

HOW TO DEFEND A LION

by Ray C. Stedman

Almost every Christian alive has heard the famous quotation from Charles Spurgeon, the great English preacher, about defending the Scripture. Spurgeon said, "Scripture is like a lion. Who ever heard of defending a lion? Just turn it loose; it will defend itself." That oft-quoted word has a great deal of truth in it. Notice that it does not deny that lions sometimes need defending; it merely recognizes that the best way to do that is to turn a lion loose and it will defend itself.

The Apostle Paul, in his second letter to Timothy, suggests a similar approach. Writing from his prison cell in Rome to Timothy, who is left all alone in the great, pagan city, Ephesus, Paul tells his young son in the faith (Chapter 1, Verse 14):

Guard the truth which has been entrusted to you by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us. (2 Tim. 1:14 {RSV})

I would like to give you a slightly different, perhaps more accurate, version of what Paul wrote, because that translation suggests that the phrase, "by the Holy Spirit," is linked with the entrusting, i.e., the Spirit has entrusted to Timothy the truth. Actually, that phrase goes with the word *guard*: "Guard by means of the indwelling Spirit the good deposit," is what Paul wrote. The "good deposit" is the gospel, or the Scripture of truth. Though the word *truth* does not actually appear in this verse, it is not inaccurate to render it as this version has, "guard the truth by means of the Spirit."

The great claim of Christianity is not that it is a religion, but that it is the truth; it is the way things really are in life. Dorothy Sayers said, "The test of any religion is not that it pleases us, but that it is true." That is what marks the character of Christian faith -- explaining life the way it really is. That is why, when Jesus taught in his day, every time people heard him say something, inwardly they thought, "Yes, of course. That's right, isn't it?" Jesus was speaking to their experience, even to their unconscious, unarticulated experience, which they felt deeply and which his words explained.

The glory of Christianity is that it is knowledge, knowledge that can free us from the lies that the world in its blindness is following to its own destruction.

Arnold Grunigen, a well known Christian businessman and leader in the early days of this congregation, used to put it this way: "The Bible is God's instruction book which goes along with man."

When you buy a new car you get a book with it that tells you how it operates and what to do if it does not. When you get a new washing machine or a new toaster you get a book with it. When you buy a personal computer you get a big book with it. God sent us into the world, complicated beings that we are, so it makes sense that he would give us a book that goes along with man. That is what the Bible is, and Timothy is to "guard that truth by means of the indwelling Holy Spirit."

It is very important that we understand what the apostle means here. It is not merely the words of the Book that make it powerful, rather it is the presence of the Spirit enlightening the words of the Book. The Spirit illuminates the Book; he brings it home to the heart. He makes these words living words, penetrating words, powerful words, words that enlighten the mind, pierce the heart, words that produce profound changes in attitude and behavior in mankind. It is true that the words are truth, that this is the Word of God, without error as God gave it to man, but it is the Spirit who makes this Book a living word, and transforms it, if you like, into a powerful lion which is capable of defending itself.

How do you turn the lion loose? That is the question we are facing in this passage and throughout this section. In fact, the first thirteen verses of Chapter 2 will detail for us four ways by which Timothy was expected to

turn the lion loose to let him defend himself. We will trace these four things, taking two of them today and two of them next week.

First, the apostle would remind Timothy, and us, of what the times were like in which this "guarding of the truth" was to take place. Verse 15:

You are aware that all who are in Asia turned away from me, and among them Phygelus and Hermogenes. {2 Tim 1:15 RSV}

It would not have been news to Timothy that there had been a great turning away from the authority of the Apostle Paul in Asia. Timothy lived in Ephesus, the capital of the large Roman province of Asia, which was about the size of the State of California. Timothy was expected to teach and to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ in Ephesus, so he faced every day the problem that Paul mentions here.

In fact, Timothy was running into increasing opposition to what Paul taught. I do not think that implies that there was a widespread turning away from Christianity -- a denial of Christ. Rather, there was an attempt to separate Paul from Jesus. This is always the beginning of apostasy -- to deny the authority of an apostle as opposed to that of the Lord himself. This, of course, was something Paul faced everywhere he went because he was not one of the twelve. Jesus had not called him in the days of his flesh. Many people took advantage of that and accused Paul of making himself an apostle. They suggested that his were invented words, that his teachings went beyond what Jesus taught and added to it things that Jesus never intended.

You can still hear that argument on every side today. Even Christians who ought to know better are suggesting that Paul was an encrusted old bachelor who had no use for women. His writings with regard to women ought to be disregarded, they say, because he was speaking out of his own soured experience. These people suggest that we need to pick and choose in Paul's writings as to what is from the Lord and what is not. That is exactly what Timothy was experiencing, and that is what Paul is referring to here.

We do not know exactly who Phygelus and Hermogenes were. They evidently were prominent leaders whom Paul expected to support him. As I read this account, I wondered if they were not among those people, described in Acts 19, in that time of riot and uprising in Ephesus, whom Luke calls "certain Asiarchs" {cf, Acts 19:31 RSV}, i.e., of Roman authorities. Luke said these were friends of the apostle who would be expected, perhaps in a day when Paul was under charge by the Roman government, even facing possible death, to come to his defense, yet they refused to do so. It may be that these were people whom Paul had looked to to support him, but they had refused to do so, and he was left alone to defend himself.

At any rate, it is clear that it is hard for Paul to write the statement, "all in Asia have turned against me." Luke records in the book of Acts that just a few years earlier, as a result of Paul's teaching in the rented school of Tyrannus in Ephesus for five hours a day, all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks, (Acts 19:10), What a wonderful awakening that represented! That was a time when the whole province seemed to be alive with the power of the gospel, and thousands were turning to Christ. Yet, a few years later, Paul has to write, "All in Asia have turned against me."

That brought to my memory the scenes, less than ten years ago, when this room was jammed with young people on Sunday nights. They would sit in the aisles and up here on the platform because we had no room to seat them elsewhere. That was part of a great spiritual awakening which we now call the Jesus Movement. Without any apparent reason thousands of young people left the drugs scene, the world of the occult, and the world of profligate sex, and turned to Christ. They began to read their Bibles, and seek after the truth. The whole of the West Coast was electric with excitement as we saw the power of the Word at work in young people's lives. But today, apathy is apparent on every side. Many of those young people who welcomed the Word with such excitement in those days have faded into the background. There is resistance to the truth, and a turning away from the authority of the apostles. An apostasy has set in.

That is exactly what the apostle is experiencing here. In the words of Dr. E. M. Blaiklock, professor of classics at the University of New Zealand (a wonderful Christian scholar who preached at PBC in the early days), "Of all the centuries, the twentieth is most like the first." It is evident that you and I are living through

similar times to what Paul and Timothy are facing here. Even the Christian community is turning away from Christian standards, morals and ethics. Divorce is epidemic among Christians, who ought to be manifesting the ability of the Spirit of God to keep a family united in love and grace and growing in truth and righteousness. Instead, Christians are succumbing to the ways of the world around. Immorality is rife among us; famous names are turning away and forsaking Christian standards. That is what Paul and Timothy were facing.

In the Roman world of that day when this letter was written, (about the year 67 or 68), the whole Roman East was aflame. Like Mt. St. Helens, it was giving evidence that it was about to erupt and explode. Just two or three years later, the Roman armies under Titus would surround Jerusalem and attack the city. They destroyed the temple, killed hundreds of thousands of Jews, and led others off into captivity. All this was about to happen, so that the world of that day was being shaken as the world is being shaken today. Paul's word for such an hour is to "guard the truth by means of the Holy Spirit which has been entrusted to us."

By contrast, there was one man from Asia, Onesiphorus, whom Paul describes as having found a way to "guard the truth" in his day. Here is what Paul says about him (Verses 16-18):

May the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me; he was not ashamed of my chains, but when he arrived in Rome he searched for me eagerly and found me -- may the Lord grant him to find mercy from the Lord on that Day -- and you well know all the service he rendered at Ephesus. {2 Tim 1:16-18 RSV}

Onesiphorus means "bringer of help." Here was a man who lived up to his name. He was, evidently, a businessman. Paul had known him and his family when he himself was in Ephesus. There the family and the man had ministered to Paul many times, so he prays a blessing upon them.

In his business travels, Onesiphorus had come to the city of Rome after Paul had been captured. Painstakingly, at great effort, he sought and found the apostle. That was not easy to do. The Romans were not telling everybody where Paul was imprisoned, but Onesiphorus kept looking until he found him. And he was not ashamed of Paul's chains. He found him at great risk to his own life, for, to befriend an enemy of Caesar in those days was to put one's own life in peril. Nero would eliminate anybody for the slightest deviation from a manifestation of loyal support of him and his plan.

Onesiphorus ministered to Paul and refreshed his spirit. He did not come gloomily wringing his hands, beating his breast and talking about how terrible things were all through the Empire. He came with confidence that God was still in charge and upholding things. Here Paul prays for him now that he is still away, probably on another trip somewhere, and he asks Timothy to support his family there and prays that God would bless him "on that Day."

By his life and his actions, here is a man who found the way to turn the lion loose in his own time. Onesiphorus was fearless, he was faithful, and he was cheerful. He reminds me of that favorite definition I have used many times of how a Christian ought to be:

- Completely fearless,
- Continually cheerful, and
- Constantly in trouble.

Paul now returns to Timothy and gives him step-by-step instructions on how he can guard the truth, how he can turn the lion loose in a day of widespread declension and apostasy. This passage runs on through Verse 13, but we are only going to take two verses this morning. Chapter 2, Verses 1-2:

You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me before many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. {2 Tim 2:1-2 RSV}

The first thing you have to do when things start falling apart, Paul says, is to be strong yourself in the grace

that is in Christ Jesus; that is a fundamental principle of helping anybody. You can only pass on to others what you yourself have received. Head knowledge is of no value. If you merely pass on a knowledge of the truth -- teaching people the various doctrines of Christianity -- you have done nothing to help them at all. Unless they can see that *that* truth has changed you and made you different, that you speak out of the experience of having been altered by the truth you believe, you will never do anything to help someone else stand in the hour of danger. If you want to strengthen others, Paul's advice is, start with yourself: "Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus." That is the way to guard the truth. That is what Onesiphorus had done. He was strong, he was able to withstand the fear and the pressures of his day because he had found that Christ could strengthen him. So he becomes an example to Timothy and to us of how to stand in an evil day.

That which strengthens is grace, Paul says, "the grace that is in Christ Jesus." A peculiar thing about grace is, it is never available to strong people. That is what makes it difficult for us to get hold of it sometimes. We are continually assaulted today with a barrage of propaganda teaching us that the way to be strong is to develop some quality about ourselves, some hidden power, some reserve of personality, some right that we need to demand and stand on and insist upon that. But if you believe your Bible, that is the way to be weak -- and that is what proves to be the case. God's grace alone is strong enough to handle the pressures of a fallen world, but the only way you can lay hold of the grace of God is to acknowledge that you are so weak you do not have anything else that will hold you. So the first thing that grace demands is that we admit our weakness, not our strength.

Many today are unable to be strong and unable to stand in the day of pressure, although they give great testimony about how they are going to follow Christ and stand for him. In the moment of pressure, however, they go down almost instantly. They have bought the lie of the world that if they just make up their mind, that if by their will or their effort they display their tremendous natural gifts, or if they develop some power to ride over the rights of others, they can stand. Not a day goes by but we are exposed to invitations to send away for this course or sign up for that one that will teach us how to stand up for our own rights. There is even a course offered today on how to intimidate others. That is the spirit of the age. But Paul's word is that the way to strength is to discover "the grace that is in Christ Jesus." Recognize your own weakness and then accept God's promise to work with you and through you in your weakness to make it strong. That is how it works.

Christians are to be forever learning to say, "I can't live up to this demand, I can't do this thing that is asked of me, but he can, therefore I can." Take the action based upon the expectation that God is in you and he will enable you to do what you otherwise cannot do. That is authentic Christianity. It is supernatural. Natural strength is its greatest enemy. When we learn that, we can be "strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus."

J. Hudson Taylor, founder of the China Inland Mission, was a marvelous exemplification of what we are talking about. Here is a quotation from his writings:

It makes no matter where he places me or how; that is rather for him to consider than me. For the easiest positions he must give me grace, and in the most difficult, his grace is sufficient. So, if God places me in great perplexity, must he not give me much guidance; in positions of great difficulty, much grace; in circumstances of great pressure and trial, much strength? As to work, mine was never so plentiful, so responsible or so difficult, but the weight and the strain are all gone. His resources are mine, for He is mine.

That is a Christian response to the pressures of the day. I love to hear a congregation sing the hymn, "Amazing Grace," especially when they put the emphasis upon the "zing." That is what grace does: it puts zing into life. "Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me."

That is what Paul is writing to Timothy. So if you want others to be pure, learn to be pure yourself, by "the grace that is in Christ Jesus"; and if you want others to stand, then learn to stand yourself by "the grace that is in Christ Jesus." That is the place to start. If you cannot demonstrate it in your own life, you will get nowhere trying to communicate it to others.

But if you start there, then the next step is, as Paul points out, "what you have heard from me before many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also." Pass it on; communicate it; let them see what you have learned. Let them see the struggles and the temporary failures that you went through in the

learning of it.

That is why Paul adds these words, "before many witnesses." Timothy had accompanied Paul on many journeys. He had often heard him preach and teach; he was with him when he addressed pagans and at times when he addressed Christians. He heard the marvelous truths that the apostle understood which fleshed out all the words that Jesus had said. He saw the tremendous impact these words had made upon various people, both for good and for bad; some words that led to life, and other words that seemed to lead some to death. He must have discussed this frequently with Paul. He saw the hurt and the opposition that introduced into the apostle's life, the struggles Paul had as a result of faithfully proclaiming the truth. Timothy also saw the fantastic blessing that spread, the tremendous changes that were introduced, and the lifting of a whole level of a community's life because of the truth as it is in Jesus. So, Paul says, "What you have heard and seen and learned from me, pass it on to faithful men."

How do you tell a faithful man? (That is a generic term that includes both men and women.) How do you tell faithful people who can learn truth? Let me share with you four qualities I look for in someone in order to pass on what I myself have learned.

- First, I look for a searching mind, a mind that is ready to learn, a mind that has given evidence, both in secular and sacred ways, that it wants to know something. Such a mind is not content to pass through life with a radio blaring, or a TV on, being entertained all the time. It wants to learn, to search out truth, to listen to what is going on around; it is willing to think about it, to meditate on it and explore its application. That is the first thing: a searching mind.
- Then I look for a humble heart, for somebody who has already learned that truth is bigger than he is. He will have learned that we are to set aside our own egos, that truth is not given to us in order to build up our image in the eyes of people, that we are not to manipulate people to gain standing or prestige among them, but we are to be willing to submit ourselves, to put ourselves down and not seek credit; a humble heart.
- The third thing is an evident gift. That is what Paul says here. Look for someone who is "able to teach others also," somebody who has a gift of the Spirit that can communicate and impart to others what he himself has learned. That is a process of duplication and reduplication that will rapidly spread truth throughout a body of people; an evident gift.
- The fourth thing I look for is a faithful spirit, somebody who has demonstrated by a track record that he does not quit when the going gets tough. He is not ready to leave when some more enticing thing comes along, when the skiing gets good or the sun is hitting the beach, but he is willing to stay with what he has committed himself to; a faithful spirit.

A searching mind, a humble heart, an evident gift, a faithful spirit; when you find such as those, commit yourself to them. Paul says to Timothy, "Give yourself and everything you know to such men because they will pass it on to others, and soon the truth will spread."

I was recently in touch with a church which, when it was founded a couple of decades ago, had great understanding of the truth about the church, about the gifts of the Spirit, about the nature of elder leadership, and the authority of the Lord Jesus in the midst of his people. Because of its commitment to truth, for a long time that church made a tremendous impression in the area in which it is located. But of late it has been going through severe struggles. It has had one serious split, and now it is gradually becoming more and more an ordinary church, merely fitting itself into the usual plan and program of the church. I asked one of the elders of that church what had gone wrong. His answer was, "It was our (the elders') fault. We did not pass on to the newer elders what we ourselves believed."

All of us live just one generation away from total apostasy. The work of the church can fall apart in one generation if we do not faithfully pass on what we ourselves know -- parents to children, elders to the younger ones, leaders to those who follow; "faithful men and women who are able to teach others also." That is God's process of supporting and spreading truth and helping it to stand in the hour of attack.

I do not think there is any greater testimony to that than what has happened in China. When the missionaries were thrust out of China in 1950, Christians everywhere wrung their hands and said, "This is terrible. China will go back into the dark ages under the Communist heel. The poor Christians there will be reduced to nothing." But the truth has now become evident. The door is open to China again, and Christians who went back in found that the church had increased numerically sevenfold over what it was when the missionaries left.

I have always maintained that God's most significant approach to evangelizing a city is to begin by locking all the preachers up in jail. Remember that Paul wrote to the Philippians, "Many of the brethren are much more bold to preach the gospel because of my imprisonment," {cf, Phil 1:14 RSV}. That is God's method of spreading the church. When you and I look around and see the apostasy that is setting in, in our day, among Christians in the church, we must remember, as the poet James Russell Lowell put it:

Though the cause of evil prosper,
Yet 'tis truth alone that's strong.
Truth forever on the scaffold,
Wrong forever on the throne.
Yet that scaffold sways the future,
And behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadows
Keeping watch above his own.

"Truth crushed to earth shall rise again," is a famous, oft-quoted saying. How true it is.

What then do you do in the day of declension, when people are turning away from Christianity? How do you let loose the lion that he might defend himself? Paul says there are four steps which we can take. We have looked at two of them: Practice a daily communion with the Lord Jesus yourself; and then communicate that to faithful men and women around you.

In the remainder of the passage Paul goes on to speak of the necessity for an earnest, dedicated commitment of the will, and of a confidence in the power of God that will continue to stand in the midst of pressure. We will look at that next week.

In the meantime, let us start to put into practice what he exhorts us to here -- a daily communion with Jesus himself, and a communicating of it to those with whom we have influence.

Prayer

Lord, we thank you for calling us to stand in this evil day. We know we are not living in a world that is going to minister to our comfort and please our indulgence very long; for that which can be shaken is about to be shaken. All the world seems about to fall apart around us; we cannot avoid it by hiding our heads in the sand. Grant that we may be faithful Christians who have learned how to guard the truth by means of the Holy Spirit in order that the lion of truth, made powerful by the Spirit, may be loosed among men and women in our day; and we will see the truth surmount its enemies and rise up to bless the world yet. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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