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JOURNAL

**JUSTIFICATION:
MODERN
REFLECTIONS**

A Quarterly for Church Leadership

VOLUME 11 · NUMBER 2 · SPRING 2002

*Reflections on Ministry
and its Rekindling:
2 Timothy 1:17*



Gerald R. McDermott

In Romans Paul unfolded the gospel for a community he had founded, precisely in terms of this biblical master theme, the righteousness (*dikaiosunē*) of God (Romans 1:16-17). Only after presenting Gentiles and Jews alike under God's judgment (Romans 1:18-3:30) and a reference to "the justice of God" (3:5, God as Judge), does Paul in 3:22, 24-26 set forth our being justified by God's grace through faith in Jesus. The sacrificial death of Christ explains how God remains just while expiating sins. Justification is not merely an initial step toward salvation, in the believer's past, but also involves future vindication and living out the experience in the present (Romans 5:1; cf. 2:13; 3:20, 24). Justification is the foundation for carrying out God's will in daily life by service to others, in church and world (Romans 12:1-2), including "whatever is just" (Philippians 4:8).

JOHN REUMANN

Paul's reflections at the beginning of his second letter to Timothy contain some of the New Testament's most poignant insights into Christian ministry. As someone who has worked in churches for thirty years, I find these short paragraphs to be both comforting and bracing—words that suggest both why many ministries run aground and how men and women of the gospel can find the strength to weather the storms of ministry.

I will first discuss the authorship of this letter because without clarity on this point my interpretation of this passage will not make sense. Then I will comment on this passage verse by verse.

Many seminarians have been taught for forty years and more that it is doubtful that Paul is the author of this epistle. The arguments for such a view are strong: the language of this letter is quite different from that of the certifiably "Pauline" epistles, and Paul's characteristic emphasis on salvation is absent.

But the distinguished New Testament scholar Gordon Fee has recently (*1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, New International Biblical Commentary, Hendrickson & Paternoster Publishers, 1995) made just as strong arguments supporting Pauline authorship. He says it is not so surprising that Paul would

have used different vocabulary because it is well known that Paul often appropriated the language of his opposition in order to serve his own purposes. The fact that the "*dikai*" word group, so prominent in Romans and Galatians, does not appear in this epistle is not significant when one recalls that it does not appear in 1 or 2 Thessalonians, both of which are widely considered Pauline. Furthermore, this is a personal letter written to someone who already knows fully the content of the gospel, and the nature of the false teaching discussed here does not relate to the nature of salvation per se. But Paul does not completely ignore his favorite subject: the idea of preserving and reaffirming the gospel is, as Fee puts it, "at the heart of this letter."

We all know that Timothy was one of Paul's closest ministry associates. Fee says Timothy became Paul's "most intimate and enduring companion." We also know that Timothy had been left in Ephesus by Paul to stop some false teachers who were tearing the church apart.

According to Fee, Paul wrote this epistle from the Mamertine prison in Rome. Just a month ago I had the privilege of touring this tiny but intimidating jail. Paul was lowered through a hole in the ground, no more than three feet across, into a dark and filthy pit dug out from the rock and clay of first century Rome. One can only begin to imagine how cold and damp it was and the filthy smells that collected in a place with no running water to carry away wastes.

From here, in this most depressing and seemingly-God-forsaken "office," Paul writes,

"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, for the sake of the promise of life in Christ Jesus" (v. 1).

I will start with a claim, perhaps controversial: Paul, and we, are "sent out" (the literal meaning of "apostle") not to proclaim the church, or healing, or liberation, or wholeness, or principles for life, or even Christianity, but *Christ Jesus*. The Christian faith is not about, first and foremost, morality or a way of life but a Person.

If we are pastors, we need to remind ourselves that we have been called! Whatever the eccentricities of our own histories, we are in the ministry because God called us to it. Therefore we are doing what we are doing *by the will of God*. This is comforting to remember when ministry seems oppressive and painful, as it often does.

Paul had more than his share of pain in ministry. But notice how he responds: here in this cold and filthy hole in the ground, fully expecting death, he focuses on *the promise of life in Christ Jesus*. In the valley of the shadow of death, Paul rejoices in the *life*, present and to come, that *Christ Jesus* brings. He does not fear death because he knows of the far better *life in Christ Jesus* it will bring.

"To Timothy my beloved child: grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord" (v. 2).

Do you hear the tone of these words? Paul is lonely and longs for his best friend. Later on in the letter he asks Timothy to come and see him.

When we are facing death in the ministry (figuratively) we need to see friends. Luther said that one of the best cures for depression was partying with one's friends. I remember once, very early in ministry, when all seemed darkness. I was facing a difficult decision and felt I lacked the emotional strength to make it. I went to Parker Hafstedt, an older minister known for his warmth and wisdom. For forty minutes I poured out my heart to him—all my frustrations and fears about ministry, marriage and life! After our time together, I felt spiritually refreshed, and knew exactly what decision to make. I thanked Parker profusely for his advice.

The funny thing was, however, that Parker had barely said a word. He had simply listened with both ears, smiled and expressed concern throughout my long monologue. Sometimes the best tonic for a drained minister is to pour out one's heart like water to a trusted friend.

"Christ Jesus our Lord." These words come from a man in prison because he refuses to say Caesar is Lord. And he is hap-

py to die for that conviction.

Are we willing to die for our convictions? In May I was in Egypt, where I met with some Coptic believers. Every male Copt I met had a blue tattoo of a cross on his wrist. Each explained this was his way of testifying to Christ, to demonstrate to Jews and Muslims that they were willing to die for their faith (truth be told, Copts are still dying for their faith today). In the United States there is little chance of that. But are we willing to lose our jobs for the sake of our testimony?

During the recent Cincinnati riots, one Christian minister said that when we are afraid to speak boldly for fear of our jobs we lose our moral authority. Have we lost ours? If we are afraid of speaking the truth, people in the pews sense it, and lose respect for us. One church in our town has grown by leaps and bounds in part because the priest is known for the courage of his convictions. People know that when they listen to Quigg they will hear a clear and bold approach to Christ and the Christian.

"I am grateful to God—whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did—when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day" (v. 3).

Paul was trained as a Pharisee to say prayers at regular intervals during the day. So he means here not that he literally prays every moment—for how could he sleep?—but that at regular times in the day and night he prays, and for Timothy.

Do you have a prayer list of people you regularly pray for? Paul probably had something of the sort, at least a mental one. Samuel said that he never sinned against his people by ceasing to pray for them (1 Sam 12.23). I have found that I am strengthened and encouraged (and often get revelatory insights about) when I use my prayer list to pray for people and concern. It is a great way to get over discouragement about my work or friends or parishioners.

Sometimes even the greatest prayer warrior is beset with doubts. Does God really answer prayer? Or am I just talking to myself? It is helpful to remember that Paul believed in

answered prayer. So did Jesus, and Moses and Isaiah and Daniel.

"Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy" (v. 4).

Paul may be remembering when Timothy joined the Ephesian elders at Miletus (Ac 20.13-38), on the shore of the Aegean, certain they would never see Paul again, after his two years of teaching "all of Asia" in Ephesus, and knelt down and prayed for him. They wept together and hugged and kissed, particularly after hearing they would never see him again. I never understood men kissing until several months ago when a retired Turkish army colonel, just ten miles from Miletus, leaned over and kissed me on both cheeks—just as Paul and Timothy and the Ephesian elders no doubt kissed! He was expressing friendship after spending two days with me, but Paul and these other men were expressing their mutual love for Christ and one another.

At this point Paul is lonely in a dreary and putrid prison. He is about to die. He thinks of his best friend, Timothy, who had loved him enough to shed *tears* with him.

Do you have friends who can cry with you? Ministry is too tough to be without friends who can cry with you. We need prayer partners and spiritual mentors before whom we can open our lives. If we complain that there is no one around, the real problem may in fact be our own. We may be afraid to open up, or too proud to.

I know a man of God who is effective in ministry but whose personal life suffers because he never lets anyone get close. He has put up huge walls around himself so that he has no Timothy he can cry with. As a result, he isn't half as effective as he could be. And he is probably far lonelier than he needs to be.

"I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you" (v. 5).

Apparently Timothy was nurtured in faith by his mother and grandmother. Are you a parent? Do your kids or grandkids respect you and your faith enough that they would want it for themselves? Or do they resent the fact that you have so little time for them because the ministry needs are so great?

We all need to be reminded from time to time that it is not worth saving the church if it means losing our family. My wife and I have learned over our twenty-five years of marriage that we need a date every week to relax and focus on each other. We've also learned that we need dates with our children—no matter how old they are. And vacations are important: children remember them over the years when they have forgotten everything else. We have had dates and taken vacations often when it seemed we could not afford them—if only because we were convinced we could not afford not to have them.

"For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands" (v. 6).

Timothy was in a low time: maybe burned out, probably fearful, no doubt weary of the battle. And there were plenty of battles in Ephesus. Like churches today, that church had complainers, dividers, and people claiming the name of Christ who didn't act like Christ. In fact, they brought dishonor to the name of Christ.

Paul's response to Timothy's battle-weariness is a charge: "rekindle." The Greek means "stir up the fire."

How do we stir up our spiritual fire? Especially when we are discouraged? And given to doubt? Perhaps we wonder if God ever really did call us. Or whether there even is a God.

The first thing to remember is that all faith is tinged with doubt. Doubt plagues the finest of God's servants. Remember Elijah's complaint in the cave after the victory against the prophets of Baal? "You really don't love me anymore, God. You've left me all alone, without any allies."

The ministerial rut can have a thousand different causes. Try to determine which is yours: have you abandoned regular

times of seeking God? Is Quiet Time a noble ideal rather than a daily reality? There is no surer way to experience spiritual dryness than to fall out of the habit of daily time in Scripture and prayer.

Perhaps we have not cried out to God for help, forgetting James' admonition ("You have not because you ask not") and Jesus' exhortation ("Ask, and you shall receive, seek and you shall find"). Try reciting throughout the day the "Jesus Prayer" of Russian Orthodoxy: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

If you are keeping up your daily devotions but they are dry, try getting a new Bible translation. Or reading a new book on prayer. I have found Richard Foster's *Prayer* immensely rewarding. Consider also reading a book on the Christian disciplines such as Foster's *Celebration of Discipline*, or Dallas Willard's *The Spirit of the Disciplines*.

C.S. Lewis who said that he got more spiritual food from rigorous theology than from most of the vapid material that passes for devotional reading.

I would also recommend getting a prayer partner or spiritual director with whom you can talk and pray over your spiritual ups and downs.

Other options include spending a day in prayer alone or at a retreat center where you can get guidance or getting away for a conference on ministry or spirituality, and reading theology.

This last suggestion will strike some as odd. But it was C.S. Lewis who said that he got more spiritual food from rigorous theology than from most of the vapid material that passes for devotional reading. I would recommend one of Luther's three 1520 treatises; Jonathan Edwards' *Religious Affections* or the

new and affordable collection of sermons published by Yale University Press, *The Sermons of Jonathan Edwards*; Bonhoeffer's *Life Together or Cost of Discipleship*; Augustine's *Confessions*; or J.I. Packer's *Knowing God*.

It may be, however, that you are experiencing depression. In that case, you need to humble yourself and see a counselor. Some depressions are indeed bio-chemical in origin and benefit greatly from the right medication, which is sometimes difficult to pinpoint. Too many Christians, particularly evangelicals, stigmatize the depressed as sub-spiritual or lacking in faith. But it has been my experience that God's most devoted servants are sometimes afflicted for reasons beyond their control, and that medications developed by God-given wisdom are used to bring blessed relief—and more effective ministry.

"For God did not give us a Spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline" (v. 7).

Apparently Timothy's besetting sin was timidity, or more plainly, fear. Paul had written to the Corinthians, "Now if Timothy comes, see to it that he has nothing to fear while he is with you" (1 Corinthians 16.10)

I have some understanding of Timothy because I have struggled with fear all of my life. Occasionally I will wake up in the dead of night with *angst*, the undirected fear that fears without knowing *what* it is afraid of. I have also stuttered all of my life. Stuttering is not caused by fear, but it is aggravated by fear and is a marvelous aid to becoming fearful in certain situations!

What helps me when I fear? Several things. First, realizing that it is a common problem. Second, recognizing that courage is not the absence of fear but doing what is right in the presence of fear. Third and most important, knowing Christ more deeply. My deepest consolations have come when in prayer, crying my fears out to God, and sensing the Holy Spirit's encouragement and strengthening.

Sometimes fear comes from lack of faith. In finances, for example, I am far less trusting than I should be. Jean, my wife,

has far greater trust in God's provision for finances, and will often be used by the Holy Spirit to rebuke my unbelief. And her faith is proven: in twenty-five years of marriage, raising three boys, God has always provided for our needs, and often far beyond.

I mentioned fear in the pulpit already. This has damaged the life in our churches. Too many pastors have been afraid to preach about marriage and divorce, abortion, and now homosexuality—for fear of division or opposition or losing membership. As a result, we wring our hands over the high rates of divorce and abortion in our churches. But should we be surprised? Because we have been afraid to teach a thoroughly Christian understanding of these ethical issues, our parishioners have been educated by the media. Their practice merely mirrors the pagan ethic they have learned there.

We have embraced Jesus' priestly ministry while holding at arm's length his prophetic ministry—willing to comfort the afflicted but too often afraid to afflict the comfortable.

"A SPIRIT OF POWER"

What does Paul mean here by "power"? Fee emphasizes that for Paul this is not a human spirit of power, but the Holy Spirit's power, originally given Timothy when he was converted, and then redirected when Paul laid his hands on him and by the Spirit imparted his gifts for ministry. In the context this seems to mean power for ministry—to stand up for truth, boldly but gently confronting the opponents of the gospel, and the power to hang in there day after day without yielding to discouragement and despair.

Paul then says that the Holy Spirit also imparts *love*. The spiritual father is saying to his spiritual son, "Timothy, do you love the people in your church? Then buck up and do what Jesus wants you to do—even though you're afraid." Love will take responsibility, fight the good fight, and not give up. Because it cares for the flock of God.

Then Paul concludes by saying this is also a Spirit of *self-discipline*. The word is *sophronismos*, which means sound-mindedness, not self-discipline. In the situation, Paul is prob-

ably telling Timothy to be as wise as a serpent in dealing with the false teachers at Ephesus. For those of us who work in and for the church twenty centuries later, this means that we need to learn what the false teachings are in our own churches, and to be bold to correct them. We pastors need to teach Christ Jesus, justification by him not by what we are or do, and sanctification by the Holy Spirit, not easy-believism where anything goes just because we believe in justification. We need to be sound-minded, and teach our people to be sound-minded about who Jesus Christ is and what it means to be joined to him.

Perhaps a fitting way for us to conclude this look at Paul's reflections on ministry, and his exhortation to rekindle our gift, is to take a moment of silence to reflect about what we need to do to rekindle the flame of our gift for ministry—and then ask the Lord Jesus to help us get the rekindling started.

Author

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Within the Pauline corpus, justification has future, as well as past, reference (Romans 2:13; 8:33; Galatians 5:4-5), and appears to relate to both the beginning of the Christian life and its final consummation.

Justification language appears in Paul with reference to both the inauguration of the life of faith and also its final consummation. It is a complex and all-embracing notion, which anticipates the verdict of the final judgment (Romans 9:30-34), declaring in advance the verdict of ultimate acquittal. The believer's present justified Christian experience is thus an anticipation and advance participation of deliverance from the wrath to come, and an assurance in the present of the final eschatological verdict of acquittal (Romans 5:9-10).

ALISTER E. MCGRATH