

The Face of Faithful Ministry

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If thou put the brethren in remembrance of these things, thou shalt be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished up in the words of faith and of good doctrine, whereunto thou hast attained. But refuse profane and old wives' fables, and exercise thyself rather unto godliness. {1Ti 4:6-7}

In this lesson to "put the brethren in remembrance" suggests not only teaching these things but actually modeling them in personal conduct. A pastor whose feet shout loudly one message cannot effectively teach a different lesson with his mouth from the pulpit. Feet always speak louder than words.

We live in a relativistic age in which often even professing Christians selectively reject or reinterpret passages of Scripture that conflict with their personal preferences. Earlier in this series we examined one of those areas related to the qualifications of ministers and deacons. People who would fiercely defend doctrinal purity as they understand it from Scripture will advocate abandonment of these qualifications on the basis that today no one lives up to them. First of all, I suggest that this attitude reveals a sad myopia in the mind of the person who offers this idea. He/she acknowledges a personal lack of compliance with the qualifications and rather than repenting and living up to them find it easier simply to impute personal failure onto everyone else-as if a global failure to qualify altered the requirements of Scripture. To anyone who presently fills either of these offices I urge a prayerful self-examination of your qualifications. If you identify areas in which you do not qualify, I urge you to take that area of your life to God in prayer and then to start a faithful effort to correct the problem immediately. Do not continue in the office with personal knowledge that you do not live up to its requirements. I must confess that at times I have faced major soul-searching of my own. I understand the gravity of what I advocate. We must all, however, face the gravity of the offices that we hold. God set the qualifications with supernatural wisdom and compassion, both for His people to whom we minister and for us who fill the offices. Obedience honors God and blesses us. Disobedience damages both our witness to others and our personal joy, while also dishonoring God. My objective for all of us is obedience that honors God. Will these steps impose change into our life? Indeed they will-incredible changes, but the changes will result in equally incredible blessings.

Paul requires faithfulness, not compromise, in the face of error. This faithfulness assures us of spiritual growth and blessing. The word translated "good" in "good minister" means "good, excellent in its nature and characteristics, and therefore well adapted to its ends. 1b1 genuine, approved. 1b2 precious. 1b3 joined to names of men designated by their office, competent, able, such as one ought to be. 1b4 praiseworthy, noble. 1c beautiful by reason of purity of heart and life, and hence praiseworthy. 1c1 morally good, noble. 1d honourable, conferring honour. 1e affecting the mind agreeably, comforting and confirming." {1} "Minister" is from the common word for servant, frequently used in the New Testament for ministers and deacons. Both offices serve in the church, not lord themselves over it.

"Nourished" refers to food for the body, but in this lesson it refers to food for the mind. It describes the way in which we train our minds by feeding them a steady diet of Biblical studies and truth. What you insert into your mouth becomes food for your body. What you "insert" into your mind, or allow to enter and dwell there, becomes food for the mind. Paul's approach to this need must find its resolution in our wills, not in our emotions.

Dr. A. T. Robertson interprets the phrase "the words of faith" as "The words of the faith." Typically-and I believe here-when you see the definite article with "faith" in the New Testament, the reference is to a commonly held body of accepted truths or teachings, similar to our "confessions of faith" or "articles of faith." Dr. Gary Habermas makes a strong case for this ancient first generation formal confession of faith in several of his writings. We live in an age that rejects or belittles formal confessions or articles

of faith. You will occasionally hear someone who rejects such documents offer the counterpoint, "No confession but the Bible." Actually this simple phrase itself becomes an extra-Bible "confession of faith."

Obviously faithfulness will feed the soul and stimulate spiritual growth and maturity, but in this case Paul seems quite focused on our faithful compliance with accepted truth as expressed in a formal confession. As we study our history, we easily migrate to our favorite confession that holds a position of respect and prominence at a particular time in our history. The London Confessions of faith (both 1644/46 and 1689, though quite different documents) both command such a role of respect.

I offer that even the London Confessions are too young to fill the Biblical role assigned by Paul to a confession. Consider his own posture, "For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures..."^{2} Here even Paul affirms that what he delivered as an apostle to the Corinthian church was a faithful preservation of what had been delivered to him. Scripture does not give us the liberty of revising our "faith" to fit our personal fancy. What a respected minister believes or what a neighboring church practices has no primary authority or weight over our "faith and practice." Any source outside Scripture for our faith is a bad source. "I can't find anything in Scripture against it" is an equally faulty basis for what we believe or practice.

What is the point? We will either develop contentment with the "food" of established and historically accepted truth as set forth in Scripture alone or we shall suffer spiritual malnutrition and deformity in our faith.

At this point Paul draws a rather sharp contrast between a well nourished faith based on inspired teaching and any other source that we might claim as our authority, "But refuse profane and old wives' fables."

D. A. Carson emphasizes this point. "In order to do this effectively Timothy must draw on his knowledge of the truth. (For an echo of this cf. 2Ti 3:15, where his early training is mentioned.) To this must be added the value of the tuition he has received from the apostle. Paul assumes that Timothy will know how to deal with the false teachers. He thinks it necessary to warn Timothy about wasting his time with myths and tales which have no basis in truth."^{3} Old women in the gnostic religion frequently told their myths to young children as something of an early childhood indoctrination into this mystery religion. The whole gnostic basis for "knowledge" claimed a private and secret verbal tradition independent of the written documents that we know as the New Testament. Therefore, as Paul observes, the basis for this teaching was mythology, not fact. Any idea claiming Christian weight that cannot stand the test of Scripture as its source should be viewed as a groundless myth, not as a revered belief or practice to be embraced and perpetuated in the church. At times it is incredibly challenging to respect the historicity of our Biblical faith while also maintaining faithful adherence to Scripture alone as the basis for our faith. We stand on the shoulders of faithful men and women who preceded us in the faith. We dishonor them to ignore their contribution to our standing in the faith. However, we dishonor them far more to substitute their ideas for Scriptural teaching, ideas that may not comply with Scripture. We stand on their shoulders, so we should stand there with respect for them. But we should also realize that they were not inspired, nor did they claim infallibility in their ideas. We must apply the same New Testament filter to them as we apply to ourselves. A robust and healthy faith will follow if we hold faithfully to this course.

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FOOTNOTES:

{1} Strong, J. (1996). The exhaustive concordance of the Bible: Showing every word of the text of the common English version of the canonical books, and every occurrence of each word in regular order.

(electronic ed.) (SGreek: 2570. kalos). Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship.

{2} The Holy Bible: King James Version. 1995. {1Co 15:3} Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

{3} Carson, D. A. (1994). New Bible Commentary: 21st century edition. Rev. ed. of: The new Bible commentary. 3rd ed. / edited by D. Guthrie, J.A. Motyer. 1970. (4th ed.). {1Ti 4:6} Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press.