

The Primary Tool for the Church Leader

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Abstract

The place and importance of Scripture as the primary tool to be used by a church leader is often affirmed at the beginning of ministry, but is often marginalized by the pressures of ministerial activities. This article is a brief study of 2 Timothy 3:10-16, and the importance and use of Scripture in the perfecting of the “man of God” for ministry work. It is a plea for the church leader to allow the Holy Spirit to use the Scriptures in a continual preparation for the role of church leader.

Key words: pastor, Scripture, conviction, correction, training, teaching, equipping.

The demands placed on the leader of a spiritual community are many and great. Whatever term¹ that might be used to distinguish the leader in his/her role, the person to whom the congregation looks for spiritual leadership is inundated with needs and expectations (both spoken and unspoken). Most groups in the greater Christian community would affirm that this person is to be a “man of God,” uniquely called, and anointed by the Holy Spirit. He/she is one who has been identified as having the unique gifts necessary to serve and lead in the Christian church.

Usually this person has gone through some process of training and education to prepare for the plethora of tasks that will be placed upon him/her. Established church groups and denominational organizations usually require formal educa-

1 Depending upon the denomination or church group, this person may be called a pastor, priest, elder, minister, preacher, teacher or simply leader. Each group has a particular reason for the term used to distinguish the leader or teacher from the general membership.

tion in seminaries or universities before an individual is “ordained.”² Although many church groups usually identified as part of the “free church tradition” may not have formally accredited institutions, most have their own training and educational processes to help prepare the “man of God” for service to Christ, the church, and the community at large. The “tools” used in the preparation process generally include trained and experienced individuals who serve as teachers, books written by knowledgeable authors which address knowledge and skills thought to be important or necessary for leadership in the church, the spoken and unspoken traditions of the community, and the sacred writings or Holy Scriptures called the “Bible.” The expectation of the preparation process is not that these tools be mastered, but rather that it be learned how to use them in the development of the continual life of the leader for effective service.

Traditionally, the ordination event which sets the church leader apart includes the reading of all or part of Second Timothy chapters three and four. In those churches which affirm the primacy of the Bible, there is usually a homily challenging the leader to “Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction” (2 Timothy 4:2). A challenging question which refuses to be ignored in the heart and mind of this writer is, “Does anyone take these homilies seriously?” Has the one who delivered the homily allowed the “Word” to prepare him/her for the seasons of life? Has the “Word” corrected, rebuked and encouraged him/her? If so, how and when was he/she corrected, rebuked and encouraged? And what of those who are quick to give a hardy “Amen!” to the impassioned homily at the ordination service? How is the “Word” used in the very personal and individual life of practicing church leaders?

This article will encourage the church leader to heed the challenge of the Apostle Paul in Second Timothy 3:14-4:2, and to keep the Holy Scriptures as the primary source for continual training in righteousness. Introductory courses in theology identify anywhere from four to seven basic sources in the development of the theology of an individual.³ The four that are commonly found in most lists include tradition, personal experience, reason and the Bible. To this list, when one is considering his/her personal practical theology, honest introspection might also add cultural values, denominational and congregational politics, expediency, and maybe world events. All of the above exert strong influences upon the

- 2 “To appoint somebody officially as a priest, minister, or rabbi” is the generally accepted term. Depending on the group, this is done by an official board, or officer who represents that church group.
- 3 For a comprehensive identification of the sources see *Christian Theology: An Introduction* by Alister E. McGrath, chapter 6.

continual equipping of the church leader. However, the source most publically affirmed, at least in Protestant circles, and most piously argued in church debates, is the Holy Scripture, the Bible.

A careful reading of the text should either settle the issue or intensify the question. When Paul admonishes Timothy to “continue in what you have learned and firmly believed” (2 Timothy 3:14), is he not addressing personal experience and reason? And when Paul adds to the challenge, “knowing from whom you learned it”, is not the apostle at least affirming personal experience as well as tradition? Raymond Collins points out,

The plural “from whom” (*para tinton*) suggests that in addition to Paul, Timothy had other teachers... Among them were certainly Timothy’s mother and grandmother, whose faith he shared (p. 261).

However, this “personal experience” is primarily related to Timothy’s experience and instruction with Paul, and the “tradition” is thus an *apostolic* tradition.⁴ With this understanding, the primary source for the equipping of the “man of God” includes, for those who have access to the tradition and teaching of Paul via the New Testament, at least the book of Acts and the Epistles of Paul.

Paul reminds Timothy and the readers of 2 Timothy 3 *why* the Holy Scriptures have primacy as “*the tool*.” First, the “sacred writings” provide “wisdom for salvation;” next, they are “God-breathed;” and finally, they are “profitable for *teaching*, for *conviction*, for *correction* or *improvement*, and for *training* or *discipline* in righteousness.” The climax of Paul’s affirmation of the use of “sacred writings” is for the purpose of enabling the “man of God” to be *artios* (variously translated “complete, adequate, fit, or ready”) and *exertismenos* (“fully prepared”) for every good work.

The Scriptures “instruct” or “make wise” to (*eis*) salvation for the “man of God”. Paul is not dealing with evangelism in this context. Instead, he is pointing to Scripture to help Timothy understand the many aspects and implications of salvation. Perhaps the “salvation” of which Paul writes might be termed the “life that salvation has brought.” But Paul is quick to underscore that Scripture must be used and applied “through faith in Christ Jesus.” The argument of Paul in this passage is not about justification through faith, but rather a challenge to use the Scriptures to delve into the realities that salvation brings, but always through the experience of faith in Jesus Christ. The disciple of Christ gains wisdom and finds

4 Aquinas, in his *Commentaries on St. Paul’s Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon* states the generally accepted interpretation that Timothy’s teacher was Paul, “who learned it neither by man nor from man, as it says in Galatians 1:12.” (See also Dibelius and Conzelmann, p. 119, who insist that the shared experience with Timothy’s mother and grandmother is secondary to what he learned from Paul.)

instruction from the sacred texts because he/she trusts the living Christ, not only to have been the ultimate author of the ancient writings, but to be the one who enlivens them and speaks current wisdom for salvation. The author “uses the phrase to affirm that the sacred writings in which Timothy had been instructed since his youth explain salvation in light of the message about Christ Jesus” (Collins, p. 262).

Arguments have been put forth as to the meaning of this new expression, “God-inspired” (used only here in the New Testament). Debates have led to broken personal relationships and church splits, and even to the formation of new fellowships and denominations - all based upon the rendering and understanding of this expression (*theopneustos*). The debates have become more heated, especially in the USA, over the placement of “all” (*pasa*). Is it “all scripture is God-inspired” or “all God-inspired scripture is . . .”? Good men and women of solid scholarship differ, but “ancient rabbinic traditions of biblical interpretation suggest that every part of Scripture is important.” (Collins, 268) The comment by Dibelius and Conzelmann is extremely helpful: “The emphasis of the passage doubtless lies, not on the concept of inspiration, but on the usefulness of the inspired scriptures” (Dibelius and Conzelmann, 120). It is important to follow the argument of the writer. Earlier in this epistle, the author told Timothy the dangers of “arguing about words” (2:14). The point of the text is that God has been and presently is involved with the Holy Scriptures.

After reiterating the divine relationship to the Scriptures, Paul impresses upon Timothy the divine profitability of the sacred texts. Although the overarching challenge of this epistle is for Timothy to provide instruction (2 Tim 2:24-25) as well as correction, conviction and encouragement (2 Tim 4:2) for members of the church in which he is to labor, the profitability begins with Timothy. It is for this one who has experienced “the laying on of hands” (1 Tim 4:14; 2 Tim 1:6). Earlier Paul instructed Timothy to “do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman not ashamed, one who *correctly handles the word of truth*” (emphasis mine) (2:15). By extension, this “profitability” is for “any and all” who would be a “man of God.” The reader of this text should be the first student. Readers and interpreters of this passage are often eager to be teachers and instructors before becoming learners and students of the sacred texts. With the absence of the verb (to be), the idea is continual activity. The Scriptures continue to be profitable for the “man of God” that he/she might be complete and fully fitted for his/her work. While it is admitted that “the relevance of Scripture may be seen in its complete sufficiency for Christian living” (Towner, 201) and thus may be applied to all believers, the context indicates that Paul primarily had Timothy in mind. Towner, in his careful, full-length commentary, is very specific as he writes, “The purpose toward which Paul’s logic moves is outfitting Timothy . . .”

(p. 593). Towner continues to write to my concern: “The various uses of scripture first make the *anthropos* of God capable, proficient, or even complete, that is, fully outfitted for the task.” (p. 593) In attempting faithful application, this must include the principle leader of any congregation.

The primary function, or “usefulness”, of Scripture which Paul addresses is identified by four prepositional phrases, each of which uses the same Greek preposition, *pros* (“for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness”). The general term “teaching” (*didaskalia*) may address “either the content of what is taught or the activity of teaching” (Towner, 590). In the context where “Scripture” is under discussion, the “content of Scripture” is what is primarily useful. Many ideas and issues might be useful to learn, but the core curriculum for the continuing education of the church leader must forever be the Holy Scriptures. Because Scripture is “living” (Hebrews 4:12) and never static, it remains fresh, full of implications and applications for the active life of the minister.

From the more general term, Paul identifies the usefulness of Scripture in a pair of terms, (*pros elegmon* and *pros epanorthosin*)⁵ that are almost synonymous, but their difference is important to note. The noun, *elegmon*, identifies the activity described variously in English translations as “rebuking” (TNIV), “convicting of sin,” “censure,” or “reproof” (NRSV). “The term covers a range of activities all related to the process of making someone aware of sin” (Towner, 591). Ultimately, it is the role of the Holy Spirit to convict of sin (John 16:8), but the Scripture becomes His tool in the continual process of perfecting the “man of God”. From lapses in ethical behavior to the misuse of relationships, the Holy Spirit will use “His sword” (Ephesians 6:17) to convict. If *elegmon* (reproof) is negative and this use of Scripture by the Spirit is painful, the term *epanorthosin* (correcting) is more positive. It “is found in epigraphic inscriptions with the meaning of restoring, repairing, or rebuilding. Used of persons, the term suggests change for the sake of improvement” (Collins, 264). Scripture not only points out the “wrong” through conviction; but when studied by the “man of God”, the Holy Spirit uses the sacred texts to correct and improve. The process is not to inflict feelings of guilt, but rather to enable the “man of God” to be thoroughly prepared and ready to do the work of God with a heart and life cleansed by the work of the Spirit using His tool, the Scriptures.

As Paul concludes his list of the ways in which Scripture is useful, he identifies it as profitable for the process of “training in righteousness.” Training (*paideia*) “was a dominate concept in Greco-Roman culture. It included not only simply education or instruction, but the corrective element of discipline” (Towner, 591).

5 Collins (264) points out that neither of these terms are found elsewhere in the New Testament.

Any master craftsman knows that instruction is only the first step in training. Instruction must be applied and then practiced under the watchful eye of the master. The principles of playing a musical instrument can be explained and modeled by the maestro, but only through disciplined practice can the student become a musician. So it is in “training in righteousness.” This righteousness is not the “imputed righteousness” of which Paul writes in Romans. It rather “reflects the Hellenistic Jewish idea of right relationship with God and others” (Collins, 265). It is the process of becoming like God. Scripture identifies exercises to practice such as fasting and prayer, but at the same time identifies how one is to practice the exercise (Matthew 6:5-18). Scripture provides models to follow. It encourages daily practice. The prayers in the Psalms are not only to be read; they are to be prayed. The Holy Scripture is, among other things, the exercise book to train the “man of God” in righteousness. As the musician regularly and systematically practices the exercises, not for performances, but so that he/she can play the great works of composers; so the “man of God” seeks out and practices the exercises found in Scripture so that he/she can rightly live “in relationship with God and others.” Living with and in the sacred texts provides a process whereby one can rightly live in the world and rightly relate to others.

Paul writes to his young protégé and challenges him to use the Scriptures as he teaches and corrects and performs all his pastoral duties. However, in the immediate context, the challenge is for Timothy to let the God-breathed Word become profitable *for him* (italics mine) so that he (Timothy) can “be ready (*artios*) and thoroughly prepared for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:17).

Conclusion

As Scripture was to be the tool for Timothy to use for his personal instruction, conviction, correcting and training in righteousness, so it should also be the primary tool for the church leader in his/her on-going equipping process. Perhaps the Bible has found other uses in the activities of the church leader. For some, it is part of proper attire to carry a Bible into the pulpit. One must carry it and hold it correctly while delivering the sermon. For some, it is a source book for sermon ideas or the “scrap book” for sermons preached before which are to be re-studied and preached again. The debater finds the Bible to be the final word based on his/her discovered “proof-texts.” As a piece of furniture, it should be placed conspicuously on the desk or table of every church leader. Perhaps the ancient text has as many uses as there are leaders of churches. The question 2 Timothy 3 and 4 raises concerns its use as the primary tool for the ongoing perfecting of the church leader.

Eugene H. Peterson challenges the church leader to eat the Bible in his thou-

ght provoking book, *Eat This Book*. He writes that “as a dog chews on a bone we need to gnaw on the text, linger on God’s word, mediating on it day and night” (Peterson, 2). Bonhoeffer challenged his students at Finkenwalde (and perhaps us) to “live with a text” for a week or even a month. He suggested that the first word heard each day be the word of God.

It was heard at ordination: “The Scripture is useful . . .” The challenge is for the church leader to use it as Paul intended, as Paul used it. His closing words to Timothy were, “Do your best to come to me quickly. . . When you come, bring my scrolls, especially the parchments” (2 Timothy 4:9-13). As they had prepared him for life, the Holy Scriptures were an on-going preparation for what would come next.

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Osnovni alat za pastora

Sažetak

Na početku pastorove službe često se potvrđuje mjesto i važnost Pisma, kao glavnog alata koji pastor treba koristiti, no ono često biva potisnuto pod pritiskom aktivnosti službe. Ovaj članak ukratko obrađuje Drugu poslanicu Timoteju 3,10-16 te važnost i uporabu Pisma za usavršavanje “Božjeg čovjeka” u njegovoj službi. To je molba upućena pastoru, da dopusti Duhu Svetom da upotrebljava Pismo i neprestano ga priprema za njegovu pastorsku ulogu.