

The Colour Purple?

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 15th of February 2004.

The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled The Color Purple and is based on Titus chapter 1 verses 5 to 9.

Well far down the list of respectable people in our society these days are ministers in churches.

They used to be top of the list, the most trusted and trustworthy people of society. But now they rank not all that much further ahead of politicians and well behind all the other sort of professions, even accountants.

And it's understandable when you think of all the news that we've heard and read about and seen about in recent years. In both Catholic and Protestant churches in this country and in other countries, there have been a series of sexual abuse scandals.

[1 : 10] There are dioceses, that is areas of churches, that are facing bankruptcy because of legal action by victims of ministers in abuse cases.

In our own diocese of Melbourne, Anglican Diocese, which covers 230 Anglican churches in Melbourne and Geelong area, we now have to budget at least half a million dollars a year for legal and professional and pastoral issues related to clergy breaches of confidence and trust.

The Governor-General, not all that long ago, was forced to resign because in his previous office as Archbishop of Brisbane, he, it was deemed, handled an old case of abuse by a priest badly.

One of the most respected preachers in Melbourne in the 1980s was a Baptist pastor in Kew. Recently it's come to light publicly that this late minister, he's died many years now, was involved with a series of affairs with women in the church where he was the minister in the 1980s, at the same time as being one of the great preachers in Melbourne.

The evangelical Anglican minister of the largest Anglican church in Tasmania resigned a couple of years ago, forced to resign because for years and years and years had been engaged with extramarital affairs with women in his parish.

[2 : 42] And the same applies to one of the leading Anglican evangelical ministers, formerly in Melbourne, but more recently in Adelaide as well. And that's not to mention a huge number of other cases and a huge number of clergy marriage breakdowns, whether or not there is some extramarital affair involved or not.

An enormous number of our clergy are divorced, many of them remarried, some of them divorced again. On top of all that, we have the appointment of an actively gay bishop in the Episcopal Church in the United States in New Hampshire late last year.

We have an Anglican bishop in Canada who is promoting same-sex unions and giving his blessing to their service of union. At the same time, for those churches that are opposing him in his own diocese, because they say that what he's doing is totally unbiblical and immoral, he is changing the locks on their doors, putting his own lay people as appointees within the parish, sacking the church councils and vestry, and taking legal action against the ministers of all the churches opposed to him.

The issue is not just sex, though. There are plenty of clergy over the years who are caught pilfering money, dodging tax, moonlighting with other jobs on the side, gaining income from all sorts of other sources that maybe their church treasurers never see.

There are probably countless stories of clergy intimidation, clergy bullying of people in their church, bullying them to do something that perhaps they don't feel is right for them to do.

[4 : 25] There are alcoholic clergy, there are lazy clergy by the million, and the reason why so many churches around the Western world are empty is not because of the lack of lay people, it's because of the ministry of ministers and clergy.

But moreover, you can sit in any one of a number of pulpits in churches in Melbourne today, and some of them you'll hear the latest pop psychology and virtually nothing about Jesus.

You'll hear in many church buildings, from preachers in pulpits, that Jesus is not the saviour, or that he's not divine, or that the Bible is not trustworthy, that we should dismiss the Bible as outdated old hat stuff.

And it's public news that periodically the Archbishop of Perth makes claims that seem to contradict the Bible, and then publicly attacks the Archbishop of Sydney, who refutes the claims of the Archbishop of Perth.

Is it any wonder that our society doesn't trust ministers and clergy? Is it any wonder that they're not respected in our society? No wonder that just last year a visiting bishop in Melbourne, wearing his clerical collar walking in a city street, was spat upon by people whom he didn't know as he walked by himself down a city street.

[5 : 47] Titus chapter 1 addresses issues of church leadership. This is not just an issue for leaders, it is an issue for all of us, each one of us.

It is an issue for leaders, because the verses that we've heard read from Titus chapter 1 tell us leaders what we should be like and what we should do. It is a passage also for those who are aspiring to church leadership, as I hope a number of you might be doing.

This is a passage to read and reflect yourself in, to see if you're like this description and do the things commanded here.

But it's a passage also for each person who's a member of a church, when you vote for church leaders, for church councils and church wardens.

This is the sort of passage to bear in mind for that case as well. It's not just about the ordained ministry. This is also the passage for those who might end up on a committee, in the Anglican Church we call it the incumbency committee, which chooses leaders or the next vicar of the church.

[7 : 03] And I would hope that one day, when and if I ever leave here, the incumbency committee takes this passage to heart before it starts interviewing prospective vicars of this church.

Far from being outdated, old hat advice in these few verses in Titus chapter 1, here we find timeless words for us today.

And the church desperately needs to hear these words. Let's pray. Our Heavenly Father, we come before these words of St. Paul to Titus about church elders and leaders.

Some of us are leaders, most of us are not. But they're words nonetheless to each one of us. And we pray that not only will you inform us with their truth, but reform our lives, especially the lives of those of us who are in leadership in some form or other, that we may reflect and do what is described in these words, for Jesus' sake.

Amen. Paul and Titus had visited Crete, an island in the Mediterranean. Briefly, it seems. We're not exactly sure when.

[8 : 23] We're unsure why Paul left so soon after arriving in Crete, but it seems as though that is in fact what he did. But he left Titus behind, deliberately so, not an oversight.

He left Titus there deliberately to carry on and supervise the ministry. In particular, two tasks that he describes in verse 5. To complete what was not done.

Presumably because Paul and Titus together had been there for such a short time, there was much more to do. And especially to appoint elders in every town. We're not sure how many towns that meant.

An ancient Greek writer indicated that there were about 100 towns in ancient Crete. Paul may not have had all those towns in mind. We're not sure. But certainly, Titus had this job of completing what was not done and especially concerning tonight's passage, appointing elders in every town.

If you remember last week, Titus is the troubleshooter and he's here for this troubleshooting task because he's not in a benign environment. He's in an environment that is hostile, especially as we'll see next week and the weeks after.

[9 : 33] He's in an environment where there is false teaching and the threat of church division. So he has a serious troubleshooting role when he is appointing elders in the various towns on the island of Crete.

Now, no doubt, Paul had instructed him before he left Titus in Crete. And no doubt, much of what we read in this letter, Paul had already verbally instructed Titus with. But now he writes this letter, partly, probably, for clarification for Titus's benefit, to remind him of what Paul had said, but partly, too, for the benefit of the church.

For though it's a letter written to Titus, it is a letter also secondary, secondarily, for the church, so that Paul's authority standing behind Titus may be evident, so that the Christians in Crete, the churches in Crete, could read this letter from Paul the Apostle and recognise that what Titus was attempting to do was what Paul had instructed him to do.

And therefore, the full apostolic authority of Paul was placed in Titus for this ministry, this troubleshooting ministry to which he'd been entrusted in Crete.

Now, the crucial issue tonight is the appointment of elders. We'll see more about the wider context of that next week. What sort of people should Titus appoint as elders?

[10 : 59] Now, you might think this is obvious. I'm not sure that it is. Because you go to any group of Christian people gathering, just like any social group gathering, and you will find, if you're observant enough, all sorts of power brokers and group dynamics going on.

Every church has got power brokers. Every church has got the custodians of the church, the hosts where the people who might own the house where they'd live on a Sunday in the ancient world, all those sorts of things.

They're the people who might be laying claim to be the elders and the leaders of the church. It isn't always the case that they would make the best elders.

So these are important instructions for us. What sort of person should be in a leadership role in a church, either in the equivalent for an Anglican church, the vicar, or others on staff, or leaders in church councils, church wardens, and so on.

This letter, this part of the letter especially, is to ensure that the right sorts of people are chosen. And very strikingly, completely, I think for us, unexpectedly, the first thing that is mentioned is family.

[12 : 18] Verse 6. The person that you should appoint as an elder in every town as I directed you is someone who is blameless, married only once, whose children are believers, not accused of debauchery, and not rebellious.

I think it's striking that the first area of qualification to be an elder in a church is that person's family life.

I'm not sure that that's what we would naturally turn to first these days. We're told that that person must be blameless. It doesn't mean perfect. It doesn't mean sinless. To be blameless means to be above reproach, that you don't expect some allegation to be levelled against this person.

They've got an untarnished reputation in the eyes of people. Not perfect, but somebody who's above reproach. And then we're told that they're to be married only once.

That is, not divorced and then remarried. It may allow for the fact that someone is divorced, maybe, but certainly it allows, it disallows somebody who's been married, then divorced, and then remarried.

[13 : 33] But what it's really driving at is for somebody who is faithful in marriage. That's really the guts of what Paul is saying here. And we might well ask, as you would expect me to ask, does this disqualify single ministers?

Because if Paul means they must be married and only once, then I ought not to be a minister. And there are some who think that way.

Not that I shouldn't be a minister, well maybe, there probably are, but that single people should not be ministers. In the wider picture of the New Testament, Paul, who is a fellow elder, he describes himself in another place, is clearly single.

He says that very clearly in 1 Corinthians 7. So it seems that if Paul is being consistent, as I expect him to be, he's not saying singleness disqualifies somebody from being a minister.

The issue is if married, faithful in marriage. And likewise the next bit, because it says then whose children are believers.

[14 : 41] Well, does that disqualify people who are married without children? In fact, does it disqualify people who are married but only have one child or none? Because children is plural. Well, I've never heard anyone argue that, although they seek to disqualify single ministers in some places.

And clearly, Paul's language here makes mockery of Roman Catholic practice where priests should be single. That's complete nonsense, it seems to me. A stupid rule.

But here, the children are believers. Now again, Paul is not saying they must have children but what he's saying is if they have children then look at their children, look at the minister or the potential elder's children to see what sort of person the elder is.

Are they believers? That's a big call. You think how many ministers' children are far from being believers in the Lord Jesus Christ? In fact, for many people brought up as what are often called PKs, pastor's kids or priest's kids, they often are wild unbelievers.

Well, certainly for some part of their life they are. Now this is a fairly demanding qualification when you think about it. Does this mean that golden-mouthed preachers are ineligible because of the life of their kids?

[15 : 58] Does it mean that the most loving and caring pastors that you can find are unfit because of their kids' rebellion? Well, in some ways it is saying that.

And the logic comes at the beginning of the next verse. Notice how next verse 7 begins. For, that is because a bishop as God's steward.

Now the word steward there is the word for household manager. What it's saying is that a person who is a leader in a church is managing the household of God's people.

And if they can't manage their own household and their own children and their own marital faithfulness to their wife, then why on earth should you consider them to be a manager of God's household of people?

That's the logic here. So if you're looking to appoint an elder, a bishop, a leader in a church, then you ought firstly to look at their family. Are they faithful to their husband or wife?

[17 : 03] And what are their children like? That's a big call. Because I suspect there are plenty of ministers around whose children are full of debauchery and they're rebellious.

They're using the language at the end of verse 6. Now you might think that's a bit unfair. You might think, well, does this really disqualify a person just because of the behaviour of their kids?

I mean, a minister or a parent can't guarantee the faith of their children, can't guarantee the life of their children. and to an extent that that is true. It's a very telling incident in the Old Testament.

A priest called Eli, early on in Israel's history, before there were kings in the land of Israel, recorded in the early chapters of 1 Samuel, Eli was the priest of the people of God in Israel, the chief priest.

His sons are profligate, rebellious unbelievers, lazy, good-for-nothings. And as a result of Eli's inattention and inability to look after and bring up his sons properly, in the land of Israel, God's word was absent, more or less.

[18 : 14] And the nation was facing enemies and being routed by them, more often than not. Indeed, the people of God were plunged into a sort of dark age for a bit. And that's due, according to 1 Samuel, to Eli's inability to bring up his sons as he ought.

Leaders of God's people must manage their families well. Now, it may be that there are exceptional cases when a child has gone off the rails and maybe for no reason associated with the father or the mother or the person who's a potential elder.

But at least these verses are directing us to look at their family life and see, can this person manage their family? Because if they can't do that, then they can't manage the family of God's people.

And when I read this, I think maybe it's easier being single after all. Well, Shakespeare asked, what's in a name? A rose by any other name is still a rose.

Over the centuries since this letter was written, since Jesus was here and the apostles preached the gospel for the first generation, there has been huge division and no little bloodshed over the issues of the names of church leaders.

[19 : 37] That is, is the person who leads a church a bishop, a moderator, a priest, a presbyter, a pastor, a minister?

Would you just call him Fred? Fred? Or Freda? Well, in verse 5, we're told that Paul tells Titus to appoint elders in every town and then in the beginning of verse 7 for a bishop as God's steward should be.

Paul's talking about the same group of people here. The logic holds that here, at least, it's the same group of people. An elder, literally in Greek, is the word presbyter, from which we get the name Presbyterian Church.

And from the name presbyter, derives the English word priest as well. Worth knowing that, I think, that a priest is actually a presbyter, not some instrument of sacrifice.

And the bishop's word is literally the word overseer, or we might say supervisor as well. But here in the New Testament, a bishop is clearly a bishop or overseer of a local church, a congregation.

[20 : 50] They're not some sort of diocesan or institutional administrative official, somebody who just shoves papers around and writes letters all the time. A bishop is, in the New Testament, is the leader of a local congregation, basically.

And it's a far cry from those pompous, purple-breasted prelates that church history is besotted with in various guises over the years.

In the end, the name doesn't matter is what I'm saying. Whether it's an elder, a bishop, a presbyter, a minister, a pastor, who cares? It doesn't matter. The names are used interchangeably here by Paul, although some might say in some other places there are some slight distinctions in the names.

But the most important thing is not what you call them, the most important thing is what they're like. And these are the qualifications that are very clear for what any minister, any bishop, any elder, any leader should be like.

We've dealt with the family life first, but now we come in verse 7 to five vices that they must not practice. So if you find any one of these five vices in a person who is a leader or aspiring to be a leader, then attention needs to be drawn to that and dealt with.

[22 : 04] Firstly, they're not to be arrogant. That is not stubborn, not pig-headed, not self-willed. Secondly, not to be quick-tempered. That is somebody who's irascible, always inclining to be angry and annoyed.

Thirdly, they're not to be addicted to wine. Doesn't say they're not allowed to drink, but they're not to be drunkards or alcoholics, addicted to wine. Fourthly, not to be violent.

That's got the sense both of striking people and the claim of power over people. And fifthly, not to be greedy for gain. Certainly, it's not saying that ministers shouldn't be paid.

The argument for that is clear in other places of the New Testament. But what it is saying, as is also said in other places of the New Testament, that ministers are not to be ministers for the sake of gain, but for the sake of Christ.

And so being greedy for gain is to make money from the gospel. Five things, five vices, if you like, that leaders or ministers ought not be. And they're common sins.

[23 : 09] The sins of pride, anger, drink, power, and wealth. That's what those five are. And they're very common. One or more in many of us.

They're the besetting sins of so many Christians. They are sins that mar fellowship. They are sins that compromise integrity. They're sins that divide churches. They're sins that harm people.

And they are sins that are self-indulgent and not selfless or serving. So if a person has one or more of these things is part of their character and habit, then they're disqualified from being a leader, elder, minister, presbyter, priest, bishop, overseer, whatever you may call it in the church of God.

Instead of those five vices, verse 8 tells us there are six virtues that should be placed, should be characteristic of a person who's a leader.

Firstly, they're to be hospitable. Literally, to be lovers of foreigners or lovers of strangers is actually what the word literally means. That is somebody who is looking out for other people, strangers, newcomers, foreigners, etc., and to be hospitable to them.

[24 : 22] Not only are they to be lovers of strangers or foreigners, they're to be lovers of goodness is the second virtue that's described in verse 8. Now, you might think that's a slightly to be expected, but there are plenty of people who tolerate goodness, who put on perhaps a charade of being good and liking goodness, but in secret love evil, but don't want anyone to know.

A lover of goodness is much more significant than a person who just practices some good things. Lovers of foreigners and strangers, lovers of goodness, prudent people, careful, serious, having your wits about you, that's what the word means, upright, that is somebody who's not going to be bribed, somebody who's impartial, somebody who's fair and just and righteous, somebody who's law-abiding, devout person, devoted to God, clearly with a strong relationship to God and service of God, a holy person, we might say.

And then finally, someone who is self-controlled, the last of the fruit of the Spirit of God, from another passage in the New Testament. That is somebody who's self-controlled, who can control their passions, so their desires don't drive them, their lusts don't drive them, their anger doesn't drive them, but rather they are spiritually and morally disciplined in their life.

So here are six virtues, all of which, not just one of which, ought to be manifest in the person who is a leader or potential leader in the Church of God. They are virtues of selflessness, not selfishness.

They're putting others first, not oneself. Here, in effect, is a lover of God and a lover of His people. So first and foremost then, what sort of person is the minister?

[26 : 22] What is their character like? What are their attitudes? What drives them and motivates them? Before you look at any skills or any experience, what is the person like?

Their family life exposes a lot, but look at the character of the person. Now in our society, in a vast urban society, when we're dealing with these sorts of issues, we live in a much more anonymous age than the ancient world.

In the ancient world, in a little village or a little town, people would know each other well. You'd know in a little tiny town whether Fred's a person who meets this criteria or not. But in our sort of urban anonymous society where we work in one suburb, live in another and worship in a third often, it's all too easy to pretend and disguise what we're really like.

That is, if we're looking properly at what sort of people should be ministers, we need to get to know them well. We need to do our homework, if you like, to do that well.

So often, we look for skills first. But character comes first. Here and everywhere in the New Testament.

[27 : 38] If there is no godly character, then all the eloquence in the world means somebody is unfit for Christian leadership and ministry. Somebody can have all the pastoral wisdom of years of experience, but without godly character, they must not and ought not be a minister in the church of God.

No amount of leadership skill and leadership conferences of which our society is oozing with is any substitute for godly character for a Christian minister and leader.

No level of strategic competence compensates for a lack of godliness. No degree of theological astuteness, all sorts of degrees or PhDs, make up for immoral character or attitudes.

Without godly character as described in these verses, all the actual competence, skill, experience counts for nothing. very important to get that right because all too often it seems to me we can be impressed by people's ability and therefore think their character is less important.

Never is that the case in the matter of choosing leaders for the church of God. Now why is that so important, you might think? Does it really matter? Well, it does really matter.

[29 : 03] It really matters for the health of the church. If the person who is the leader of the church doesn't exhibit godly character then all the good teaching or pastoral wisdom or whatever will in the end come undone because relationships will disintegrate.

But it also matters if you like theologically because if you remember back to verse 1 of chapter 1 what Paul said there about the gospel. Godliness is essential for the gospel.

So if a person is to be a minister of the gospel godliness must be exhibited in their character. If you remember the little slogan I gave you last week the God's gospel's goal is godliness.

So godliness must be manifest in the leader in the church of God. If not all their skill and ability and competence and experience counts for nothing.

Well only now after these verses 6, 7 and 8 does Paul address the issue of if you like ability or job description. What are they actually going to do? And one thing is mentioned one alone.

[30 : 24] He must be verse 9 he must have a firm grasp of the word that is trustworthy in accordance with the teaching. A firm grasp of the word.

That is a firm grasp of the scriptures. A firm grasp of the gospel if you like. That is they cling to it. It's actually an active idea. Not just he's got a firm grasp as in he knows it well but he's actually clinging to it holding fast to it trusting it not just head knowledge but trusting it.

He's not sitting loose with it or tampering with it around the edges like it seems to me so many people do. It also implies some element of training as well because he must have a firm grasp of the word that is trustworthy in accordance with the teaching so that he may be able and the word for able there is equipped if you like so that he's trained to hold fast to the word so that he's equipped to both do two things at the end of verse 9 to preach with sound doctrine that is to urge encourage exhort people with what is true and sound and healthy truth of the gospel but then secondly the flip side if you like to refute to contradict wrong teaching not only to teach what is true that's only half the job the other half and we'll see the importance of this next week is to actually contradict or confound false teaching to rebuke it so elders leaders bishops priests whatever you call them have a fundamental doctrinal responsibility my chief job as the vicar of this church is to teach preach urge persuade rebuke along the lines of the truth of the gospel that's my number one job description there's a lot of other things i could do a lot of other things i do do that's number one to teach the word and with that goes refuting the wrong teaching and that's because only the true gospel leads to the hope of eternal life as we saw last week in verses one and two you see it's not a matter of well sit loose with the gospel because all roads lead to heaven they don't only one gospel leads to heaven therefore you've got to hold fast to it you've got to be trained by it and equipped by it you've got to teach it well and rebuke and refute wrong teaching because only one gospel the gospel given to us by god concerning his son recorded for us in the scriptures only this gospel leads us to the hope of eternal life and to godliness so that's why i've got to get it right and why my job is to make sure you get it right and to contradict and tell you off if you're getting it wrong for your own sakes for your eternal destiny here then is the unequivocal essentials for any minister and leader of the church of god godliness and teaching the truth a lack of godliness damns whatever is taught because i could say the greatest truths up here and if you know that i'm a person who is addicted to wine who's greedy for gain and all those other vices that i mentioned in verse 7 then it doesn't matter what i say you're not going to believe it and you're not going to do it the gospel leads to godliness and it must be modeled by godliness but on the other hand a lack of truth taught by a godly person actually leads people to hell it's the only other destination isn't it either the true gospel leads people to the hope of eternal life or it leads them to hell that's an awesome responsibility for those who teach the word of god well sadly in today's day and age our church is more likely to look for people who are good at leadership rather than teaching that's the predominant thing today it seems to me they look for people who've got good interpersonal skills rather than godliness or a love of people they're disinclined to test people's doctrine and all too often reluctant to take much concern with their family matters i wonder what would happen if we rigorously applied paul's words today to all the churches of melbourne of every denomination what if we today could sack any minister and church leader who failed to live up to the description given to us in these verses today i dare to say that there would

be dozens of churches without a minister and imagine the outcry the people say we can't do that we won't have a minister but perhaps if we could do that then god might actually bless his church we should pray we should pray for people who are leaders and ministers that they are as described here that's why i and the other leaders of this church covet your prayers that we may be like what is described here not prancing around in purple shirts but serving and loving people and loving god and his gospel