

What is the essence of true religion? The Bible gives more than one answer to this question, or at least it expresses the same answer in several different ways. The prophet Micah said that the Lord requires you “to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). Jesus said that the two greatest commandments are to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and to love your neighbour as yourself (Mathew 22:37-40). The apostle James said something a little different, or maybe he said the same thing and made it more specific: “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (James 1:27). Caring for women who are alone in the world is one of the best ways to honour God and love your neighbour. It is Christianity at its finest. Taking care of widows is pure and faultless religion.

This is why Paul’s letter to Timothy contains such extensive teaching about widows. As we saw a few weeks ago when we looked at verses 1-8 of 1 Timothy 5, Paul has already explained what makes a widow truly a widow (5:3, 5-6), and has commended true widows to the ministry of prayer (5:5). He has also commanded Christians to provide for their own relatives (5:4, 7-8). In the verses we come to this morning (vv.9-16), Paul explains how the church should treat the widows left to its care. Apparently, the early church was systematic about doing this, because in v.9 Paul refers to a “list of widows”. What was this list for? Certainly to make sure that Christian widows received their daily bread. Widows were registered so that they could be helped. It is the duty of the church to “help those widows who are really in need” (v.16). The model for this was the first church in Jerusalem, which, you will remember from Acts 6, had organised a daily distribution of food from very early on. A church needs to keep track of its widows - where they live and what they need. One church of which I was a member made sure that every widow living on her own or in a nursing home had a visit each week from a minister or elder.

There is another reason for keeping a list of widows, however. These women seem to have had some special ministry in the church. John Calvin argued that the roll of widows was for both support and service. A good example of the position of widows in the early church comes from the ministry of Dorcas in the city of Joppa. Dorcas was exactly the kind of woman Paul goes on to describe in v.10, a woman who was “always doing good and helping the poor” (Acts 9:36).

It is clear from the account of Dorcas in Acts 9 that widows had a distinctive identity within the early church. There were large numbers of them, and by the third century they formed an official order in the church. The widows “gave themselves to prayer, nursed the sick, cared for the orphans, visited Christians in prison, evangelized pagan women, and taught female converts in preparation for their baptism” (John Stott). By the Middle Ages, however, few if any churches followed the guidelines given in 1 Timothy 5. Doubtless one reason why the contemporary church is so confused about the role of women is that this pattern for women’s ministry has been neglected, or even forgotten altogether.

#### 1. Widows Who Belong on the List vv.9-10)

The main reason for thinking that these widows must have been active in some form of Christian ministry is the way they are described: “No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over sixty, has been faithful to her husband, and is well known for her good deeds, such as bringing up children, showing hospitality, washing the feet of the saints, helping those in trouble and devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds” (vv.9-10). These qualifications would seem overly strict if a widow had to meet all of them before she could get any help from the church. Perhaps they make better sense as qualifications for women to serve in some form of ministry in the church.

(1 Timothy 5:9-16; 1 Corinthians 7:1-9; 32-35 and 39-40)

Three requirements are given. First, maturity, or seniority. Why must the widow be at least sixty? In the ancient world sixty was sometimes viewed as the age at which a person reached full maturity. As one commentator has said, "Sixty was the recognized age in antiquity when one became an "old" man or woman, and a woman's sexual passions might be deemed to have lost their dangers then". Presumably, women under the age of sixty could work to support themselves, or else remarry.

The second requirement to be enrolled as a widow is fidelity. Only a widow who "has been faithful to her husband", who has been the wife of but one husband, is eligible for the list. Part of what prepared her for faithful ministry was a faithful marriage. The third requirement is charity: she must be "well known for her good deeds", which Paul proceeds to list in logical order. He begins with bringing up children, because raising a family is the most important work many Christian women are given to do. But the good work of bringing up children is not limited to a woman's own children. There were many orphans in the ancient world, as there are today, and a godly woman, as she has opportunity, will want to extend God's loving care to them. And maternity leads to hospitality. Once a woman gets her house in order, she is ready to welcome strangers. Hospitality was especially important in the ancient world, where travel was inhospitable, and even dangerous. The first thing a good hostess did for her guests in the ancient world was to remove their sandals and wash their dusty feet. This task was usually performed by slaves, but a widow known for her good deeds would do it herself. Foot washing is a reminder that the godly widow patterns her life after the example of Jesus Christ, who washed his disciples' feet in the Upper Room on the night before his crucifixion. Washing his disciples' feet was an act of great humility and selflessness that pointed forward to the greatest act of humility and selflessness - the pouring out of his life blood for their sins on the cross. But not just for their sins, but for ours - yours and mine- as well.

Finally, a true widow "helps those in trouble and devotes herself to all kinds of good deeds". This list is not meant to be exhaustive. A godly woman is godly in every way. Such good deeds begin at home but then spread all around the community. One of the reasons the church has always been a leader in mercy ministry is that Christian people - especially Christian women - have devoted themselves to all kinds of good deeds.

To take just one example, consider the life and ministry of Elizabeth Fry. In 1813 a woman named Anna Buxton took Fry to visit London's infamous Newgate Prison. When they arrived, the two women were nearly overwhelmed by the miserable conditions. Three hundred women, with their young children, were shut up together in four rooms - without sufficient clothing, sleeping on the floor, in the cold of winter. They were allowed to receive money, and to buy as much intoxicating drink as they liked in the prison. The result was that those four rooms were like dens of wild beasts. The two women did not know what else to do except to kneel down to pray. As they did so, the prisoners gathered around to join them. Elizabeth Fry devoted the last thirty years of her life to sharing the gospel with those women in word and deed. At first, the authorities - the magistrates - tried to stop her, because they thought the situation was hopeless. But Fry persuaded them to let her try. She began by sewing woollen garments for the prisoners. She started a school for their children. She made the women agree not to swear, beg or quarrel. She brought supplies so they could do needlework. Every morning and evening she gathered them for Bible reading and prayer. The whole character of Newgate Prison was radically transformed. When some time later the magistrates visited again the prisoners were sitting quietly at work, and listening to reading, decently dressed, with calm cheerful faces. From this first prison, these plans of helping the female prisoners spread throughout England.

This was only the beginning of Fry's work. Among many other things, she established the first "Nightly Shelter for the Homeless in London". Elizabeth Fry was exactly the kind of woman Paul describes in 1 Timothy 5:10, a woman "devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds". By the time she was sixty, she had a reputation for such works. This is because

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she did not wait until she was sixty to start doing them. Her work in Newgate Prison began when she was in her early thirties. What qualifies a widow to receive support from the church and to perform a service for the church is the work of a lifetime.

Younger women, I encourage you to devote yourselves to all kinds of good deeds. Get involved in ministries to children and young people, mentor teenagers, be hospitable, volunteer to help in schools and hospitals, help with meals and child-minding for mothers who are sick or disadvantaged, care for the homeless, and pray for the work of the church.

## 2. Too Young to Make the List (vv.11-15)

Not every woman made Paul's list. Some were not eligible to serve in public ministry or even to receive financial support. Some did not qualify for help because they had not been faithful to their husbands or active in good works. Or they were too young: "As for younger widows, do not put them on such a list" (v.11). What was Paul's rationale for this restriction? It was based on both biological and religious reasons: "For when their sensual desires overcome their dedication to Christ, they want to marry. Thus they bring judgment on themselves, because they have broken their first pledge" (vv.11-12). Paul is simply referring to a woman's natural sexual desire, which is given by God and finds its proper fulfilment in marital intercourse. He is saying that the natural urge to marry will return to these younger widows, with the very real danger that their natural desires will overrule their religious ones. This happened when these younger widows were so bent on marriage that they were willing to marry even unbelievers. As a result their new marriages would actually lead them away from Christ. In their wilful disobedience in marrying unbelievers (contrary to God's command to Christians, "do not be yoked together with unbelievers", in 2 Corinthians 6:14 and Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 7:39), they have broken their first pledge, literally their first "faith". That is, they have broken their original commitment of faith to Jesus Christ as Lord of their lives, including their married lives. The warning that Paul gives here applies more generally to all single Christians, doesn't it - not just widows. It is possible for the desire to get married to outweigh your desire to serve Christ. Sometimes single Christians are so determined to get married that not even their relationship to Christ can stand in their way. They may put their lives on hold until God provides a spouse (which he might never do, of course). Or they may use poor judgment about dating relationships, even courting unbelievers - and then rush off and marry contrary to God's will. There were young widows like that in the early church, too, and they brought judgment on themselves.

The other danger of putting young widows on the church roll is that they are more likely to waste their time: "Besides, they get into the habit of being idle and going about from house to house. And not only do they become idlers, but also gossips and busybodies, saying things they ought not to" (v.13). These women sound like real social butterflies. Perhaps, in our age, they would be spending all their time on social media in its many different forms. Here the Bible warns against the sin that people often fall into when they have nothing better to do: laziness or idleness. Human beings were created to work. Work is a creation ordinance. This does not mean that every Christian has to work at a paying job, but every Christian must work. People who depend on one form of public welfare or assistance or another need to find something productive to do with their time - either at home or in the community. If nothing else, there is always plenty of volunteer work to do at the church.

Idleness leads to other sins - in this case, gossip. In Ephesus, as such women made their way from house to house they heard all kinds of interesting news, not all of which should have been repeated - but it was! Gossip in all its varieties is a common problem in the church, perhaps especially among Christian women. With technological advances - mobile phones, the internet and social media - you can be a busybody from the privacy of your own home, or your car. It is good for Christians to stay in close touch with one another, of course, but not just to have something juicy to talk about. Instead, intimate

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conversations should be directed toward encouraging and building others up in their faith, helping those in need, sharing the gospel and setting an agenda for prayer. Gossip destroys others, especially in their relationships. At some level, gossip has contributed to nearly every conflict and division in the history of the church.

It is because the sins of idleness and gossip are so destructive that Paul proposes a solution: “So I counsel younger widows to marry, to have children, to manage their homes and to give the enemy no opportunity for slander” (v.14). As a general rule, it is good for young widows not just to devote themselves to the care of their families but to remarry. Clearly Paul was committed to marriage as an institution of God. And, although people in the ancient world commonly believed that it was disloyal for widows to remarry, this is clearly not the biblical view. What Paul says about remarriage in 1 Timothy 5 is fully consistent with what he says about singleness in 1 Corinthians 7: “I wish that all of you were as I am. But each of you has your own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that. Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do. But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion” (vv.7-9). Notice that widows are specifically mentioned as women who might be better off getting married. The single life is a good life, especially when it is devoted to fruitful Christian service (1 Corinthians 7:32-35). Indeed, singleness is Paul’s personal preference for those who are so gifted. But there are many good reasons to get married, among them the danger of sexual temptation. Not only does Paul advise the younger widows to marry but also to have children. Child-bearing is not the only, nor even the primary, purpose of marriage (Genesis 2:17), but it is certainly a natural and significant part of it. In addition, they are to “manage their homes”, indicating that Christian wives have a large sphere of influence and freedom in the area of home-making and child-rearing.

But what happens if these instructions are ignored? Paul wants to make sure that the enemy - the devil - is given no opportunity for slander. Paul is always concerned for the public image of the gospel and the church. Paul’s cautionary words are based on local knowledge, since he continues, “some have in fact already turned away to follow Satan” (v.15). It seems that some widows had done more than just remarry. In their haste they had been willing to marry non-believers, contrary to Christian standards (1 Corinthians 7:39) and so strayed back into Satan’s kingdom in the world.

This whole section of 1 Timothy is mainly intended to make sure that widows get the care they need. So after explaining that some widows do not need any help, Paul closes with a reminder that others need to be helped after all: “If any woman who is a believer has widows in her family, she should help them and not let the church be burdened with them, so that the church can help those widows who are really in need” (v.16). The important thing is for Christians to provide for their relatives. The family is the first line of defence for the poor. The second line of defence for the poor is the church. One of the advantages of belonging to the church of Jesus Christ is always having family to help provide for one’s needs. As I said a few weeks ago when we began looking at chapter 5 of 1 Timothy, in countries like ours where government services for the aged and poor exist, the churches and their families should do what they can to support, in material and caring ways, their needy members. Although 1 Timothy 5:3-16 is, in the first place about widows, it can be applied quite effectively to other groups within the Christian community such as the unemployed, those with disabilities, the homeless and the terminally ill. May the Lord help us to do that in the life and work of our church.

Amen