

Guards of a Sacred Trust

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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O Timothy, keep that which is committed to thy trust, avoiding profane and vain babblings, and oppositions of science falsely so called: Which some professing have erred concerning the faith. Grace be with thee. Amen. (1Ti 6:20-21)

Repeatedly throughout First and Second Timothy Paul frequently touches the refrain that we see in these verses, "Keep the trust," "Guard the deposit." After almost fifty years of ministry, I increasingly realize that a very few core principles will either make a man's ministry or break it. We touched one of them earlier in this series, "...He desireth a good work" (1Ti 3:1). Ministry is not about privilege or position; it is about work, about working for God. The man who pursues ministry for what he might derive personally out of it is doomed to failure. The driving force behind a man's calling is a passion for work that is God-centered and that truly benefits others. He will realize blessings as a part of his ministry, but the motive for his ministry cannot be what he derives, either from God or from the people to whom he ministers.

I believe the theme that we see in our study verses here underscores this same principle. Timothy's ministry does not belong to Timothy. It is a trust. It belongs to another and has been given to his safe keeping and distribution. He must give account to God for how he uses this trust. Stewardship, though often referring to the Jews' stewardship of the holy writings of Old Testament Scripture, the "oracles of God," forms one of the dominant themes in Jesus' parables. Stewardship of ministry should find a similar emphasis in the thoughts and lives of every man who serves in, or seeks to serve in, the ministry. Are we willing to give up ourselves for God's service to others? Are we willing to work tirelessly, knowing that often the only thanks we shall ever hear for what we did will be the "Well done" that we hear from our Lord at the end of our assignment. Often the reaction of the people to whom we minister may be more one of resentment or rebellion than of appreciation. Our fallen human nature does not like to be told that it needs to change.

Not long ago I had a rather minor, but quite irritating encounter with my bank. On two occasions someone at the bank lost a small check that I had put in an envelope for the night deposit. As I worked through my frustrations and concerns with the bank, the thought of such passages as this became more my focus that my bank's administration errors. I realized that I expect my bank to keep meticulous records of every cent of my money that they hold in trust for me. When they failed that trust, I struggled with the disappointment of a broken trust. Normally we put trust in institutions and people whom we respect and trust to honor our commitment. While no man ever earned the trust of ministry by personal merit, Scripture imposes a distinct requirement that the man who aspires to the ministry, as well as the man who fills it, meet certain rather demanding qualifications. Throughout this series I have emphasized the necessity of honoring these qualifications as a condition for ordination to ministry, and, in my personal conviction, for continuing in the office after ordination. This thing we call ministry is a solemn trust from God, as well as from the people who seek our ministry, not something to be viewed as a hobby or pleasant pastime when we have nothing better to do.

"Timothy should guard the truth of the Christian faith that God had committed to his stewardship by proclaiming it accurately and faithfully (cf. 1Ti 4:12-14; 6:2; 2Ti 2:2). Another possibility is that what had been entrusted to Timothy refers particularly to his responsibility to oppose the false teachers and to keep his own life pure (cf. 1Ti 4:11-13; 5:22-23; 6:11-12). Specifically he should avoid the controversies and false teaching that Paul referred to previously that characterize the world system and are valueless, as well as the opposition of those who claimed superior knowledge. This last warning is apparently a reference to gnostic influence that was increasing in Ephesus. Gnostics taught that there

was a higher knowledge available only to the initiates of their cult. Paul had already set forth his full rebuttal to their contention in his epistle to the Colossians. The appeal of these false teachers had seduced some in Ephesus who had wandered from the path of truth.”¹³[1]

Periodically we sadly encounter men in ministry who turn from the teachings on which they were ordained. In most cases we should not question their sincerity, but a man who serves in ministry must present more than sincere personal opinions. He is charged to keep the trust of truth that he professed upon his ordination. The moment a man allows himself to become the hub of controversy he has taken the spotlight off the Lord Jesus Christ in his ministry. No good can follow such a shift. Constable’s reference reminds us convincingly to guard the trust of the gospel and to keep it for future generations. How should a man react if he realizes at some point in time that he is not in agreement with the dominant theological and practical bent of the churches in his fellowship? I am convinced that he has only two honorable options. 1) He can assess the value of his convictions against the damage of controversy, not overlooking that he may be mistaken and not perfectly enlightened in his views. In this case he may still hold his views, but choose to keep them private for the greater benefit of the fellowship of believers with whom he serves. 2) If his views are sufficiently central to the beliefs of the people with whom he serves as to represent a material difference, he can honorably announce his sincere difference and seek fellowship with people who share his views.

In first century Roman culture the Gnostic philosophy was in its infancy. It lacked a broad basis of appeal in its own right, so it apparently sought a clandestine merger with Christianity. However, its primary tenets contradicted basic Christian belief and practice. The god of Gnosticism hated all material things and was viewed as remaining eternally aloof from all other beings, even his own followers. Gnostic teachers enticed new followers with the promise of gaining a secret and otherwise unknowable truth. Yet they lived with the constant realization that their professed god refused to reveal himself to them or allow them to approach him intimately and personally. Gnosticism had to live with the contradiction of never truly knowing the supreme deity.

Paul was likely not at all confronting scientific teachings of his day at all, but rather the claims of Gnostic teachers whose primary appeal to the untaught was their secret and supposedly superior knowledge. Neither Timothy nor the Ephesian believers could embrace true Christianity *and* Gnosticism. If they embraced Gnosticism, they erred in the faith, the core beliefs of the Christian faith.

On occasion believers have stumbled in their faith over scientific issues, but more often they err regarding their supposed higher knowledge of spiritual truths. Near the turn from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, the scientific teaching of evolution was making its way into mainstream scientific thought. Some notable Christian leaders felt forced to find a way to accommodate Biblical creation and evolution, no less impossible than reconciling Gnosticism and Christianity. A. H. Strong was a leading Southern Baptist theologian and writer of this era. He espoused the idea of “theistic evolution,” the idea that God actually created the universe, but that He employed the processes of evolution to do so. This giant of a Christian man soon lost much of his respect and standing within the Christian community by this compromise.

We should be far more cautious at the significantly larger number of men who compromise their faith for aberrant spiritual views. Inevitably error leads to extreme views. For example, the Reformers in Europe rightly opposed the church of Rome and generally moved into a far better theological posture than their “mother church.” However, many of them went to the extreme by adopting fatalistic salvation by decree. They were immediately followed by Arminius and his altogether man-centric salvation by human works. Truth suffered in both camps. Today most Christian groups that hold to Arminian theology have little awareness of James Arminius and his influence on their core ideas, must less a major contributor to his thinking in the Jesuit teacher Louis de Molina. Sadly in the Reformed camp “Calvinism” has become a litmus test in which Calvin’s teachings become substantially the sixty

seventh book of the Bible. You hear such phrases as “hyper-Calvinist,” “five point Calvinist,” “four point Calvinist,” or more recently “moderate Calvinist.” John Calvin becomes the standard of truth, not Scripture. The whole Christian world divides into Catholic and Protestant, or Arminian and Calvinist, plus any number of other similar hopeless divides. Much heat and little light shines over such a sad landscape.

This whole fragmented scene cries out the truth with which Paul closed his letter to his dear son in the faith and in the ministry. When we begin to follow our definitions of “truth,” of “science,” we easily become excessively subjective and err from the faith by following “falsely so called” knowledge. Polarity and winning arguments becomes the trademark of such corrupted Christianity. Winning people to the truth of the Lord Jesus Christ, serving Him by work, keeping the trust of the gospel; all these Biblical objectives fall by the wayside in defeated disarray.

Sometimes within any number of historical Christian fellowships contemporary teachers will focus on past preachers or writers of high reputation. Similar to the Reformed emphasis on Calvin or Arminius, they will pour over every word that these men wrote and spend hours interpreting them as if they were Scripture itself. Often anything that these men wrote or believed will be presented with the same solemn and binding authority as Scripture itself. And with almost equal frequency differing interpretations of these men and their writings become the focal point of what we must believe. Biblical Christianity is indeed historical. We enjoy Biblical truth and light because God preserved His truth through past generations. We may profitably study the men of past generations within our tradition to familiarize ourselves with the shoulders on which we stand historically. However, we do ourselves, the people whom we teach, and the God whose trust we enjoy, a sad disservice when we make these men and their teachings as sacred as Scripture itself. Every one of them was a flawed vessel who gave his best, but he was not an inspired man who wrote under the Holy Spirit’s inspiration with flawless truth. Any of these men worthy of our respect would cringe to think that they or their personal writings would be used by believers in a subsequent generation as if they were nearly inspired. Often, sadly often, a study of Christian history in any tradition is a study in errors that we should learn about, and thus learn to avoid. We trace these errors through the writings of men who lived through them, sincerely embraced them, and believed them, but they, like we, were not perfect or flawless in their beliefs. We can only find that measure of purity in Scripture alone. Literally, you can study long enough within any Christian tradition and find past writers who taught almost anything that you wish to endorse. Biblical teaching, not past writers, must define the trust that we are to guard faithfully and without compromise.

May we each return to the mindset that our ministry, whatever it may be, was bestowed upon us by its Owner and Founder as a sacred trust that we are to guard with our life and with our honor, but never with our pride. May we seek occasions to serve others in the gospel and opportunities to guard the trust of the gospel as communicated to us in Scripture—and Scripture alone.

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