave spiritual power authority. These men are seen as under shepherds, with Jesus himself being the chief shepherd (1Peter 5:1-4, Act s 20:28). In the western world, democracy is being strained because ultimate power belongs to the people and some do not see all people as being equal. Some prefer a benevolent dictator, but Jesus is the only truly benevolent and just dictator, or Lord.

When it comes to men being leaders in the church, the problem is a lack of humility; leaders can easily become proud and start bullying the flock of God; they forget that the flock is God’s, not theirs! The apostles were not without their ambitions and resulting conflicts. Judas in particular forgot that Jesus was the head, the one who called him. Submission to authority is essential within the church of God. Indeed, we are all told to submit to one another as humble servants of the Lord, and to ‘submit to your elders’ (1Peter 5:5).

Leadership has always been a challenge for the church, probably more so today than ever before. We live in a society that rejects authority at every turn, a society in which every person does what is right in their own eyes- actually that was true of Israel in the days of the Judges! This is becoming true in the church. But remember, the church is different because Christ is the head of the church and we all, including leaders, must give account to him (Heb 13:17). Sadly, some leaders overlook this solemn truth, which is why we must be careful and prayerful in electing and appointing our leaders, and why we must be praying for them.

It seems there was some problem regarding leadership in the church at Thessalonica because Paul addresses this issue here in chapter 5. The problem was not with the leaders but with respect for the leaders from within the church; society has never respected leaders in the church. It appears that Paul had appointed leaders or elders in this church, referring to those who are ‘over you in the Lord’ (5:12). Our subheadings are: ‘Leaders and their duties’, ‘Members and their duties’, and ‘Functioning fellowship’.

**1. Leaders and their duties**

As Paul comes to the end of his first letter to the Thessalonian church he has another word of instruction for the ‘brethren’, for members of this infant church. His final word was at the beginning of chapter 4 but he is still exhorting them here in chapter 5 verse 12; the word ‘urge’ can also be translated ‘ask’ or ‘request’. He asks the members to respect their leaders and show appreciation for the work they do; attendance is a good start! He asks that they recognise those who are ‘over you in the Lord’, but has a couple of other things to say about these rulers.

These rulers, we assume, were appointed by the apostle Paul. He, or strictly speaking, he and his fellow missionaries, appointed elders in every church. Paul was an apostle appointed by the risen Lord, but still is was ‘they’ who appointed elders (Acts 14:23). We later read of Aristarchus and Secundus representing the Thessalonian church (Acts 20:4). Back in Jerusalem, the apostles had asked the ‘brethren’, the church, to select men who they appointed as deacons by the laying on of hands. In the church there is always a plurality of elders and deacons; leadership is never left in the hands of one man. This rule has not always been followed, either in practice or perception. Some elders think they are individually in charge even when other elders are present. In Presbyterian churches we have ruling elders and a teaching elder or minister, making up what we call a session, and then a presbytery (Acts 15:6). These men are elected according to guidelines in 1Timothy 3, and appointed in the local church.

Back to verse 12 and the two things said about the church leaders in Thessalonica. Firstly, they ‘labour among you’ (5:12). Many people, and some pastors themselves, think that ministers only work one day a week! Some years ago a fellow minister logged his daily work. Reading for, and writing, two, two thousand plus word sermons each week requires quite a bit of time; and then there is pastoral work. The Thessalonians had seen Paul ministering among them, for a time doing manual work to support himself. The word for ‘labour’ refers to hard work, work that draws a sweat, and sometimes tears.

Secondly, these leaders ‘admonish you’ (5:12). Leaders or elders are to preach and teach the word, and rule the church as they do their own house (1Tim 3:4). Paul makes special reference to ‘admonishing’ as part of the leader’s labour. His duty is to warn against bad behaviour and its consequences, holding up before you the word of God when you wander from the way.

Peter tells elders, fellow elders, to shepherd the flock of God (1Peter 5:2). A shepherd leads the sheep by instruction and by example; he does not bully the sheep into submission. Sheep do not respond to being pushed around! That said, sheep can be foolish, and the shepherd had the duty to do all he can to stop them stepping into danger. The shepherd must feed and lead the flock, and the elders, especially the teaching elder, must feed the brethren with spiritual food. It is a joy and privilege for the minister to study the Bible as he does, but he must share all good things with the flock.

To switch metaphors briefly, the minister is like a farmer labouring night and day in sowing the seed. He then keeps watch as the crop grows and produces a harvest. There is great rejoicing when the harvest comes in, when individuals repent of their sin and believe in Jesus, and when they grow and mature as Christians. The minister and elders spend time in prayer, as well as preaching and teaching, and you as church members should be praying for your leaders even when they admonish you.

Can we change the metaphor again? Can we see the minister and elders as ruling over the family of God? We all know that children have to be taught, and also have to be admonished or corrected at times. A child may refuse to hold your hand when crossing the road, but you know, as the child may not, that crossing a road is dangerous. New believers, and sometimes not-so-new believers, need to be admonished at times, not by a bully but by a caring brother in the Lord. Elders are entrusted with this solemn duty, and Paul asks the church to respect them for their admonishing, as well as their teaching.

**2. Members and their duties**

We have touched on some of these duties already in saying we are to respect our leaders and pray for them. All members of the church, like members of a body, have important duties within the body of Christ. We all have spiritual gifts that we should be exercising for the building up of the body (5:11). This was happening in the Thessalonian church, but some, it appears, were not respecting or esteeming their elders. Members of the church are called to love one another (4:9), and to submit to one another, and especially submit to the elders. Peter gives particular instruction to young people in this regard (1Peter 5:5). Those new in the faith are prone to be critical of the elders, just as youth tend to be critical of their parents. Adolescents tend to think they know better than their parents. Churches are warned not to appoint ‘novices’ as leaders (1Tim 3:6).

Young or old, all members of the church are urged to respect their leaders and submit to them as men over them in the Lord (5:12). ‘Submit’ is not a popular word today; is it still in the dictionary? Our secular culture tells us to be ambitious, even if this means stepping on other people. Listening to older people is a big ‘No, No’ in our day. Respect for anyone in authority has gone out the door, including and especially respect for church leaders. Some leaders may not deserve respect, but it is our God-given duty to respect properly appointed leaders in the church. This is commanded in the Bible and this command has not changed, even if society has: ‘Obey those who rule over you and be submissive’ (Heb 13:17, 1Peter 5:5)

As the body of Christ, the church is hated by Satan. Satan hates seeing his followers become followers of Jesus. So as well as targeting new believers with temptations, Satan targets men preaching and teaching the word of God. He also loves to see division in the church; division often starts with the breakdown of respect for authority or the abuse of authority. But whenever Christ is held up as the head or chief shepherd by leaders and members of the church, Satan has no power. Christ defeated Satan at the cross and resurrection. When the love of Christ is flowing in the church, Satan cannot enter. Paul emphasises love in chapter 4, and again here in verse 13. When love abounds peace abounds, and the church functions as it should, as the body of Christ. Jesus talked about salt being good: ‘Have salt in yourselves, and have peace with one another’ (Mark 9:50). More salt and less pepper is what our churches need!

**3. Functioning fellowship**

While it is the duty of elders to shepherd the flock of God, to teach and admonish members of the church, members themselves should also be looking out for each other. We have organisation through the office-bearers in the church but we remain an organism, a family of brothers and sisters in the Lord. We pray for one another and help one another as we see the need and are able (Gal 6:10). We can also speak to others a word in season, a word of advice or warning to any who are unruly. Paul refers to three different types of people found in the church: unruly, fainthearted or timid, and weak (5:14). Each will be spoken to differently, as he says. In every situation or relationship we are to exercise patience and self-control, with no thought to personal revenge, even if we have been offended (5:15). Next to love, or as part of love, forgiveness promotes unity in the church.

Firstly, the unruly or insubordinate or idle. This word refers to soldiers who will not obey orders, and also to people who are lazy or idle. We know from Paul’s second letter that some in Thessalonica were disorderly and not working (2Thess 3:11). Were they sitting around waiting for Jesus to return? Maybe. Or were they so ‘spiritually minded’ that physical work was below them? Many in that society despised manual labour. Whatever the reason for them being idle, Paul tells the church to discipline such people in no uncertain terms (2Thess 3:10). Such conduct is probably behind the reference to ‘admonish you’ in verse 12, and Paul’s whole concern about respecting leaders. This warning to those who are idle goes back to Paul’s instructions about work in 4:11, his warning to bludgers, busybodies, and bullies. Leaders must note and deal with any such conduct in the church. A church in which there is no discipline soon becomes dysfunctional, just like a family without discipline.

Fainthearted, timid or anxious people are also found in the church (5:14). Such people may be forgotten in society, but not in the church. They must be comforted and encouraged. The church is made up of people from all walks of life, people from different ethnicities, genders, ages, and status in society. There are people with widely differing personalities, but all are loved by Christ and loved by the body of Christ. There are people strong on the faith and people weak in the faith, people who must be patiently looked after. Some think Paul is referring to those tempted by sexual immorality (4:3).

The good of the church and the glory of God is promoted when the good of every individual member is considered (5:15). As already mentioned, forgiveness must triumph over revenge, with no thought being given to returning evil for evil, something clearly taught by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Having God-fearing men appointed and respected as elders, as teachers, pastors, and rulers in the church, is a must if the church is to grow in love, as well as numbers, to the glory of God.