

2 TIMOTHY 2:1-3

ENSURING A FUTURE FOR THE FAITH

“You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.”¹

Apostolic succession is essential to a healthy church. However, whenever we speak of “apostolic succession,” it is important to define what is meant. When I speak of apostolic succession, I imply adherence to the model provided in Scripture. I do not refer to the aberrations, however popular they may be, that occur in contemporary church life. By “apostolic succession,” I mean that there is a continuation of the Apostles’ doctrine, the apostolic message.

Our Catholic friends, Orthodox Christians and numerous Protestant communions as well, hold to what they call “apostolic succession.” By this term these religions infer that they depend upon being able to trace the ordination of priests back to Peter; this is succession of the office. Tragically, we are aware of the scandals that have marked many of the churches holding to this particular aberration. Those who perpetuated and attempted to cover over crimes which were committed by priests were certainly not living as Peter would have lived. It is obvious that God could not approve of their actions. They would argue, however, that because of succession of ordination leading back to Peter, then doctrine and full fellowship are ensured.²

Among some evangelical churches, and especially touted by certain Baptist groups, a form of apostolic succession that has caused great harm to the cause of Christ is promoted. These churches do not argue that they have a succession of ordination; rather, they hold to “baptismal succession.” Their argument is that your baptism is invalid if you cannot trace your baptism back to John the Baptist. Their de facto argument is that only baptism administered by a church holding the name “Baptist” is valid; and all other baptisms are, by definition, defective.³ My wife is an excellent genealogist; however, not even my wife is able to trace such a lineage.

Apostolic succession, however, is readily witnessed by appeal to the Word of God as we hold churches to the mirror of the Word. You will note a statement concerning the practise of the first congregation in Jerusalem. “[Those baptised] devoted themselves to the apostle’s teaching” [ACTS 2:42a]. These earliest Christians were committed to knowing and to obeying what was taught by the Apostles. That mark of knowledge and obedience is witnessed to this day among churches that practise, whether they use the term or not, apostolic succession. Apostolic succession is the succession of the message that defined the first congregations and continues to mark those faithful congregations to this day.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Wheaton: Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

² Cf. “Apostolic succession,” The Catholic Encyclopedia, http://orthodoxwiki.org/Apostolic_succession, accessed 16 September 2015; “Apostolic Succession,” http://orthodoxwiki.org/Apostolic_succession, accessed 16 September 2015; “Apostolic succession,” Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apostolic_succession, accessed 16 September 2015; Arthur Brinckman and E. B. Pusey, **Notes and Questions on the Catholic Faith and Religion, the Notes and Answers Compiled Chiefly from the Works and in the Words of Dr. Pusey**. (A. D. Innes & Co., London 1891), 170–183; Wladimir Guettée, **The Papacy; Its Historic Origin and Primitive Relations with the Eastern Churches** (Carleton; S. Low, Son & Co., New York 1867), 52–91; Catholic Church, **Catechism of the Catholic Church**, 2nd Ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), 24–25, 867

³ Stephen R. Holmes, **Baptist Theology**, Doing Theology (T&T Clark, London 2012), 35–36; Timothy George and David S. Dockery, eds., **Theologians of the Baptist Tradition** (Broadman & Holman, Nashville, TN 2001), 341–342

In our text, Paul informs Timothy of his responsibility to hold to what he has been taught. Then, he is responsible to ensure that this truth is passed to others who themselves will faithfully hold these same teachings. In this way, continuation of the apostles' teaching is assured; this ongoing communication will transcend time, culture and language. If we question whether the things taught from the pulpit align with what the apostles taught, we need but review what is recorded in the Word of God to give ourselves assurance. Whilst the continuing communication depends upon those proclaiming these truths, those listening bear responsibility to know the Word and to compare what is taught with the standard of the Word.

A FUTURE FOR THE FAITH — “You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.” The text continues the primary theme of this letter—Timothy's succession of Paul.

Paul had long served as God's messenger—if not to others, than certainly he was such to Timothy. Restricted by incarceration, his death sentence made it obvious that the aged saint would shortly cease serving as God's workman. Though no one could have known it at that time, there would not be another Apostle to the Gentiles; Timothy would now be responsible to continue serving as elder to the Ephesian congregation without the Apostle's encouragement. His service was the precise reason he had been appointed by the Apostle to serve in that location.

In his earlier letter to Timothy, Paul had reminded the younger man of his responsibility in Ephesus. “As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith. The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions” [1 TIMOTHY 1:3-7].

Timothy had received a charge to confront errant teaching, doing so in a manner that honoured the Master while revealing love for the Saviour. He was to expose those individuals who erroneously promoted themselves as spokesmen for God through self-appointment. Opposition to error, and especially opposition to errant teachers, is seldom welcomed either by those confronted or by members uncertain and confused about the status of such individuals.

Now, Paul was reminding Timothy that just as the Apostle had limited time to continue his service, so Timothy would also need to recognise that his time of service was limited. Ministers, and especially young ministers, must always know that the time to fulfil one's appointed service is limited—there must be an end to every ministry. At Christ's return all work shall cease. If the return of Christ is delayed, then each of us knows that we must go the way of all the earth. Whether it is because He has returned or whether we must pass through the dark waters, whatever is to be done must be done now. Jesus warned those who would follow Him, “We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work” [JOHN 9:4]. Whatever we may hope to accomplish for the cause of Christ our Master must be done now. We dare not delay serving His cause.

Just as the requirement to evangelise is urgent and our evangelism must be conducted now, so our ministry to the people of God is urgent. The writer of the Letter to Hebrew Christians cautioned disciples, “Exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin” [HEBREWS 3:13].

Paul had urged the Roman Christians, “You know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires” [ROMANS 13:11-14].

Elsewhere, Paul warned believers, “When anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says,

‘Awake O sleeper,
and arise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.’

“Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is” [EPHESIANS 5:13-17].

At any moment in time, the Faith is but one generation from extinction. Of course, I’m speaking from a human perspective. I am fully aware that we serve God and that He is sovereign; I know full well that His will shall be done. However, recognising God’s sovereignty does not excuse our responsibility to fulfil His command to labour in His cause while we are able. Our work must be done now; we do not have the luxury of fulfilling the Master’s command tomorrow. Because Timothy is now being commissioned to succeed Paul, the Apostle issues three urgent commands—“be strengthened,” “entrust,” “share in suffering.” The same commission is given to all who serve Christ in this day.

We are often prone to relegate Paul’s instructions given here to preachers. After all, Timothy was an elder in the Church of Ephesus. He served as an overseer because the Apostle had appointed him to that position. Thus, it is easy to imagine that anything Paul has written applies at best to elders without any relevance for church members. However, I contend that what is written applies to all believers—both generally and specifically.

Perhaps our contemporary view grows out of a distorted view of the church. In modern thought, we go to church. We preachers have done a poor job of teaching the saints the truths of who we are and what our relationship to our Sovereign Head, Christ Jesus, is to be. Thus, too often Christians see church as a spectator sport. We go to church, watch a worship team worship and a preacher preach. The entire event is treated somewhat as entertainment. We seem to have forgotten that each individual is to meet the Risen Saviour, being lost in wonder, admiration and awe before His majesty and power. We are responsible to meet Him; and we meet Him through the elements of worship—reading the Scriptures; praying; singing hymns, psalms and spiritual songs; and through the preaching of the Word.

“[The first congregation met and] devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” [ACTS 2:42-47].

This nascent church was marked by devotion to biblical preaching, devotion to unity as a congregation and devotion the Risen Saviour revealed through worship. Consequently, church was a living entity for these earliest saints. These new believers attended and participated in the worship of the congregation because they had been transformed—each one knew that she or he had a vital role. For each of these believers, church was not a performance—the church was the living Body of the Risen Son of God and they were each members of that living Body.

An old saying among the churches presented the truth that the workman dies, but the work continues. God superintends His churches, ensuring that the Faith will not be extirpated from the earth. However, it is the Master's plan that He ensures continuation of the Faith through mere mortals. Each generation is responsible to reach the next generation with the message of life, bringing those who follow into the Faith and committing the work into their hands. Successful succession is dependent upon catechesis of others. Without new birth into the Family of God, the present generation dies out and the Faith ceases to exist. Succession ends with the last one to prepare others for assuming the role of pastor and teacher.

What I would have you hold tenaciously is that each member shares responsibility to advance the cause of Christ and to bring the next generation to life in the Son of God. Therefore, when the Apostle delivered these three imperatives, he spoke to all believers—including us! Together, we are charged to deliver the apostolic message to the generation that follows.

THE UNCHANGING DEMANDS — “You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.” The message is pointed; and was I able to do so, I would make the appeal pointedly to each of you who shares this service at this hour. “You” is emphatic. This is not a generalised plea; it is a pointed command. Moreover, the conjunction is too easily ignored—“*You then!*” Paul contrasts his expectations for Timothy, insisting upon a difference in the response of those who will honour God and those who have turned aside out of fear or out of love of ease.

“*Be strengthened*” translates a Greek term that is not particularly common in Paul's letters. The Apostle does use the word six times, and half of them are in his correspondence with Timothy. This is a compound word composed of “in” and “power.” What is interesting for us as we consider the message is that this word always points toward moral or spiritual strength.⁴ If the Faith is to continue, it will be necessary that we cease depending on human stratagems and rely on spiritual power supplied by God.

Focusing somewhat further on the linguistic parameters that are communicated by this command in order to tease out the impact of what the Apostle has written, I note that the command is in the present tense, indicating that the action Paul is commanding is to be undertaken continuously or repeatedly. Moreover, the word is in the passive voice, indicating that the strengthening comes from outside of Timothy as he is acted upon by another outside of himself. Thus, “a meaning something like ‘take responsibility to allow yourself to be strengthened’ may capture the intent.”⁵ Those who will receive the apostolic command are to be strengthened repeatedly—they are to anticipate a continuous replenishment of moral strength.

⁴ William Arndt et al., **A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature : A Translation and Adaption of the Fourth Revised and Augmented Edition of Walter Bauer's Griechisch-Deutsches Worterbuch Zu Den Schrift En Des Neuen Testaments Und Der Ubrigen Urchristlichen Literatur** (University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1979), 263

⁵ John A. Kitchen, **The Pastoral Epistles for Pastors** (Kress Christian Publications, The Woodlands, TX 2009), 339

The child of God is counselled to appropriate the power that is available in Christ Jesus. The key phrase to note is “in Christ Jesus.” The believer is strengthened through the grace that is in Christ Jesus, administered to each Christian by the Spirit who dwells within each Christian. Let me refresh your memories of a crucial truth, pointing out that the Spirit of God does indeed supply gifts to His people. I admit that we do not speak of these gifts often enough—there is far too little teaching concerning His gifts. Nevertheless, beyond divine gifts given by the Spirit of Christ is the Spirit’s empowerment of His people for effective service.

Preparing the disciples for His ascension, Jesus said, “Behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high” [LUKE 24:49]. It is doubtful that the disciples understood what Jesus had just promised. Jesus iterated this promise ten days before the descent of the Holy Spirit as He prepared to ascend into the heavens. “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” [ACTS 1:8].

Thus, in the text the Apostle points to something he had written only moments before. Paul had written, “Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you” [2 TIMOTHY 1:13, 14]. If the Faith is to continue without adulteration, without dilution or without distortion, those who hold to the Faith must hold to the pattern of sound words as taught by faithful men and guard the good deposit—the gospel that has been entrusted to each one. Christians are keepers of the truth; and they are keeping the truth by the grace that is in Christ Jesus which is administered by the power of the Holy Spirit.

I must stress this truth because it is liable to be distorted unintentionally on occasion. Believers are empowered by the grace that is in Christ Jesus; however, this power is not as imagined so often. Follow the Apostle’s argument beginning in the previous chapter and you will see that the power supplied by Christ’s Spirit enables His child to adhere to the truth, recognising and guarding against error. What God supplies is not power that leads us to resort to the methods of the world in order to accomplish His work. The power supplied to the child of God is power to be holy, it is power to recognise error and it is power to speak the truth in love.

Tragically, many professed saints of God attempt to employ the means of this world to accomplish the work of God. If I use the world’s methods, I will achieve only what the world can give. We do well to remember John’s admonition, “The world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever” [1 JOHN 2:17]. Perhaps we need to remember the Master’s teaching that cautions would-be disciples. “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal” [JOHN 6:27]. Why appeal to human courts to halt wickedness? Why not rather reach out in love declare the power of Christ to redeem fallen people? No parliament, no congress, no legislature can bring in the reign of righteousness.

Here is an example of what the child of God may expect when Christ’s power is appropriated. You will recall that Jesus had cautioned His disciples, “Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles” [MATTHEW 10:16-18]. Then, He added this promise concerning how the believer is to respond, “When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you” [MATTHEW 10:19, 20].

Then, the Christian is commanded to “*entrust to faithful men*” what he is heard in the presence of many witnesses. Whenever I preach, I am conscious that God’s Spirit is working in your lives. The truths that I am teaching will be echoed through your lives and through your interaction with others. Each time we participate in a service of worship, we hear the Apostles’ teaching and we are equipped to communicate this precious truth to others.

Let me be blunt, what I think about a passage is of no particular account. What you think is meant by a portion of the Word means nothing. What is important is the intent of God who gave the Word. For this reason, it is essential that I deliver, not a lecture or a mere sermon; rather, I am obligated to bring a message from God. I have said on numerous occasions—any pagan can preach a sermon, but only a Christian will have a message. I do not deny that God is able to speak through a donkey—He did so on at least one occasion [see NUMBERS 22:28-30]. Nevertheless, God is pleased to use mere men as the usual means of delivering His Word. That which is delivered from the sacred desk must be truth filtered through mere mortals. The man of God is responsible to spend time in the presence of God, listening for the voice of the Son of God so that he may deliver the message in the power of God to the people of God.

The world may not be impressed by the message we bring, but it is this message that brings life to those who are dead and gives sight to those who are blind. Recall Paul’s teaching to the Church of God in Corinth. “The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,

‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.’

“Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” [1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-25].

Soon after writing this, Paul confessed to these same Corinthian believers, “When I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God” [1 CORINTHIANS 2:1-5].

To be certain, through preaching the Word we are preparing people to meet God, for all must give an account to Him. As I preach and as I teach, I am conscious that some listen who will carry this message beyond the days of my life. God is at work even now calling some young man to declare this message. He is working effectively in the life of some fellow believer, equipping that sister or preparing that brother to speak to a neighbour or to comfort a colleague. God is equipping someone even now to stand firm in the storms of life and thus glorifying His Name. Jesus would say, “My Father is still working, and I am working also”⁶ [JOHN 5:17]. The Master was working when He walked with the disciples; and He is working now. Similarly, Jesus was working when Paul wrote his final missive; and Jesus is working now.

⁶ Holy Bible: Holman Christian Standard Version (Holman Bible Publishers, Nashville, TN 2009)

Timothy had heard Paul as he spoke “sound words.” These words had been spoken “in the presence of many witnesses.” Paul’s words—the messages he had delivered and which Timothy had undoubtedly heard, the instructions Paul had provided multiple congregations, the studies of the Word that Paul had conducted—these were now to be entrusted to faithful men. These men who would be entrusted with this knowledge base were to be chosen in part because they would be adjudged as “able to teach others” just as they themselves were being taught.

Permit me to take time to focus on Paul’s qualifying statement designating the specific words to which he refers. At that time, almost all transmission of the Gospel and the teaching concerning the will of God would have been oral. Written copies of the Old Covenant, of the several letters that had been sent and various commentaries on the revealed will of God would be somewhat rare. Today, the instructions would include especially what has been written. The written Word of God in particular has become essential for our understanding of Paul’s intent.

There is another matter that should be noted, and that is that the words Paul wanted Timothy to entrust to faithful men had been spoken first “in the presence of many witnesses.” Whenever the Apostle delivered a message he was communicating the mind of God. His words were intended for more than a tiny, select group; many witnesses heard what was preached. Paul was delivering messages intended to build the people of God. This is consistent with what he wrote to the Corinthian saints. “The one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church. Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up” [1 CORINTHIANS 14:3b-5]. Building up the Body figures prominently in the apostolic theology.

Within this information lies a point that is essential for Christians; and yet, I refer to a point that is easily ignored today. There is no secret knowledge that only a few attain among the faithful—God’s Good News is an open secret. Indeed, all who share in the Faith bear responsibility to ensure the reliability of what is taught. Whenever I stand to preach, or whenever you listen to a preacher holding forth the Word on television or the radio, as believers in the Risen Son of God you are responsible to assess what is being said, testing the words that are spoken against what has been received in our Bible.

I have a deep concern that we have entered into a strange new day among the churches—a day of specialists. The ideal of men of character recognised for their godliness and God’s appointment to service seems somehow passé, obsolete, unworkable. Today, pastors are hired based on the degree possessed, the school attended and the connections within their particular denomination. Thus, the churches are dependent upon a *de facto* guild controlled from without. However, by making such a transition we have eliminated accountability to the Body of Christ. Preachers today are accountable to denominational entities because the churches have relinquished responsibility to hold the preacher accountable to the Word. Thus, it becomes easier to move toward a doctrinal model built on what sounds good and what makes me feel good about myself rather than being built up in the pure Word of God. Following the Apostle’s instruction, we are to judge those who preach according to fidelity to what the Apostle taught.

Faithfulness to apostolic doctrine and adherence to the Apostle’s example is the criterion by which we are to assess a preacher’s suitability for the pulpit. It is of no particular importance how polished they are in speech or in dress; it is essential to know that they are serious about pursuing righteousness and that they are faithful in declaring the message of life. It is not particularly critical where they went to school or who they know—are they walking with Christ?

Every Christian should aspire to be a teacher. We can't all be preachers, but we can all teach someone. From earliest days mothers must teach their children of the love of God and of the life that is offered through Christ the Lord. Every father must teach his family, modelling a righteous life and seeking to present every family member alive in Christ the Lord. Every woman must aspire to tell his friends of the love of God in Christ the Lord, pointing them to life in Him. Every man must seek the salvation of his colleagues and co-workers. We can all seek to tell of God's salvation and seek life for those whom we know and love.

If the whole church holds the preacher accountable for what is taught, the community of faith will be denoted as faithful and competent. If the assembly is content to watch professionals present a show, other adjectives will describe what we have become—I suggest such words as entertaining, talented, dead. A day is coming, faster than I could wish, when I must cease standing in the pulpit. Before that day arrives the people of God will be called upon to seek out one who will fill this pulpit. He must be a man of God. He must meet the criteria presented in the Word, bearing in his life the evidence of God's appointment [see 1 TIMOTHY 3:1-7; TITUS 1:6-9]. You are responsible to assess that man's call and character. We seek apostolic succession—not a succession of office, but succession of message; and that message will be embodied in a godly life dedicated to serving the Son of God through serving the people of God.

Paul issued one further sharp command. That command is one word in the original language, but when it is translated into English we receive the command as “*share in suffering*.” *Sunkakopathēson* is the Greek word. The word is a tri-compound work that means literally, “suffer evil with.” It could mean either that Timothy is to “suffer together with” Paul, or that he is “to take his share in suffering.” Suffering marked the lives of the early saints. Paul has referenced suffering already and will do so again before he concludes this missive. Suffering because of Christ is to be expected in the life of the child of God. Is this not what our Master has taught us? “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” [JOHN 15:18, 19].

Earlier, Paul had testified, “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, who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, for which I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher, which is why I suffer as I do” [2 TIMOTHY 1:8-12a].

In a few short verses, the Apostle will once again point to his suffering, writing, “Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal” [2 TIMOTHY 2:8, 9a].

Then, as he draws the letter to a conclusion, he will admonish the young theologian, “I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry” [2 TIMOTHY 4:1-5].

In order to reinforce this imperative, Paul uses the metaphor of a soldier's life. While exploring this metaphor more fully must wait for another study, it is important to note that Paul appeals to the hardships faced by Legionnaires on numerous occasions. The appeal is apt—the rigors of military life would be generally appreciated in that day, though the specifics could not be necessarily known. The reference is to the demands of life as a follower of the Christ. It is sufficient to say that the Christian life is demanding, rigorous, challenging—if it is real.

In my brief life I have observed a number of men driven from the ministry. A frequent complaint is that there isn't enough money in pastoring. I thought about that in light of this pointed command. The Apostle to the Jews commands young elders, "I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly" [1 PETER 5:1, 2]. Biblical elders stand out because of a "willingness to sacrifice." One does not serve as a shepherd of God's people with money as the primary motivation. A shepherd will shepherd whether or not there is financial remuneration. The "financial support," if there is any, does not provide motivation—it provides time, so the elder can spend fewer hours earning his wages and more time doing the work of shepherding.

If a person is resistant to shepherding God's people without pay, then pay will not motivate him to godly shepherding. This "voluntariness" must be accompanied by eagerness marked by enthusiasm and cheerfulness. A person may be willing to volunteer as an elder, but to do it with joy is a sign of the true shepherd's heart. I do not want you to imagine that what I have just said is permission for the congregation to refuse to provide generously for those who preach and teach. Nevertheless, I do want those who say they will preach and teach to understand that a fire burning within impels the man of God to labour at preaching.

Inadequate pastoral support is a minor problem when compared to genuine opposition. I have often weighed the words penned by an unknown writer almost two millennia past. "Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood" [HEBREWS 12:3, 4]. I've been ridiculed and mocked, but I've never been beaten because of my Faith. I've been threatened and I've been ostracised, but I've never shed blood because of my Faith. I'm speaking to people who for the most part have never been called to shed blood because of faith in the Son of God. We have perhaps been opposed because of what we believe; but seldom have we suffered physically. Each Christian needs to take seriously the divine invitation to "share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus."

RECEIVING THE MESSAGE — "You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus." Whether we live or whether we die as a congregation depends upon choices we make even now. We can either retreat into enclaves, silencing our message as the world perishes, or we can fulfil the commands given by our Sovereign Head.

Jesus commanded, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" [MATTHEW 28:19-20]. Our responsibility is to obey Him whom we call "Master," telling the inhabitants of this darkened world of life in God's own Son.

As a congregation, we must always encourage believers to create opportunities to instruct the righteous in biblical truth. Every member must accept the challenge to tell the lost of the love of Christ the Lord. We provide Bible studies now, but we need to create even greater opportunities to instruct believers and to reach the lost. I understand that not everyone who says “I want to teach” is qualified to teach. Part of the challenge of providing pastoral oversight is encouraging the faithful to continue to grow; and evidence of growth is revealed through willingness to stretch oneself through striving for excellence.

As pastor, I pledge to encourage each member who determines to instruct others in righteousness. Our ladies can invite neighbours and friends to learn of Christ over tea or through friendship evangelism. We’ve witnessed multiple efforts in the past of Bible studies conducted by and for our ladies; such efforts should be multiplied this year. Similarly, we have seen our men engage other men in discussing the Faith during outdoor events or through accepting the responsibility of leadership for teaching. An entire generation of boys and girls are rapidly passing through our lives; we have only a short time to teach them of Christ the Lord.

The message, however, confronts us with an urgency that is palpable to prepare for the future. Should Christ delay His return, we will be challenged to prepare for the future. Disappointment in previous efforts to secure elders equipped to provide leadership must not deter us from preparation to entrust the message of life to faithful men. As a congregation, we must be alert to recognise those men in whose lives God is evidently at work. These men must be encouraged and trained as we prepare for the days to come.

I close with the account of a congregation fulfilling the will of the Lord. The family of George W. Truett moved to Whitewright, Texas in 1889 where the local Baptist Church recognized his talents and he was elected superintendent of the Sunday School. On several occasions when the pastor of the church was absent, Truett was asked to speak to the congregation. Whenever he conducted the services, he always stood in front of the pulpit because he felt unworthy to stand behind it. While living in Whitewright, he entered Grayson Junior College, intending to prepare for a career as a lawyer. He planned to attend Yale University where he would study for the legal profession. Many times he was urged to enter the ministry instead of following his legal pursuits. Each time he solemnly answered, “I will speak for Christ, but I am not worthy to be His minister.”

Finally the congregation called a special meeting on a Saturday night. The oldest deacon of the congregation said, “I move that this church ordain Brother George W. Truett to the full work of the Gospel ministry.” Truett rose to protest, but the members’ pleadings forced him to relent. In later years Truett talked about that night. “There I was, against a whole church, against a church profoundly moved. There was not a dry eye in the house ... one of the supremely solemn hours in a church's life. I was thrown into the stream, and just had to swim.” That night the call to preach superseded the plans to be a lawyer, and his course was set.

The next day he was examined and ordained and one of the worst men in the community was gloriously converted under the influence of that service. George W. Truett preached his first sermon in the First Baptist Church of Sherman, Texas, now standing behind the pulpit.⁷

Seeking faithful men is the work of the congregation. To be sure, the pastor must be ever alert for God at work; but the congregation will ratify the work of the Spirit in the life of some godly man whom God is preparing. Whether that choice honours God or debases the ministry depends upon the faithfulness both of the people and of that one whom they choose. Amen.

⁷ Information taken from, Ed Reese, “The Life and Ministry of George Truett,” http://www.profilerministries.com/uploads/2/8/9/8/2898606/g._truett-_biography.pdf, accessed 20 September 2015