

## **Should a Christian Minister be Conservative or Progressive?**

*“If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed.” ~ I Timothy 4:6*

Should a Christian minister have a conservative or a progressive mindset? In asking this question, I am not speaking of his politics, or even his view towards doctrinal orthodoxy. I am assuming in this essay that we are speaking of Christian ministers who seek to be true to the Scriptures and to the historic Christian faith.

Rather, I am talking about his general mindset. We have all been to ecclesiastical meetings where men quickly show themselves to be one or the other. At elders’ meetings, or ministerial associations or in presbyteries, certain men can show themselves either to be adamantly conservative about everything, or as those who constantly want to push the envelope and try things a different way.

So is there an answer to the question? Should ministers, in general, be either conservative or progressive in the way they view their work in the world? I suggest that Paul provides an answer to this question in his pastoral epistles to Timothy and Titus. In particular, I believe we find help in I Timothy 4:6-16, as Paul exhorts Timothy to be a faithful minister of the Gospel.

And Paul’s answer to the question in this text is that we should be both. We should be absolutely conservative about certain aspects of the faith, and open mindedly progressive in other areas. What do I mean? Let me attempt to demonstrate this by taking each in turn.

### **A Faithful Minister is Conservative**

A faithful minister should be utterly conservative in three regards, or if I may borrow a term from JI Packer, he should be a conservationist. We want to conserve that which has been handed down to us and not allow it to be corrupted by the prevailing winds of our age. So in what ways should a minister be conservationist in his work? I believe in these three ways:

#### **Conserve the Message of Grace**

In verse 6 of I Timothy 4, Paul writes: *“If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed.”* What is encouraging here is that Paul is not asking Timothy to come up with his own theses statements or original ideas. All he must do is “put these things before the brothers.” What are those things? The “words of faith” he has been trained in,

the “good doctrine that (Timothy has) followed.” He does not need to make anything up or be brilliant but simply pass on the truth of the Gospel to his congregation. That is all God asks. Our job is to conserve the message, not add to it or try to improve upon it by our brilliant insights. We are “steward” and “heralds,” of what God has already done, not innovators.

That is why Paul twice tells Timothy to “guard the good deposit” of what has been passed down to him. There was a body of teaching worth preserving and protecting. Guarding is primarily a passive duty, a duty of conservation. Doctrine is not to change, but is to remain Apostolic and Scriptural, the same truths embraced by the early church. Doctrinally, we are to be staunchly conservationist; and if a church’s doctrine has departed from Scripture, we must be reformers, restoring the truth.

Why is this important? You see, some men take these exhortations to heart and want the Church to remain true to Scripture and for all doctrine to remain the same, without deeply embracing what this doctrine protects: that God saves us by His grace alone. That it is a done deal through Christ. That is why we do not need to add anything to the work of redemption. No “progress” on our part is needed. It is finished, Jesus said upon the cross. The whole message of the Gospel is that God has done all that is needed for our salvation already, so that all we must do is to fall on Christ in our need and weakness, and so know that we will be saved (cf. Acts 2:21; Romans 4:5; 11:36).

And those who have come to learn and love this grace of God, of a salvation already accomplished, will guard that grace with their lives. There is nothing we need to do to add to what God has already done through Christ Jesus. We must then be conservationists if we love grace.

### **Conserve the Means of Ministry**

But there is more. It has become commonplace in our day to say that “the message stays the same, but the methods change.” That we are to “contextualize” the message, becoming “all things to all men” as Paul says he did (I Corinthians 9:22). Of course this is true to a point. That is Paul’s point in I Corinthians (but notice that he did not say that he would become strong to the strong, and think on that a bit).

But does that mean that we can do things that violate the principle of living by faith, not sight? That we may do things that ignore or undermine the simple means of grace God gives us to do ministry? Listen to Paul in I Timothy 4:13: *“Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.”* That is it. Of course, Timothy was to pray (I Timothy 2:1, 8), see to good order in the church (I Timothy 2-3, 5), and administer the sacraments as well (cf. II Timothy 4:5, compared to Acts 8:38; 21:8).

But the point is this. If we believe that the Word of God is sufficient for the work of ministry, and that God gives us three books in particular addressed to pastors, shouldn't we believe that the Pastoral Epistles are sufficient to address the means by which we do ministry? This does not mean that they address every issue – we do have 63 other books after all – but it does mean that there is no need to add to the means by which God promises to grow His church. Faith comes by hearing, but how can they hear unless someone preach? That is why Paul tells Timothy to devote himself – not just practice but devote himself – to the public reading, teaching and exhortation from the Scriptures. That is our primary work, along with prayer and the sealing of God's promises with the sacraments.

And so we learn that a faithful Christian minister must be a conservationist in regards to both the message of grace and the means of grace.

### **Conserve a Single Mindedness**

But there is one more thing about which we must maintain a conservative mindset if we are to be faithful to our callings. And that comes from what Paul says in verses 7-8: *“Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.”* Here Paul speaks of discipline; of refusing to be distracted from godliness. Now in the original context, this had to do with particular heresies that had arisen in the early church. But it fits an overall pattern in the Pastoral epistles in which Paul exhorts Timothy and Titus to avoid foolish controversies and distractions (cf. I Timothy 6:20; II Timothy 2:16; Titus 3:2, 5). They are to be single minded about their mission: preaching the Gospel of Christ and building up His church.

And so in our day, various controversies and fads may serve to distract us from our primary calling. It does not mean that we cannot have some interest in them, but we must not quarrel, we must not be drawn away into projects and programs that will take us away from preaching the Gospel and discipling our members. The distractions of our day take many forms in my view. To name just a few: political misadventures, church sponsored art galleries and wine parties, and the constant drone of internet controversies. As Solomon wrote, “of the making of many blog wars there is no end.” We may have an interest in all of these things, but we must constantly ask if they are taking us off our main task as preachers and pastors.

And so we must remain conservationist here as well. The faithful Christian minister will discipline himself to remain single minded about his work to preach the Gospel of God's grace in Jesus Christ.

### **A Faithful Christian Minister is Progressive**

And now we flip to the other side of the coin. It is not enough to say that a Christian minister must be conservative. About some things, he must be progressive – someone who seeks change and expects progress in his life and his ministry. What do I mean? Again, let us turn to see what Paul says in I Timothy 4.

### **Pursue Progress in One's Godliness**

In verses 12 & 16, Paul encourages Timothy: *“Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.”* Here Paul calls on Timothy to make progress in his character, in his growth in grace. He is not to remain the same. We are not to be conservative regarding our own sin; we must root it out, continually repenting and returning to the goodness of God (cf. Romans 6-7). We are to set examples in our conduct, and where we fall short, make a full-hearted effort to amend our ways and reflect the character of Christ more. Ministers cannot afford to be stuck in our ways, but must in humility seek to become more and more godly. And when we fail – as we do daily – we must learn what it means to believe the Gospel even more somehow. We must be progressive in terms of our character and godliness; all the while resting in Christ and basking in His love.

### **Pursue Progress in One's Gifts**

In verses 14-15, Paul tells Timothy: *“Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you. Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress. Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.”* Paul cannot mean here that Timothy was in some risk of losing his salvation (cf. Philippians 1:6; John 10:28). But what it means is that the same way Timothy is to be saved is the same way his hearers are to be saved, by hearing and believing the Gospel. And he needs to grow in his ability to preach this Good News so that his ministry may be as effective as possible.

So, Timothy is not to be conservative about the gifts given him; he is not to stay the same in terms of his practice. Paul even uses the word, “progress,” here! So, surely, a Christian minister is to pursue growth in his gifts. We do not know precisely what gift Paul is speaking of in verse 14, but it is a good guess that it was nothing particular to Timothy. It sounds like Paul is describing a regular ordination service and that Timothy was there given the gift to be an evangelist and pastor (cf. II Timothy 4:5). And so now he is to grow in his abilities, to immerse himself in them, so that his progress is evident to all.

This takes work and discipline and, at times, heart wrenching suffering. Ministers must progress in their abilities if they are to be faithful to their calls.

Study, prayer and humility are all in order and necessary if they are to remain effective in the pastorate. Ministers must be progressive in the development of their gifts, nourishing them in the gratitude of the Gospel.

### **Pursue Progress of the Kingdom**

Finally, Paul says this in verses 9-11: *“The saying is trustworthy and deserving 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 people, especially of those who believe. Command and teach these things.”* Verse 10 contains a notoriously difficult phrase to translate, but I believe Paul is saying that Jesus “is the Savior of all kinds of people, namely (Greek: *malista*) those who believe.” In other words, the Gospel is worldwide in scope, saving people from every nation, tribe, people and language as the Gospel is preached and believed. This is one of the trustworthy statements of the Pastoral Epistles that are to be “accepted” and “taught” (I Timothy 1:15; 3:1; II Timothy 2:11; Titus 1:9; 3:8). And it indicates that Timothy is to be about the progress of the Kingdom. As God blesses, the church is to prosper and grow under his watch. The Gospel must get out, and those whom God calls must hear, believe and join the Body of the Christ on earth. But it does not just happen magically. Paul says “to this end, we toil and strife.” We work hard to plant and water all around us, even as we depend on God to grant the growth (I Corinthians 3).

We must seek the progress of the Gospel so that people of all different sorts become saved and get to live forever with God in His heaven. And we seek to see the Gospel break down barriers, reaching new peoples – people different than us – bringing us all together in One Church (Ephesians 2:11-22; 4:4-6). This requires progress, work, and a mindset that is open to change. In this regard, a Christian minister is certainly not to be conservative, but the most progressive person around. He must set an example of welcoming new and different kinds of people into the church, helping his members to love them and accommodate the changes which will of necessity occur (cf. Acts 7, 15; Galatians 2). A minister will generously welcome new folks in with the same welcome he himself received from Jesus.

And so we see that a faithful Christian minister is to have both a conservative and a progressive mindset all at once. He is to conserve the message of grace, the means by which that message is communicated, and to maintain a single minded focus on the Gospel. At the same time, he is to pursue progress in godliness, the development of his gifts, and the growth of the Kingdom around him, breaking down barriers as God’s grace is proclaimed. May God help each of us to be faithful ministers of His Gospel that we too may be found to be good servants of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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