

PASSING IT ON (2 Timothy 2:1-7)

Ted Schroder, May 16, 2010

In a relay race the baton has to be smoothly passed onto the next runner in order for the contest to be won. The changeover is as crucial as the speed of the runners. So it is in changeovers between leaders in an organization, or pastors in a church, or from one administration to the next, or from one generation to another. Critical information needs to be transmitted to the successors in order for them to do their jobs well. The wisdom of the older generation needs to be communicated to the younger generation. The purpose of education is to teach the learners so that they are equipped for the world they are to enter. As we age we find ourselves asking to whom we are going to pass on the accumulation of a lifetime. What do we do with our memories, our family histories, our passions and property? Do they die with us? Are we the end of the road for the knowledge we possess and have painfully acquired over the years? What do we do with our experiences?

Transmission of truth, faith, life experience, knowledge and wisdom is central to the human adventure. We do it through parenting, through mentoring, through creative and artistic endeavors, through educating and influencing others, through leadership of various forms. We do it through libraries, universities, colleges, schools, institutions, hospitals, businesses, churches, agencies, government. We want to leave this place something worthwhile. We want to be a blessing to others, to give back what we have received. The next generation builds on the shoulders of our generation for good or ill.

St. Paul captures this understanding of the purpose of human existence when he reminds Timothy: “The things you heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.” (2 Timothy 2:2) There is a fourfold succession of legacies: from Paul to Timothy, to reliable men, who are qualified to teach others. This is the way the Gospel was passed down from one generation of Christians to another in the days before the printing press or mass communication. At the heart of the mission of the Christian church was teaching the next generation, the transmission of the content of the Gospel of Christ. In order for the Gospel to be preserved accurately it had to be safeguarded through reliable witnesses who were qualified to teach others.

The teaching occurred through conversation and classes, mentoring and discipling. Regular instruction in the faith was given by acknowledged leaders specially selected for this work by those who had trained them. They were selected for their gifts and for the consistency of their lives. The Gospel had not only to be taught, it had to be lived. It was not a question of merely transferring information – beliefs, doctrines, knowledge, it also involved example – behavior. The Christian life was incarnate in Jesus – it was embodied. Who you were in your character and relationships guaranteed the truth of what you were saying. Personal integrity and authenticity were primary values. How you handled the challenges of daily life were noticed. There was no room for hypocrisy, for saying one thing and doing another. Church leaders who claim to stand for purity and truth, love and justice, and lead immoral and selfish lives showing no compassion for others, bring the Gospel into disrepute.

To ensure that transmission of the Gospel is authentic and trustworthy Paul compares the reliable witness by three analogies: the soldier, the athlete and the farmer. First, is the analogy of the good soldier of Jesus Christ. (2 Timothy 2:3,4) When you are on active service you cannot get distracted by civilian life, by leisure and pleasure. If you want to please your commanding officer by following orders, you will focus on the mission in hand – the living and leading of a life dedicated to Christ. To gain this objective you must work with others in your unit, you must have good relationships with one another, you must be available to them when they need you,

you have to cover for one another, you have to be there for one another, for you are a band of brothers. Unit cohesion is imperative. There can be no divisions between you, no divided command. You are given your orders. You cannot go AWOL, by leaving it for others to do in your place. You cannot excuse yourself because you have more congenial things to do. When you are at war you know that you do not have the luxury to amuse yourself at the expense of others who are counting on you for support. You only have a limited time to do what you are commissioned to do. You are given a lifetime and no more. You must make each moment, each day you have been given, count. You are not on leave. You cannot make excuses. None of us is exempt from this kind of service. We are all called to be witnesses to the truth, to be servants of the Gospel.

Second, is the analogy of the athlete, who has to compete according to the rules if he wants to receive the victor's crown. (2 Timothy 2:5) Practice makes perfect. It is only when you practice at your skill that you can perfect your execution of it. Training requires self-discipline and commitment. You have to respect the game if you want to excel in it and be recognized as a worthy professional. You cannot cut corners. You cannot flout the rules. You have to be willing to compete with others on a level playing field and not seek a false advantage through illegal equipment or drug enhancement. There are rules of life. Jesus made them quite clear. "Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:19) We need to pass on to the next generation the rules of life that we must follow if we are to win the victor's crown. They need to know about faithfulness, integrity, commitment, sacrifice, generosity, compassion, self-control, kindness, patience and truthfulness. If we don't pass them on our marriages, families, businesses, social and political life will deteriorate into chaos. We will all be losers for it. To be a winner we need to follow the rules whether we like them or not. We are not here to make up the rules to suit ourselves. Winning requires the humility to recognize our limitations and to respect the One who has set the rules for us to follow.

Third, is the analogy of the hard-working farmer, who is entitled to the first share of the crops. (2 Timothy 2:6) The reward for all his hard work is the harvest. He is motivated by the results of his work. There is something very rewarding to see the fruits of your labor. It takes hard work to produce a crop. The farmer has to work from sunrise to sunset in order to make a good living. I once went to stay with my cousins on their dairy farm and enjoyed getting the cows in morning and evening for milking. But to do that every day of my life without fail would have been more than I could take. A man reaps what he sows. If we want to reap a harvest of influence, and leave a worthwhile inheritance, we must be prepared to sow. There is no gain without pain. We must be prepared to put in the hours of work required to produce results. Nothing worthwhile comes easy. Ignatius of Loyola summed up his aspirations in this famous prayer:

*Teach us, good Lord, to serve you as you deserve;
to give and not to count the cost;
to fight and not to heed the wounds;
to toil and not to seek for rest;
to labor and not to ask for any reward,
save that of knowing that we do your will;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Paul calls on Timothy to reflect on what he is saying for the Lord will give him insight into all of it. Likewise we can reflect on these analogies to spur us to pass on to others what we have received, and to take seriously our task to transmit the Gospel to those who follow us.

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