

Introduction

These are difficult days for those who pastor God's people. In many parts of the world, especially in the West, culture and society have turned away from their Christian past, as if from something both passé and repulsive. Churches are profoundly divided over how to cope with this disorientating situation, and there is much unseemly confrontation. It is no wonder then that many people who might previously have considered giving their lives to full-time ministry in the church are now uneasy and uncertain at the prospect. And yet it is at just such a time—when huge swathes of the population are ignorant of even the basics of the faith, and churchgoers are often left confused and bewildered by the deep public rifts in the church—that we need trustworthy spiritual guides.

Being a pastor today can be tough. John Calvin remarked that gospel ministry 'is a laborious and difficult charge; and that they who aim at it should carefully consider with themselves, whether or not they were able to bear so heavy a burden. Ignorance is always rash; and a mature knowledge of things makes a man modest.' This is not something to rush into. Men and women without ability or wisdom often aspire so confidently to hold the reins of secular government, he says, but we ought to restrain such rashness in the church. 'It is no light matter to be a representative of the Son of God in discharging an office of such magnitude,' he warns, 'the object of which is to erect and extend the kingdom of God, to procure the salvation of souls which the Lord himself hath purchased with his own blood, and

to govern the Church, which is God's inheritance.'¹ What we need are pastors who appreciate the seriousness of this task, and yet have confidence in God to strengthen them for it.

Paul wrote 2 Timothy and Titus for this very reason. These are letters from an apostle, a missionary church planter, and a pastor of great experience to his trusted younger colleagues. Yet as the Presbyterian commentator David Dickson (1583–1662) says, Paul wrote 2 Timothy so that 'all teachers may learn how they ought to duly discharge the ministry of the gospel.'² Like many today, Timothy and Titus were facing huge challenges in serving the gospel, trying to keep their churches safe from charlatans and false teaching while doing the work of an evangelist in places famously full of idolatry, immorality, and entrenched opposition. Paul's letters gave them the guidance they needed in such a moment, to keep them on track.

Erasmus once said (paraphrasing 2 Timothy), 'there are perilous times at hand because of some who, under pretence of godliness, turn true godliness upside down, and so boast of themselves, as though the Christian religion consisted in words and not rather in pureness of heart.'³ Is it not true that we remain in such perilous and precarious times for the gospel? No wonder many are often wary of entering full-time ministry today.

I am convinced that these God-breathed words contain vital instruction for us today, especially for those who are considering or just starting out in the demanding work of gospel service. I have preached on them many times in different places around the world, and always found them to be richly rewarding and edifying for my own soul as

1. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon* (ed. William Pringle; Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), pp. 73–4 on 1 Timothy 3:1.

2. Lee Gatiss and Bradley G. Green (eds.), *1-2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon* (Reformation Commentary on Scripture; Grand Rapids: IVP Academic, 2019), p. 215.

3. Gatiss and Green (eds.), *1-2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, pp. 212–13.

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well as those I was preaching for. Every year for nearly a decade I spoke on them at the Junior Anglican Evangelical Conference (JAEC) for men and women who were either considering ministry, training for it, or in the early stages of full-time service in the church.⁴ I have also edited the Reformation Commentary on Scripture volume on the Pastoral Epistles, which involved a delightful deep dive into the historical interpretation of these Pauline letters. The chapters in this book therefore have something of an Anglican and Reformational flavour to them at times, though not, I hope, in a way that would be too distracting for readers from other traditions. It is my prayer that they may enlighten, enliven, and inspire a new generation to ‘preach the word... in season and out of season’ (2 Tim. 4:2) and pass on the gospel ‘to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others’ (2 Tim. 2:2 NIV).

May this book help you to ‘fulfil your ministry’ (2 Tim. 4:5), discharging all its many difficult duties—for the glory of God and the good of the world.

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4. You can find out more about JAEC at www.churchsociety.org. A few of the expositions in this book have appeared in an earlier form in books published by Church Society emanating from that conference.

Shamelessly Suffering for the Gospel

2 Timothy 1:1-10

2 Timothy is probably the Apostle Paul's last letter. It is quite a personal one, to his trusted co-worker Timothy. And the first thing that Paul mentions in this personal letter, after 'the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus,' is Timothy's spiritual heritage, and his own spiritual heritage. They both had believing ancestors who brought them up to love God, and who prayed for them, no doubt every day. The first message Paul has for Timothy as he launches into this letter is 'be faithful to our spiritual heritage.' That's the thrust of verses 1-7 of this opening chapter.

Be faithful to our spiritual heritage

What Paul actually says, when you boil it down, is that he thanks God for Timothy's faith. So verse 3, 'I thank God... as I remember you' and verse 5, 'I am reminded of your sincere faith...' But there's more to it than just 'Paul thanks God for Timothy's faith.' He must be letting us in on his prayers for a reason. And I think it's to do with the little asides he inserts into his thanksgiving. He's appealing to shared memories, and to his intimate knowledge of Timothy's family and history.

Have you ever noticed the way that Paul reminds Timothy of his spiritual heritage in verse 5? 'I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother

Lois and your mother Eunice...’ Timothy is just one in a line of believers in his family. He’s not an isolated Christian. There’s a history here, people who came before him who laboured over and prayed for and worried about his spiritual health.

Paul knows that too of course. Verse 3: ‘I thank God whom I serve, *as did my ancestors*, with a clear conscience...’ He too had a believing family. So both Paul and Timothy are part of something bigger than just themselves as individuals. They had faithful families, and are part of an ongoing work of God which spans the generations. They were not just serving a cause that started a few decades ago.

Paul is also reminding Timothy of their time together. They had developed a close relationship through working together on the mission field over many years. So Timothy is, says Paul, ‘my beloved child.’ Or as he puts it in his first letter to Timothy, ‘my true child in the faith.’ Paul wasn’t literally his dad, biologically. But spiritually speaking he was like a father to him.

And Paul remembered Timothy’s tears, when they had parted. They were close. That’s implied by the fact that Paul knows the first names of Timothy’s mum and grandma too, of course. Just think about that—can you name your friends’ mums? What about their grandmothers? I think we’re often closest to those whose families we have some acquaintance with. And Paul wants to remind Timothy at the start of this letter that they’re intimate friends.

There’s a big stress on memory here actually. Paul thanks God when he *remembers* Timothy in his prayers. He *remembers* his tears, verse 4. He’s *reminded*, verse 5, of his sincere faith. This talk of memory and reminders is all leading to the persuasive reminder of verse 6. ‘For this reason’—because of our spiritual heritage and our shared spiritual history—‘I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God.’ Where he’s come from, all they’ve done and been through together, gives Paul the way in to encourage this young pastor. But notice the tone of Paul’s remarks. It’s not

a heavy-handed command or a patronising reprimand from the great apostle to the young convert. Paul appeals to him from alongside him. That's his 'rhetorical angle.' Not above, but beside the younger man.

He reminds Timothy in verse 6 of a significant moment in his life and ministry when hands were laid on him. I think that's probably the same event described in 1 Timothy 4:14 where the council of church elders laid hands on him and he received some kind of gift, probably the spiritual gift of leadership of the church at Ephesus. Paul was there on that day when Timothy started on this path. So his appeal to Timothy is from beside him—not just as the great apostle, which he was by the will of God, but as his partner in ministry and fellow-worker. He reminds him that he was given a gift that needs to be continually fanned into flame.

God did not give us, he says, a spirit of fear—the word can also be translated 'cowardice' or 'timidity.' He's saying that when God equipped him for ministry, He didn't give him the Spirit of spinelessness. Or actually, he doesn't say that, does he? He says 'God gave *us* a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.' It's not just about Timothy, but about Paul too: 'God gave *us*....' As if Paul is also reminding himself of God's empowering, strengthening his own resolve not to shrink back or be a coward in the face of suffering and hardship.

He's saying again: be faithful to *our* spiritual heritage and inheritance. We've been given the Spirit of power, love and self-control. Just what's needed at a time like this. Just what we need as ministers of the gospel, says Paul. We'll need *power*, just to keep going as Christians, especially if we have to suffer for it. Paul tells Timothy to suffer for the gospel 'by the power of God.'

And we'll need *love* when people in the church are difficult to deal with. Anyone who has been in ministry for a few years can testify that the sheer, youthful enthusiasm for the job wears off after a while, but if you love the people

God has put in your care, then that sustains you and compels you. But we also need *self-control*, as Paul says, so we don't fly off the handle at our theological opponents, but keep our heads in the face of heresy and immorality. Such things are as inevitable as the annual tax return, and can be just as frustrating. Yet we're not to run to the whisky or to social media to cope or procrastinate. God has given us the Spirit of self-control.

So I don't think it would be fair to say that Timothy is timid by nature, as some people seem to assume. He was one of Paul's most trusted, well-trained, and respected colleagues. If he was scared by the slightest thing then he wouldn't have survived very long in Paul's mission agency, would he? No, Paul is saying that God has given *us* everything we need for this difficult task, Timothy. So let's both of us keep going! It may not be easy—and we'll come to why that is in a moment—but let us press on.

They have a shared spiritual heritage. Paul is confident of Timothy's faithfulness. But heritage requires loyalty, and confidence needs to be validated—in both their cases. As a good preacher I'm sure Paul is preaching to himself in verse 7 just as much as he's preaching to his co-worker. Neither man can afford to sit on his laurels as it were.

I wonder if it would be possible to apply this to us? Let's be faithful to *our* spiritual heritage and fan into flame the gift of God that we've been given, however dimly it might be burning at present. Let's keep the flames of humble, prayerful, careful study of God's Word alive in our day, just as it's been handed down to us over many years by our spiritual forebears. Let's not be afraid to work hard at it, and let's not grow weary in the battles, for God did not give us a spirit of fear, but of power, of love, and self-control.

I know this is addressed to an individual, Timothy, and not to a church. But it would be a great message for churches which have a history of solid biblical ministry. Let us be faithful to our spiritual heritage. Let's remember those men and women of the faith who stood for biblical

truth and passed it on faithfully to us. Our families perhaps, our mentors, our children's church teachers, our camp leaders perhaps.

It would be great to go on and ponder how this might apply to denominations too. Can we call the Church of England, my own denomination, back to be faithful to its spiritual heritage? Can I appeal to my fellow Anglicans by reminding them of those great theologians and bishops like Thomas Cranmer, Nicholas Ridley, and Hugh Latimer—the evangelical doctrines they placed in our constitution, and died to defend? Will the Church of England be faithful to that heritage, or shrink back, so that instead of power and love and self-control we end up merely with worldly compromise, superficial nicety, and rampant immorality?

Can we apply it to the wider evangelical world too? We have a heritage of standing firm on the Bible, on the cross, and on evangelism. Many seem to be going wobbly on these core commitments today. Evangelicals were once united on such doctrines and on biblical morality. Nowadays there are so many fault lines in our constituency that I sometimes wonder whether the only thing which unites us is opposition to gay marriage. And in some evangelical circles, even that seems to be weakening.

An evangelical bishop said to me recently that he feared we were now clear on homosexuality but utterly divided and at war over the Atonement. And that this was wrong, and totally at odds with our spiritual heritage. I fear he may be right. But it's so easy to be timid, to be tempted to shy away from that kind of internal controversy, when we really need to be united on the things we *can* be united on. As the bishop spoke, I could feel in myself a tendency to want to smooth over such differences for the sake of an apparent unity on a pressing issue of the day. But part of me also whispered that it would be difficult for me to read or preach this passage, if I wasn't prepared to apply it to the struggles I face in my own ministry. The question kept

coming back—will I be timid for the sake of an easy life, or be faithful to our spiritual heritage as evangelicals?

Well, I don't know if we can apply it like that. But it would be interesting to try. Yet we must press on and look at the second part of this opening chapter, and particularly at verse 8. It's a key verse for understanding this whole letter actually, so we'd better spend some time unpacking what it says. I think what verse 8 is saying is: Let's suffer together without shame.

Let's suffer together without shame

Because of our great spiritual heritage and history and inheritance, let's suffer together without shame, Paul says: 'do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God...' Suffering is a big theme in 2 Timothy. Paul himself is in prison as he writes the letter, on trial because of his preaching of the gospel. And he warns Timothy later on in 2 Timothy 3:12 that 'all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.'

So the temptation is to be ashamed. Ashamed of what? Don't be ashamed 'of the testimony about our Lord.' Or as he calls it later in the verse, 'the gospel.' The good news of Jesus Christ our Lord. Don't be ashamed of it. Don't water it down, or ignore bits of the message, or leave out the unpopular bits. Don't be ashamed of it, whatever people say or do.

And then, more surprisingly, he says don't be ashamed of *me*. Don't be ashamed of Paul? Well, it's one thing to call people to be loyal to Jesus and His Word, but surely Paul is going a bit far now? Has he got one of those narcissistic personality disorders, that you sometimes see in celebrity pastors (or those who would like to be celebrities)? Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God Himself. But Paul? He's just a man.

Well, we're going to come back to that thought in the next chapter, because it deserves careful attention. But let's