

The Pastoral Wisdom of John Calvin

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“Do not rebuke an older man, but exhort him as a father, the younger men as brothers, the older women as mothers, the younger as sisters, with all purity. Honor widows who are really widows” (1 Timothy 5:1-3).

We know there are very few that can abide to be rebuked, though they have done amiss, and feel themselves faulty. For first of all we are proud, and that hinders the most part of us from submitting ourselves to correction: and then, we have a foolish kind of shamefacedness, so that we had rather abide still in our sins than to be told of them, to the end we might beware of them.

For this cause it is requisite, for him that must reprove sinners, to have some moderation and modesty in him, that he may somewhat sweeten his reprovng and rebuking of them, which otherwise might seem sharp and bitter. As we see Physicians used to do, when they will give a sick man some drink, they will sweeten it, because the medicine of itself is unpleasant, and therefore they mix some sugar or syrup with it. So is it profitable, by reason of that resistance which I spoke of—if we will do good in warning them that have done amiss—to use some gentle and meek kind of dealing. And this is especially requisite toward old men who are more forward and hard to rule. For they think they have lived long enough in the world to know what is good, and would exempt themselves from all rebuke, under a pretense or color of their age, although they have more need than others, inasmuch as when an old man gives himself to do evil, it is less to be suffered a good deal, then in a young man. But yet old folks are not very patient to be corrected. And therefore we must go wisely to work with them, to the end that they may take our correction well in worth, and we must sweeten it, so that they may abide it, and profit by it. And therefore Saint Paul says to Timothy in this place, that he must not deal roughly with old folks, but exhort them as fathers and mothers. For we have seen indeed that Timothy was a young man, therefore they that should be rebuked of him might perhaps reply and say, that he was yet to uppish to handle them so rudely.

Therefore Saint Paul uses such means as he knows to be fitting. And so we see by this, that he that has the charge to preach the Word of God, must not only expound the holy Scripture generally, and reprove vices, and rebuke those who have done amiss, but also deal wisely and discretely with every one: yea, so wisely that the doctrine which he preaches may be well received of them, or if not that at the least, it would not be not through his fault. For it may fall out very well, that when a man has done what he can, he shall find notwithstanding that some will be strong and stubborn against such warnings as he gives them, though they are sweet and gracious. But this is not of his fault. Yet notwithstanding (as I said before), we that have charge to teach the people must not only see what is profitable for all in general, but we must also have this regard, to deal with every one according to his age.

But we must emphasize here with the rest, that it is not enough for a man who is a shepherd in the Church of God to preach, and cast abroad the word into the air. We must have private admonitions also. This is a point wherein many deceive themselves. For they think that the order of the Church was made for no other end and purpose but that they should come to Church one hour in the week, or certain days, and there hear a man speak, and that when he is come out of the pulpit, he should hold his peace. They that think in this way clearly show that they never knew either what Christianity is, or what God’s order meant.

For as we see in this place, and it has been shown to us already before, when he that preached the word has taught the people, he must have an eye to them that have need to be warned of their faults ‘a parte’: as we see also, that in Ezekiel it is not only said that God has set the Shepherd to lead his flock out to feeding, but his office is to help the weak, and to heal the

sick, and to remedy all infirmities that are among them. And therefore if we will do our duty toward God, and to them that are committed to our charge, it is not enough for us to offer the doctrine generally, but when we see any of them go astray, we must labor to bring him to the right way, when we see another in grief and sorrow, we must go about to comfort him, [and] when we see any that is dull of the spur, we must prick him and spur him, as his nature will bear. This is what we have to note in this place.

But yet we must consider also, that St. Paul will not have us bear with old folks so far as to nourish them in their sins: for if they have need to be told of their faults we must do it. True it is, that they would gladly be spared, and be touched in no way. But we see what order God takes by St. Paul's mouth, namely, that we must always reprove faults both in young and old, and not foster them by flattery, that men may not be privileged [or held to be immune] from correction, and discipline. Whatsoever they can say for themselves, we must beware of this only, that they become not too fat. And especially when we see an old man, we must yet honor age, and use as much sweetness and gentleness as we can. Of course this truth is to be understood of them that are not utterly past correction. For if an old man is hardened in evil, and will play the rebel too bad against God, then must we deal vehemently and sharply with him: but yet before we have tried him, we must use this modesty that St. Paul sets down here, that is, we must exhort them as fathers, although they have done amiss. And it is certain that when he that must tell an old man of his fault, which he has committed, if he [will] set the person of a father before his eyes, he will use reverence and modesty in reprovng him. And therefore St. Paul says in express terms that God presented the Elders to us, as our Fathers, and will have us to have that regard to them. And this is the first point we have to note.

As for those that are equal in years to us, St. Paul will have us take them as brothers and sisters. And this all serves to cause us to use gentleness, that we be not too rigorous against them: as also brothers and sisters must be gracious one towards the other, for so nature itself has appointed. For this cause therefore, when the age is equal St. Paul will have—as it were—a brotherliness used, and therefore that we use gentle admonitions that none may be offended, unless he will be stubbornly obstinate and fall into rage, as we showed already before, that there are a number that do so, however we conduct ourselves in reprovng them so that we can never win them. For they harden themselves against God, and will not abide to be found fault with. Such men, therefore, will never profit, though we are ever so gentle and loving in dealing [with them]. And why so? The Devil possesses them. They become fat in all bitterness. They have the sharpness of spirit that the scripture speaks of, to poison themselves against God, and to refute all good warnings. We see a number whom the Devil has so marred that there is no means nor way to bring them to good. But if a man be not yet wholly hardened in his sins, and someone bring him a well seasoned medicine, it is certain it will make him bow and soften his courage.

And thus we see in few words what St. Paul's meaning is in this place. For though we speak to them who have the charge of teaching, showing them what their office is toward their people, yet notwithstanding, this admonition belongs to all. For if we are gently dealt with when we have done amiss—and feel that we are brotherly handled, and that they seek our salvation— if we should play the rebels we would not show that unkindness to a mortal man, but to God who we despise, and grieve his Holy Spirit as much as lies in us. And why so? Because we see that God has appointed this means, to the end that we should profit in his doctrine and not be hardened in our sins. He will not have our sins covered, and lie hidden so that they may not be known, nor found fault with. Therefore God will not have men use such flattering—for that engenders rottenness that can never be healed—but will have sins reprovng. He will have us beat down: yea, though sins be lovingly, and leniently reprovng, yet if we cannot abide such loving admonitions when they are made us, this is not to despise men, but to make war against God. It is this that we must bear away. And if this were well marked we should see another obedience than we do. For no man can now abide to have his fault told him, but as soon as a man opens his mouth to reprove some one, then begins an open war! Then shall we have deadly hatred! And why is it so? Because we consider not, that to refuse the admonitions that are given us in God's name, and by his commandment, is to refuse God.

And therefore we must mark this place so much the more, where we are told, that God will not have sins nourished by dissembling as though we see them not, but that we must be corrected gently and modestly.

And we have yet another point to gather out of this place, namely, that as we are all commanded to reprove and rebuke our neighbors, so we follow the rule which is contained here, that because all correction is sharp and loathsome, we moderate it and sweeten it the best we can, that it may be the better received, and profit more. When St. Paul willed Timothy to do this, with all pureness as touching the young women, he does not mean that Timothy should abstain from all dissolute manners (for he was a man of great holiness). Instead, his meaning was to prevent such suspicions as might arise because the world is wicked. As soon as one sees a man speak with a young woman—although it be for her salvation—right away men talk of it, and murmur. And therefore St. Paul seeing that Timothy might be subject to false reports, warns him to be wise and circumspect in this matter, and if he must needs have conference with young women to warn them of their duty, that he do it with such fear and reverence that the mouths of the wicked may be stopped, that the weak be not offended, and that they may conceive no evil opinion to trouble them. And this is a place well worth noticing. For we know that the Devil seeks nothing, but to bring the word of God into hatred, and uses such craft especially to hinder us, that we may not do our duties which God has committed to us. If it lay in him, we should never have sermon nor doctrine: and seeing he cannot bring that to pass, he would gladly [have it] that when we go up into the Pulpit our sermons should be as the playing upon organs, that we should preach such doctrine that no man might be touched, but go home as he came. As we see these scoffers and profane vagabonds they would that all were brought to confusion. What preaching is it, I beseech you, that they would have? That the doctrine might hang in suspense, and be like a flint, as Ezekiel makes the comparison, that we might hear no others words but these, ‘Oh, he preached very well, Oh, that was a good sermon.’ And how? Without any profit, or edifying the hearers. And yet this is it that a great number seek nowadays. And this proverb, ‘To preach according to the text,’ imports nothing else but this, that the word of God must have no use nor virtue among us, but as it were in closets, and not be enlightened of God. But it is said, on the contrary side, that the word of God must be a two-edged sword, [and that] there be neither marrow nor bone, nor thoughts, nor affections, but all must be sought and fetched to the bottom. God must make a trial, and as it were a cutting up of all the parts of our souls: and moreover, as it is said in another text, that the office of the word of God is to search us even to the bottom, and to bring to light the things that we would have hid: as also it is said, that as it is God that sounds out the heart, and that the matter belongs to him, so will he also that the virtue be in his word. So then seeing it is the craft of Satan to prevent and hinder us from preaching the word of God freely, when he can do no worse he finds out these false reports. Yes, and how so? Under color of admonishing and reprovng a preacher has liberty to say this and that: moreover a preacher has liberty to go into houses. And so other things which a man might allege. Therefore St. Paul wants us to be wise and to prevent these murmurings, and all other things that might bring the doctrine into hatred which we preach. And therefore, let them that would profit the Church, take good heed to give no occasion either to the weak or to the malicious to be offended, or to speak evil and blame them when they do their duty.

And therefore St. Paul gives order to Timothy when he speaks to young women. He uses such gravity with himself, that no man may conceive any evil suspicion, but be bridled, and that the word of God be not subject to mockery by that means. Now if Timothy had need of such an admonition, what shall we say of ourselves who have come to nothing near to being such good scholars as he was, especially in such an exercise? And therefore, let us learn to take heed ourselves, and to abstain from all talk, and all countenances: and whatever things might engender any murmuring so that they that who would speak evil of us might be ashamed, and when the matter and truth shall be examined, it may be found that they are impudent and past shame in inventing and forging such slanderous reports.

This is what we have to mark. But still every one of us must apply this admonition to himself: for St. Paul shows us how we must behave ourselves among men, that is to say, in such a way

that neither our words, nor our countenances, may breed any evil suspicion. If this were well marked we should not see such liberty as there is, and so consequently, there would not be so many stumbling blocks among us as there are. But there are very few that think upon this that is said in this text. That every one must edify his neighbor in that which is good. For St. Paul shows us there, that we must not be given to ourselves, none of us ought to please himself in contenting his own person, but seeing God has made us bound one to another that we see that we do our duty to our neighbors. In what manner? To edify them in that which is good, says St. Paul. But there are very few that practice this lesson, nay rather every man gives himself the bridle. If we see a man offended by us, we shall hear right away. 'Well, it is all one to me, I did it not for any evil, let them be offended if they will.' Yes, but we should abstain from all appearance of evil. For it is not enough for us that our conscience be pure before God, unless we take away all evil occasion before men, as we are debtors to them. So then let us walk in such an honest way that no man may suspect any evil of us. And though St. Paul direct his talk to Timothy, we know that it belongs to all the faithful, and that every one of us ought to make his profit of it, according to the place and charge wherein God has set him.

Moreover, after St. Paul has shown how Timothy ought to govern himself, warning them that have done amiss, he adds another lesson touching widows, saying: *Honor those that are widows indeed*. Now this word 'Honor,' has a significant import, namely, that he should have care to take them into his charge and—as it were—his protection. And this is said expressly, because the widows which were now old (as we shall see presently) were received—as it were—into a hospital, and found there. Truth it is that they worked notwithstanding, but if they wanted anything, they had it supplied by alms, and they also served to see to the sick; to be brief, they that were widows gave themselves wholly to serve the Church, and were as public persons, and had also a name that they were called deacons. For as men served to distribute the alms, and to gather them, the widows were to help the sick and to play the housewives amongst the poor, which were also kept up by alms. And because the widows that were thus received were in some honor (for they were consecrated to God), St. Paul says precisely to Timothy that he should honor them that are widows indeed! By this word 'indeed' he means that he must not receive all widows, as it shall be shown hereafter, as the text indicates. If a widow, says he, has children, let her keep her house, and let the children learn with the widows to do their duty, and to do the like for them that have begotten them: for this is good and acceptable before God. And after St. Paul shows more clearly, what widows must be received to this place, to wit, they that are comfortless, and have no help on their side, they must be received and nourished. But yet they also must employ themselves to serve the poor: and yet beside all this, though there be a widow that is comfortless, St. Paul will have her to wait upon God and trust in him: for this is to keep the widows under, when they are received into the church, that if they put their trust in God in this way, they shall not be carried away with the world. And, again, he will have them continue in prayer both day and night. This is, in few words, St. Paul's meaning in this place. For—though we must speak more at large of these things hereafter (I mean, of the order of widows and of the policy that was in the old church)—yet, notwithstanding we have to note presently that there was in those days what we do not now have. Truth it is that there are some hospitals among the Christians, but it is so slender a thing, that it is pitiful to behold. And yet, if we should compare our time with that which St. Paul speaks of, have we not better occasion, I ask you, to maintain this order which he appoints and sets down here than they had in those days? For the poor Christians were persecuted—they had the knife always upon their throat—they were always set out to the spoil—they were poor vagabonds, as it were, having nothing certain. Therefore if we compare the charity that was then, with the charity of these days, we may be greatly ashamed. And yet there are a number that would have the hospitals to be made poorer. They are at not a penny of cost: yet, notwithstanding, they would that it were clean down, it troubles them so much that they think men pluck out their guts out of their bellies when anything is given to nourish the poor! Alas, this is far from offering every day some thing to the poor, as they did in those days. They had neither rents nor possessions—there were no foundations—but they were gladly willing to gather day by day alms to nourish their sick, and poor and widows. Yet God wrought among them and the faithful had such compassion in

them that there was sufficient to help the necessity of them that wanted sustenance. But now, when there are revenues from ancient times, and foundations erected (as they term them), we see nothing but to cut them off, and to take away all from the poor, and snatch the bread as it were out of their mouths, and profane that which was dedicated to God, and which should be held as a holy thing. And they turn it to a use—I will not say other than God had appointed, but—completely contrary to such things. Therefore, as often as we hear speaking of the old order (as St. Paul touches here) they are so many condemnations and processes against us, to make us inexcusable. For when the word of God had its strength, what was the result? There was sufficient to nourish men that were in necessity. There was some policy. There were men that would employ themselves to serve the poor. Others spared not their own property and yet they had not one penny rent. There was not a house to be had upon hire. Thus does God set a looking glass before us, where by we ought to confirm and frame ourselves. But if we look upon ourselves, we shall find the exact opposite: for it seems that we have conspired to do quite otherwise than was then observed in the ancient church.

Is it not as much then, as if God made our process to shame and confound us? There are very few that are touched with it, yet we shall pay well for it, seeing this order is showed to us and we make no account of it; and seeing we are so blockish nowadays, God will awaken us. Yes and we see (and that not far off) that the poor blind wretches, and the enemies of the truth, condemn us, and God does us this shame, to make *them* our judges. When the papists have no fault to find with us for our doctrine, what will they say, but that we have taken the gospel to devour the goods of the Church withal, and to spend all, and to bring all to naught? Why so? Because we are not worthy to be reprov'd by God's mouth, for we will not hear that which is contained in holy writ. Where we are shown our office that we should fulfill we stop our ears, and play deaf men. And therefore God sends us to the unbelievers, to the end that we should be condemned to our greater shame. It is this in few words that we have to mark in this text: and not only to tarry as we are, but to sigh and lament, that these faults may be remedied, that are not to be borne with. But we must mark, touching these widows that they were partly taken to be nourished—if they had nothing—and partly to employ themselves to the service of the poor. And because in applying themselves to this, they were common servants of the Church, this state was holy and honorable. And therefore we must mark this first of all, that we may understand what St. Paul says, and also that we may make our profit of it. And surely it is very requisite that we should be put in mind of these things, because Satan (as he is an ape that always counterfeits God's works) has made a new fashion, and this by disguising that which God appointed. But he took his cloak from this that St. Paul says in this place, although there be as great difference between them as is between the day and the night. For the Nuns of hospitals came from this that is said here. But St. Paul takes order in plain terms that no widows be received before the age of three score years, and has been once married, as we shall see. And seeing it is so, that St. Paul had this regard, it is clearly against what the ignorant and unskillful appointed, and is at this day observed among the Papists. And therefore I said that it was requisite for us to be armed, seeing that we know St. Paul's meaning, to apply this which is here spoken of to our instruction and learning.

Now let us come to that lesson which he gives Timothy. "Honor" he says, "the widows that are widows indeed." We see what his meaning is here: that we examine and try a man well when we mind and purpose to put him in an office; and it is a point well worth the marking for states and offices all be it that they conceive the policy of men, yet ought they be dedicated to God. Why? Because he is the chief master and therefore ought all to be referred to him. When a prince will set his house in order he has a master to appoint the officers. But God, because he will hearten us the better to serve him, does not only appoint a great master here beneath, but has a care himself of all the offices that are in his Church. And therefore let us mark that when we have to employ any man in any office, and choose him to it, we must examine him, else we profane the place we set him in. And this injury is not done to creatures, it is done to God himself. And what does St. Paul speak of here? Even of the provision of widows, which (as we said before) must serve to see to the sick and therefore were supported by alms. Now if Timothy was warned that he should not take all widows that might be presented—yea and such as were not worthy to be received to this office—if we look

upon this calling according to the outward appearance the matter is not great: what shall we think then of offices that are far more excellent? When the case stands so that there is a minister to be chosen to preach the word of God what care and what wisdom I pray you is to be used, that the place of truth be not profaned? For (as we saw before) the rule and government of God's house is committed to us, and therein we bear the message of salvation to men, the treasure of this great mystery is given us to keep, namely, that God is manifested among men. Therefore when the question is one of choosing pastors, must we not, I pray you, use far greater wisdom than is here required touching widows? And therefore let us take good heed in this case. For if any of us would have a servant, he will seek a fit one as near as he can, and such a one as is meet for him, and if there be any great evil fault in him, all the world shall not persuade him to take him. Is he a drunkard? I will never trouble myself with him! Is he thought to be a thief? Is he a loiterer? Is he a telltale? We are wise enough to beware of those faults which may hurt or damage us by any means! We are discerning enough to our own profit and therefore we would never take a worthless servant into our house. In like sort, if a man would have a herd of beasts he would gladly have a diligent fellow, and honest too. But if a man should choose a schoolmaster for his children, it fares so oftentimes that he would be less careful in that case, than in choosing a herder to see to his beasts! And what is the cause of it? A beastly blindness that men are possessed with.

But let us go further yet. If there be any question of choosing men that must rule in the execution of justice, and govern in God's name, not only little children, but the elder and greater sort, what order is taken therein? We think not much upon it, as we daily see before our eyes, and the case is to be lamented. It is evident that God is dishonored by profaning that which he had sanctified for our salvation. For nowadays it is made a jest and matter of sport, to put men in an office. There is nothing regarded but the ceremony only and the outward show, as though they should play a play. And not this only, but it seems that men seek occasion to provoke God's anger and vengeance by putting men in place that are chosen for the veriest villains and scoundrels they are. And thus the matter goes in our elections! To be short, there is no question nowadays to have offices honored and revered, there is nothing but heaving and shoving for them. And what manner of men? Such as are utterly worthless, and have not so much as a show of honesty. For the best and readiest way to promotion and to be preferred, is to be an open enemy and at defiance with God, to be given to all kind of wickedness, to show themselves bolsterers and maintainers of all perverse quarrels, to seek nothing but to bring all to naught. These are the men that shall—and do—come to credit and authority. And therefore it behooves us to note this place so much the more: yea, and we have need of this admonition this day, for the election of them draws nigh, that must be established in the government of this commonwealth!

But, I pray you, how do you proceed in this election (for I must not wait till next Sunday to tell you a thing that is very well known)? When there is question of electing the magistrates you should be here to call upon God, that he would be president in your counsel, and give you the spirit of wisdom and uprightness. But for all that where are you? You are either at the tavern, or at play, and they that have voices to choose come less to sermons than all others. True it is that you shall see them come more upon other days than upon this, and yet they will be first at the general council, and their voices shall be loudest of all, although they never showed any token of Christianity in all their lives. And yet will they then show the greatest disorder, and behave themselves worst. For upon such a day a man shall see them come with most bold and impudent faces, and will flock together in companies, as if they would make their masters! Instead of being there to call upon God's name, and to look into themselves, they come from a tippling house. They should think thus with themselves: 'We have this day to choose men to govern us in God's name, and we may not choose them after our own fantasy, because they must sit as rulers here in the authority of God. Let us take heed that we set none to govern in such sort, that God may be served and have always his sovereign honor and empire, and that both small and great may do him homage.' Again, every man for his part ought to think thus: 'Well, I must choose a man that shall have power over my life, he must execute justice and if all things be well ordered, every man shall have his own— especially if it please God to keep us under his protection and shadow of justice—and suffer us not to be as

wild and savage beasts.' Thus, I say, men ought to think. But do they? No, No! And therefore they shall be recompensed accordingly.

To be short, although the matter deserves to be handled more at large, let us remember this, and bear it away, that when there are any to be placed in office that God has appointed in the Church for the profit of the whole, we must examine them: and if we do not do so, but profane the things that are holy, and despise God, we know that this confusion shall come upon the heads of those that have by favor and bribery, or any other regard, put up such as they thought good and as their fantasy led them. And therefore, when there is any question of setting order in God's house, let us learn to behave ourselves in such sort that no office be dishonored by base and wicked men, or such as are unworthy of the honor that is sought by them. For if this is to be observed in the least offices (as St. Paul shows us in this text) we must have greater care and wariness when we come to the greater. And if we do so it is certain that God will bless us, and show that he rules among us and gives his Holy Spirit to them that are put in office, to lead them to do their duty. And so we shall feel his virtue to be such in us that every one of us shall have occasion to rejoice on his own behalf, and all in general to give thanks to this good God for providing so well for us. But if we will go on to do as we have begun, namely, to strive to set confusion in the church of God, he will show us that he can easily depart from us, as it pleased him for a season to sit and rule among us. For if his glory departed from the temple of Jerusalem— as the prophet Ezekiel shows us—and the temple which he called his house and his everlasting rest became void of his grace and so was made profane place, let us mark that if in this day we cannot abide to have God rule among us, and give us men to rule in his fear, but will have disordered persons that care not much either for God or our salvation, he can give us our desires. But it shall be to show us that we are not worthy to be governed by him. And when he has so forsaken us what shall become of us?

Therefore let us take good heed to ourselves, and pray to God, that it would please him to raise us up men that have his Holy Spirit given them, and with wisdom have love and affection to govern us in such a manner that all be referred to him, and cause especially that he may be served and honored among us.

Prayer: Now let us fall down before the face of our God, confessing our faults and beseeching him that it wuld please him to forgive us these faults, and to put out the remembrance of them, and henceforth reform us in such sort that we desire nothing but to frame ourselves h=wholly to his holy commandments. And thus let us say: "Our Father...etc."