

The Need for Training

In many areas life-long training is now mandatory. For teachers, nurses, doctors, opticians, engineers, plumbers, builders, gas fitters – to name only a few trades and professions – ongoing and regular training is a requirement in order to continue to trade. How much more should men in the ministry endeavour to be the best they can be – and that is aided by ongoing training and study. I have met men in pastorates who tell me that with the responsibility to prepare two or three messages a week there is little time left over for other study and training. But it seems to me that this is to have a very short-sighted view of our responsibilities to serve the Lord who gave His all for us.

Paul encourages Timothy, a young man, to ‘stir up the gift that is in him’ and to ‘labour in the Word and doctrine’. He encourages him to ‘give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine’. Timothy is to keep studying, keep learning and keep his own spiritual life pure.

1. Spirituality is not measured by experience. Experience is good – but it is not infallible. Some have years of experience, but it is the experience of making the same mistakes over and over again! They never seem to learn. We have a saying that describes such: ‘You cannot teach an old dog new tricks!’ Some older people are so used to doing things a certain way you will never change them.

2. Spirituality is not measured by age. Moses, Eli, Gideon, David, Noah and many others all sinned grievously when they were old. Sadly, there were terrible effects on the work of God as a result. But there were others such as Joshua, Samuel, Nehemiah, Elisha, and Daniel who were still greatly respected in old age.

3. Spirituality is not measured by qualifications. It is GOOD to learn. It is important to be well qualified. But whatever learning we may acquire, we are first and foremost to be spiritual men. Some while ago John Piper wrote a book entitled, *Brothers, we are Not Professionals*. While he is attempting to protect pastors from becoming taken up with secular goals, we must never lose sight that we are to be the best we can be for God. That vision is essentially spiritual. We are to be the best we can be in holiness, spirituality, pastoral care, godly love, and as we strive for the ‘faith once for all delivered to the saints’. In that sense we are to be the most professional that we can. If we are pastors, we are to live our lives as examples to the flock. We are to be the most spiritual, most godly, most holy in our churches. We are to set examples of godliness and holiness, seeking to teach and instruct our people to the best of our ability, using the gifts and graces that God has given us. We are to remind believers of their relationship to Christ and of their duty to Him by our example: in word (by what we say), and in conduct (by how we live). We are to ‘strive for holiness without which no-one will see the Lord.’ Paul writes to Timothy to encourage him to keep going. Timothy, you are doing well. But keep at it. Keep studying, keep reading, keep preaching. Study the Scriptures for yourself. Only then will you be able to teach well and to exhort men to obedience. Tell them what the Scripture says and exhort them to obey God. Why? Because great doctrine will keep us from false teaching. We need to teach the truth and warn against error. If we believe the wrong things – that is often more dangerous than not knowing all the truth. So keep studying, keep believing, keep trusting God to give you understanding – because it is GOD who has gifted you and will encourage you the more you endeavour to get to know Him whom to know is life eternal.

What can EFCC churches do to help? As far as I can tell, there is nowhere to get a comprehensive evangelical Congregational training. Who is teaching Congregational polity and churchmanship? The only book that I know of is rather dated: R W Dale's Manual of Congregational Principles (Quinta Press, available from the EFCC Office, £13). Professional qualifications may be useful. If a country boy like me, born in a village and told by his teachers that he was not clever enough to go to university can gain qualifications by hard work and the grace of God, then there is hope for anyone. Academic qualifications are not necessary. But continuing to learn, study, and grow that we may be stretched and developed in our love, understanding and knowledge of God is vital so that we do not grow stale or unfruitful in the work of God.

'But grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and forever, Amen.' 2 Peter 3:18