

Charge to the Pastor

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Editorial Note: *Dr. Leonard was invited to give the “Charge to the Pastor” at the installation of Ronald C. Farb as minister of Seward Congregational Church.*

1 Timothy 4:9-16 RSV

The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance. For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of those who believe. Command and teach these things.

Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. Till I come, attend to the public reading of scripture, to preaching, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophetic utterance when the council of elders laid their hands upon you. Practice these duties, devote yourself to them, so that all may see your progress. Take heed to yourself and to your teaching; hold to that, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.

2 Timothy 4:1-5 RSV

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 urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke, and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in 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 likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths. As for you, always be steady, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfil your ministry.

These readings from 1 and 2 Timothy offer us a glimpse of ministry in the New Testament church. The Apostle Paul has departed Ephesus to go on to other work, leaving Timothy in charge. In his letters to Timothy he gives his young protege a few sets of “bullet points” — or perhaps we could call it a checklist — to guide him in his ministry. We could summarize these “bullet points” something like this:

- Set an example for believers in:
 - speech and conduct
 - love
 - faith
 - purity
- Read the Scriptures publicly
- Preach
- Teach
- Exhort
- Evangelize
- Persevere

Let's take these up one by one for some comments.

First, set an example for believers in *speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity*.

I wish I had a nickel for every thoughtless, cruel and stupid thing I ever said as a young pastor. I know that I often hurt people with my tongue. I didn't know the Lord in those days, but even after I came to him I found I still have to watch what I say. There's always the temptation to make the funny or sarcastic remark that cuts somebody down. And as to *conduct* — well, we won't even go there. The point is that the pastor has to be extra careful about what he says and what he does.

We might resent that, thinking that it represents a double standard, but this isn't the only place in the New Testament where leaders are held to a higher standard. James, the Lord's brother, says “Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, for you know that we who teach shall be judged with greater strictness” (3:1). The pastor is called upon to *model* the life in Christ, and that's part of his teaching role.

“Set an example for believers in *love*.” How we do that depends on our definition of *love*. If love means a nice, warm, squishy feeling towards people, I would be willing to bet it won't last long once the rubber meets the road in your pastorate. To borrow a phrase from the title of Marshall Shelley's book, the church

can sometimes turn out to be the lair of *well-intentioned dragons*. And that squishy, soft love melts quickly under their fiery breath. But of course that isn't what the Bible means by *love*.

As John points out in his First Epistle, our love for one another within the Christian community is based on God's love for us. And the New Testament understanding of God's love is based on the often-used Hebrew word *hesed*, which refers to God's faithfulness to his covenant people. In other words, God loves us *not because we are loveable, but because we belong to his family*. So when Paul says, "Set the believers an example in love," he's saying, "Keep your commitments, be faithful to your Christian brothers and sisters, treat them like family."

*Blest be the tie that binds
Our hearts in Christian love;
The fellowship of kindred minds
Is like that to that above.*

"Set an example for believers in *faith*." Here, again, is a word that needs defining. Faith isn't some nebulous hope that everything will work out in the end. Nor is it a set of intellectual propositions—what John Wesley called "a train of ideas in the head." Compared to New Testament faith, these are only partial definitions.

Biblical faith is, first of all, *faithfulness* — your determination to stick to the Lord and his ways. Faith is trust in Christ, and loyalty to his kingdom. It's not something we dream up on our own, but we have it because of what Christ has done to rescue us. Faith is an outlook we have, based on the life God has created in us. When you maintain that consistent outlook, others pick it up from your example.

"Set an example for believers in *purity*." The need for moral purity in Christian leadership is perhaps greater today than ever because of the direction being taken by certain segments of our culture. Through the media, the schools, the courts, our environment is telling us, "God doesn't count." And purity means nothing if there is no God, for who's to define and judge it?

But, biblically, there's more to purity than the moral dimension. Jesus said, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." What does it mean to be "pure in heart"? I think Søren Kierkegaard put it well when he titled a book *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*. To be pure is to be focused on one goal, the greater glory of God. Naturally, that kind of purity will lead you into every other kind — and also to faith, love, and right speech and conduct.

Now Paul's checklist continues with several additional points: *Read the Scriptures publicly, preach, teach, convince, rebuke, exhort, evangelize*. We'll take these up briefly.

First, *read the Scriptures publicly*. It is wonderful to read the Scriptures for your own study and devotional time, but Paul is saying: Read them to the assembly, and to whomever will listen!

After Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press, Protestants began to think that the Bible was lines of type on the pages of a book. In Bible times and for centuries thereafter, Christians knew the Bible as a spoken, living Word because someone *read it* to them. Few believers had personal copies of the Scripture, and most might not have been able to read them if they had them. But they knew the Word because someone read or recited it. Today, bombarded by media, we seem to be moving back toward to a non-reading culture. It is appalling to me, then, how little Scripture is *read* in the worship service of many Bible-believing churches. You have an opportunity to restore the reading of God's Word to the central place it has enjoyed in historic Christian worship.

Then, *preach and teach*. What's the difference between preaching and teaching? One might say that preaching is geared toward motivating people to make a change in their lives, while teaching is giving them the tools for change. Reading the New Testament closely, you've noted this important distinction: preaching takes place *outside* the church, but teaching occurs *within* the body.

Preaching is the announcement of what God has done in Christ to reconcile people to himself and give them a new start in life. So — theoretically — it's the unbeliever who needs to hear preaching, not the believer. How do you find opportunities to preach, in this sense, when so much of the public forum today seems closed to the Christian message? Answering that question calls for some creativity on your part.

Then, the believer needs to be equipped to move further into the commitment he or she has already made after hearing and responding to the good news. That takes another set of skills, the most important

of which is that of “rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15). But understanding your people, and where they’re coming from, is another big part of it. Somebody once defined a sermon as “the application of faith people don’t have to problems the minister doesn’t understand.” To teach effectively, we do have to understand those problems.

Paul goes on to urge Timothy to *convince, rebuke, exhort*. There will always be those in your congregation who are wavering in their commitment. Perhaps they’re even the deeper thinkers, and the faith has been presented to them in too superficial or cut-and-dried a manner. They see the holes in the argument and want more proof. They need *convincing*, not by rehashing the tired old arguments but by moving the discussion to a more basic, or more sophisticated, level till the light bulb turns on in their head and they see what the faith is really about.

And then there are always those who need *convicting* because they’re falling over the line into some form of un-Christian behavior that they don’t recognize. They may need the *rebuke*, the kind pastoral reproof that follows the guidelines Jesus laid down for this process.

And then there will be the discouraged and unmotivated, those who have been pressed down by life circumstances, dysfunctional relationships or poor modeling. They will need the word of *exhortation* and comfort, the strengthening counsel of a pastor willing to come alongside and walk with them through their dark valley till the light of a new day dawns.

The next word in Paul’s checklist is *evangelize*. We all know that the word *evangelize*, in Greek, is related to the word *gospel*, and that the gospel is the *good news*, the beneficial message of God’s action in Christ to meet and deliver his people. You’ve probably noticed that all of these “bullet points” in our checklist sort of run together; they all boil down to one thing: *making Jesus real* to people for whom he is the only answer and source of new life. So all of your ministry is really evangelizing, bringing people into that new perspective of God’s truth that allows them to see the poverty of the old way of life and the riches of the new life in Christ. Recall these words from Paul’s Letter to the Romans, part of every pastor’s pledge: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation.”

The final word in the checklist we’ve extracted from Paul’s words to Timothy is this: *persevere!* He doesn’t use that word, but he says “practice these duties, devote yourself to them,” “be unfailing in patience and in teaching,” “always be steady, endure suffering.”

There is so much in Scripture about persevering, standing firm, being faithful, being “strong and of good courage.” “Having this ministry by the mercy of God,” Paul says, “we do not lose heart” (2 Corinthians 4:1). And the clue to why we don’t lose heart is right there: we only have our ministry “by the mercy of God.” It isn’t our ministry, anyway, as Paul adds in the same place, 2 Corinthians 4:5, “For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake.”

At the end of our two readings Paul urges Timothy to “fulfill your ministry” (2 Timothy 4:5). I used to work for a publisher with operations in several locations, and one of the plants was called a “fulfillment center.” The fulfillment center didn’t design anything, it didn’t produce anything, it didn’t modify anything. All it did was *fulfill orders*, passing along to customers what had been designed, produced, or worked on by somebody else in the company. It was an essential part of the operation. If it hadn’t done its work, no revenue from its customers would have flowed back to swell the company’s sales figures. But it was invisible to most people.

The publisher’s name is a household word, *Rand McNally*. But outside that company whoever heard of the Richmond Fulfillment Center in Kentucky? In some ways the ministry is like that. The pastor’s office isn’t the company headquarters or the production plant. It’s a “fulfillment center.” If the “fulfillment center” does its job, people won’t stand up and cheer for it; they’ll use and enjoy the “product,” if you will, that it sends out. If we fulfill our ministry as the Lord directs us, then may it be said of our people as it is said of the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration: “And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only” (Matt. 17:8).

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