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# Authentic Ministry and Faithful Ministers

JAMES FREIE

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## A CRY FOR HELP

In days of trouble and hours of crisis, ministry is difficult. Like a thief in the night, trouble seeks to rob the young minister of his joy and faith. Restless and troubled, he can't sleep and his stomach hurts. He is fighting for his spiritual life. The path to true *eusebeia*<sup>1</sup> seems so blurred tonight. He knows something is seriously wrong in the church, but he doesn't know how to make it better.<sup>2</sup> He senses God calling him to prayer. He moves from the table, where he had been reading and writing, to the rooftop, his place of prayer.

Hear my prayer, O Lord; Listen to my cry for help:

I am so discouraged. Ministry is more difficult than I ever imagined it would be. I don't know what to do. Lord, will the church ever take me seriously or will they continue to despise my youth and dismiss me?<sup>3</sup>

The opposition from within the church is great and growing. Some of the overseers and helpers are part of the problem. Not only is their teaching flawed, but their character and behavior does not conform to true godliness.<sup>4</sup> Their teachings have changed the behavior of the church for the worse. Their doctrine forbids eating and drinking. They forbid marriage and seem to look down on sexual relations in marriage. Rather than growing in godliness, there is a growing licentiousness and greed. There is unhealthy interest in controversy and the quarreling about words never ends.

Everywhere I look, in both men and women, I see envy, strife, and conceit growing. I hear malicious talk, and rumors of sexual indiscretion. Attractive young widows, at the urging of some of the elders, have remained single. They get money from the church treasury at the expense of those who really need it. How the money is distributed is creating a problem, and there is a growing suspicion about who really benefits. Some women are gossips and troublemakers. They go from house church to house church and from household to household creating chaos and distrust.

Sadly, we are developing a reputation in the community as a quarrelsome and argumentative people who know it all. Lord I am sick to my stomach and feel terrible. I don't know if I should stay or go. What I want is a church where people lead tranquil and quiet lives in all godliness and dignity. Lord, what should I do?

Timothy

To Timothy's amazement, a letter comes in the mail. It is a word from God through Paul. He feels a stirring within as the Spirit of God speaks and writes upon his heart. His prayer has been answered. God's answer is clear: "Stay in Ephesus!<sup>5</sup> Stop the unhealthy teaching and teach people how to behave as the people of God. Here is what you do." Paul in a very systematic way lays out for Timothy his perspective on authentic ministry. The introduction (1:1-20) gives Timothy perspective on why he must stay. In the body of the letter, the first part (2:1-4:5) charts a course for the church and shows Timothy where to begin. The second part (4:6-6:2a) charts a course for Timothy as to what he must personally devote himself to if he is to be

a good minister. The conclusion (6:2b—21) summarizes important themes for Timothy to address. It reminds him for whom he must live and what has been entrusted to his care.

How does 1 Timothy help us in our quest to be faithful ministers of Jesus? Paul shows Timothy the difference in good ministry and bad ministry. He brings his philosophy of authentic ministry to Timothy and shows him how it must shape specific strategies for Ephesus. From the Timothy correspondence, we learn new ways to think and engage the faith and fears of our listeners, especially our own. What are the pitfalls to avoid? What are the goals of authentic ministry? What are the questions we need to be asking?

### REVISIONING MINISTRY: SEEING ITS GLORY 1:1-2

*First Question: Can one be a faithful minister of Jesus without encountering the glory of God and growing a vision of ministry greater than himself?* How does God create a minister who sees through his eyes and feels with his heart his burden for reconciliation with his creation? It does not happen overnight. One's experience of God is often forged in turbulent storms. So it was for Paul. Packed within Paul's greeting to Timothy, is 30 years of ministry and thousands of miles traveled with Jesus. Rich with theological perspective, the greeting reflects Paul's experience of God.

At Corinth, circumstances led Paul to reflect upon his understanding of authentic ministry and a faithful minister. I believe it is the organizing principle shaping his conversation with Timothy. In 2 Corinthians, Paul describes how his journey with Jesus led him to the third heaven and the pit of despair. His experience of God's strengthening grace in weakness totally changed his response to hardship.<sup>6</sup> Of special interest is 2 Cor 2:14-6:10. He presents a clear and compelling vision of what he does as a minister of Jesus Christ and why he does it. I would summarize it in this way:

Authentic ministry unveils the glory of God. It is a ministry of the Spirit writing upon the human heart, giving life where there is none, removing veils that restrict our vision of God and creating unrestricted access to God. The Spirit of God writes on the heart and creates a turning to the Lord that reproduces the life of Jesus in the one beholding so that the story of Jesus (and story of God) is continually being told. The death and resurrection of Christ is being reenacted and embodied in the messenger.<sup>7</sup> We become the "sign and wonder of God" on display. The miracle is the Christ living in us and sharing the life of God in us. The miracle is God at work within us reconciling and re-creating a new society on earth, called the church of the living God.

If we read Paul's reflection carefully and lay it over the writings of the pastoral letters, it gives us a new way of looking at his advice to Timothy and Titus.<sup>8</sup> 2 Timothy is especially revealing as Paul invites Timothy to endure hardship with him.<sup>9</sup> Paul is not only facing the end of his own ministry, but he is realizing his enemies have done great damage. Luke Timothy Johnson writes,

Caught in his own fatigue, fear, and fragility, Paul must somehow rally his beleaguered younger colleague to stand fast within truly threatening circumstances. That Paul could write at all is noble; that he wrote a letter such as this is inspired.<sup>10</sup>

What Paul learned at Corinth Timothy must learn at Ephesus. Paul's vision of ministry will create a radical revisioning of ministry for most of us. It is a new way, a higher way of seeing what we do in ministry and what we are to be. It literally dwarfs and transcends my old understandings of ministry.

Looking back, I fear I operated more out of a "Corinthian/Ephesian" understanding of ministry than a "Christ" understanding. Too self-defined, too self-absorbed, and too self-directed, this profound preoccupation with "self" worked its way into every aspect of ministry and the church's life. I fear in our prayer life and our family life, in our search for the perfect ministry or the perfect church, in our sermons and corporate



worship, “self” seeks to rule us and change the agenda of Jesus. Can we really follow Jesus and be good ministers if we feed the “self-life”?

Oliver Wendell Holmes once wrote, “What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.” Along with Timothy, we must discover what it is that lies within us. What will drive our ministry and dictate our moves?

Paul knows the deeper “why” driving him. He knows that God won a victory on the Damascus road when Christ took him captive. His war with God ended when he saw the radiance of God in the face of Christ. Now a man under the command of God and chained to Christ, his life is not his own anymore. He is led in parade before the world as a testimony to the unlimited patience and power of God’s mercy in Jesus.<sup>11</sup> Saul of Tarsus, a violent man, became by the mercies of God, Paul the apostle, a loving man.

What will become of us? Will our legacy in ministry be fighting the good fight, finishing the race, and keeping the faith, or will it be a legacy of fighting and arguing along the road about doctrine and form that can give no life?<sup>12</sup>

### **GOSPEL REVISIONISTS: RELIGIOUS VODOO AND SHIPWRECKED LIVES 1:3-20**

*Second Question: Can one be a faithful minister of Jesus without experiencing the life-changing power of Christ in his own life?* How does God work to change people’s lives so they can live with a pure heart, good conscience, and sincere faith? How does God reproduce the life of Jesus in us? In the glorious gospel of the blessed God, we see God’s way of working in the world to change a person’s life.<sup>13</sup> In authentic ministry we interpret the mighty acts of God and frame the scandal of the cross in such a way as to create a fresh encounter with God in Christ. We are telling God’s story and living God’s story. The goal of our ministry is to illuminate the mighty act of God in this mysterious Christ event so that it convicts the conscience and creates faith, hope, and love.

The Christ event (gospel) is an act of God so powerful that it is creating a new world order. The faithful saying, “Christ Jesus came into the world (incarnation) to save sinners (atonement)” is the foundational event upon which the identity and practice of God’s household is built.<sup>14</sup> This event shapes how we move

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into the presence of God and behold his glory in a way never before possible. Can one be an effective minister if he cannot articulate his own encounter and experience of the transforming touch of God? Paul shows us how to tell our story of failure so that God our Savior and Christ Jesus our hope is revealed in our weaknesses. (1:12-17)

Certain men at Ephesus have a vision of ministry and message that is reframing the gospel and placing it under the framework of the law. Their

teaching and practice of religion has no more power to transform than the old pagan magic and religious voodoo they once practiced.<sup>15</sup> In effect, they are surrendering the formation of faith and conscience to a form of paganism and Judaism once renounced. The unbelieving Judaism of old was a blend of paganism and Jewish myths that led to their self-destruction. Already, some, in rejecting conscience, have shipwrecked their faith. It is true, they had once burned their books of magic, but they are still filtering their thinking through old maps of understanding regarding the workings of God. Their devotion to myths and genealogies has obscured the true meaning of the cross and created the very opposite of what God intended.

Could it be that many of us stand in need of a radical revisioning of gospel? Religious reductionism among us has reduced the message to five steps of salvation or four spiritual laws and a sinner’s prayer. In our reductionist reconstruction of gospel, we divorce it from the narrative framework of God’s mighty acts in history. In doing so, we diminish the doctrinal framework for encountering the mightiest of all his acts,



Jesus Christ. The sacred writings begin with the story of God's mighty acts in creation, and they end with a new vision of Jesus Christ ruling the new heaven and new earth. From the Genesis creation to the Revelation new creation, we see God at work.

Preaching—divorced from the Christ event—becomes moralizing and makes us religious peddlers manipulating the message for gain. Instead of seeing ourselves as the people of God living out the drama of scripture in the mighty acts of God, we see ourselves as a people attempting to live up to a moral code of behavior. When the Bible is seen simply as a book of moral instruction, it then becomes a book that mocks the helplessness of mortal man and his futile attempts to build a tower that leads to God.

Within mortal man lies a very powerful desire: the desire to be like God. In the gospel is the story of God coming to mortal man in his helplessness, not to condemn but to transform him into the divine image. The gospel fully recognizes the truth about man's powerlessness and the powers that rule over him—sin and death. It is good news that the power of God is greater than the powers that rule over man—that God can create again and restore peace to his creation. In the gospel, the deepest longings of God and man are fulfilled in Christ.

Souls traveling the yellow brick road in search of God and godliness meet some very poor wizards who do more harm than good. Therefore, the notion of sound doctrine will also need major revision. Sound doctrine, in some camps, has little to do with the Christ event.<sup>16</sup> It has more to do with the burning issues of the day that we create and a dead traditionalism<sup>17</sup> substituted for the message of the cross. They form our flawed understanding of how godliness develops and become the basis of how we accept one another.

So we find ourselves bogged down in endless controversy, digging through religious garbage that has the smell of death. Rather than disarm principalities and powers, we arm them and give them new power to operate through the door of anger and disputing.<sup>18</sup> The religious landscape is littered with shipwrecked lives.

As a young man, I came to associate sound doctrine solely within our tradition. When I looked into my gospel mirror to see who was the fairest church of them all, it was easy to see. We were. There came a day when I looked into the mirror of the *Word* and saw a greater truth than I had ever known. I saw Jesus and beheld the glory of God. His light penetrated my darkness. I saw how ugly the sectarian spirit could be in a religious movement when it loses its way. Paul associates sound doctrine with "God our Savior, Christ Jesus our hope." Sound doctrine is healthy teaching regarding God's way of working in his world and household.<sup>19</sup>

E. W. McMillan was in his 80s when he took me under his wing and talked with me about God. At times I thought myself to be in third heaven, so compelling was the vision of God he presented to me. To this day I remember his words to me about doctrine:

James, a man mastered by his doctrine will forsake his Lord to uphold his doctrine. But a man mastered by Jesus Christ will forsake his doctrine to uphold the risen Lord. Be a man mastered by Jesus Christ.

Healthy teaching has a higher aim than knowledge. It understands the goal of instruction as love issuing from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith.<sup>20</sup> Our teaching is not healthy if it does not promote God's work by faith, so that the life of Jesus is reproduced in God's household. In this miracle of transformation, God moves us from our initial faith *in* Jesus to the faith *of* Jesus. As the faith of Jesus grows within us, we begin to relate to God in a new way.

### **KEEPING THE STARS: UPHOLDING THE MYSTERY OF GODLINESS 2:1-6:2A**

*Third Question: Can one be a faithful minister of Jesus without continually renewing the church's vision of God and his desire for a renewed humanity?* Navigators of old in sailing the seas had an expression,

“keeping the stars.” Fixed lights and points of reference are critical to charting a course of destination. Our tendency today is to chase fads and look for quick fixes. There is no shortcut or easy path to godliness.

The body of the letter (2:1-6:2a) shows Timothy the way forward. The first part (2:1-4:5) charts a course for the church. In essence he says: “Timothy, here’s what you need to do to help the church get back on course and behave as the people of God.” Worship and prayer must illuminate the truth about God and what he wants for all people. Restoring a praying people with a passion to know God is critical. Paul summons the church to rediscover true spiritual worship with God our savior and Christ Jesus our mediator at the center. The behavior of men (anger and arguing) and women (inappropriate dress and attitudes) has created a very sensual atmosphere, and the truth about God is buried under a Hellenistic-Jewish understanding of the workings of God. The overseers of the church and the men and women helpers need to be people who uphold the mystery of godliness in their lives.

The moves Paul tells Timothy to make are designed to correct the disruptive influences that have displaced passion for knowing God. Our temptation is to make church growth the key issue. Paul makes the Christological vision and confession the key issue.<sup>21</sup> How would our strategies change if we made “vision of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” our key concern?<sup>22</sup> We would have a new way of measuring the spiritual health of a church.

If love is the ultimate goal of instruction and it flows out of a pure heart, good conscience, and sincere faith, why not target these three areas? How do we probe heart, conscience, and faith? We might start by asking more “begin with God questions”—questions like:

- How’s your faith?
- How’s your heart for God?
- Does God seem far away from you today or very close?
- How’s your conscience? Is it clear or troubled?
- What truth did you learn about God today?

Not all teachers are false teachers, but too many of us have unhealthy attitudes and behaviors growing out of ideas that distort the essence of God and godliness. Those distortions change the spiritual fabric and character of a church family, turning the values of God upside down. What would happen if we faithfully presented God’s kingdom vision for his household?

*Fourth Question: Can one be a faithful minister of Jesus without establishing the spiritual training program of Jesus in his own life?* How can we do the ministry of Jesus without establishing the core commitments that formed his habits? To be able to do God’s work, God must minister to us so he can work through us. In the second part of the letter (4:6-6:2a) Paul in essence says,

Timothy, Here’s what you need to be and how you need to respond. What you do and how you say what must be said is critical. Be a living illustration of godliness as you handle difficult people and tense situations.”<sup>23</sup>

### **CLOSING THOUGHTS: LIVING FOR THE ONE WHO SEES AND GIVES LIFE 6:2B-20**

*Fifth Question: Can one be a faithful minister of Jesus if he is intimidated by powerful people and loses his voice for God?* In the *Road Less Traveled*, Scott Peck’s opening words are “Life is difficult.” Paul would say, “So is ministry.” Most of us are ill-informed about the hardships and unprepared for the disappointments.<sup>24</sup> I would like to think Timothy found his courage and voice and a renewed vision of God. I would like to think on the following Sunday, Timothy stands before the church and says:

Church, great is the mystery of godliness. Today I say to you, “Take hold of the life which is really life.” I urge you in the name of Jesus to trash your studies and devotion to myths



and traditions that give no life. If you do not, you will find yourself standing with those who have already destroyed their conscience and shipwrecked their faith. Write this saying down and commit it to your memory, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." Remember, you are God's household, and he intends that you live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. God is your Savior and Christ Jesus your hope. Today I invite you to reaffirm this truth about God. Say it with me: "God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honor and might forever. Amen.

Authentic ministry grows out of our encounter with God. In beholding God's radiance, we become living illustrations of God's work of mercy and grace in Jesus.

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#### END NOTES

- 1 *Eusebeia* is a word being used frequently in the Hellenistic culture of Ephesus. It is thought to be a highly valued virtue in the Artemis cult. The false teachers of Ephesus misuse the true goal of *eusebeia*. See 1 Tim 6:5. Its meaning parallels "fear of God" in the OT and describes the attitude and behavior of one who has accurate knowledge of God. It describes a devotion to God and lifestyle that grows out of faith in God.
- 2 Timothy's resume in the New Testament is impressive. Paul often sent him into difficult situations with great confidence in his ability to instruct new converts and assess the needs of a congregation. Timothy's character and unique ability to keep the interests of Jesus in focus is highlighted in Phil 2:19-24; 1 Cor 4:14-17; 2 Cor 1:1,19. He is a gifted teacher and evangelist. It would seem he is not one easily intimidated. At Ephesus, he is intimidated and struggling with how to use his spiritual gift from God. (2 Tim 1:6-7).
- 3 See 1 Tim 4:11-12.
- 4 I have attempted to describe what Timothy might pray for based on the content of Paul's letter. Behavior is described in passages such as 1:3, 5:24-25, 6:3-10, and some of the teaching content is spelled out in 4:1-4. Evidently some kind of problem is occurring with the widows' support, and the behavior of the younger widows is very sensual and sexual. Acceptable sexual boundaries are being crossed, and unbelievers perceive widows to be "kept women." It seems elders are a part of the problem in their teaching and lack of character.
- 5 "Stay on at Ephesus" is the equivalent of a direct command. It suggests that Timothy is struggling with his desire to be at Ephesus. Is he intimidated by the difficulties? Does he want a new assignment? Luke Timothy Johnson classifies 1 Timothy as a *mandata principis* letter. A superior writes to his representative giving instructions concerning his mission. They are to be read aloud. Within it are instructions to the community and instructions for the delegate regarding his role and behavior. In L.T. Johnson, *The First And Second Letters To Timothy*. The Anchor Bible, (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 140-142.
- 6 See 2 Cor 12:1-10.
- 7 In 1 Tim 6:20 and 2 Tim 1:7,13-14, Paul brings the Spirit's role into focus. He challenges Timothy to guard the message but sees the Holy Spirit as guarding both message and messenger.
- 8 In recent years, a segment of modern scholars have been convinced that the Pastorals are pseudonymous letters written by someone after Paul's death. Of late, a growing number of scholars are leaning toward authentic Pauline authorship.
- 9 2 Tim 2:3-6 uses analogies of soldier, athlete, and farmer as the basis of appeal.
- 10 L.T. Johnson, *1 & 2 Timothy & Titus*, Knox Preaching Guides, (Atlanta: John Knox Press 1987), 13.
- 11 His words in 1 Tim 1:1,12-17 parallel 2 Cor 2:14. It is the picture of a conquering general riding through the streets in a victory parade. Chained to his chariot are the officers of the defeated army.
- 12 See 2 Tim 4:6-8, Mark 9:33-50. Conflicting scripts of ministry are most often revealed in the area of values and goals—the way we think things should be—and the assumptions we have about the way things are. Jesus' vision of ministry and the Twelve's vision of his ministry are very different scripts, with very different outcomes in legacy. Two very conflicting scripts of ministry and the path to godliness are being presented to the church at Ephesus; one is by Paul and the other by the false teachers. One of the most significant things we do in ministry is to help the church develop perspective on God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Any ministry that obscures the glory of God in the face of Christ or diminishes the presence of God within us cannot be healthy. It hinders genuine transformation. In authentic ministry, we unveil God's glory and embrace God's agenda in Christ.
- 13 The phrase "administration of God which is by faith" is critical to the underlying construction of his letter. It describes the working of God to save us in Christ and how we live with God. 2 Corinthians reflects on how God works to create ministers of reconciliation who become co-workers with him.

- 14 Unique to the Pastoral Letters is the formula “faithful is the saying.” They seem to function as supporting evidence for Paul’s argument. Some scholars think they might also reflect things being said by the church. Note 1 Tim 1:15, 3:1, 4:8-9 or 9-10; 2 Tim 2:11; and Titus 3:5-8a.
- 15 See Acts 19 to understand their practice of religion before being introduced to Christ.
- 16 Our understanding of sound doctrine looks a lot like the lists of 1 Tim 4:1-5 and Col 2:16-23.
- 17 “Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.” From J. Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1984).
- 18 See 1 Tim 4:1-2 and Eph 4:26-27; 6:10-12 for why 1 Tim 2:8 is so important.
- 19 The false teachers have a flawed doctrine of creation. It has led them to forbid and reverse God’s own word about what is good. Even worse, it has infected their doctrine of redemption and how God changes lives. Note 1 Tim 4:3-5 and 1 Tim 1:3-11,15.
- 20 See 1 Tim 1:5.
- 21 See 1 Tim 3:14-16.
- 22 See Prov 29:18. (This is not a verse for creating vision statements. It reminds us that when a society loses its vision of the one true God, it comes apart at the core. It begins to live by human speculation and wisdom rather than divine revelation. Idolatry re-creates God and distorts his image. This is why idolatry is so bad for humanity’s health.)
- 23 Note how 5:1-6:2a develops and identifies some of the grouping of people and problems he must deal with.
- 24 Authentic ministry is characterized by affliction, pain, suffering, weakness, rejection, and even death. Paul knew prison and hardships would face him every step of the way (Acts 20:22-24). 2 Cor 1:3-11 is the first of a series of extended reflections on the realities of ministry. Paul sees hardship as necessary if one is to share fully the experience of Christ. The death and life of Jesus is being worked out in our lives. Paul will develop this theme in Timothy, especially in 2 Timothy. See 1 Tim 4:12, 2 Tim 2:1,3,8-10; 3:1; 4:3,14-15.

