

Continuing in the Faith

2 Timothy 3:10–17

Recently, CNN ran a story under the provocative title: a tsunami of church closings is poised to remake America. Their figure of 100,000 churches closed or repurposed in a decade is an estimate, not an actual count, and it's already being disputed. But the strain underneath it is not. Churches are aging, attendance is thinning in many places, budgets are tighter, buildings are harder to keep, and pastors are tired.

In 1992, one in three Protestant pastors in America were under 40 years of age. By 2022, Barna found that only 16 percent of senior pastors were. Three-quarters of pastors now say it is becoming harder to find mature young Christians who want to pastor, and nearly four in five say the churches themselves are not training the next generation of leaders. We have gotten good at gathering around a gifted man. We have not gotten as good at raising up the one who will take his place.

James Bell has named the deeper problem. A church was never meant to be a group of Christians watching one professional do the work of ministry. Christ gave leaders to equip the saints for the work of ministry. If the next decade brings more closings, the answer will not be enough pastors to keep every building open. It will be older Christians discipling younger ones, and ordinary believers who know the ministry belongs to the whole body.

Jesus said the gates of hell will not prevail against his Church. He did not promise that every local church would stay open, or that a faith no one handed on would survive in a building. The faith once delivered to the saints outlives every congregation. But a congregation continues only if someone hands that faith on.

Paul saw a different kind of closing coming. His own. He is in prison, the time of his departure is at hand, and impostors are going from bad to worse. What does he do? He does not write Timothy a survival plan for the institution. He writes, *"You, however."* You know and have followed my life. Continue in what you have learned. The faith will outlive the apostle if it is passed on.

That is the aim of the whole letter. The faith had dwelt first in Lois, then in Eunice, and now in Timothy. What Timothy heard, he is to entrust to faithful people, who will teach others also. Holding on to his faith is a must. But it is not the end goal.

Main Idea: The next generation continues in the faith, and passes it on, not by keeping buildings open, but by following godly lives, enduring the cost, and remaining under the God-breathed Word until someone else is made wise for salvation.

As we unfold the text, we will walk the path Paul gives Timothy for continuing in the faith and handing it on.

The path begins with a life that can be followed.

“You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, **11** my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra.” 2 Timothy 3:10-11

Notice what Timothy followed. Not a brand. Not the latest church-growth trend. A life. Did he follow Paul’s teaching? Most certainly. But he also followed his conduct, his aim, his faith, his patience, his love, his steadfastness, and his suffering.

As I was reflecting on these characteristics, Paul’s words, “my aim in life,” gripped me. Timothy didn’t just follow Paul’s reputation. He followed the thing Paul was actually after. He knew what it was. What about us? What is our aim in life? Does it align with Paul’s?

His aim was not a bigger crowd. It was not merely to cross the finish line having lived a moral life. Paul is in prison, and he is still writing. If all he wanted was to end well, the letter was unnecessary. He writes because the faith he received has to outlive him. Timothy followed a man whose purpose was to know Christ, to preach him, and to put the same charge in someone else’s hands. Paul could point to the pattern because Timothy had watched him live it.

A few verses later he will say, “*knowing from whom you learned it,*” and he will reach back to childhood, to the sacred writings Timothy had known

since he was a boy. Lois and Eunice are still in this letter. Lois was his grandmother. Eunice was his mother. Paul has already said that a sincere faith dwelt first in Lois, then in Eunice, and now in Timothy. The faith was taught, and it was lived where a child could see it.

That is how you tell a mentor from an impostor. The impostors in the previous paragraph have a form of godliness but deny its power. They creep in behind a mask of religiosity and capture hearts that are in love with self, not with God. But a godly mentor can be followed home. You can see the patience, the love, the steadfastness, and the suffering. If the life can't be observed, we must not hand the next generation to it.

And we must not stop at following. Continuing is not complete until the one who followed becomes the one who is followed. Timothy followed Paul's teaching and conduct. The letter has already told him to turn and entrust what he heard to others who can teach others.

Parents and grandparents, the faith that dwelt in Lois and Eunice is the kind of faith God still uses. Older believers, who is watching your conduct, your aim, your patience? Younger believers, whose life are you close enough to follow? A church that only gathers to watch one man work will not outlive him. A church that follows a life, and then offers a life, will.

Notice that **the path continues through endurance, and endurance is dependence.**

Paul does not hide the cost. He names the region he traveled to, Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. These are real places he visited on his first missionary journey and where real people watched him suffer. Timothy was from that region and saw it first-hand. And Paul not only endured the hardships, he said *"yet from them all the Lord rescued me."* (v. 11)

Then he states the rule. *"Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived."* 2 Timothy 3:12-13

Brothers and sisters, a comfort-driven faith will not continue, and it's not worth passing on. If we tell the next generation that godliness means the pressure comes off, we are not preparing them. We are setting them up to leave when the pressure comes, and we are handing them a faith that

collapses when real life hits. Paul tells the truth. The godly will be opposed and the impostors will not retire. The days do not get easier because you decided to continue.

But endurance is not gritting your teeth and digging deeper. Paul said, *“From them all the Lord rescued me.”* He makes the same point in 2 Corinthians 1. There he said the afflictions they endured were so severe they despaired of life itself. He continues, *“Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again.”* 2 Corinthians 1:9-10

The endurance came from reliance on God, and reliance took the form of prayer. A tired pastor and a thinning church do not need a better brand first. They need a people who will stay, and who will pray, because the rescue does not come from slick marketing or modern facilities.

If you are young and the cost already feels like too much, hear this. The Lord who rescued Paul has not changed. You are not asked to be impressive. You are asked to rely on the God who raises the dead, and to keep going. The faith you receive under pressure is the faith you will be able to hand to someone else when their pressure comes.

And now the path is sustained by the Word, which does not stop with the one who received it.

“But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it **15** and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. **16** All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, **17** that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” 2 Timothy 3:14-17

Paul said, *continue in what you have learned and firmly believed.* This is not nostalgia, and it’s not a longing for the good old days. It’s not a private holding pattern either. The sacred writings made Timothy wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus and equipped him for every good work. They

are still sufficient for that today. And Paul will not let him lose sight of the means. He said, *“Knowing from whom you learned it.”* (v.14)

The same Word that saved him came to him through a grandmother, a mother, and a spiritual father. Scripture is breathed out by God. And it teaches, it reproves, it corrects, and it trains.

The aim of all of this in verse 17 is a complete man of God, equipped for every good work. The goal is not a consumer of religious content. But a person ready to work, and ready to equip someone else to work. In the context of this letter, that good work includes guarding the deposit, entrusting it to faithful people, and preaching the word when it is in season and when it is not.

That claim is being tested in many pulpits today. Recently a well-known megachurch pastor went viral for driving a Rolls-Royce onto the platform as a sermon prop. He is known for these kinds of props. Knowing the criticism was coming, he said the church is in the entertainment business, and that if people are bored the fault is the preacher’s, not God’s. He then reached for a Greek word to prove it. The word was *ekplēssō*. He said it covers what he was doing, because the crowds were astonished at Jesus.

But he is twisting the word. The word translated astonished there means “struck” by the teaching, not held by a prop. In Matthew the crowds are astonished at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their scribes. What struck them was the word, not a prop. Nazareth was amazed at him and then tried to throw him off a cliff. Astonishment is not faith. The crowd felt something. But they had not yet been made wise for salvation.

Paul names the same problem at the start of the next chapter, which we will come to next week. A time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching. Boredom is not the standard. Neither is the appetite of the crowd. The God-breathed Word is the standard.

H.B. Charles put it plainly: “Our preaching is not the reason the Word works. The Word is the reason our preaching works.”

There is a difference worth keeping clear. An occasional prop is not the problem. Jesus held up a coin. He set a child in the middle of the room. He

pointed to a field, a flower, and a fig tree. The picture served the truth, and then it got out of the way. A preacher can do the same. A chair, a letter, a tool, even a story from the news, can make a point land, as long as the point is the point. The trouble starts when the prop begins to say that the Word is not enough. When the car is the memory and the gospel is the caption, the illustration has become the message.

When the preacher says that a sermon without the visual is not fully biblical, and that boredom is the pastor's fault, the appetite of the crowd has been made the standard. That is a form of godliness. It has the appearance of ministry. But it denies the power, because the power is in the God-breathed Word, not in whatever holds the room.

Paul does not give Timothy that job. He tells him to continue in the sacred writings he has known from childhood, the writings that are able to make one wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. A car can fill a platform, but it can't make anyone wise for salvation. If the next generation continues by whatever holds their attention, they will not continue, and they will have nothing to pass on. The Word is sufficient. The show we put on is not.

James Meeks, who pastored Salem Baptist here in Chicago, once told a story that shows what verse 17 can look like when the Word equips the man of God for every good work.

A deacon in his church kept urging him, for months, to go fishing. Meeks kept saying, maybe one day. The deacon was persistent. One Sunday after service he asked again, and the pastor agreed. They set a day. Then the deacon told him what time he would pick him up. Four-thirty in the morning. Meeks was already regretting it. The deacon said, you do not have to worry about anything. I will take care of everything. The morning came. They climbed into the deacon's van and drove a couple of hours to the spot. By the time they arrived, the pastor was almost looking forward to it. A quiet morning. A pole in his hand. Then the deacon began to unload the van, and there was only one fishing pole. Meeks thought they might share it. But the deacon never offered. The pastor stood there the whole time and watched him fish.

On the way home, he was still turning it over. Did he bring me out here just to watch? Then it all searched his own heart. He thought to himself: That is the picture of my own ministry. People had been coming to church to watch him fish with the one pole. But that is not the goal. The goal is a church

equipped to fish, and equipped to teach someone else to fish. That is how the kingdom advances.

Church, I don't want to be the man with the one pole. I don't want you leaving this room talking about how well the pastor handled the rod, or how many he seemed to catch. God forbid that I mishandle this Word. Paul told Timothy to cut it straight. But if I do that and all I have gained is your admiration, I have still fallen short of the charge.

The Word was not given to make a preacher impressive. It was given to make a people wise for salvation, and then to put a pole in their hands. If you only watch me fish, I have not been faithful to my calling. If you leave equipped to open this Book, to obey it, and to teach it to someone else, then the morning was not wasted.

So, let me put a pole in your hands before you leave. You don't need a platform, and you don't need to sound like a preacher. You need one person and an open Bible. This week, ask a younger believer, a friend, or one of your own children, to sit with you over a short portion of scripture. Read it out loud. Then ask one honest question: what is God saying here, and what would it look like to obey it? Listen more than you talk. Close by praying for them by name. That is all. Parents, that is Lois and Eunice. Older saints, that is Paul with Timothy.

Some of you are already afraid you will not know what to say. You don't have to have every answer. If a question comes that you can't handle, say so, and tell them you will get back to them. The power is not in you being able to answer every question. It is in the Word you open and the prayer you pray. If you have no one yet, ask the Lord for a name, and pray for an open door. The ministry of this church is not what you watch me do. It is what the Word equips you to do for someone else.

One pole, in one man's hands, and a faithful life that never hands it over, ends when he does. Paul will not leave Timothy there. Continue in what you learned, knowing from whom you learned it, until you are the one from whom someone else learns it.

Again, the church in Acts didn't have a Rolls-Royce on the platform. It had opposition. And Luke writes, "But the word of God increased and multiplied" (Acts 12:24). The church had no empire. It had Jesus' marching orders,

prayer, and the Word, and that was enough. Ordinary people carried it because it would not stay shut in them.

Conclusion

So, stay on that path, or get on it. Follow a life you can actually watch. Endure through prayer, and stay under the Word until it has done its work in you. Let it teach you where you lack knowledge, reprove you when you are drifting, correct you when you are wrong, and train you when you would rather be left alone. Then open your mouth and put a pole in someone else's hands. The next generation will not continue if the Bible stays closed and the faith never became their own.

Paul is about to leave, and he will not be around to see whether Timothy does it. Timothy is told to continue. So are we. Hear the call again: "You, however, continue." And do not continue alone. Pass it on.