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Introduction: the horror stories

You may have heard some of the stories. You may even have been in some of the stories.

There is the young man from Europe who was contemplating his future service in the church. He had a vague thought that some generic ‘Bible’ degree somewhere in America was the best way to set himself up for such a life. Or you have the seminary student with a theological degree but with no practical experience, sincerely and incompetently laying waste to the flock entrusted to his care. Or there stands the arrogant theological graduate, persuaded that his degree is the only qualification he needs for the work of ministry.

Perhaps it is the preacher flailing vigorously in the pulpit, thrashing about theologically, but showing no systematic instruction or awareness of the whole counsel of God. Or perhaps it is the gifted speaker who can carry the crowd but has little to say.

Maybe it is the earnest fellow desiring to be properly equipped for the work of the ministry. He has a working assumption that the only course open to him is a formal degree, and is mindlessly counselled by friends with a default setting of 'seminary' when it comes to training for service. Or it could be the equally earnest brother with an ingrained suspicion of anything formal when it comes to instruction. He is terrified of what he considers the inherently deadening effects of any sort of deliberate training, confident that it is the surest way to quench the Holy Spirit.

Have you heard the litany of complaints about the young preachers who have been coming to the church from the respected seminary? They are men with the best of intentions, no doubt, but clearly not preachers by constitution or instruction. Or it may be the testimonies of dismay, despair and even disgust about the rising generation of ministers. They give the impression of being men without a well-tempered bone in their backs and a well-governed tongue in their heads, slouching into

pulpits, ill-equipped for the work that they have come to do.

You may know about the church that has endured a long and crippling ‘interregnum’ (a fearful word—the space between the kings!). That church has declined to a state of fussy passivity, inertly wondering where the next man will come from. You may be aware of the desperate congregation that appointed a preacher after one Sunday on which he delivered his two most sparkling sermons. (To be honest, they may have been the only two sermons he has ever preached that had any sparkle!) Now that church finds itself locked in an ugly ecclesiastical marriage with a man they do not know and who has no real regard for them.

There is the church that decides that something is better than nothing, and decides to compromise on some weighty issue in calling a man. It moves forward hoping that the fallout will not be too devastating.

And here is the man who hawks himself as a preacher or pastor for hire, and here the church which effectively swipes left and right, bestowing favour or disdain as they flick through the preening candidates. Together they act as if ministerial

appointment were more like a dating application than a matter of spiritual life and health.

There is also the story about the church that did not quite know how to handle the obnoxious fellow who was persuaded he was called to preach, so they sent him off to seminary in the hopes that someone else would deal with the problem.

Perhaps you could add colour to these stories, or you could offer more stories. Perhaps you are one of the stories, or could tell worse stories. Perhaps you are inclined simply to shrug and to sit on your hands until Jesus comes back and makes it all better, or at least until the next revival.

Perhaps you hope that there is something better. You are right! Storytelling and shrugging are no proper responses to this situation. A righteous response requires biblical deliberation, deep-rooted conviction and principled action. We must begin with the sufficiency of Scripture and the centrality of the church.

1

Following the Bible

The apostle Paul was persuaded, and expected Timothy to be persuaded, that Scripture was first of all able to make someone ‘wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus’ (2 Tim. 3:15). He further impressed upon Timothy that ‘all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work’ (2 Tim. 3:16–17). The Word of God is all we need to address all the questions of righteousness, in principle and in practice, and rightly followed will cause us to live godly lives in Christ Jesus.

Paul also said to Timothy that he wrote some things ‘so that you may know how you ought to

conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth' (1 Tim. 3:15). The church of God is the house of God, the place where God is in charge. It is the place which God orders for his glory, and therefore for the joy and blessing of all those who are brought under his roof.

It is no accident that these—and other such counsels—are found in what are often called the pastoral epistles. Here Paul expresses his convictions about the sufficiency of Scripture and the centrality of the church; in this context we find Paul's divinely inspired prescription for the challenge of equipping the next generation to serve the Lord.

Timothy was called upon to get, to guard and to give the truth in an environment marked by desertions and defections. Paul said to him, 'that good thing which was committed to you, keep by the Holy Spirit who dwells in us. This you know, that all those in Asia have turned away from me, among whom are Phygellus and Hermogenes' (2 Tim. 1:14–15). What a dreadful state of things! While all others are turning away, including what may have been the unusually shocking and distressing cases of Phygellus and Hermogenes, Timothy is to hold fast. Furthermore, he is to take deliberate action: 'the things that you have heard from me among many

witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also' (2 Tim. 2:2).

It is this specific command which we will be examining in the course of this book. Paul tells Timothy that he needs to take to heart the responsibility for equipping the next generation of pastors and preachers. He needs to entrust them with a deposit of truth for which they will be stewards in their turn. That responsibility, passed on through these pastoral epistles, continues to be the responsibility of the faithful pastors of faithful churches today. It is a particular duty for the shepherds of Christ's flock, but it is a duty in which every member of the flock has an interest. The duty to nurture, prepare, instruct and encourage a new generation of faithful men is one in which every thoughtful Christian and faithful congregation recognises their stake.

For pastors, it is a matter of passing the baton, ensuring that we do all we can to raise men who will walk in the footsteps of Christ in caring for his people. For churches, it is a question of who will shepherd our children, who will care for our souls in old age, who will equip the next generation of workers, who will hold the gospel torch high if the gloom deepens.

This matter of passing the baton is the closest thing you will find in the Bible to apostolic succession. Paul received the gospel he preached direct from heaven: ‘I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ’ (Gal. 1:12). Paul was nurtured in some measure by Barnabas, but the teaching itself was of God. Paul then taught Timothy and others, committing to their charge the truth of the gospel. Now Paul calls Timothy to do the same in his turn, teaching other faithful men the things which he himself has received. These in their turn will pass on the same ‘body of divinity’ to others similarly qualified, and so on down the line.

This is the clear biblical model for ministerial training, for pastoral succession. Fundamentally, such training takes place under seasoned ministers in the context of the local church. I am therefore writing with those men in mind, and conscious that this is a responsibility in which they need to be encouraged and supported by local churches.

Show and tell

Paul delivers this charge to someone who is already the practically proven product of the very system he describes, working in the context of a local church. This was Paul’s own model.

Timothy himself is the graduate of this select, though not quite exclusive, course. Paul could say of him, ‘you have carefully followed my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, love, perseverance, persecutions, afflictions, which happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra—what persecutions I endured. And out of them all the Lord delivered me’ (2 Tim. 3:10–11). Timothy learned from Paul through the outward highs and lows of his apostolic career. What Paul said to the Corinthians as a whole, he could say to Timothy in particular: ‘Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ’ (1 Cor. 11:1).

This is, to use more modern phrases, true discipling and real mentoring. It is teaching by example—a show-and-tell method of instruction which involves taking the learner under the wing of the teacher. Timothy had not only heard about this life, he had actually seen it. In this way he had learned the art of preaching, and the reality of pressure, and the power of prayer, and the nature of pains, and the challenges of persecution. Now he is called to guard that same gospel which Paul has been faithful to guard. He is to guard it by way of personal strength, for which he must look to Christ. He is to guard it by way of passing it on, for which he must invest in Christ’s men. Timothy is to adopt this model of in-house, hands-on equipping for ministry.