

# **St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore**

## **How to Run a Church**

**Rev. Catherine Buchan**

**Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> October 2010**

1 Timothy 5:1-8, 17-24

Isaiah 60: 1-7

Some people criticize the church for being too impractical. They see Christians as being too heavenly minded to be of any earthly use. And of course there are Christians, just as there are people of other faiths or none, who seem to specialize in seeing the big picture. Isaiah was one. In his prophecies we have several passages like that we read this morning, which paint a picture of God's love and triumph with broad strokes. There are Christians who are filled with awe at the wonder of our faith, of the loving nature of God revealed by Jesus, at the superb work of salvation accomplished in his death, and at the wonderful gift of God's Spirit with us and in us. And they are right. It is fantastic and never to be lost sight of. That is the big picture. It is what we believe and why the church exists in the first place: to worship God for his amazing love.

There are other people, however, who criticize the church for being too regimented, for forgetting the big picture in a welter of rules and regulations. Some would see our Church of Scotland like this. We have rules about who can join the church and how (though the rules actually say anyone with faith in Christ and by a variety of ways). We have rules about how to govern a congregation, and because there is more than one way to do it, there is more than one set of rules around this. We have rules and structures regarding the national life of the church in various areas, and there is some truth in the jibe that the Church of Scotland answer to any problem is to form a committee. Surely, say the critics, the church is one big family. So why all the rules, why all the detailed plans? Why can't we just be together and be happy?

The church *is* family. What we read this morning emphasizes that in the first couple of verses. We are to treat each other as we would members of our family (or, if we are aware that we don't always treat family as we ought, as we know we should treat our family). We are to encourage older men, as we would a father - both by words and example, and we are to treat younger men, and women as we would brothers, sisters or mothers. The church is a family. But this chapter might well be entitled "How to run a church", because family life needs practical principles and organisational details if things are to run smoothly.

In a nuclear family there are norms and there are rules, and family members need to know what they are. The actual rules need not be set in stone, but may change as the family grows and ages, but the principles will be more steadfast. So families have rules about bed-times and meal times (even if in some families the rule is that there is no rule - people still need to know that). Children need to know if there are expectations of them to be in for certain times and to be bedded at a given hour. Parents need to know that too, so that they can be available to their children and to each other at the appropriate times. The family needs to know too what their priorities are for spending of both time and money. As the children grow and make new partnerships, the family will be a bit questioning of those joining it. Is Jimmy the best husband for Jeannie? Will he share her values and bring out the best in her?

And it is like this too in the church family. There are practicalities, rules and underlying principles which we have to observe if we are to do the best possible job of showing God's love and glory to the world.

A lot of this fifth chapter of Paul's letter is about the early church's provision for widows. It goes into great detail. Who should be regarded as really needy and who should not. Who should look to their families for help, and who should be able to get help from the church. In a way it boiled down to who had the church as their only family, and who had other family, even if they too were part of the church. In the book of Acts we see the very first Christians coming together and sharing all that they had and we are told that there was not a needy person among them. That was still the way the church wanted to function, and indeed twenty centuries later our goal in that regard should be undiminished. Our theology, our big-picture thinking tells us that Jesus

came to transform us and to transform the world; to set us free and to set the world free. Our theology tells us that Jesus came to transform our priorities and our circumstances. That's the big picture, but how is it to be done in practice?

The bulk of this chapter is telling Timothy how to treat widows, and who is to be regarded as a widow and who is not. Paul knew that the church in Ephesus, which probably was not very large or very wealthy, only had limited resources. If word went round the city that the Christians were handing out money to anyone who was a widow, then the church would be faced with a problem of what the nineteenth century missionaries called "Rice Christians." Rice Christians were people in poor countries where the Gospel was having its first proclamation, who professed to have converted to the Christian faith, and who hung around the church, all for the sake of hand-outs of food or other things. But when anything was asked of them, or when things became a bit difficult for the church, or when the supplies of rice were exhausted, they quietly melted away.

Rice Christians, or widows who want a hand out so that they can gad around, or any other sort of hanging around the church for what one can get is bad. It is bad for the person, teaching them laziness and insincerity, and it is bad for the church, which seems to be supporting bad habits, and which is weakened in its witness by the unfaithful behaviour of the hangers on. One of the family principles is generosity to those in need, but another one is making sure that nothing is done which might weaken the family's witness to the transforming power of Christ. We give because we have known his transformation, and we give so that others might also know it. That may include a transformation of their physical circumstances, but it should not include giving in such a way that those who receive are in the end made worse off, because they are encouraged to see themselves as helpless when they are not, or dependent when they need not be. Of course there are many who really are helpless and dependent - like the real widows with no other recourse. Then the giving is a real transformation.

Because what Paul is really referring to in this chapter is the Church's stewardship of money.

Our money is given to us to use in God's service, and the money which comes to the church is also only ours in trust. The simplistic view in Ephesus might have been that all widows should be given what they sought, no matter if they were established Christians or if they had other family to care for them. But that would have been poor stewardship, which in the end would have harmed the recipients and the church. When it comes to handling finances, wisdom is needed. After all, the widows weren't the only people who might need to be provided for, or who should, in fairness be provided for. There were also the elders. Elders, who often functioned in similar ways to ministers nowadays, who ruled well - offered good guidance and who laboured in preaching and teaching are to be given "double honour." This doesn't just mean that they are to be thanked verbally or given a round of applause (perish the thought!). It is quite obvious from what Paul goes on to say about not muzzling treading oxen and labourers being worthy of their hire that what is meant here is money. For honour read honorarium. Even way back then, those who served the church in this way were to be kept by the church. The family has its own values, and it shows what they are by the way it spends time and money. So the Christian family values the time and effort put into teaching and preaching God's word because the family knows that this is the way that they can come to learn more of their father and of their own identity as his children.

In the Christian family, and in the various branches of that family which are denominations and local congregations we have things which we expect of each other, family rules and norms which need to be adhered to so that we can function. How we give, how we give to the church and how we give and use our money as a church is one area which we should never shy away from considering. It is not worldly to think and talk about money. It is wisdom to apply our big-picture thinking to the everyday of what we do. Our big picture shows us God sending his Son to us in love and generosity, sending him to die and rise again and set us free from the death which is the consequence of sin. Our big picture shows us God as our parent providing for us and asking only that we allow our lives to be transformed. Surely transformation should be our criterion in our giving. Our big picture shows us Jesus honouring Scripture, teaching it and interpreting it for his followers, and showing them how to become wise as they take it to heart. So we too should show that in the way we honour those who teach us. Honour them in providing for them, and in protecting them from unfounded criticism. Ministers, yes - I have to say that, don't I? But also those who teach our children, and those who lead Bible Study, and those who are prepared to help us wrestle with the problems of life.

We are people of the big picture. But we also have to be people of the detail, so that in our daily life the big picture is not distorted and betrayed. God give us grace and patience to live as his faithful people.

Amen.