
1TM 4:16 : A PASTOR CAN MAKE OR BREAK HIS FLOCK

No. EE36

Paul seriously warns Timothy to take the utmost care in the way he conducts his life and his ministry, because this could be the determining factor, not only in his own salvation, but also that of his flock.

Do you realise that it is possible in principle for one or more of the preachers in this church to spend eternity in hell should they (a) in their discipleship of Christ fail to be what they should be, or (b) preach heresy? The shocking fact is that while the average church member may still get away with something on that terrible day of reckoning, we as preachers may be doomed - because those who teach will be judged more strictly (James 3:1).

What is more, do you realise that we as preachers hopefully play a definite role in the salvation of each of you - but could also be the cause of your eternal damnation?

Take another look at our verse: *A determinative condition for the salvation of both Timothy and his flock is that he keeps a close watch on his life and his doctrine, and persevere in both.*

Many pastors think that their role in the salvation of a person ends when he or she has become converted and has joined the church. All that remains is to strengthen and assist such people in their sanctification. Only the lost need to be saved, not the members of the church. They, after all, have already been saved!

However the Bible teaches that if we fail to persevere in obedience to the end, it not only leads to a lower level of sanctification, but indeed to

eternal damnation. *The task of the pastor is therefore not only to edify the saints, but in fact to "save them"!*

Is this Scriptural?

In the first place, is it not blasphemous arrogance to say that *I* can save people? Surely this is something only the Lord can do? Indeed! Yet the Bible makes it plain on more than one occasion that His workers, in some sense, also save people. Paul writes in 1 Cor 9:22: "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means *I might save some*". And James says: "Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way *will save him from death ...*" (Ja 5:20) (cp. also Acts 26:18; Rm 11:14).

We should see it this way: in almost everything that He does on earth, God works mediately or indirectly - He uses instruments. Thus He makes use of His disciples - very often His preachers - to be instruments in His hand by which He saves people. It is in this sense that *they* save people.

Secondly, is it correct to say that those who have already been saved, still need to be saved?

The story goes that the famous 19th Century theologian, bishop Westcott, professor in theology at Cambridge, was once confronted by a rash student with these words, "Professor, are you saved?" "Good question," Westcott replied, "but it depends on what you mean by your question." He then changed over to Greek and used three passive participles of the verb "to save": I have been saved, I am being saved, and I will be saved. Needless to say, the student quietly disappeared off without comment.

Salvation is presented to us in three ways in Scripture. *We have been saved* (Rm 8:24; Lk 7:50; Eph 2:5, 8); *we are being saved* (1Cor 1:18; 2Cor 2:15); *we will be saved* (Rm 5:9-10; 13:11; 1Pe 1:5). This is because salvation is a process. In one sense therefore we still have to be saved.

In several places the Bible teaches that the life of a Christian is like a marathon race and that only those who persist until the very end will be saved.

This involvement of shepherds in the salvation of their flocks is not something to which they may adopt a casual approach - it demands their all. Paul writes: "Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory (2Tm 2:10). In 2Cor 1:6 he says, "If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and *salvation ...*"

In the case of the Corinthians we have a good example of how a pastor can intervene to save his flock. They had fallen into sin, so Paul wrote them a letter which greatly disturbed them - the so-called "letter of tears". However, it had the desired effect, because the Corinthians repented. In his next letter Paul writes that he was strict with them, but not with bad intentions. No, he was concerned about their salvation - because "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death" (2Cor 7:10).

The letter to the Hebrews is perhaps the best example of such pastoral censure for the sake of believers' salvation. The Hebrews were at the point of forsaking the faith and reverting to Old Testament Jewish religion. The writer tried to stop them from doing so at all costs, and in the process bombarded them with some of the most serious pastoral warnings and reprimands to be found anywhere in the New Testament. "It is a dreadful thing," he says to these people who had been disciples for several years, "to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hb 10:31). As far as the writer was concerned, the eternal salvation of these people depended almost entirely on his pastoral effectiveness.

It is the responsibility of every pastor (and every elder) to perform his duties and live in such a manner that none of his brothers or sisters are lost. He is responsible to the Lord for this, and if any of them were to quit before reaching the winning-post, *he* is in a sense responsible. Have I put it too strongly? Well, that is the *attitude* with which every pastor should carry out his duties.

But, of course, the Bible emphasises the other side of the coin as well. While Scripture places a heavy emphasis on the responsibility of the under-

shepherd and minister, a similar responsibility rests on the shoulders of each believer personally.

Paul warned both the Romans and the Corinthians not to become a stumbling block to their fellow believers, even in such trivial matters as their eating and drinking. To the Romans he writes, "Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died" (Rm 14:15). And to the Corinthians he says, that if you were to use your Christian freedom in such a manner as to have a fellow believer follow you contrary to his own convictions, you would be leading him to do something against his conscience - and that could cost him his salvation. "So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge" (1Cor 8:11).

How much more may the leaders of a church, who are naturally more prominent and influential, be the cause of fellow Christians losing their way?

In pastoral ministry and preaching it is not only the members' growth in sanctification that is at stake, but their very inheritance of eternal salvation.

A few points of application

1. Nothing should be more important to us than holy perseverance in the race of faith.

One thing that the apostles regarded in a very serious light is our responsibility to force our way into the Kingdom with everything in our power. Herein they were following the instructions of the Lord Jesus who said that the kingdom of heaven should be laid hold of forcefully (Mt 11:12), and that we should cut off our right hand or gouge out our right eye if either of them were to cause us to stumble (Mt 5:29-30).

It is correct to emphasise and rejoice in the fact that we owe our salvation to the sovereign intervention of the Lord in our lives. But this should never be the only way in which we consider our redemption. Unless we also continue to work out our

salvation with fear and trembling, the chances are that we will never see the Lord. This is a terrible thought, but do you realise that unless the Lord shows us great mercy, some of the people listening to me today will spend their time in eternal damnation!

This I can say with a Biblical mandate: nobody, not one single person, will inherit the kingdom with a lackadaisical attitude and approach.

2. I must take great care not to be a stumbling block to my brothers and sisters in their race.

All this does not mean that those who have been truly saved can be lost. It emphasises that perseverance to the end is the ultimate proof of true salvation. Those who are not true believers will drop out. But note carefully what the Lord says in this respect: if *you* cause someone to stumble it will be better for you to be drowned in the depths of the sea with a millstone hung around your neck (Mt 18:6-7). Our influence on fellow-believers is no small matter!

3. The answer: the solid food of the Word.

In the light of what has been said above, it would be easy to reason that preachers should limit their preaching to the delivery of evangelistic sermons. Not so! This was exactly the problem in the case of the Hebrews: they never progressed beyond the milk of the first principles (Hb 5:11-6:3).

4. Innumerable people go on to eternal doom because they believe that it does not really matter to which church you belong.

Many think that it is quite sufficient merely to live in a personal relationship with the Lord. What they lose sight of is the fact that the race you run to a large extent depends on the preaching you receive every Sunday, and the quality of the discipleship with which you surround yourself. We tend to forget that the Christian race that ends in eternal glory, demands your all. And if you are not continually fed and strengthened by your church - not to mention the poisoning influence of some churches - chances are that you will not make it.

5. One of your most important and often repeated prayers should be for your minister(s).

In this church we are reluctant to attach too much importance to the office of the pastor. We much rather emphasise the fact that we are all brothers and sisters in Christ. But this does not take anything away from the fact that a heavy responsibility rests on the shoulders of our preachers and elders.

Please pray that the gravity of our calling may be engraved ever more deeply in our hearts - because one of our gravest dangers is underestimating this responsibility before the Lord. According to Hb 13:17 we will have to give account for you!

But also pray for us, for your own sake. I think it is true that nobody plays a more vital role in your spiritual growth and perseverance than the elders and preachers of this church - apart from yourself, of course.

6. The secret of success in this race of faith is to keep your eyes riveted on Jesus Christ.

Let me conclude with three quotes from the book of Hebrews: "...and, once made perfect, he [the Son] became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him ... (5:9). "We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first" (3:14). "... let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith ..." (12:1-2).

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