

Life in the Body—1 Thess. 5:12-15

It is easy to get discouraged in our churches, because we sometimes clash with others over personality differences; style preferences; and social, economic, ethnic, and even theological diversity. In addition, we were all raised in different homes and churches with different traditions. When considered from this perspective, it is astounding that six hundred people choose to get together every Sunday to worship and work together. This is a testimony to good leadership and to everyone's ability to be patient and to forgive. These are the topics of this week's text.

Background: The leadership structure in the churches that Paul established is something of a mystery to us. We know that from an early date some churches had elders, men who were the recognized leaders of all the Christians in a city or region. But many churches probably did not have elders for several years. These churches may have been led by those who took on a leadership role simply by virtue of their godly lives and leadership ability. We all know how this works—in fact, we normally choose our “official” leaders from those who have become unofficial leaders. It is also quite likely that hosts of house churches functioned as church leaders. These wealthier members of the church probably acted as patrons and took care of the poorer Christians (as was discussed in the study on 1 Thess. 4:9-12). We also do not know whether the leaders discussed in this week's text would be more like our full-time ministers or more like our elders—or whether they would even have made such a distinction. Our lack of knowledge in this regard does not keep us from understanding this passage, but it should make us wary about assuming that their situation was just like ours.

Text: 1 Thess. 5:12-15 is another fairly easy passage to understand. In verses 12-13 Paul tells these new Christians to acknowledge and have the highest regard for those who work among them, lead them, and advise them. Although these verses may be generic exhortations applicable to all churches, Paul was probably writing about the specific situation in Thessalonica. It is not hard to imagine that some in the congregation resented and disagreed with the leaders, especially if the leaders were “admonishing” regularly. (It is also not hard to imagine that some churches had poor leadership, but Paul gives no hint of this in his letters to the Thessalonians.) The demand that they “live in peace with each other” indicates that some were causing dissension. We don't know what the troubles were about, unless it had to do with some Christians failing to work and taking advantage of the generosity of others.

Verses 14-15 instruct all the Christians, not just the leaders, to be involved in ministry. They are to warn, encourage, strengthen, and be patient with all. These verbs remind us of the nature of the church family. It is not simply a group of people who come together to worship, pretending that all is well, always wearing a smile, ignoring their own troubles and those of others. It is a group of often weak (probably physically ill and aged), disheartened, and often troubled brothers and sisters. It also invariably has a few who are “problem children.” Paul calls on Christians to warn them, and yet he also tells the Thessalonians to be “patient with everyone.” Even when we have been wronged by another Christian, Paul calls on us to repay evil with good. And this “turning the other cheek” applies not just to fellow Christians but to all people (v. 15), even those who are persecuting the Thessalonians.

Discussion Questions

This text is easy to understand but difficult to put into practice. It may even be difficult to discuss, since we quickly associate Paul's words with our particular situation. Many of us have strong feelings about our elders, ministers, and other leaders; and those feelings can quickly come out in a discussion such as this. It is important that this discussion not become a gripe session and that it not become a source of division among Christians. This kind of discussion would be in complete opposition to the spirit of this passage. The leader(s) of the discussion should try to ensure that comments promote feelings of love and respect.

1. Those who have never led a church may not be able to imagine the kinds of troubles and stresses that face our leaders. What do you think are the greatest issues facing church leaders? Can church leaders please everyone in the congregation? And if they could, should they?

2. When it comes to leadership in a church, respect must be earned. However, it is also very easy to find fault with leaders and to assume we could do better. Why do humans have a natural tendency to resent or disagree with leaders? How can we best fight such a tendency? What are some ways we can show our respect and love to our leaders?

3. What are the ways we often react when we disagree with leaders? How should we react?

4. Paul writes that all Christians should encourage, help, and be patient with other Christians. He also says that we should "warn" the troublemakers. How is that best done?

5. Let's be honest: Some Christians are simply hard to be around. How do we learn to be patient with each other? Think of those you are patient with, and ask why and how you have learned this patience.

6. Paul (following Jesus) writes that we should return evil with good? But both also tell us to go to others when we have problems with them. How do we know when to confront and when to just be patient and leave matters alone?

7. If there is still time, think of someone you have admired as a church leader. Then list the characteristics of that good leader.