

Youthful Maturity in Ministry

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Let no man despise thy youth; but be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity. Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine. {1Ti 4:12-13}

New Testament scholars generally believe that Timothy was relatively young for someone who served in ministry. He might have been in his late teens or early twenties, or he might have been as old as twenty-five to thirty. The charge that Paul gave to him has more to do with his spiritual maturity than with his chronological age. Had he wished, Timothy could have acted rather immaturely and simply claimed youthful inexperience as his reason. Neither he nor Paul seem at all inclined to such irresponsible action.

I must confess that it is far more acceptable to see a young person acting their age than to see an older person acting like a very young person. Sometimes disease or accident occurs and interferes with a young person's physical development. We occasionally neglect to consider that things also happen that interfere with a person's emotional and spiritual development. Although they are old enough-and have even spent many years in their discipleship-they act very immaturely. These people leave their loved ones and friends constantly off balance. You expect maturity commensurate with their age and experience, but you never see it. Rather than acting forty or fifty years old, they may act more like an adolescent. Like the immature adolescent (I must observe that I do not stereotype all adolescents as immature. I have seen many adolescents whose godly and selfless maturity served as a noble example to believers of all age. May their tribe increase!), they are self-consumed. Everything that happens around them is interpreted in terms of how it impacts them. They are so self-consumed that they seldom tolerate any kind of confrontation or corrective exhortation. In their adolescent mind exhortation becomes an unfair and vicious attack. Thus instead of responding with repentance and reflection, they react with anger and defensiveness. They have never come to understand how to learn from their mistakes. They are so self-consumed and insecure that they refuse to acknowledge that they make any.

In refreshing contrast to this type of person Paul's direction to Timothy nudges him to live his faith in exemplary fashion. Let me start with the last verse, "Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine." By reading Timothy would gain access to other minds than his own. He would become an active member of a greater Christian community of thinking Christians. Doctrine refers in this context to teaching, not to core theological topics. Exhortation addresses the core issue of spiritual maturity. The Greek word, "parakaleo," literally means to invite or call alongside. A person who is acting immaturely or inappropriately cannot-at least should not-invite others to join in the errant conduct. Timothy is directed to live so that at any time and under any circumstance he can invite believers under his charge to join him in his conduct. This exemplary requirement is an incredible challenge to every preacher of the gospel, as it is to every mature and seasoned Christian whose conduct and life in the faith invite younger believers to look up to them as examples.

When Paul listed the detailed qualifications of both offices of minister and deacon, he made a point of emphasizing the man's interaction with his family. Paul viewed a man's interaction and leadership (or lack thereof) with his family as a primary indicator of his leadership style in the church. In both cases he must lead by example and by respect, not by brute force or threat. If he fails to lead his family with grace and respect, he will likely also fail to lead a church body with those traits.

I have already made some rather strong points regarding the necessity of qualifications for these offices, but this passage calls for added emphasis. Every man who has served in either office for very

long has experienced his own humanity or that of others, especially his family, that rebuked him and gave him second thoughts regarding his qualifications. Neither in those chapters nor here do I care to emphasize that a man should either resign or be removed from office at the first or least infraction. My desire is that he take his office seriously enough to repent where necessary and rise to the qualifications. The moment a man in either office gives up on living up to the qualifications he has hopelessly marginalized his function in the office. As his conduct becomes known to those in the church that he serves, they will join him in marginalizing his office and begin to ignore him and his teaching. If he doesn't respect his position enough to live up to the Biblical qualifications-knowingly so-he cannot expect the people in his church to respect him when he tries to lead them either from the pulpit or from the office of deacon. My hope is that every man who holds either office will read these qualifications regularly, reflect on their meaning and application to his life and circumstance, and live determined to honor the qualifications as his dominant lifestyle.

"Be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity." Six criteria appear as benchmarks to measure Timothy's exemplary conduct.

1. Word. Whether in private conversation or in pulpit speaking, the minister of the gospel is to speak so that others may safely and honorably model his speech.
2. Conversation might well be translated as "manner of life," for it refers to our whole conduct, not just to our words.
3. Charity refers to how we live, not to how we feel. It is an act of the will more than an act of the sentiment or emotions. Anytime you want to clarify the intent of this word in your conduct go to 1Co 13 and read the details of Miss Charity's conduct, always the gracious lady.
4. Spirit may well refer to attitude, to those silent but obvious signals of our conduct that reveal far more about us than we sometimes wish or realize. You can do the right thing with resentment or with joy. The "spirit" of resentment or joy will show clearly in your body language, your voice quality, and in many other ways that cannot be hidden. Timothy's spirit, no less than his actual conduct, is to set a noble example for the believers.
5. Faith. Oh, how difficult during seasons of trial it is to embrace faith and live by her powerful influence. We often distrust disease or the ill treatment of others far more than we trust God to stand by us during our trials. When you are undergoing a severe trial, the people close to you will watch you closer than at almost any other time in your life. What example will they see?
6. Purity. In the absolute sense purity might refer to sinlessness. Yet Scripture no where teaches that we can live above any sin in this life. At the least, however, Paul will not permit Timothy to use excuses and rationalizations to justify his failures or sins. He expects this young preacher to live in the trenches of life what he must preach from the pulpit.

Given the fact that Paul left Timothy in Ephesus to address and to correct major problems in this church that had such a noble beginning, we must consider that a low view of its leaders, both by the church members and by the leaders themselves, must have been a major part of the problem there. Paul always takes a practical approach to problems. He is not typically a theoretical man. If he surfaces a problem, it is quite likely that it is a real problem to his readers, not merely something that might become a problem. If the church had adopted a low view of its leaders-and more so if its leaders had adopted a low view of their office and of their conduct in it-we quickly grasp a powerful insight into this letter and its pointed teachings. We also get a concise view of Paul's-and the Holy Spirit's-expectations of us.

How committed are we to Biblical criteria to evaluate and to direct our conduct, both as members of a New Testament church and especially as officers in a New Testament church? If we have been inclined to compromise our faith, now is a good time for reflection and repentance, beginning with me.

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