

THE ROLE OF BISHOPS

February 3, 2019
32nd Sunday after Pentecost
Revision D

Epistle: 1 Timothy 4:9-15

Today's Epistle lesson is not used at all in the West for Sunday services. Going back about 50 years, many Western churches had Scripture readings for Matins and Vespers and today's Epistle reading was included. But these readings are falling largely into disuse today. Looking through the old lectionaries (from the 1940's) of Western churches, virtually every verse from 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy and Titus (the Pastoral Epistles) was read either at the weekday services or during Sunday services. With the passing of Matins and Vespers, the main theme that is now missing in Western churches is that of bishops and the role of bishops in the Church.

For example, Table 1 lists the Sunday lectionary for most Western churches (going back at least to the 1940's) that is used today. Table 2 lists the weekday lectionary for some Western churches that is starting to fall into disuse. Note how much the themes in Table 2 revolve around the Bishop's role in the Church.

Background: Timothy, Bishop of Ephesus

Paul first met Timothy in Lystra and Timothy was well spoken of by the brethren there and at Iconium (Acts 16:1-4). While this occurred at the beginning of Paul's second missionary journey (49 AD) or right after the Council in Jerusalem (Acts 15), Paul probably met Timothy on his first missionary journey². Timothy may have been among the elders (or presbyters) Paul and Barnabas appointed at the end of their first missionary journey in 48 AD (Acts 14:23).

Lystra was not Timothy's first contact with Christianity either. Titus was numbered among the original Seventy who were sent out by the Lord two-by-two to heal the sick and cast out demons (Luke 10:1-24). Timothy was added to the number of the Seventy later. Timothy had probably been a believer for a while when Paul met him.

Paul's first letter to Timothy was written in about 64-65 AD, or following Paul's release from house arrest in Rome; that is, after the end of Acts 28. During the intervening years 48-64 AD, Timothy had accompanied Paul on all his missionary journeys doing Apostolic work (1 Thessalonians 3:1-3, Acts 19:22, 1 Corinthians 4:17).

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² Compare 2 Timothy 3:10-11 where Paul referred to events of his First Missionary Journey that Timothy was very familiar with.

Table 1
Pastoral Epistles Used in the West for Sundays

Scripture		Theme (OSB Title)
1 Timothy	1:12-17	Salvation by Grace
1 Timothy	2:1-7	Faithfulness in Prayer
1 Timothy	6:6-19	Greed; Pursuing Spirituality
2 Timothy	1:1-14	Thanksgiving; Timothy's Gift
2 Timothy	2:8-15	Strengthening Others, Diligence
2 Timothy	3:14-4:5	Inspiration of Scripture, Sound Doctrine
2 Timothy	4:6-8, 16-18	Paul's Example and Trials
Titus	2:11-14	Proper Behavior
Titus	3:4-7	God's Kindness to Us

Table 2
Pastoral Epistles Omitted in the West for Sundays

Scripture		Theme
1 Timothy	1:1-12	Opposing Speculation & Legalism as Bishop
1 Timothy	1:18-20	Wage Good Warfare as Bishop
1 Timothy	2:8-15	Men's & Women's Roles
1 Timothy	3:1-16	Bishops' & Deacons' Qualifications
1 Timothy	4:1-5:25	A Bishop's Work
1 Timothy	6:1-5	Regarding Slaves & Disputers
2 Timothy	2:1-7, 16-26	Apostolic Teaching, Conduct & Oral Traditions
2 Timothy	3:1-4:5	Moral Decline & the Bishop's Response
2 Timothy	4:9-15	The Role of Bishops
Titus	1:1-16	Ordination of Bishops; Opposing False Teachers
Titus	2:1-10	Sound Doctrine & Behavior
Titus	3:1-3	Kindness
Titus	3:8-15	Heretics & Schismatics vs. Other Apostles

Paul had recently left Timothy in Ephesus (1 Timothy 1:3) to set some things straight. The words Paul used for Timothy's mission there are very strong. Paul describes qualifications and characteristics of a bishop for Timothy's benefit (1 Timothy 3:1-7); this implies that Timothy ordained other bishops in the area. Paul knew many of these things didn't apply to Timothy himself, but they very well may apply if Timothy, himself, was ordaining Bishops. Timothy remained Bishop of Ephesus until about 95 AD when he was martyred. Shortly after Timothy's martyrdom, the Apostle John returned from a 15 year exile on Patmos and ordained Onesimus, Philemon's former slave (Philemon 10), as bishop in Timothy's place. Tradition credits Aquila (also one of the Seventy) as the first Bishop of Ephesus beginning in 52 AD during Paul's Second Missionary Journey (Acts 18:18-19). Gaius (also of the Seventy) was the second Bishop of Ephesus; he, like Timothy, traveled with Paul a lot (Romans 16:23, Acts 19:29, 20:4).

The Role of Bishops

The Epistle reading begins, literally, “Faithful is the Word and worthy of all acceptance” (1 Timothy 1:9). In verse 11, Paul instructed Timothy, “These things command¹ and teach” (1 Timothy 1:11). The Greek word *paragello* comes from the Greek word *agellos* meaning “angel” and an adverb meaning near or close. Thus Paul is saying that Timothy’s work in Ephesus is the Word of God coming to the Ephesians as in an angelic visit. These are strong words; it’s not something that’s optional whether they receive it or not².

When Paul wrote this, Timothy was at least in his late 30’s. Yet Paul encourages Timothy, “Let no one despise your youthfulness” (1 Timothy 1:12). Perhaps some of the older men in Ephesus had other ideas on how things should be run. The same word *paragello* is also used later (1 Timothy 6:17) where Timothy was instructed to command those who are rich not to be haughty or arrogant.

Ignatius of Antioch (martyred c. 107 AD) wrote³ very similar words to the Church in Magnesia, reminding them that the honor paid to the Bishop is actually paid to God the Father.

“And it is fitting for you not to take advantage of the bishop’s youth (cf. 1 Timothy 4:12), but to render him full respect in accordance with the power of God the Father, just as I know that the holy presbyters have not presumed upon his youthful external appearance but, as men wise in God, yield to him – not to him but to the Father of Jesus Christ, to the bishop of all. For the honor of him who loved us, it is fitting for us to obey without any hypocrisy; for a man does not deceive only this visible bishop but also cheats the invisible one. The reckoning of this account is not with flesh but with God, who knows men’s secrets”. For more discussion on this topic, see the special Feast Day for Hierarchs.

Ignatius also wrote that the purpose of the Bishops is the purpose of the Lord Jesus; subjecting oneself to the Bishops represents living not in human fashion.

“For Jesus Christ, our inseparable life, is the expressed purpose⁴ of the Father, just as the bishops who have been appointed throughout the world exist by the purpose of Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 3:2). “For when you subject⁵ yourselves to the bishop as to Jesus Christ, you appear to me to be living not in human fashion but like Jesus Christ, who died for us so that by believing in His death you might escape dying” (Trallians 2:1).

If these are hard words for people of the 21st Century to consider, Ignatius goes on⁶ with more:

“Similarly all are to respect the deacons as Jesus Christ and the bishop as a copy of the Father and the presbyters as the Council of God and the band of Apostles. For apart from these no group can be called a Church. I am convinced you accept this. For I have received an embodiment of your love, and have it with

¹ “Command” is the Greek word *paragello*; “teach” is the Greek word *didasko*.

² The same word *paragello*, is also used in 1 Timothy 1:3, 1:5, 1:18, 5:7, 6:13, 6:17.

³ Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Magnesians*, III, 1-2.

⁴ Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Ephesians*, III, 2.

⁵ Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Trallians*, II, 1.

⁶ Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Trallians*, III, 1-2.

me, in your bishop, whose demeanor is a great lesson and whose gentleness is his power. I think that even the godless revere him” (Trallians 3:1-2).

Paul particularly instructed Timothy to give attention to the reading, the exhortation and the teaching (Greek: *didaskalia*). The word translated “the reading” (Greek: *anagnosis* meaning knowledge through repetition) is used only two other places in the New Testament (Acts 13:15, 2 Corinthians 3:14). Both other places clearly refer to the Reading of the Scriptures in the synagogues. In addition, following the Reading of the Scriptures, both the Law and the Prophets in Acts 13:15, the synagogue ruler asked Paul if he had a word of exhortation for the people. Thus “give attention to reading, to exhortation, to teaching” (1 Timothy 4:13) is clearly referring to various aspects of the liturgical worship and teaching in the Church in Ephesus. Timothy was evidently gifted in these areas (1 Timothy 4:14-15) and the whole tone of Paul’s letter is encouragement for Timothy to be bold about it.

One might observe that both Paul’s and Ignatius’ letters are rather authoritarian in terms of the bishops’ charge to command and direct the activities of the Church. It is true that democratic principles such as majority rule and checks and balances seem to be missing. Church government is a matter for everyone to discern what the Will of God is and not to focus only on what is the will of the majority. We in the West would do well to pay close attention to the readings from Table II that our culture has not heard much.

Old Testament Instructions on the Role of Bishops

To see where the tradition of the authority of Bishops came from, one needs to look to the Old Testament. For more study on this topic, see the Study on Hierarchs in the Church.

Early Christian tradition applied⁷ the Old Testament instructions for the government of Israel to the Bishops of the Church. The Bishops were the shepherds of the Lord’s flock and they needed to take this matter seriously to provide proper care for the people of God, and the Bishops will be judged on what they have done about this at Judgment Day. The Bishop needs to truly love his flock, when he does so, the people will love him in return. He needs to actively seek out the lost sheep; in doing this, the Bishop will become a source of healing and mercy for the lost. In all this, nothing is mentioned about any efforts for the Bishop to attempt to convert wolves into sheep.

General Instructions to the Bishops

“Let the Bishop extend his concern to all sorts of people: to those who have not offended, that they may continue innocent; to those who offend, that they may repent. To the Bishop does the Lord speak, ‘Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones’ (Matthew 18:10). It is the duty of the Bishop to give remission to the penitent. As soon as anyone who has offended says, in the sincerity of his soul, ‘I have sinned against the Lord’ the Holy Spirit answers, ‘The Lord has put away your sin; you shall not die’ (2 Samuel 12:13). Be sensible, O Bishop, of the dignity of your place, that as you have received the power of binding, so you also have received that of loosing. Having therefore the power of loosing, know yourself, and behave yourself in this world as becomes

⁷ Roberts and Donaldson, ed., “Constitutions of the Holy Apostles”, II, iii, 18-20 in Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume 7.

your place, being aware that you have a great account to give. ‘For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required’ (Luke 12:48). No man is free from sin, excepting Him that was made man for us. It is written, ‘Who shall be pure from uncleanness? Not even one; even if his life should be but one day upon the earth’ (Job 14:4 LXX). On this account the lives and conduct of the ancient holy men and patriarchs are described; not that we may reproach them from our reading, but that we ourselves may repent, and have hope that we also shall obtain forgiveness. Their blemishes are to us both security and admonition, because we learn from them when we have offended, that if we repent we shall have pardon. It is written, ‘Who can boast that he has a pure heart? Who dares affirm that he is pure from sin?’ (Proverbs 20:9 LXX) No man is without sin. Do you labor to the utmost of your power to be blameless, inquiring about all the parts of your flock, lest anyone is outraged on your account, and thereby perishes? The layman asks only for himself, but the Bishop speak for everyone, as having a greater burden, and carrying a heavier load. It is written, ‘The Lord spoke to Aaron, saying, you and your sons and your father’s house shall bear the sins of the holy things, and you and your sons shall bear the iniquity of your priesthood’ (Numbers 18:1 LXX). Since the Bishop has to give an account for everyone, take care of everyone. Preserve those that are sound, admonish those that sin; and when you have afflicted them with fasting, give them ease by remission. When the offender begs the Bishop with tears for readmission, receive him, and let the whole Church pray for him. When you have admitted him by imposition of your hand, give him permission to remain in the flock. But for the lethargic and the careless, endeavor to convert, confirm, warn and cure them, understanding how great a reward you shall have for doing so, and how great danger you will incur if you are negligent.”

Ezekiel Speaks to the Bishops

“Ezekiel speaks to those overseers who don’t take care of the people. ‘Thus says the Lord God; O shepherds of Israel, do shepherds feed themselves? Do not the shepherds feed the sheep? Behold, you feed on the milk, and clothe yourselves with the wool, and slay the fat; but you don’t feed My sheep. The weak ones you have not strengthened, the sick you have not cherished, the bruised you have not bound up, the stray one you have not turned back, the lost you have not sought; and the strong you have worn out with labor. My sheep were scattered, because there were no shepherds; they became food to all the wild beasts of the field’ (Ezekiel 34:2-5). And again, ‘The shepherds did not search for My sheep; the shepherds fed themselves, but they did not feed My sheep’ (Ezekiel 34:8). A little later, ‘Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require My sheep at their hands, and cause them to cease from feeding My sheep. The shepherds shall not feed themselves any more; and I will deliver My sheep out of their mouth, and the sheep shall no longer be food for them’ (Ezekiel 34:10). He also adds, speaking to the people, ‘Behold, I will judge between sheep and sheep, and between rams and rams. Is it not enough for you that you fed on the good pasture, that you trampled with your feet the remnant of your pasture? You drank the standing water; you disturbed the residue with your feet? So My sheep fed on that which you had trampled with your feet!’ (Ezekiel 34:17-19) A little later He

adds, ‘They shall know that I am the Lord their God, and they are My people. O house of Israel, you are the sheep of My flock, and I am the Lord your God’” (Ezekiel 30-31).

“Listen Bishops; pay attention, you of the laity, how God speaks: ‘I will judge between ram and ram, and between sheep and sheep’. He says to the shepherds, ‘You shall be judged for your lack of skill, and for destroying the sheep’. That is, I will judge between one Bishop and another, between one lay person and another, and between one ruler and another. What this means is that a lay person might say, I am a sheep and not a shepherd; I am not concerned about myself. Let the shepherd pay attention to that, for he alone will be required to give an account for me. However, just as the sheep that will not follow its good shepherd is exposed to the wolves to its destruction; so that sheep who follows a bad shepherd is also exposed to unavoidable death, since his bad shepherd will devour him. We must take care to avoid destructive shepherds.”

The Love of the Bishop

“As to a good shepherd, let the lay person honor him, love him, reverence him as his Lord, as his master, as the high priest of God, as a teacher of piety. He that hears the Bishop, hears Christ; and he that rejects him, rejects Christ; and he who does not receive Christ, does not receive His God and Father (Luke 10:16). In like manner, let the Bishop love the laity as his own children, fostering and cherishing them with affectionate diligence, like a bird cherishes her eggs, in order to hatch young ones. Let him admonish all men; reproving all who stand in need of reproof; reproving, but not striking; putting down arrogance, but not overthrowing them; warning them to assist their conversion; chiding them to affect their reformation and better course of life. Let the Bishop watch the strong; that is, keeping him firm in the faith that is already strong; feeding the people peacefully. Let him strengthen the weak, confirming with exhortation that which is tempted; healing that which is sick, curing by instruction that which is weak in the faith through doubtfulness of mind. Let him bind up that which is broken, binding up by comfortable admonitions that which is gone astray, wounded, bruised, or broken by their sins. By doing this he will give hope, restoring it in strength to the Church, bringing it back into the flock. Let the Bishop bring back that which is driven away; that is, not permitting that which is in its sins, and is cast out by way of punishment, to continue excluded. Let him receive it, and bring it back, restoring it to the flock, to the people of the undefiled Church. Let him seek for that which is lost; the Bishop should not allow anyone to perish, even if they desponds of their salvation, because of the multitude of its offenses. Let him search for that which has grown sleepy, drowsy, and sluggish, and that which is not mindful of its own life, through the depth of its sleep. People who have drifted to a great distance from their own flock, may be in danger of falling among the wolves, and being devoured by them. Let the Bishop bring them back by admonition, exhorting them to be watchful; let him insinuate hope, not permitting it to say that which was said by some: ‘Our errors and our lawlessness are upon us, and we waste away in them. So how can we then live?’ (Ezekiel 33:10) As far as possible, let the Bishop make the offense his own, and say to the sinner, ‘If you will only return, I will undertake to suffer death for you, as our

Lord suffered death for me, and for all men'. 'The good shepherd gives his life for the sheep. But a hireling, he who is not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming, that is, the devil, and he leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them'" (John 10:11-12).

The Mercy of the Bishop

"We know that God is very merciful to those who have offended, and has promised to accept our repentance. But he who has offended, who is unacquainted with this promise of God concerning repentance, who does not understand His long-suffering and forbearance, and who is ignorant of the Holy Scriptures, inasmuch as he has never learned them from you, perishes through his folly. Like a compassionate shepherd, and a diligent feeder of the flock, search out, and keep an account of your flock. Seek what is straying (Matthew 18:12); as the Lord God our gracious Father has sent His own Son, the good Shepherd, our Master Jesus. He has commanded Him, 'Leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost until you find it. And when He has found it, he lays *it* on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together *his* friends and neighbors, saying to them, Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!' (Luke 15:4-6). In like manner, be obedient, O Bishop, and seek that which was lost, guide that which has wandered out of the right way, bring back that which is gone astray. You have authority to bring them back, and to deliver those that are broken-hearted by remission. Through you our Savior says to him who is discouraged under the sense of his sins, 'Your sins are forgiven' (Luke 5:20); your faith has made you well. Go in peace, and be healed of your affliction' (Mark 5:34). This peace is the Church of Christ, into which you restore them, when you have loosed them from their sins, as now being sound and blameless, of good hope, diligent, laborious in good works. As a skillful and compassionate physician, heal all who have wandered in the ways of sin; for 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick' (Matthew 9:12); and the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost' (Luke 19:10). Since you are a physician in the Lord's Church, provide remedies suitable to every patient's case. Heal them by all means possible; restore them sound to the Church. Feed the flock, 'not with insolence and contempt, as lording it over them' (Matthew 20:25, Ezekiel 34:4 loosely) but as a gentle shepherd, 'gathering the lambs into your bosom, and gently leading those which are with young'" (Isaiah 40:11 LXX).