

(1 Timothy 4:11-16; Nehemiah 8:1-8; Numbers 27:15-23)

John Bunyan's famous book, "The Pilgrim's Progress", tells the story of Christian's journey to the Celestial City. Early in his travels, Christian comes to the house of Interpreter, who shows him a portrait: "Christian saw the Picture of a very grave Person hung up against the wall; and this was the fashion of it. It had eyes lifted up to Heaven, the best of Books in his hand, the Law of Truth was written upon his lips, the World was behind his back. It stood as if it pleaded with men, and a Crown of Gold did hang over his head." Christian asks the obvious question: Who is this man, and what does his picture mean? What Christian saw at Interpreter's house was the portrait of a gospel minister. He was a man who helped sinners become the children of God, who kept a firm grip on God's Word, and who turned his back on everything the world had to offer. The apostle Paul wanted Timothy to become the same kind of minister, with "the World behind his back" and "the best of Books in his hand". In the closing verses of chapter 4 of 1 Timothy (vv. 11-16), Paul paints a portrait of the minister as a young man.

1. An Exemplary Life

The sketch for Paul's portrait comes at the beginning of verse 16: "Watch your life and doctrine closely". Timothy must keep a careful eye on both his behaviour and his teaching. If he fails in either one he will fail in the ministry. Notice the order in which Paul lists life and doctrine: first life, then doctrine. Timothy cannot defend the Christian faith until he lives the Christian life. The famous Puritan Richard Baxter said, "There are too many men who are ministers before they know how to be Christians." Since Paul wanted Timothy to be a Christian first of all, he begins by telling his young protégé to lead an exemplary life: "Command and teach these things. Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity" (vv. 11-12).

The Greek word translated "command" at the beginning of verse 11 means "to direct" or "to give orders". A teaching elder has true spiritual authority. It is his responsibility to teach - even to command, in God's name - his congregation to trust and obey the doctrine he has received from the apostles (the apostolic teaching of the New Testament). Why did Paul need to remind Timothy of his God-given authority? Maybe because Timothy was timid? In his second letter to Timothy, Paul will write, "For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline" (2 Timothy 1:7). Whether Timothy was timid or not, he was still a youngster, relatively speaking. Paul feared that Timothy's authority as a minister might be undermined by his tender years. So he said, "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young". Given the date when he first joined Paul (AD49-50) and the date of this letter (AD 62-64), Timothy may have been in his thirties at the time - one of the younger men as distinct from the older men (over 40). It was a relatively young age to bear full pastoral responsibility for an important church like Ephesus. Certainly it was not time to be immature or irresponsible. Timothy needed to be wise beyond his years.

At the same time, the Christians in Ephesus needed to respect Timothy's office. The command not to let anyone look down on him was intended for their ears as well as his own. Paul wanted to make sure that no one discriminated against Timothy on the basis of his age. But how can a young minister gain the respect of his elders - those older members of his congregation? Obviously not by demanding it, or by throwing his weight around, but only by setting a godly example. Timothy needed to be the very model of a godly Christian. People would not despise his youth if they could admire his example, especially "in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity".

Start with the minister's conversation. His speech is to be seasoned with grace. He should speak naturally and clearly about spiritual things. He is to tell the truth and not be argumentative. He must not be a gossip. Even his words of rebuke are to be covered with affection, like the medicine delivered with a spoonful of honey. He truly knows how to speak the truth in love. Such godly speech is one part of a godly life. Conduct and speech go together. What a minister's life ought to say is that he is God's man all the time: at home, at church, in the car, on the sporting field, at the supermarket...everywhere. The minister also sets an example in love. He is to keep both of the

great commandments (Matthew 22:37-40). He is to have a passionate concern for the lost. He is to have a special place in his heart for the people God has placed under his spiritual care. He shares in their joys and sorrows. He cares most for those who are most difficult to love and care for.

With tender love goes strong faith. A minister should have complete confidence in his Lord and God. He seeks wisdom from above for the uncertainties of the future. He lives, studies, teaches and preaches by faith. And he is faithful, in that he is trustworthy and dependable in all his relationships and responsibilities. Last, but not least, the minister sets an example by his purity. Although the Greek word used for “purity” can describe general moral conduct, the Greeks more often used it to refer to sexual behaviour. An exhortation to sexual purity seems particularly appropriate for a young man like Timothy. In his second letter, Paul exhorts Timothy to “flee the evil desires of youth” (2:22). How important it is for God’s people to pray for the purity of their ministers. Young men preparing for pastoral ministry must work at applying the gospel of faith and repentance to any areas of sexual sin, and to practice godly discipline in what they look at, at what they think about, what they say, and what they touch. In short, a minister or pastor must set an example in every way. If he does, then his people will know how to live the Christian life.

One is reminded of the famous words of Robert Murray M’Cheyne: “My people’s greatest need is my personal holiness”. These words are all the more appropriate when it is remembered that they were spoken by a minister who died when he was only thirty. M’Cheyne understood, as Paul wanted Timothy to understand, that even as a young man he was to excel in those qualities in which youth is prone to be deficient - seriousness, prudence, consideration for others, trustworthiness and mastery over the passions. As John Calvin said, sound biblical teaching “will be of little worth if there is not corresponding uprightness and holiness of life”.

2. Biblical Doctrine

Upon scanning this portrait of a young minister, Timothy may have been tempted to ask, as the psalmist did, “How can a young man keep his way pure?” The psalmist’s response was, “By living according to your word” (Psalm 119:9). Paul gave Timothy the same answer: “Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching” (v. 13). Until such time as Paul might return to Ephesus, Timothy must teach the biblical doctrine. And teaching the Bible begins with reading the Bible. This applies to private study, of course, but the Greek word used here for reading refers to the public reading of Scripture. This held a central place in early Christian worship, being one of the practices the first Christians carried over from Jewish worship. By the time Paul was writing to Timothy, public readings included not only the scrolls of the Law, the Prophet and the Writings of the Old Testament, but also the letters of the apostles. The public reading of Scripture was necessary in the early church because books and parchments were scarce. For many Christians, public worship was the only opportunity to hear the Word of God. History shows that the work of the gospel flourishes whenever the Bible is read. This is why the disappearance of Scripture reading from many evangelical worship services both in Australia and South Korea is so alarming. It is crucial that the Word of God from the Old and New Testaments continues to be read in all the churches.

The Scripture is not only to be read, but it is also to be explained. Thus Paul commands Timothy also to devote himself to the preaching and teaching of the Word of God. The word translated “preaching” meant to encourage or to exhort, but it was widely used for sermonising. The letter to the Hebrews may be a good example of this kind of exhortatory preaching, since it speaks of itself as a “word of exhortation” (Hebrews 13:22). It is certainly full of pastoral exhortations. The second term translated “teaching” has more the idea of instruction. The Christian teacher is responsible for faithfully transmitting the inspired Word of God and catechizing God’s people in Christian doctrine. He is to explain the meaning of God’s Word and the applications it might have in new life situations. Paul tells Timothy to teach the Bible. This is because Bible exposition has always been at the heart of biblical worship, at least since the days of Ezra (Nehemiah 8:1-8). Timothy, and all Christian ministers everywhere, must follow the same pattern. First the Bible is to be read - then it

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is to be explained and applied. The systematic exposition of Scripture remains the most effective means for the conversion of sinners and the confirmation and maturing of God's people. It is the most effective means because it is God's chosen means. The central place of preaching and teaching the Bible in the life and work of the church is a crucial factor when it comes to calling a new minister.

Teaching biblical doctrine is what Timothy had been ordained to do, and his ordination to gospel ministry is mentioned explicitly in v. 14: "Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you." Although it is not a sacrament, the laying on of hands is an outward sign of an inward gift for ministry. The practice itself goes back to the blessings of the Old Testament. For example, Moses laid his hands on Joshua and commissioned him as his successor to lead God's people. It was natural, therefore, for the first Christians to commission missionaries and pastors through the laying on of hands. This is the way Paul and Barnabas were set apart for missionary service by the church in Antioch of Syria (Acts 13:3). In much the same way, Timothy was ordained for the gospel ministry at the hands of the Ephesian church elders or elders from a number of congregations gathered for the special occasion of Timothy's setting apart - including the hands of Paul himself (2 Timothy 1:6). One special feature of Timothy's ordination was prophecy. At the time of his being set apart for his ministry, a prophetically inspired utterance was given about him in confirmation of his calling by God to the work. Perhaps it was a prophecy about what would happen through his ministry. In any case, Timothy was called to the ministry by the Holy Spirit. A true minister is called by the Holy Spirit, working through the desires of his heart and the wisdom of the church. This spiritual call is essential for enduring the hardships of ministry.

Paul continues to motivate Timothy by telling him, "Do not neglect your gift". This is presumably the gift of leadership in teaching. Timothy is in danger of neglecting to develop and use his gift through timidity, or undue deference to those who were older or more experienced than him. The leadership gifts of the Spirit must be continually stirred up by a deliberate effort on the part of those who have received them. Only through constant use will they develop fully and be effective. What about you - are you using the gift or gifts that God has given you so that they develop fully and are effective?

3. The Church's Salvation

Timothy's continuance in the ministry is a matter of life and death, for Paul closes his instructions by saying, "Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers" (vv. 15-16). Timothy must persevere for the salvation of the church, not to mention his own salvation. Be diligent, make these matters - that is, all those pastoral instructions Paul has given to Timothy in vv. 6-16 about being a good minister of Jesus Christ - make them your business. When it comes to ministry, practice makes perfect. Paul calls on Timothy to be totally committed to the task before him. Nothing less would bring about the sorts of results that the Christian leader is committed to see. Pastoral ministry should be Timothy's life. And if Timothy makes that commitment, then he will make the kind of "progress" that everyone will be able to see. The mention of "progress" is always an encouragement to us, isn't it? If Timothy was like most young ministers, there would have been times when he wondered if he would ever become the minister God wanted him to become. There must have been occasions when he was disappointed with his preaching or discouraged about his evangelism. After all, the standard for pastoral ministry in Ephesus had been set by none other than the apostle Paul! A man does not become a minister all at once, however. There is always room for improvement. Even if Timothy was not yet the minister he would become, at least he could make visible progress in life and doctrine. What about you as a follower of Jesus Christ? Are you making progress - real and visible progress - in living the Christian life and understanding God's Word? Commitment in the Lord's service should and will always show, though it should never be showy. And persistent commitment in practice will produce personal growth and greater confidence in doing the Lord's work. As God's

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people see the spiritual progress of their young pastor they will be spurred on to persevere themselves and to gain in grace as well. Paul applied the same principle with the deacons in 3:13, didn't he, where their faithful and diligent diaconal work spurs others in the congregation to grow in their pastoral care of others.

Finally Paul wanted to be sure that Timothy's work was not in vain, as it would have been if he were to give up and quit before it was finished. Ministers who continue in God's grace have the assurance of their own salvation and the joy of leading others to Christ. Salvation - forgiveness of sins and a new life lived in the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit - comes only by faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But as Paul says to the church in Rome, "faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). And the word of Christ, in turn, comes by the preaching of the gospel. Therefore, Christian ministers are crucial to God's plan for the salvation of the world. There is even a sense in which they can be said to "save" their hearers, not by their own merits, but by the proclamation of Jesus Christ. The spiritual destiny of any church is tied up with the spiritual destiny of its minister - or ministers - and his or their faithful proclamation of the gospel. Sound preaching can make the difference between life and death, and acknowledging its vital role in salvation does not detract in any way from the grace God gives in the gospel. God's glory is in no way diminished by his using the work and service of men in granting salvation through Jesus Christ. As Calvin said, "This ministry is itself entirely God's work, for it is he who makes men good pastors and leads them by his Spirit and blesses their work so that it may not be in vain." Every minister, every pastor, pleads with his people, implores them, to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation "for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). May God give each one of us the grace to respond to that call and wholly trust in Jesus' name for eternal life.

Amen

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