



Installation of Officers

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

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Lection – 1 Corinthians 16:15-18 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 15) Now, brothers and sisters, you know that members of the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints; (v. 16) I urge you to put yourselves at the service of such people, and of everyone who works and toils with them. (v. 17) I rejoice at the coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus, because they have made up for your absence; (v. 18) for they refreshed my spirit as well as yours. So give recognition to such persons.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

The installation of church officers and other church leaders has become a significant event in the life of many African American churches. Theologically it has signaled the veracity of the biblical claim that “When [Christ] ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people” (Eph. 4:8, NRSV). African American Christians, a historically *captive* people, used their God-given gifts of leadership and service for the Church and for the broader community during and after slavery. In the “Invisible” slave church individuals were recognized informally as leaders within the community based upon personal *charismata*.¹ With the merger of the “Invisible” slave church into the “visible” church after Emancipation in 1865,² more formal recognition and procedures to recognize church leaders were instituted.³

One cannot help but to recognize the historical and communal importance of committed leadership in the African American community. Just as in the “Invisible” church of the slaves, there are still “leaders” within the black church who function without formal recognition. Nevertheless, the African American church does itself no disservice to formally and publicly acknowledge and celebrate those individuals who “devote themselves to the service of the saints” and the community.

The formal installation of officers in African American churches generally emphasizes that those who are elected or appointed, as officers of the church of Jesus Christ, do not enter into such an office lightly, but with sobriety and clarity of purpose, seeking to build up the church and benefit the community in all that they do.

A helpful early liturgical resource written from the black church perspective is Benjamin S. Baker’s Special Occasions in the Black Church.⁴

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: 1 Corinthians 16:15-18

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

Growing up and being nurtured in the black church (National Baptist U.S.A. Inc., denomination) under the pastorates of my paternal grandfather and then after his death (when I was four years old) of my maternal uncle, I was afforded many opportunities to participate in and to experience various aspects of black Baptist church life. I remember my mother serving on the usher board, serving as a nurse and on the kitchen committee. I remember also my eldest sister serving as the church clerk, as a Sunday school teacher and singing in the choir. But I cannot recall any public act or ritual of installation for either of them, although my sister held a *formal church office* as church clerk. Yet both my mother and my sister were certainly “leaders” within the church and devoted themselves to church service. I also recall several deacons and deaconesses serving on the deacon board, but no formal public act of installation was performed to recognize their assumption of the diaconate office.

Reflecting upon my early experience in church and my own service as a junior deacon, member of the choir, service as a youth minister and serving in ministry for over twenty-eight years now, I have had exposure to various pastoral styles and practices. I have discovered, on the one hand, that some “old school” (not just old in age) founding pastors, (like perhaps, my grandfather and uncle), were reluctant about public and ceremonial (formal) acts of “installation” to church offices because of their fear or anxiety that such public acts of acknowledgment would produce private pride and public problems instead of purposeful, productive service.

Also, there can be and has been tension and divisions within congregations concerning the qualifications and/or suitability of, “like-ability” or capability of individuals elected or appointed for church offices.

Despite these concerns, realistic or presumed, regarding the misuse and abuse of church offices, we can be encouraged by Paul's experience with the Corinthian church, which itself was divided over its church "leaders" and the public display of their *charismata*. Paul's example can encourage the contemporary African American church not to deny itself the joy of celebrating its leaders publically in spite of the problems and politics that can sometimes accompany the process. If it is kept in mind that Paul's exhortation to "give recognition to such persons" is qualified by his preceding statement, that said persons "have devoted themselves to...service," then the process of installation and joy of celebration can be heightened instead of hindered.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

The lection for this installation moment (1 Cor. 16:15-18) speaks to this situation and exhorts the church to give due recognition to such persons who have devoted themselves to the service of the church. In his customary letter format, Paul reserves the concluding section of his letter to address the practical matters of his travel plans, special requests, commendations and his final greetings (vv. 1-24).

In verses 15-18 he desires to commend certain individuals before the church (as his letter will later be read publicly before the church at Corinth) who have displayed the kind of leadership, sacrifice, and service that is paradigmatic for the entire community. Such persons should be accorded cooperation and support from the larger church community. This section, then, could adequately be headed, "Appreciation and Commendation of Corinthian Leaders."⁵

Yet, there is perhaps a hidden tension within and behind the commendation that is undoubtedly connected with the issues that prompted part of the writing of Paul's letter anyway (especially chapters 1-4) – tensions and divisions over leaders in the church and the inordinate and exorbitant attachment of certain church member's to their own chosen sage and guide. One would think that given these circumstances of struggle and strife that Paul would commend that the Corinthian church put a moratorium on accolades and recognition of leaders in the church until the matter is fully resolved. But this he does not do. Instead he offers for the consideration of the Corinthian community individuals whose ecclesial commitment and "service to the saints" (v. 15) qualify them for recognition and esteem. Paul's recommendation of Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus (the leaders and emissaries of a certain segment of the church) in the very letter that they are to carry to the entire church, might also reflect some disrespect or lack of cooperation from the community in recognizing the "approved" leadership.⁶ In either case, Paul seeks to correct some of the Corinthians' misplaced attention to the wrong matters.

Yearning also for recognition and proclamation are some lexical items within the text that can further enhance the notion of committed service and honorable leadership. In verses 15-16 Paul speaks personally about *the personal qualities and qualifications* of the household of Stephanas. He describes them as "devoted (*etazen*) to the service (*diakonia*) of the saints." The first italicized term *etazen*, has the related meanings, "to do something with devotion, to give oneself to, with the possible implication of systematic, regular

activity.” Of special note here is that Paul most likely had not *appointed* (another meaning and translation of *etazen*) Stephanas and his household or even Fortunatus and Achaicus to any *diakonia*. Apparently the members of “Stephanas’ household” engaged in a particular “service” (*diakonia*) to the Christian community, but the nature of the service is not specified.⁷

Nevertheless, they spontaneously took this service upon themselves. This is indeed commendable: Stephanas and his household “appointed themselves” or assumed the “systematic and regular activity” (*etazen eautous*) of service to the church.⁸ This is the how the Tyndale translation renders the passage – “They have appointed themselves,” but not to an “office” but to a “service.” The King James Version (KJV) translates the phrase, “they have addicted themselves....,” which can have ambiguous implications in the contemporary moment, but creative interpreters can find positive applications for even the KJV translation.

In verses 17-18 Paul reflects upon arrival of the delegation and *the e/affect that their service and leadership has had upon him and the benefit is has had* for the entire Corinthian community. Paul, most likely in Ephesus at this time, receives word from “Chloe’s people” that there are factions and divisions in the church (1:11). This news troubles him and he is concerned for the community. He was encouraged and *rejoiced*, however, with the arrival of the three-person delegation, which might have brought along with them a letter with certain questions to Paul from the Corinthian community. In the ancient world a letter could serve as a substitution for the actual physical presence of an individual or group. This is the role played by the emissaries: they were a sufficient substitute for the community. (See also Phil. 2:30) Church leaders today might take notice of how their own service and representation of the Church might cause others inside and outside of the Church to rejoice.

Moreover, the commended individuals “refreshed” (*anapauo*) Paul’s spirit (See also 2 Cor. 7:13; Phlm 7, 20). The verb *anapauo* primarily means to “cease” or “cause to rest.” The related meaning, “to refresh,” derives from this: to cause troubles, tension and trials to cease and hence to effect relief and refreshment. Thus the use of this term in the text might suggest that the representatives of the church mitigated some of the tensions that existed based between Paul and the Corinthians, which relieved and refreshed his spirit. Hence, an insightful translator renders the passage: “they *put my spirit and yours* [(pronoun in the plural) referring to the wayward members of the Corinthian church that is] *in a fresh relationship.*”⁹ This is an essential role that spirit-led leaders can play in their service to the church: they can help to keep peace and provide solutions to interpersonal and group conflict. To be sure, the African American church beckons their gifts and participation.

Thus, Paul gives his approval to the church’s public and communal recognition of faithful service in the church. Church leaders are to be recognized with more than casual acknowledgment: the membership is to *give recognition to such people*. The two characteristics of this other-serving, spirit-led leadership are clearly marked in Paul’s commendation: *cooperation* and *hard work*.

Celebration

This text teaches and encourages the church to celebrate and to recognize devoted and committed leadership within the church. There will always be challenges and tensions within the church, but we will not let such matters steal our joy or hinder our celebration of those who are committed and devoted to sincere service to others. Thank God for every sincere servant. We thank God for those who greet us at the door; thank the Lord for those who serve us at the communion table; for those who lead us in giving; for those who serve our seniors; for those who care for our children; and thank you for those who lead in good times and bad. Thank you, Lord, for those who serve.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sounds: The sounds of rejoicing and exclamations of praise (v.17);

Sights: The joy of whole families working and worshipping together. Also of various individuals working communally and cooperatively together, toiling side by side, for the common good (v. 16); and

Smells: A refreshing evening breeze after the heat of a summer day that reinvigorates the body and refreshes the soul (v. 18).

III. Other Material That Preachers and Others Can Use

It is always helpful for the preacher or teacher to have access to a number of diverse resources that speak to and from his or her own cultural experience and those that expose him or her to other cultural and religious expressions. In this regard, I offer the following sources for consideration:

- Massey Jr., Floyd and Samuel Berry McKinney. Church Administration in the Black Perspective. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1976.
- Harris, James H. Pastoral Theology: A Black Church Perspective. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991.
- United Church of Christ Office of Life and Leadership. Book of Worship: United Church of Christ. New York, NY: United Church of Christ Office of Life and Leadership, 1986.
- Maring, Norman H., and Winthrop Hudson. A Baptist Manual of Polity and Practice. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1963.
- Hiscox, Edward. The Hiscox Guide for Baptist Churches. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1964.

Notes

1. The plural from the Greek, “gifts”; *charisma* [singular], “gift.”
2. That is, with the independent churches of some slave communities and those of free blacks in the north.
3. To be sure, some antebellum churches like some of the African Methodist Episcopal Church(es) (AME established in 1816) already had formal policies to govern their churches before emancipation.
4. Baker, Benjamin S. Special Occasions in the Black Church. Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1989.
5. Orr, William F. and Walther, James A. I Corinthians. New York, NY: Doubleday, 1976. p. 362. The Anchor Bible series.
6. Robertson, Archibald and Alfred Plummer. First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians. International Critical Commentary. New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1911. pp. 394-5, 397.
7. The use of *diakonia* here provides no evidence that an office has been formalized in the mid-first-century church. It is not even included in the list of God-appointed persons in 1 Corinthians 12:28.” Orr, William F. and Walther, James A. I Corinthians. p. 363.
8. Same verb used in Acts when the brethren “appointed” (*etazen*) that Paul and Barnabas and others should go to Jerusalem about the question of circumcision (Acts 15: 2). Robertson, Archibald and Alfred Plummer. First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians. p. 395.
9. Orr, William F. and Walther, James A. I Corinthians. p. 362.