

## **After the Apostles: God-Breathed Scripture, Godly Leaders**

### **By David Feddes**

On July 19, 64 A. D., a great fire swept through the city of Rome and destroyed many buildings and many lives. A rumor began to spread that the emperor Nero himself had ordered some of his men to start the fire because he could then rebuild Rome the way he wanted it. Whether or not the rumor was true, it presented a problem for Nero. A growing number of people were blaming him for that terrible fire, so he needed to shift the blame.

Nero decided to blame a small, new, religious group called Christians. Nero's troops began hunting down Christians and killing them, saying they were the terrible arsonists. The Roman historian Tacitus says that the Christians were treated in a terrible manner: "Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired." Nero would have parties lit up by human torches, burning Christians as his lamps.

During this time, the apostle Peter was caught and killed. "Peter was crucified at Rome with his head downwards, as he himself had desired to suffer" (Origen). Years earlier Jesus himself had told Peter, "'When you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will carry you where you do not want to go.' Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God" (John 21:18-19). According to ancient records, when Peter was facing crucifixion, he asked not to be crucified upright, because he was unworthy to die in the same way as Jesus had died. Instead, he asked to be crucified upside down. In this same period, the apostle Paul was beheaded in Rome. He was a Roman citizen, and as a citizen, Paul could not be crucified. Instead, his head was cut off (Eusebius). This was a terrible time. Other apostles were also losing their lives. Many Christians were being hunted down and killed.

### **Preparing for Departure**

The inspired apostles were not caught by surprise. The Lord told them what was coming, so they prepared themselves to die, and they prepared the church to continue in gospel truth after the apostles were gone.

Peter wrote, "I know that the putting off of my body will be soon, as our Lord Jesus Christ made clear to me. And I will make every effort so that after my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things" (2 Peter 1:14-15). Peter knew that his death was very near, and he wanted to make sure that others would be able to recall the truths he had preached and taught. He wanted them to know the Word of God with certainty when he would no longer be around to proclaim it. The gospel of Mark records Peter's memories of Jesus' life and teaching and death and resurrection. Peter told these things to his friend Mark (who also knew Jesus personally), and Mark wrote them down. In addition to this, Peter wrote two letters to Christians. In these letters, Peter communicated God's truth, fully aware that he would be departing soon.

The apostle Paul also knew what was coming. He was not caught by surprise. Paul wrote, "I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Timothy 4:6-7). Paul knew that soon he would no longer be alive to preach the gospel or to teach the doctrines of the faith. So, in view of his departure, he wanted to communicate the Word of God in a way that would guide the church long after Paul was gone.

Paul knew that the Christians were going to face deadly persecution from outside the church, and he knew also that there would be false teachers rising up within the church, wolves dressed

in sheep's clothing, as Jesus had warned. Paul wrote letters to a young pastor, Timothy, and warned about people "having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power... always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth... these men also oppose the truth, men corrupted in mind and disqualified regarding the faith" (2 Timothy 3:7-8).

Peter gave a similar warning: "There will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction" (2 Peter 2:1). These teachers would try to make Christianity into something other than it was, something more like the Greek and Roman religions, or more like a version of Judaism. Such religion would not be persecuted. It did not focus on Jesus Christ as Savior, and was more legalistic than the gospel of grace. The apostles saw it all coming.

### **Would Christianity Vanish?**

There would be false teachers. There would be ferocious persecutions. What would become of the church? Would Christianity vanish?

When Paul was sitting in that prison cell facing execution, many people back in the province of Asia, where Paul had planted so many churches, were distancing themselves from Paul. Paul wrote to Timothy, "You are aware that all who are in Asia turned away from me (2 Timothy 1:15) This was a broad generalization; some people, such as Timothy, were still faithful to Paul and to the gospel he proclaimed. But hardly anybody wanted to identify publicly with Paul. Even the leaders of the church were going underground to keeping a low profile. It seemed like Christianity was vanishing.

With ferocious persecution, with prominent apostles in prison and scheduled for execution, with their followers in disarray and distancing themselves from the apostles, with false teachers trying to turn Jesus into just another pagan myth or another Jewish sect, how was Christianity going to survive? As one scholar says, "To every eye but that of faith it must have appeared just then as if the gospel were on the eve of extinction." Christians were an endangered species. It looked like just a short while until all of them would be gone. The Jesus movement would vanish. Nothing would be left of Christianity.

Of course, it didn't turn out that way. The fact that I'm writing this means that there are still some Christians around. I'm just one of the countless millions of Christians all around the world today. Christianity didn't vanish. Even today there are times when we wonder how the faith is going to survive in this area or that one, and yet God is faithful and He protects His church.

Still, in those early years of the Jesus movement, the Christians were comparatively few in number, and they faced enormous challenges. What would happen after the passing of those who had known Jesus and received direct revelation from him? After the apostles, how would the church survive and continue to be "the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15)? How could the church be this great fortress of truth indwelt by the living God when it was besieged by such persecution and harassed by the danger of so many errors and false religious ideas?

God provided two vital things that enabled his church to survive and thrive. He provided God-breathed Scriptures, and he provided godly leaders. God-breathed, inspired Scriptures would witness to Jesus and provide the standard of truth for all generations to come. God made sure that the apostles committed to writing the truths of the gospel and the pointers to Jesus that all generations would need. Still today, we have these Scriptures. And though they've been attacked many times over the centuries, God's Word stands sure.

And God did more than just provide the scriptures. He also provided godly leaders in each generation. These leaders would guard the treasure of truth, preach the Word, and pass the faith to a new generation. After the apostles, the church would not collapse. God's Word would abide in the Scriptures, and God's Spirit would empower new leaders for each generation.

### **God-breathed Scriptures**

Peter writes about the Scriptures,

And we have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. (2 Peter 1:20-21)

Peter was very conscious that God caused His word to be written through prophecy and these prophecies were directed and carried along by the Holy Spirit as he helped them to write what needed to be written.

The apostle Paul says something quite similar:

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it 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. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:14-17)

God breathed out, inspired, these Scriptures. The word for "spirit" in Greek and Hebrew is the same as the word for breath. And it is the breath of God, the Holy Spirit of God, who breathed out the words of the Bible. God did not leave His church when He took away the apostles, those great martyrs and heroes of the faith. He gave his Spirit, and the Spirit provided a Word, a sure Word, when He spoke through the writers of Scripture. The Spirit also provided leaders who would continue to build upon that Word and to test everything by that Word.

"Oh, Timothy," says Paul, "guard the deposit entrusted to you. Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge" (1 Timothy 6:20). The Bible is a precious deposit, a treasure to be guarded. Every Christian, and especially every leader in the church, must avoid the babble and the contradictions and all the unbiblical stuff that claims to be knowledge of God. In each generation, we must avoid the trash and guard the treasure.

### **Godly Leaders**

God's plan to build his church involved giving us the Spirit-authored Scriptures of the Bible, and along with that precious book, God's plan for the generations after the apostles included a continuing provision of godly leaders. What does this mean for us? At least three things. First, we must follow godly leaders who have come before us. For Timothy, this meant following the apostle Paul and following his mother and grandmother who were believers before him and who had mentored him in the Scriptures. Second, having followed godly leaders, having been shaped by their life and example, we must be godly leaders ourselves in the way we influence others by the Spirit of Christ in the name of Christ and by the truth of the Scriptures. Third, because new settings required new leaders, we must keep training others to lead. Each new church, each advance of the gospel into a new area, and each new generation needs new, trained leaders. That's what the early apostles did. They mentored others and trained them for the future.

### *Follow Godly Leaders*

Let's think a little more about each of these leadership-related elements. First of all, we should follow godly leaders. Many of us learned from family leaders, who taught us the faith. The apostle Paul writes to Timothy, "I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also" (2 Timothy 1:5). Many of us have learned much from family members who were Christians before us. They had a sincere faith, and we should walk in that same faith.

Whether or not we've had godly family leaders, we can also look to godly church leaders and follow their path. As the apostle Paul tells Timothy, "You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings" (2 Tim 3:10-11). So Timothy had the example of a godly leader, Paul, as well as writings from God to help shape him and lead him.

There are times in life when it's wise to pause and reflect on people you've learned from. If you grew up in a godly family, thank God for them. Such people don't grow on trees; they are a gift from God. There are many non-Christian families, and even some Christian families, who do not live very close to the principles of the Scriptures. So if you had godly family members who taught you the Scriptures and really shaped you and had a sincere faith, thank God for them, and don't forget what they showed you. If you learned the faith from someone outside your family, from a church leader or a godly friend, then when times get tough, remember what their teaching, their conduct, their faith, their patience, their love were like. Let their example lift you and inspire you. Remember them when times get tough. Tell yourself, "I am not going to fall away from what those people modeled for me and believed and taught. I am not going to drop the ball in my generation. I am going to hold fast to what was passed to me, and I am going to pass it on to others as well." Follow godly leaders. God speaks to us through the Bible and also through the Spirit living in other people.

In the days of the early church, it was very important to listen to the Scriptures and to listen to those whom God had appointed to be leaders, overseers, elders in the congregations. As the church matured, it was also helpful to have creeds that summarized the scriptures. Those creeds served a couple of purposes. One purpose of creeds was to summarize the central teachings of Scripture in a brief form so that a new believer or a child who was learning the faith and wanted to profess their own faith could learn a good, clear summary of the most important basics of the faith. That's how we got the Apostles' Creed and later the Nicene Creed. Another purpose of those creeds was to resist false teachers. These creeds were useful as brief summaries to expose the glaring errors of the false teachers and to show the pattern of sound teaching, to help identify the kind of leadership that could be trusted.

Following godly leaders is vital.

### *Be a Godly Leader*

Next, be a godly leader. As the apostle Paul writes, "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" (1 Timothy 4:16). Watch two things: yourself and your teaching. As you watch yourself, live a holy life on the path that leads to life. As you do that, your way of life will benefit not only you but others as well. If you are to be a godly leader, you must know the Word of God deeply, and you must live the Word of God with the help of the Spirit of God. As you do that, you're walking the path of salvation. Salvation is a gift of God which Jesus gives you, but then it's also a path that you walk on the way to glory. As salvation comes to you through the sound doctrine of salvation

in Christ and by the life of the Spirit in you, so your hearers will hear that sound doctrine and catch that life from you. By God's grace working in and through you, they too will be saved.

The apostle Peter sounds a lot like Paul. Peter urges leaders, "Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain [this isn't a get-rich-quick business], but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock" (1 Peter 5:2). What beautiful words from Paul and Peter on what it means to be a godly leader! Teach well, and live well! Remember the setting that they were writing in, and then apply their words to the setting that you live in.

Again and again, the Bible reminds us: Don't fit in. Stand out! You don't fit in with the wicked world or the false teachings. Don't give in to the pressures of persecution. Dare to be different. "Then 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" (1 Timothy 4:6). The times will be evil, and many of the people will be evil, but you must be different.

There's something very distinctive in Paul's second letter to Timothy. Paul repeatedly describes how the world will behave in the last days between Jesus' first coming and Jesus' second coming, and then each time, after describing the wicked world, Paul says, "But you!" In the original Greek, "*su de*" means "You however" or "But you!" You are to be totally different.

In the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, ... lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power... always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth... You, however, [*su de*: BUT YOU] have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings. (1 Tim 3:1-11)

Evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. But as for you [*su de*, BUT YOU], continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it 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 (2 Timothy 3:13-15).

The world around you will be phony and false, *but you* have a living faith. You know the real deal. You know the godly people you learned from. So be different from people who don't know Christ. Don't be swayed by the sheer number of people who pursue pleasure and embrace lies. People in the grip of evil will go from bad to worse, *but you* must continue in what you learned from God's Word and from godly leaders.

Live by God's truth, and preach God's Word. Be ready to do this on just two occasions: when it's popular, and when it's not! Be ready in season and out of season. Proclaim the biblical gospel during times of spiritual revival when almost everyone seems to be flocking to Christ, and proclaim the biblical gospel during times of spiritual decline, when the church seems weak and ineffective and fading, when almost nobody seems to follow Christ.

Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season... 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 passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you [*su de*, BUT YOU] always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. (2 Timothy 4:3-5)

There will be people who want religion tailor-made to their preferences, and there will be teachers who are willing to scratch itching ears and say whatever people want to hear. There will be such people and such teachers, *but you* must be different. Don't just fit in. Stand out.

Think back to the Old Testament, to David and his mighty men. David had to stand out for God when nobody else would do so. He faced the giant Goliath and the Philistine army when everybody else was too afraid to fight. David stood alone, took on the giant, and defeated him. Suddenly David's fellow Israelites were filled with new courage and charged against the enemy. Suddenly the enemy Philistines panicked and ran. When one brave leader dared to stand alone, his boldness brought courage to God's people and put God's enemies to flight.

Later the Bible tells about some of David's mighty men. It tells about the Three, and it tells about other men who were mighty but didn't quite rank with the Three. One thing to notice about the Three is that each one held his ground against an entire army even when everybody else ran away. The chief of the Three once took on eight hundred men at one time and defeated them. Another member of the Three was in a battle where the Israelite army was retreated, but he stood his ground, refused to retreat, and fought and fought till his hand froze to his sword and he could hardly loosen his fingers from it. When the other Israelites saw him fighting, they turned around again and came back into the battle, but there was nobody left to fight because the enemies troops were already fleeing or dead. The third mighty man of the Three was once in a lentil field, facing an enemy charge while the rest of Israel's army fled. He stood firm in the middle of the field and struck down many enemies, and the Lord brought about a great victory (see 2 Samuel 23:8-12). David and his three greatest men dared to stand alone when enemy forces seemed overwhelming and the rest of God's people were in a panic. That's leadership!

New Testament leaders no longer took up the sword as Old Testament warriors had done. The warfare and the weapons were different, but the courage was the same. The apostles were mighty men, bold men. Like David and his three mightiest men, the apostles were willing to stand alone if necessary. They gripped the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God, so strongly and faithfully that nothing could break their grip. They kept preaching God's Word even when more popular teachers opposed them, even when enemies were about to kill them, even when many in their congregations were panicking. When nobody in Asia stood with Paul, the mighty apostle stood firm in the faith. And because he stood firm, others came back to the faith.

Godly leaders lead. They don't go with the flow or join with the enemy or flee with the fearful. Back in David's time, brave leaders awakened others' courage. First, it was just David standing alone. Then he had a few mighty men who had each dared to stand alone. Then there were more mighty men, and then more. Eventually vast armies followed David, and the various enemies were utterly defeated.

In the time when the apostles were being arrested and executed, it may have seemed that there was only one Christian here or one there. It may have seemed that the Jesus movement had no chance. But mighty men and women of God dared to stand alone and even to die alone. By their faith, their courage, their life, and even by their death, they stood for the Lord when very few others could. As they refused to deny or compromise the gospel, more people joined them, then more, and then more. Today millions stand with them.

### *Equip Godly Leaders*

As we follow godly leaders before us and accept responsibility to be godly leaders ourselves, we also need to equip godly leaders. The apostle Paul knew that he wasn't going to live forever on this earth, so he trained Timothy and others for leadership. Paul also knew that Timothy wasn't going to live forever on this earth, so he urged Timothy to keep training additional godly leaders, who would then teach others. "What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (2 Timothy 2:2).

Leaders reproduce. They take the lead, and others become like them. So it's important to equip and appoint faithful, godly leaders. In 1 Timothy 3 and elsewhere, Paul describes the kind of people who ought to be elders and deacons. In a nutshell, he says that these must be the kind of people you want more of. Leaders reproduce, so train and appoint leaders whose beliefs you want to reproduce, whose character you want to reproduce, whose families you want to reproduce. Don't cut corners by appointing leaders who have some impressive abilities but whose doctrine is a mess, or whose character is a mess, or whose family is a mess. It's not enough for leaders to be skilled at particular tasks. The church must identify, equip, and launch leaders whose faith, character, and families we want more of. As we seek more such leaders, we must honor those who already are leading well. "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor" (1 Timothy 5:17).

### **Apostolic Succession**

God's provision for leadership after the apostles was to give us the Bible as the permanent record of gospel truth and to give us leaders who would carry on what Jesus and his apostles began. This is a tremendous blessing and a tremendous responsibility. We stand on the shoulders of giants. We have a treasure handed to us from many great and brave people who went before us. The treasure they hand on is, first of all, the wonderful Word of God. How did the church survive and stand strong as the church of the living God, the pillar and buttress of the truth? The God-breathed Scriptures stood as the enduring, trustworthy witness to Jesus and provided the standard of truth for all generations to come. If you want to stand strong in the Lord, you must know the Scriptures and take your stand on those. Anything less is just mud and sand; it's not a firm foundation. But Scripture is solid rock. We must take our stand on Scripture as the sure Word God provided, and then embrace God's provision of godly leadership. We must follow godly leaders who taught us, we must be godly leaders ourselves, and we must keep equipping godly leaders for each new group and each new occasion and each new generation that comes along. God uses godly leaders to guard the treasure of truth, to preach the Word, and to keep spreading the Word from place to place and from age to age.

Some churches talk about apostolic succession, and they take apostolic succession to mean that an apostle laid his hands on someone and made him a bishop, and then that bishop laid his hands on another person and made him a bishop, and that person in turn laid his hands on someone else and made him a bishop, and so forth, down through the ages. Is that how apostolic succession works? Not quite. For instance, Paul wrote about some of his colleagues whom he had worked with but who later abandoned the faith, such as Demas. No doubt Paul had laid his hands on Demas, but it turned out that Demas was no true successor of the apostles. And there have been many bishops since who had somebody's hand laid on him but is not a true successor to the apostles.

Apostolic succession is not just a matter of who laid hands on whom. Apostolic succession is succession in the God-breathed Scriptures that the apostles wrote. If you are true to the Scriptures, you are true to the apostles, and you are true to Christ. The measure of a godly leader in each generation is faithfulness to the Scriptures and to the Christ of the scriptures. That is real apostolic succession: teaching the truths the apostles taught, living by the example the apostles provided, and leading people along the same path as the apostles led people. This is how God has chosen to carry on His work in the world after the apostles and until Jesus comes again.

The church has faced many terrible times from the apostles' time to our time. About two hundred years after Jesus, the Christian leader Tertullian wrote, "If the Tiber reaches the walls...

if the earth quakes, if there is famine, if there is plague, they cry at once, “The Christians to the lions!” (Tertullian) The Christians were blamed for nearly every problem, and were hunted without mercy. For the first three hundred years after Jesus, the church faced ferocious persecution from the strongest empire in the world. The church survived and grew, while various emperors came and went, and the empire eventually collapsed. At many times since then, faithful Christians have faced many attacks. Still today in some parts of the world, Christians are hunted and persecuted and killed. But as Jesus promised, the gates of hell shall never prevail against his church.

The apostle Paul, locked in a prison cell facing execution, was not about to give up on Christ or the future of his church. Paul had seen Jesus before in dazzling glory. Later Paul had been to heaven in a vision or perhaps even in his body—he wasn’t sure. But he had been there. He knew the reality of Jesus and of the world to come, and he knew that Jesus would care for his church here in this world. So Paul wrote, “I am not ashamed.” When he was actively working as a missionary, Paul had written, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation” (Romans 1:16). Later, locked in a shameful cell, facing a shameful death, with many of his colleagues and converts ashamed to be associated with him, Paul again wrote, “I am not ashamed.” He told Timothy,

I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me. Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you. (2 Timothy 1:12-14)

In reading that, we might take it to mean that Paul thought Jesus was guarding Paul’s eternal life and would bring him safely to everlasting glory. It is certainly true that Jesus did that for Paul, but in this context, when Paul talks about the Lord guarding what he entrusted to Paul, he is probably saying that Jesus is going to guard until the day of His return the truth of the gospel and the well-being of the church. This had been entrusted to Paul for a time. Now it would be entrusted to others for a while, and then to others. But in every generation, Jesus would be guarding his truth and his church until the day of His return. So in the meantime, says Paul, “Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you.” That’s our call as believers and as leaders: to guard the precious deposit, with confidence that God himself is guarding both us and the good deposit he has entrusted to us.

John Stott, who has gone to be with the Lord, was a mighty leader of the church and a great expounder of the Scriptures for many years. He lived in England during a period when many people were falling away from the faith, when the church was shrinking. Did he give up? Did he think Christianity might vanish? No! Dr. Stott wrote,

We may have to watch an increasing apostasy in the church, as our generation abandons the faith of its fathers. Do not be afraid! God will never allow the light of the gospel to be finally extinguished. In entrusting the deposit to our hands, he has not taken his own hands off it. He is himself its final guardian, and he will preserve the truth he has committed to the church... Guard it faithfully. Spread it actively. Suffer for it bravely. This is our threefold duty.