

IS YOUR MINISTRY CRIPPLED OR STILL ON COURSE?

Today's Text: 1 Tim. 3: 1-13

Extracts:

This is a faithful saying: If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work. A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behaviour, hospitable, able to teach; not given to wine, not violent nor greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous; one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence ... Likewise deacons must be reverent, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy for money, holding the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience.... Likewise, their wives must be reverent, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things [1 Tim. 3: 1-4, 8-9, 11]

Mpho Tutu-van Furth was ordained a clergywoman of the Anglican Church in the US in 2003.¹ She is the daughter of the former archbishop of Cape Town, South Africa, Desmond Tutu, who won the Nobel Prize in 1984 for his struggle against apartheid. Divorced with children, she is the Executive Director of the Desmond and Leah Tutu Legacy Foundation. In December 2015, she married Marceline van Furth, a professor of paediatric infectious diseases at Vrije University in Amsterdam, Netherlands, in a civil ceremony. However, the canon of the South African church states that marriage is between one man and one woman. Since she was married to another woman, the South African bishop who had given her permission to officiate as a priest in his diocese was required to revoke her clergy licence. She returned it before they could take it from her.

A clergy man (or woman) is a minister of God who is bound by certain rules of morality that are consistent with the word of God. Increasingly, ministers are finding it more difficult to meet with such required standards. Ministers are challenged by sexual misconduct, love of money over Kingdom issues, and much more, both within and outside the church. How about you? Is your ministry already crippled or still on course? In today's Bible verses, Paul gives guidelines to Timothy on how to select God-fearing bishops and deacons that can do the work that Christ had sent them. There are general principles therein to help us to deal with our situation.

¹ Story is based on Harriet Sherwood, "Desmond Tutu's daughter leaves clergy after marrying female partner," *The Guardian*, Tuesday, 24 May 2016; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/24/desmond-tutus-daughter-leaves-clergy-after-marrying-female-partner>

1. Background: Selecting true ministers for the vineyard

Soon after the Day of Pentecost, “believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women” [Acts 5:14]. As people began to complain about favouritism and ethnic bias, the twelve apostles saw the need to put a formal administrative structure in place. They summoned the multitude of believers and said to them, “It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven *men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom*, whom we may appoint over this business, but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word” [Acts 6: 1-6]. Of interest to us among the seven selected is Philip [v. 5]. He was anointed by the apostles as an administrator but it was through him that the gospel was first brought to Africa!

Following the martyrdom of Stephen [Acts 7: 54-60], the disciples were scattered out of Jerusalem. Philip fled to Samaria where he preached Christ. Through his ministry, a sorcerer, Simon, was converted [Acts 8: 4-13]. Then the Holy Spirit took Philip into the desert, to Gaza, where he met with an Ethiopian eunuch “of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians” who had come to Jerusalem on pilgrimage. He baptized him after he had received Christ. We are told, “Now when they came out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away, so that the Ethiopian saw him no more, and he went on his way rejoicing” [vv. 26-40]. The Ethiopian Church of today draws inspiration from that experience. The last time we heard about Philip was when Paul on his last missionary journey was heading back to Jerusalem. He stopped by at Caesarea where he stayed with “Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven...and this man had four virgin daughters who prophesied” [Acts 21: 1-9].

Examine the growth of Philip’s ministry. He was appointed an administrator. Then, he became an evangelist and he raised a family of prophets. Compare that with the ministry of Judas Iscariot who was one of the twelve apostles chosen by Jesus Christ [Matt. 10: 4] but ended as a suicide [Matt. 27: 3-5], or Gehazi, the servant of the great prophet Elisha, who brought leprosy upon himself and his descendants on account of greed [2 Kgs 5: 20-27].

Most believers are familiar with the five-fold ministries, namely, *apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers*, whose aggregate output is for the equipping of the church, the work of ministry and edifying of the body of Christ [Eph. 4: 11-12]. *However*, as we have seen in the case of Philip, *what you are called (or appointed to do) is not as important as what you actually do for God, as you are empowered to so do by the Holy Spirit* [1 Cor. 12: 1-11, 27-31]. After all, most of us know how to drive and some of us have a driver’s licence. Yet, we are not all called drivers! So, are ministers of God.

How is your ministry doing? Is it already crippled or still on course? As we approach end-times, Satan is doing overtime on the ministers of God. *The devil*

does not go after murderers and the sexual perverts because they are already on his side. Instead, he is after those “who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ” [Rev. 12: 17]. The divorce rate among pastors and other church workers/members is growing at an alarming rate. We hear now of embarrassing leadership disputes, financial impropriety or sexual harassment of female subordinates. What are you doing to make sure that you do not get cut down by the creeping demonic onslaught?

Paul’s first letter to Timothy, the third chapter, is very handy here. *It is a healthy thing to desire to be a minister of God* (bishops and deacons in Paul’s illustration). *However, success depends on meeting some important requirements [1 Tim. 3: 1].* Paul listed certain criteria to guide Timothy in choosing bishops and deacons under his jurisdiction in the church at Ephesus. We can summarise them as follows:²

a) *Family life*

Paul writes, “A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife ... one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence [vv. 2,4]. Deacons must also be “the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well” [v. 12].

For some people, “the husband of one wife” has been interpreted as serial monogamy, that is, being with one wife at any particular point in time, provided you are properly divorced from the previous wife/wives. Some people see it as “till death do us part” with one woman (single or widowed) since no man can separate what God has joined together, and whoever marries a divorcee is guilty of sexual immorality [Matt. 19: 1-9]. In some denominations, the members of the clergy are not permitted to marry because *marriage is a choice, not a fundamental human right* [vv. 11-12].

Let the Holy Spirit guide you on your circumstances. *The word of God consists of commandments, statutes and judgments [Deut. 11: 1].* We are familiar with the Ten Commandments [Ex. 20: 1-17] which are like the constitution of a country. However, just as the law courts interpret the constitution to deal with specific cases, which we call judgments, God also shows us interpretations of His commandments. For example, under the law of inheritance among the children of Israel, God’s word was that it would pass from father to only sons. However, Zelophehad, a descendant of Manasseh, the son of Joseph, only had daughters. So, the daughters brought their case to Moses and we are told, “Moses brought their case before the LORD.” The LORD replied, “If a man dies and has no son, then you shall cause his inheritance to pass to his daughter.” That became to the children of Israel “a statute of judgment, just as the LORD

² For more, read: http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume_3/PDFs/MinisterofGod.pdf

commanded Moses” [Num. 27: 1-11]. So, take your case to the Lord’s “Supreme Court”!

How the minister of God relates to his family will certainly affect his work in the church. Eli the priest’s children were wayward and lay with the women in the house of God. God sent a prophet to warn him but his rebuke of them was mild and ineffective. In the end, his two sons were killed in battle on the same day [1 Sam. 2: 22-36; 4: 11]. God did not allow Samuel’s word to fall to the ground [1 Sam. 3: 19]. Yet, neither of his two sons qualified to be made judges after him because they were corrupt [1 Sam. 8: 1-5]. So, a minister must pay as much attention to his family as to his ministry.

b) Adequate training

Paul required that a bishop or deacon should not be “a novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil” [1 Tim. 3: 6]. That suggests the need for adequate training for ministers. For example, Jesus took pains to train His disciples on how to pray, preach and minister [Lk 10: 1-24; 11: 1-4]. He also taught them the Scriptures [Lk 24: 44-45]. The Holy Spirit uses what we have to do what He has to do! Therefore, a minister should know what he is called to do and what he will need to succeed. A Catholic priest, for example, spends over 10 years in the seminary before he can be ordained!

c) Good conduct

Paul also wrote that bishops should be “temperate, sober-minded, of good behaviour, hospitable, able to teach; not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous” [1 Tim. 3: 3]. A deacon must not be double-tongued or given to too much wine nor greedy for money. Their wives are expected to share such desirable conduct and must not be slanderers, among other vices [vv. 8,11].

That is a timely warning to modern ministers who preach prosperity to the detriment of salvation, who run their ministries as family enterprises or who become increasingly inaccessible to their members as they fly about in private jets bought with church funds!

In sum, Paul is warning Timothy to avoid what was rife in the Corinthian church where there was such a high sexual immorality, such that could not even be named among the Gentiles- “that a man had his father’s wife!” [1 Cor. 5: 1-13]. ***It takes ministers that lead by example, operate on the principles of accountability and fear of the Lord for the gospel of salvation to take root.*** A church can only prosper if it has peace and is edified and, walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, is multiplied [Acts 9: 31].

2. Lessons for dealing with your situation

What lessons can we learn from the foregoing to deal with our modern situation? The following should be noted, among others:

a) *Know your own calling*

The first thing is to know your own calling. What has God specifically called you to do for Him? For example, the prophet Amos was a farmer. Listen to his words: “I was not a prophet, nor was I the son of a prophet, but I was a sheepbreeder and a tender of sycamore fruit. Then the LORD took me as I followed the flock, and the LORD said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to My people Israel’” [Amos 7: 14-15].

The work of God is not an enterprise to pass from father to son. Who inherited John the Baptist’s ministry? Who did Paul hand over to? Therefore, your work is to do the will of God and He alone can tell you how you can glorify Him. So, let Him lead you step by step and then you can do it as He wants it.

b) *Be at your best in what you have been called to do for God*

Although we are made ministers according to the “the grace of God given unto [us] by the effectual working of His power” [Eph. 3:7], we still need adequate preparation before we can successfully take on our ministerial responsibilities “lest being lifted up with pride, [we might] fall into the condemnation of the devil” [1 Tim. 3: 6]. We need *training in self-discipline, managerial, administrative and human skills*. We need to have *a deeper knowledge of the word of God, preferably but not necessarily through a Bible college*. Elijah mentored Elisha on the job. Jesus mentored His disciples on the job. You can also learn on the job from your superiors and mentors. Of course, the Holy Spirit is your best teacher. So, you should be prepared to be mentored by those whose bodies carry the scars of trials, tribulations and triumphs.

c) *Learn to work well with others to be at their best in their own calling*

You are going to work with superiors and colleagues, that is, those you can neither punish nor reward and yet you need their resources and cooperation in order to succeed in your work. You need subordinates that you must motivate to work well with you. There are other stakeholders, outsiders, that you may need to tap their talents and political support for your success. If you do not work well with them all, your ministry can be crippled or struggling.

For example, Jesus was among His disciples as the one who served

[Lk 22: 24-27]. He related to the women, such as Mary Magdalene and others who provided for His needs with integrity [Lk 8: 2-3]. He had friends in high places, such as Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, who became instrumental in getting His body retrieved from the Roman authorities for a respectable burial [Jn 19: 38-42]. You must learn to be humble, to be responsible and not a responsibility, and to be trustworthy.

d) *Leave God to judge your performance*

The word of God says, “Let another man praise you, and not your own mouth; a stranger, and not your own lips” [Prov. 27: 2]. Let that stranger be God, not man! What you may consider success, such as the size of your congregation or bank account, the noise on television and social media that you may think is testimony, it may not mean anything to God. What you may consider as a huge failure may actually be the best success you can hope for. For example, John the Baptist thought that he had failed. He sent his disciples to ask Jesus if He was the Messiah. After they had left, Jesus told His listeners, “Assuredly, I say to you, *among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist: but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he*” [Matt. 11: 1-11]. Jesus sees you as greater than John the Baptist! Wow!

As you ponder about your ministry today, make sure that you operate within God’s “zone of indifference.” In that zone, His mercy and grace continue to cover you. He continues to guide you aright to do His work as He has called you. *Watch your competence (ability to do the work), compatibility (ability to work with and through others) and character (ability to be trusted with human and material resources). Leave judgment to God. That is Paul’s message for us from today’s study.*

3. Conclusion: Watch your walk!

The modern church has been rocked by one form of scandal or another. For example, ministers of God are profaning their calling through sexual immorality, fraudulent practices, and user-friendly interpretation of the word of God. Although these are not new, since the Bible has good examples of them, the tempo has increased. Some ministers have been crippled, that is, they can NEVER recover from their fall. The rest of us are struggling, trying to remain relevant to our congregations and to the world. But your most important consideration should always be what God sees of you. In the words of Paul, “all who desire to live godly in Christ will suffer persecution” [2 Tim. 3: 12].

It is better to be a struggling minister than a crippled one!