

“Character Formation”

I hate to sound like I am launching into a continual diatribe against our contemporary western secular culture, but it is the culture in which we live and move from Monday through Saturday; and if we are not very thoughtful about it, it can color the way we hear the word of God. In other words, rather than having our minds renewed and transformed by the Word and will of God, even well-meaning Christian people can begin to parrot the philosophies and harbor the mindset of an increasingly post-Christian culture. For example, when we read verses 4 and 5 in chapter 2 of Paul’s letter to Titus, we may have found ourselves feeling somewhat uncomfortable. When he writes that older women should “train the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands”, it may have set off four-alarm-fire-bells of protest in our minds, because we have been indoctrinated, trained in way we should think and speak about women, in a culture that has zero tolerance for alternative viewpoints. So as we heard the Holy Scriptures being read, we may have found

ourselves interjecting all the objections of cultural censors on the lookout for any breaches of political correctness. We may have heard an inner voice saying, “Yes, but women don’t have to be married. Yes, but women don’t have to have children. Self-controlled and pure? Why that sounds like repression and sexual frigidity to me. Busy at home and subject to their husbands? What does he want? Barefoot and pregnant Stepford wives?” Now, maybe you didn’t think any of those things. But if you did, it might suggest that, like me, you have been conditioned not to violate or even question the strict rules of politically correct thought and speech. No wonder we get nervous or embarrassed by verses like the ones we’ve read today. I have heard sincere Christian people make haste to distance themselves from such verses by saying, “Well, that’s just Paul!” (As though Paul’s letters aren’t a major part of the New Testament), or by speaking as though it goes without saying that we are obviously more enlightened than Paul and we hardly need to be bound by such patriarchal and chauvinistic assumptions. You see, it is true that we need to explore exactly what Paul was saying and make sure we don’t misinterpret it by reading it through the wrong lens. But the point I am trying to make is that we are so steeped in western secular

cultural assumptions, that we could reject or dismiss large portions of the Word of God because they don't fit into the web of assumptions we have been trained to accept without thinking. And if that is the way we find ourselves responding to the Word of God then we have to reckon with the fact that we are giving our culture the authority to correct the Scriptures, rather than acknowledging God's authority to correct our culture. This, I think, has been the struggle-point of the modern mainline churches. Do we tell God what we think and let that shape our theological directions? Or do we take our directions from the Word of God and let Him shape the people we are becoming and the church we must be? All of us must think about the assumptions we bring into this room. Where does truth come from? Does it come from my inner feelings, or from the Word of God? Am I here to negotiate with God on behalf of my culture, or am I here as a citizen of the Kingdom over which Jesus is sovereign, and therefore I have come to receive my marching orders, and to be trained in his unimpeachable way? We can't have it both ways. As Eric Liddell's father said in the film "Chariots of Fire", "The Kingdom of God is not a democracy. There is no discussion, no deliberation, no referenda as to which way to go, which road to take. There is no low road, only

the high... one right, one wrong, one voice, one absolute ruler... one benevolent despot, demanding to be obeyed...” Folks, what assumptions do we bring into this room? If I assume that my inner feelings are the final arbiters or judges of what I must or will do, then I could sit here for a thousand Sundays in a row, and never once have the Word of God make a dent in my chosen ways of life. It would all be like water off a duck’s back. But if I come in these doors as one who acknowledges that Jesus is my Lord, that his Name is above every other name, and that his Word trumps every other word, then I must yield to his will and Word and way – or I am a liar, and I am playing a kind of game in which I pretend to belong to God, but maintain an allegiance entirely to my own will. What do you assume to be true when you walk in the doors of this room? If we don’t stop and figure that out, this could be an elaborate exercise in self-deception; wanting to convince ourselves that we are into this God-thing, when we may never in fact have shifted our allegiance to anyone but ourselves. If we have never really decided who we are here for, we are liable to start drifting away when we discover one Sunday that “I didn’t get anything out of it.” Isn’t worship something we are supposed to give, without any strings attached? Are we here

for our own good pleasure? Or have we come hungry to hear from God, anxious to be trained, and ready to practice what we've learned as a way of life? I think that is what we are here for. So let's set aside our cultural biases, and listen responsively to God's remarkable alternative; because I am convinced that God is addressing every person in this room.

First of all (gulp!) he is talking to preachers like me, and every Sunday school teacher, and youth leaders, and parents, and grandparents – to anyone who has an opportunity to teach a child the truth about God, “You must”, Paul says, “teach what is in accord with sound doctrine.” The word here is that when someone is counting on us to tell them the truth, the truth is what they should hear from us; not someone's exciting new theory, not an opinion from the last columnist we read, and not ever our own skewed philosophy. If they come to us for truth we must tell them that the truth comes from the one who is the way, the truth, and the life. We point them to Jesus and the word of God written that literally tells us everything we need to know for our life and for our salvation. If we do less than that, or if we convince them that the Word of God is just one of many optional

and equal truths that can be selected from the salad bar of possibilities, then we will have betrayed their trust. No one has to accept the truth of the Word of God. But woe to the preacher who reneges on his or her responsibility to teach what is in accord with sound doctrine. “You must”, Paul says. This is imperative that disallows any other option. If preachers took this seriously, our churches might not be any bigger, but it would be a lot more difficult to find people in the pews who can’t distinguish between sound and bogus doctrine.

Now, what does he say to each group represented here this morning? He tells Titus to, “Teach the Older men to be temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled, and sound in faith, in love and in endurance.” What is he talking about here? He is talking about the church as a primary place for character formation. Notice he is not talking about some select handful of older men. He is not, in this place, talking about the qualities or characteristics of those whom we would ordain as Elders. He is talking about every older man in the church. Every older man in the church should understand his responsibility to be a moral and spiritual example to the young people and new Christians

in this church. Notice that there aren't any exceptions, no term limits, and no one man who can claim to be retired from this responsibility. And what kind of character do Christian young people need to see in the older men of this church? They need to see seasoned soldiers of Christ whose conduct of life is both responsible and sensible. Young men want to be able to respect the older men in this church. I really believe that. But if they see men my age and older throwing their own "grown-up" versions of temper-tantrums, pouting and grouching, ready to complain but unwilling to help, spouting goofy ideas or launching into angry tirades against anyone who disagrees with them, apparently not that interested in worship or the things of God, it creates what psychologists call "cognitive dissonance". And that means that what they see doesn't match-up with what they know should be true. If we don't behave with dignity, maturity, wisdom and love, they see a bunch of white-haired old guys acting like children. And our young men desperately need to see older men they can respect. They need to be able to look at us older guys and say, "Now that's the kind of man I want to grow up to be." Some of them don't have fathers at home, and I am happy to say that I could point them to any number of men here, and say, "Now that is what Christian

manhood looks like. There is maturity in Christ.” But it doesn’t happen over-night, and it is never accidental. Men, the kind of Christian you are in your maturity matters more than you will ever know. There are young men and boys here hoping to see in you a model of Christian manhood worthy of respect. If they see it, I am convinced they will never forget it.

And to the older women in the church Paul says your responsibility is every bit as serious as the men’s. He tells Titus, “Teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good. Then they can train the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God.” Let me say a word about the historical situation here. The truth is that women in the early church found an incredible new freedom and equality in Christ. So much so that some women took freedom to mean license. They abandoned their responsibilities, you could not find some of them at home, and some just took over, constantly disrupting the good order of church gatherings. So Paul was, in

effect, trying to temper some of the zeal that was leading to church and family chaos. He was, I think, trying to say that a mature women's wonderful new status in Christ didn't mean they were free to deep six all the norms of social decorum and family stability. And if they wanted the watching world to take Christianity seriously, it was important for the older women to demonstrate the wisdom that comes from maturity and the discipline of self-control, so that families could continue to be the first place of Christian education and a credible arena in which young women would see modesty and supportive love lived-out. And if our young women don't see those examples of mature Christian discipleship in the adult women of this church, you can bet they won't find it in our secular culture. If you don't provide the model, where do they have to look? Anyone can choose to abandon the faith but I would be loath to think that they would do so because they couldn't find credible examples at their church. And again, I will be quick to say that there are many good examples here, but it is a duty from which our women must never shirk.

Paul goes on, "Similarly, encourage the young men to be self-controlled. In everything set them an example by doing what is good.

In your teaching show integrity, seriousness and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us.”

Folks, I happen to believe that young people growing up in this superficial, sex-saturated, sophomoric culture of ours are starving for credible examples of maturity, wisdom, and spiritual depth. The culture doesn't have it for them. And what Paul is asking us, is, do we? Have we got what they need to grow up into the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ? You see, I get the feeling that when push comes to shove, what really counts, - - for now and for the future - - is what kind of person Christ is making of you. If knowing Christ really causes you to grow in grace, if knowing Christ really makes you more humane, if knowing Christ really makes you a deeper, wiser, warmer, kinder, a more humorous, balanced, humble, playful, compassionate human being; in short, if knowing Christ causes you, step by step to become more like Christ, then you will make an impression so indelible that your children will never forget it.

That's what we need in the church. I think if Paul would have had access to all the leadership-training manuals marketed in the last

thirty years, he would have sold them cheap at a garage sale. We don't need trendy new techniques or the proven formulas of Fortune 500 companies. What we need is intentional Christian character formation. What we need are leaders and models, (in Eugene Peterson's words) "men and women who know how to treat people in their congregations in order to bring them to maturity in Christ." We don't have to be "gifted", extraordinary Christians: we need ordinary Christians who will use their gifts to build up the body of Christ. What we need desperately is a depth of character; characters formed by a lifelong and ever-growing maturity in Christ. Who would have guessed that maybe our greatest gift to the next generation of the church would be for us to grow-up – to get mature in Christ? I tell you what; real maturity is in short supply in this world. Spiritual adulthood has almost disappeared. If you want to be exceptional and effective, be temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled and sound in faith, in love and in endurance. Amen? Amen.