



LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, June 8, 2008

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Lection – I Timothy 5: 17-18 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 17) Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching; (v. 18) for the scripture says, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain,” and “The laborer deserves his wages.”

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

The Pastor's Anniversary is a special moment in the life of most African American churches because of the role that pastors have historically and currently play within our community. W.E. B. Du Bois spoke about the black pastor in his classic book, The Souls of Black Folk when he wrote:

“The preacher is the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil.”¹

Du Bois continues his description of the black preacher by saying:

“He early appeared on the plantation and found his function as the healer of the sick, the interpreter of the Unknown, the comforter of the sorrowing, the supernatural avenger of wrong, and the one who rudely but picturesquely expressed the longing, disappointment, and resentment of a stolen and oppressed people. Thus as bard, physician, judge, and priest, within the narrow limits

allowed by the slave system, rose the Negro preacher, and under him the first Afro-American institution, the Negro church.”²

These statements by Du Bois serve two roles for the observance of the Pastor’s Anniversary. First, they set the position of the black pastor in a clear historical framework that is different from the role played by any other religious leader of any other ethnic community in the United States. Second, they make clear that pastors within the African American church are far more than preachers. They are teachers, counselors, political advocates, community organizers, comforters at the hospital bedside, and consolers at the cemetery graveside, all the while realizing that they are ministering to persons birthed in the crucible of oppression who daily still face oppression.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: I Timothy 5: 17-18

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

As I write this commentary, I do so without hesitation. Yes, I know that there are black preachers who do not represent a continuation of the historic role that has been the hallmark of this position for over three-hundred years. Yes, I know that in this era of heightened prosperity theology, there are black preacher/pastors who are more focused on personal enrichment than they are on servant leadership in the roles discussed by Du Bois. However, the average black preacher does not serve for pay, pastoring no more than 200 to 300 members, and many pastors are bi-vocational to make ends meet. So, there needs to be a day when the church pauses to celebrate the Pastor’s Anniversary and it should be a time of great celebration and appreciation.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

I Timothy 5: 17-18 is set in the context of the Apostle Paul reminding a young man named Timothy concerning the role of and the importance of leaders in the life of the Christian church. Much like David attempting to tell his son Solomon what it would take to be an effective king (II Samuel 23: 2-4), what Paul is doing, especially in chapters 3-5 of I Timothy is setting forth what constitutes being an effective minister – elder – pastor in the church.

In the third chapter Paul writes of some of the qualities expected of a leader within the church, whether it be the bishop (ordained clergy), or the deacon (ordained lay leader). For the office of the pastor it includes such things as living a moral life, possessing a gentle spirit, not exhibiting a great interest in money, maintaining an orderly family life, being well thought of by persons outside of the congregation, and being above reproach when it comes to relationships within the congregation.

In the fourth chapter Paul addresses some of the challenges that await anyone who assumes the office of a pastor or minister. These would include the work of safeguarding the faith against false doctrine, the challenge of living a godly life before the people, and

the responsibility of rigorously employing the spiritual gifts that Timothy possessed, and the authority he received from Paul as a result of his ordination.

In the fifth chapter Paul focuses upon church organization and administration. While the issue he discusses is that of the care of widows, the larger issue is being sure that the church is organized so that certain areas of need are met, certain standards are established regarding who should and should be helped, and so that others in the congregation and in the community assume their responsibilities relative to caring for one another. As with the creation of the office of deacons in Acts 6, following the complaint about an unequal distribution of resources between the Palestinian and Greek widows in Jerusalem, Paul is urging Timothy to be sure that these administrative details are properly handled, and to do so without losing sight of those assignments that are uniquely his; especially **preaching and teaching**.

The idea of ruling well, now called administration or governance, should be understood in light of the Greek word *prohistemi* which in a sense means, one who runs or oversees the running of a household. Here, the household is the church. Paul's writings would suggest that the work of governance is just as important, if not more so than the work of preaching. This is an important point to make in black churches where so much attention is given to the "top ten preachers" who have oratorical prowess. While the gift of preaching certainly deserves to be celebrated, the reason we observe the Pastor's Anniversary has just as much, if not more, to do with their equal effectiveness in the work of governance.

The idea of "double honor" is based on the Greek word *time* (pronounced as *tee-may*) which equates to compensation/payment; in short some an additional monetary expression is warranted.³ The word honor does not simply refer to prestige or status within the community. Rather, it implies some compensation above and beyond the norm in recognition of a job well done. This is no small point for two reasons. First, it frees up the church to celebrate those pastors who have done an exemplary job. Second, it challenges those pastors who want to be the beneficiaries of an anniversary observance to be careful to do the work of good governance. It is in response to that level of pastoral effort that an observance of the Pastor's Anniversary should take place.

In verse 18 of the lection scripture Paul refers to a passage from Deuteronomy 25:4 which says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain." Paul uses this same passage in I Corinthians 9:9, and in doing so he makes the point that just as the ox ought to be provided for while it is hard at work for its owner, so too should those who labor well in the service of the Lord be allowed to enjoy some reward for their good work. Paul also uses a statement from Jesus found in Luke 10:7 which concludes with Jesus saying, "for the laborer deserves his wages." When taken together, Paul is not only saying that pastors should be provided for by those among whom they regularly labor, but those who serve especially well should receive "double honor."

Celebration

Thank God for pastors who pour out their hearts, their energy, and their spiritual gifts in service to the Church. The work of black pastors is among the most significant roles played by anyone in the African American community. It is often a relentless, lonely, and overwhelming job that is too often performed for moderate or low pay without a pension. I therefore, joyously honor all pastors for work well done and remind them as an old song says, “Serving the Lord, show will pay off.”

Descriptive Details

Sights: Try to image the sight and sound and exertion of an ox hard at work grinding out the corn that will feed people, a pastor at a hospital bedside, at a cemetery, and standing in support of a family in a court room.

Resources

In addition to the helpful suggestions provided in the Pastor’s Anniversary cultural resource unit, below are two good resources that can be consulted when a pastoral anniversary service is being planned. They are:

Kirk-Duggan, Cheryl A. ed. African American Special Days: 15 Complete Worship Services. Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1996. pp. 67-72.

Baker, Benjamin S. ed. Special Occasions in the Black Church. Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1989. pp. 92-103.

Notes

1. Du Bois, W. E. B. The Souls of Black Folks. 1903. New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 1999. pp. 120, 123.
2. Ibid., p. 144.
3. Johnson, Luke Timothy. “The First and Second Letters to Timothy.” Volume 35 A. The Anchor Bible. New York, NY: Doubleday Press, 2001. pp. 277-278.