

**LET'S WORSHIP GOD: A SERIES OF REFLECTIONS BASED ON 1 AND 2 TIMOTHY**  
**A study course for Baptist readers 2021**  
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Worship is the *raison d'être* of the church. In the final analysis, the church doesn't exist to tell others the good news of Jesus Christ; nor does it exist to help the world to be a better place. The church exists for God. In the words of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever". What is true of men and women in general is even more true of the church. We are "a people for his praise" (Isaiah 43.21 RSV: also 1 Pet 2.5,9) – or as Eugene Peterson puts it, we are "a people custom-made to praise" (*The Message*).

**1, LET'S WORSHIP GOD (1 TIM 1.17)**

True worship is first and foremost doxological – at its every heart worship is about giving God the glory (*doxa* is the Greek word for glory). Worship sings the praises of God. It celebrates the majesty of God. It declares the wonder of who God is. Or perhaps a little more mundanely, we proclaim God's worth. Indeed, this is the thrust of our English word 'worship', which is derived from the Saxon *weorthscipe*, from which later the word 'worthship' came.

In worship the focus is on God. It is not on the choir or the worship group, and most certainly not on the preacher or indeed on any other personality. God is the celebrity, from start to finish of the worship. Let's therefore ensure that the physical arrangements of our churches reflect that focus upon God. It surely cannot be right for a worship group to be centre stage – God needs to be centre stage. For me one of the glories of Chelmsford Cathedral where I now worship is that there is a huge figure of the Ascended Reigning Christ with pierced hands and welcoming outstretched arms suspended above the nave. Not every church, of course, can afford such a magnificent sculpture – but at the very least could not there be a figure of the Risen Lord portrayed on a screen?

Worship is for God, and for God alone. It is a turning away from self and a gazing upon God in such a matter and adoration and praise, confession and penitence, dedication and commitment are our response. Once the welcome is over, worship proper must begin with God – the God who has revealed himself in Jesus; the God who raised Jesus from the dead, set him at his right hand, and pours out his Holy Spirit upon his church.

Have you noticed that both at the beginning and the end of Paul's First Letter to Timothy is marked by 'doxology' (1 Tim 1.17 and 6.16): the doxologies have been described as "the theological bookends" which provide a framework for Paul's instructions to his junior party. There is a further brief doxology in 2 Tim 4.18, However, my focus here is on the longest of the three: "To the King of all ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory forever and ever. Amen" (1 Tim 1.17) Or as Eugene Peterson puts it in his paraphrase, *The Message*:

Deep honour and bright glory to the King of All Time –  
One God, Immortal, Invisible, ever and always. Oh, yes

Almost certainly Paul is not ‘ad-libbing’ here. Rather scholars suggest that he is quoting a doxology which Christians probably took over from the worship of the Jewish synagogue. That’s a thought: did you realise that Paul is into liturgy here? Indeed, as we shall discover through this series, Paul in his letters often quotes early Christian hymns, creeds, and confessions of faith.

As it stands by itself, the cry of praise to God is not specifically Christian – there is no reference, for instance, to God’s amazing love in Jesus. But look at the context: there Paul writes of how “the grace of our Lord over-flowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ” (1.14). He quotes the “sure saying” that “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners”. It is the context which gives added depth to his outburst of praise. In the words of one commentator: “The terms of his praise size up the character of the God who has the capacity to make good on the stunning promise to save sinners for eternal life through Christ Jesus” (R.W. Wall).

God is described as “King of all ages”. He is beyond all time. He was there before time began and will be there when time is no more. As Martin Luther graphically put it, “With one wink of His (God’s) eye He beholds the eyes and crowns of all kings in contempt. They are the kings of the hour.”

Over against others who would have a claim on our lives, God’s superiority is celebrated in three special ways. First God is “immortal”: he is beyond the ravages of decay and death. Secondly, God is “invisible”: he is, said John Stott, “beyond the limits of every horizon”; he is beyond, reason and beyond conception. Thirdly, God is “alone” (Greek: *monos*) in his splendour: Christians, like Jews, are ‘mono’-theists. God has no rivals; he is unique.

It is this amazing God who has provided the world with a “Saviour Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Tim 1.10). The resurrection is at the heart of the Christian faith. As Christians we do not believe in the immortality of the soul: rather through the victory that God gained over sin and death through his Son, we share in that immortal life which is God’s alone to give. I have little doubt that this thought was in Paul’s mind as he celebrated God’s ‘immortality’ in our opening doxology.

To him, therefore, “be honour and glory. Amen”. ‘Amen’ is a Hebrew word with a punch. In Christian worship today ‘Amen’ tends to be little more than a full-stop to a prayer. But, as Donald Coggan, a former Archbishop of Canterbury makes clear, “Amen is a great word, strong and powerful”! It is a word which enables the worshipper to make it his own. ‘Yes, so be it!’ Indeed, the suggestion has been made that at this point, as the letter was being read out in church, the reader would have paused, to enable the listening congregation then to shout out their own Amen too. So too, when we say ‘Amen’, when we sing our praises, when we proclaim God’s greatness, let us not mumble under our breath, but let us raise our voices and so give God the glory.

Almost three hundred years ago, this doxology became a means of worship for the young Jonathan Edwards, one of America's great preachers and theologians. For in 1721, as a seventeen-year old, he was pondering these words of Paul. Later he wrote: "As I read the words (1 Tim 1.17) there came into my soul, and as it were diffused throughout it, a sense of the glory of the divine being; a new sense quite different from anything I ever experienced before. Never any words of Scripture seemed to me as these words did. I thought with myself, how excellent a Being that was, and how happy I should be, if I might enjoy that God, and be wrapt up to God in heaven, and be as it were swallowed up in him." Hopefully in turn we too can make time to ponder and encounter afresh this God whose glory we can never fully declare.

1. Christian worship, declared Karl Barth, the greatest theologian of the twentieth century, "Is the most momentous, the most urgent, the most glorious action that can take place in life". To what extent is that true for you?
2. How has Covid-19 affected your experience of worship?

## **2. LET'S PRAY FOR OTHERS (1 TIM 2.1-4)**

Many Baptist churches have given up on praying for others. The more contemporary the worship, the more likely it seems that prayers of intercession will be missing. By contrast the Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy: "First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may live a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 1.2-4).

In the first instance, notice that for Paul praying for others is a primary feature of Christian worship. "First of all", he wrote (2 Tim 1.1). It couldn't be clearer. "The first thing I want you to do is pray" (*The Message*). As the context makes clear, Paul was writing not about personal prayer in the privacy of our homes, but about corporate prayer when the church is comes together (see 2.8,9). Praying for others is to be a regular part of Sunday worship.

Secondly, Paul expected Christian worship to include all sorts of prayers for others. In addition to prayers of thanksgiving there are to be "supplications, prayers, intercessions" (1 Tim 2.1 NRSV). Attempts have been made to distinguish between the various kinds of prayers here, but it is generally agreed that Paul was piling up synonyms for praying for others, and not least for people outside the church. We should pray "for everyone" (1 Tim 2.1). Why? Because God's love encompasses everybody. As Paul says: "God desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (2.4); "Christ Jesus... gave himself a ransom for all" (2.5,6a). God doesn't simply love his church - he loves his world. And so should we!

Yet strangely some wish to limit the scope of our prayers. Paul, it is suggested, was not encouraging prayer for people's general well-being. Rather his sole concern was to see people saved. To quote one popular commentator (Philip Towner):

"The church's prayer for all people is an essential aspect of its participation in the

Great Commission. It is prayer that seek the gospel's penetration into all parts of the world and every aspect of life. The closely related prayer for those whom God has placed in charge of governments finds its ultimate purpose too in the accomplishment of God's plan for salvation".

I find it difficult to believe that Paul would have wanted his words to have been interpreted in such a narrow way. Of course, he wanted to everyone saved, but this was not his initial focus. Paul belonged to the Jewish Diaspora, which for centuries had taken seriously the Lord's instructions to Jeremiah for the exiles of his day to "seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and to pray to the Lord on its behalf" (Jer 29.7). Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount taught his disciples "to love your enemies and to pray for them" (Matt 5.44). By implication to love is to pray.

Thirdly, Paul urged specific prayer "for kings and all who are in high positions" (1 Tim 2.2). Amazingly, when Paul was writing those words to Timothy Nero was on the throne. Far from being a Christian, Nero was anti-Christian. Indeed, he ended up persecuting and torturing Christians for their faith. Yet Paul enjoined prayer for him and for all others in positions of responsibility. In today's terms that means we need to pray for the leaders of our nation and of the world; for the CEOs of global corporations and for UN officials; for leaders of industry, NHS managers and decision-makers in education; for local government councilors and officials. For all who in one way or another have power to influence our lives.

Fourthly, leading on from prayers for those "in high position", Paul urged Timothy to pray that "we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity" (1 Tim 2.2). I like the suggestion of Robert Yarborough that Paul wanted "prayers at Ephesus to aim for social, political, and economic stability conducive to everyone's well-being, that of Christians included". He went on:

"The international refugee situation that has persisted in the absence of such stability has been a tragic feature of the twenty-first century world. The desirability of social order in any century, Paul's and Timothy's included, needs no belabouring at the present time, when chaos and genocide make headlines with staggering frequency. People regularly risk their very lives to flee conditions under which 'peaceful and quiet life' has become impossible; the spectre of death in a leaky refugee boat is less feared than the insanity of disorder, insecurity, deprivation, and sometimes lethal intimidation."

By contrast some attribute to Paul a much narrower focus on the benefits of peace for the Christian community. "Peaceful conditions facilitate the spread of the gospel" wrote John Stott. Similarly, Philip Towner: "What is sought is the best conditions for expanding God's kingdom, not simply a peaceful life". But this runs counter to Paul's concern "for everyone". Certainly, the thrust of Paul's instructions for prayer is that we should pray first and foremost for others, and not just for ourselves.

To return where we began. Prayers of intercession should not be an optional extra. In praying for others, we are not simply obeying the command of Scripture, we are also reflecting the love of Christ.

1. To what extent does the intensity of our praying reveal the intensity of our loving?
2. "Pray thankfully (1 Tim 2.1). Pray briefly... avoid long, drawn out details. Pray clearly... use words and ideas people will know. Pray specifically ... ask God to do definite things. Pray expectantly... something's going to happen. Pray humbly... you do not have all the answers (2 Chron 7.14). Pray boldly... that is our privilege (1 John 5.14). Avoid using prayers to teach people points you think they need to know". How do you respond to these instructions taken from an Anglican training course?

### 3. LET'S CONFESS THE FAITH (1 TIM 3.16)

Strange as it may seem to Christians in the more liturgical churches, Baptists rarely confess their faith by saying together the Apostles Creed, let alone the Nicene Creed. Instead, They have had a suspicion of creeds, perhaps in reaction to the way in which in the past subscription to the ancient creeds was required as a test for entry to many public offices. Yet the early Christians had no difficulties in confessing their faith. Neither should we today! As I have written recently:

"With the general demise of the singing of old hymns, in which the congregation used to confess its faith, I think there is a lot to be said for saying the Apostles Creed in Baptist churches. Creeds have a real place in public worship, for through the saying of the creeds we are not just saying what we believe, but also committing ourselves afresh to the one in whom we believe. It would be good too to bring into Baptist worship the great credal acclamation found in the Anglican Eucharistic liturgy: 'Christ has died – Christ is risen – Christ will come again'."

One significant early confession of faith is quoted by Paul in 1 Tim 3.16. Almost certainly this is either a hymn or a creed which was sung or recited in the worship of the early church. This may not be clear in our English versions, but it becomes very apparent in the original Greek. We have here two couplets followed by a refrain, which ensures that each 'verse' ends on a note of triumph. Here six important affirmations are made about Jesus.

He was revealed in flesh,  
Vindicated in spirit,  
Seen by angels.

He was proclaimed among Gentiles,  
Believed in throughout the world  
Taken up in glory

1. **Jesus is God's Son:** "He was revealed in flesh". Whereas we came into being when our parents made love, Jesus was already in being before he entered his mother's womb. Before time was, Jesus was. Yet, in a way which defies understanding, "He appeared in human form" (GNB). Here nothing is said about the purpose of his coming. However, in 2 Tim 1.10 Paul speaks of "the appearing of our Saviour Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel". Left to our own devices, death would be the end of us. In the words of the French philosopher Blaise Pascal: "The incarnation shows man the greatness of his misery by the greatness the

remedy which he required". Jesus came to save us from sin and death.

**2. Jesus rose from the dead:** "He was vindicated in spirit". As far as his contemporaries were concerned, Jesus ended as a failure on a Cross. But they were proved wrong. For God raised Jesus from the dead on the third day, and in raising him from the dead by the power of his Spirit his claim to be God's Son "was shown to be right" (GNB). The resurrection was the real moment of revelation when God's initiative in the incarnation is at last seen to be vindicated.

**3. Jesus is Lord of heaven and earth:** "Seen by angels". The risen Lord became the ascended Lord. In ascending to his Father in glory he made known his victory over sin and death to the angelic powers. At the time of Jesus and the apostles the world was thought to be full of spirit powers, many of whom were hostile to God and to his purposes. To them Christ appeared after his resurrection in all his glory. In the New Testament we have a parallel in 1 Pet 3.19 : traditionally this has been understood of Jesus descending to the dead, but modern scholarship has established that "the spirits in prison" are not the dead, but rather captive angelic powers to whom the ascending Christ proclaimed his victory.

**4. Jesus is the Saviour of the world:** "Proclaimed among Gentiles". From the very beginning Jesus has been good news for all. The Jews of his day had been looking for a Messiah who would restore their nation to its former greatness, but Jesus broke the Messianic mould and came as the Saviour of the world. I find it significant that the day the church was born was the day when Luke tells us that good news was preached to men and women from "every nation under heaven" (Acts 2.5; see also 2.9-11). In the medieval wars of religion in France, the English soldiers used to call out, "The pope is French but Jesus Christ in English!" What rubbish. Jesus can never be the exclusive preserve of any one group, nation, or race: he is the Saviour of all.

**5. Jesus is the Saviour of those who believe:** "Believed in throughout the world". None of the great founders of the main world religions lived in so restricted area as Jesus. None lived for such a terribly short time as Jesus. None died so young. Yet the influence of Jesus has been greater than any of them. Every fourth human being is a Christian. Jesus has not only been preached, he has also been "believed" in. A little later in 1 Timothy Paul said: "We have our hope set on God, who is the Saviour of all people, especially of those who believe" (1 Tim 4.10). Faith is the catalyst which turns the potential into actual. Salvation becomes a reality where men and women put their trust in Jesus as the Saviour of the world.

**6. Jesus shares in the Father's glory: "Taken up in glory".** Some have thought this affirmation out of place - for clearly the preaching and the believing took place Jesus was taken up in glory. However, the emphasis here is not so much on the ascension as a past event, but a reminder that even now Jesus shares in his Father's glory. The Crucified and Risen Lord sits at God's right hand and enjoys a state of splendour beyond our imagining. Yet at the same time the Jesus who sits at God's right hand and shares in his Father's glory, is also the Crucified Jesus. I like to think that the scars are still there on his hands and in his side. Jesus has been one of us: he knows that life can be tough, and precisely because he has been through the mill, he is able to intercede for us at the right hand of God.

This hymn or confession of faith is not a developed creed compared to The Apostles Creed. The focus is very much on the triumph of the Risen, Ascended Lord. The Cross is not mentioned. In the words of Gordon Fee, “The first stanza sings Christ’s earthly ministry, concluding with a word of triumph and glorification. Similarly, the second stanza sings the ongoing ministry of Christ through his church, concluding again with the theme of glorification”. Nonetheless, this confession of faith already embraces “major elements of the Christian kerygma”. It is an embryonic creed.

1. Other New Testament creeds and confessions include Phil 2.6-11 (Though he was in the form of God, he [Christ Jesus] did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him... so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend.. and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father); 1 Cor 15.3-5 (Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures..... he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scripture....); and Col 1.15-20 (He is the image of the invisible God... in him all things in heaven and earth were created... all things have been created through him and for him, He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church: he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fulness of God came to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things... by making peace through the blood of Christ). Do you think there is a place in worship today for these Scriptural creeds and confessions?
2. As I wrote in *Radical Believers*, “Christian faith can never be totally systematized, for we are dealing with a God who is beyond all systematization. Precisely because God’s ways and his thoughts are not our ways and thoughts, there will always be areas of uncertainty. We cannot dot all the ‘i’s and cross all the ‘t’s of faith. There will be times when we just don’t know. However there are, there are basis issues on which certainty is not only possible, but necessary.”? It has been said by a certain Rupert Meldenius: “In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity”. What for you are the essentials of Christian believing?

#### **4. LET’S READ THE SCRIPTURES (1 TIM 4.13)**

Over the years I have discovered that the more ‘Bible-believing’ a Baptist or independent church is, the less Scripture is likely to be read. Amazing as it may appear to my Anglican friends, I have known churches where the one Scripture reading is limited to three or four Scripture verses. Indeed, this was regularly the case of morning ‘chapel’ at an international Baptist Seminary where I spent a year. I got so frustrated that when I was asked to take the morning chapel service, instead of reading three or four verses and then preaching a sermon, I dispensed with the sermon and read the whole of Paul’s Letter to the Colossians. That caused a sensation – but as I pointed out, originally Paul’s shorter letters would most certainly have been read to a church in one sitting. The fact is that we need to read the Scriptures when we gather together in worship.

We need to take seriously the charge of the Apostle Paul to Timothy: “Give attention to the public reading of scripture, to exhorting, to teaching” (1 Tim 4.13). In the original Greek the phrase ‘the public reading of scripture’ is actually just one word (*anagnosis*) which simply means reading out loud. This was the word that was used in the courts of the reading ‘out loud’ of wills and of petitions. But it was also the word used in the Septuagint of the public reading of Scripture, as when the priests read from the law in Ezra’s day (Neh 8.8). Luke too uses the cognate verb when he tells of how Jesus stood up “to read and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him” (Luke 4.16,17).

The question arises: what ‘scripture’ was Paul charging Timothy to read? In so far as early church worship drew to a large extent upon the worship of the synagogue, the scripture would have included readings from the Law and the Prophets. However, in addition to the Old Testament ‘Bible’, letters and writings from the apostles would have been read at early Christian gatherings. Paul, for instance, wrote to the Thessalonians: “I solemnly command you by the Lord that this letter be read to all of them [literally, ‘all the brothers’]” (1 Thess 5.27: see also 1 Thess 5.27). He gave similar instructions to the church in Colossae: “When this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church in Laodicea, and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea” (Col 4.16: see also 2 Cor 4.7). Significantly the Book of Revelation opens with the words: “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it” (Rev 1.3: see also Rev 22.18-19). As John Stott commented: “These are extraordinary instructions. They indicate that the apostles put their writings on a level with the Old Testament.” At the same time, there would have been the telling of stories about Jesus: which were probably receiving written form around the time 1 Timothy was written.

By the time of Justin Martyr (AD 110-165) it appears that Christian worship always included two public scripture readings – one from the Old Testament, and one from the ‘memoirs of the apostles’: “On the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the overseer verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things.”

So what principles can we learn from Paul’s First Letter to Timothy as also from the early Christian practice? In the first place, I would encourage churches to have at least two readings (for instance, Old Testament and New Testament, or Gospel and Epistle), and read at the very least twenty-five verses. If people bring Bibles, or look at the Scriptures on a screen or on their phones, then people’s concentration span can easily be extended. My father was a great believer in reading the Scriptures in the context of a Sunday service. In his church in Cambridge he created quite a stir when over a series of six Sunday evenings he read through all 48 chapters of Ezekiel! Later I remember his excitement when the *New English Bible* first came out – with such a ‘modern’ and accessible version, he would often read several chapters from a Gospel before preaching to the congregation.

The scripture readings are then followed by what Paul calls ‘exhortation’ or ‘preaching’ (GNB/NIV) (*paraklesis*) and ‘teaching’ (*didaskalia*). We should probably not over-distinguish between the two activities: “it is hard to imagine teaching without leading the people to response, or preaching without providing a reasoned exposition of a text’s principles”. In one way or another God’s Word needs to be expounded and applied (see also 2 Tim 3.16)



In Paul's day, of course, many people could not read – nor could many afford to get hold of 'books' to read. This therefore made the "public reading of scripture" all the more important. Although we live in a day when general literacy can be taken for granted, and when the Bible can be bought relatively inexpensively, nonetheless we cannot assume that most Christians are regularly engaged in personal Bible reading. For although British churchgoers in a 2008 survey claimed to read their Bible every day, my experience as a pastor tells me that this is not the case. I am much more inclined to believe a 1997 Bible Society survey of regular churchgoers which found that 16% read something from the Bible every day; a further 9% read the Bible several times a week; 11% read something from the Bible about once a week; and 9% read the Bible about once a month. In other words in any given month the majority of churchgoers never read their Bible. Indeed, I sometimes wonder how many ministers read their Bible on a regular basis: for in a survey I conducted of over 300 Baptist ministers, some one in five (19%) said that they had no system of regular Bible reading. All the more reason, therefore, for 'the public reading of scripture' within Christian worship!

1. Is the issue today not so much the public reading of the Scriptures as the private reading of the Scriptures?
2. When I was in the Congo new Christians could not be baptised until they could read, on the basis that reading the Bible was essential to the Christian life. To what extent is reading the Bible an essential part of your Christian life? What helps you to read the Scriptures?

## **5. LET'S NAIL OUR COLOURS TO THE MAST – IN BAPTISM (1 TIM 6.12)**

The term '*Nailing your colours to the mast*' has its roots in the Battle of Camperdown, fought on 11 October 1797 between the British and Dutch ships as part of the French Revolutionary Wars. The British fleet was led by HMS Venerable, the flagship of Admiral Adam Duncan. Initially the battle didn't go well for the English. The mainmast of Duncan's vessel was struck and the admiral's blue ensign ('colours') was brought down. Realising that this could be interpreted as a sign of surrender, Jack Crawford, a 22-year-old sailor stepped forward. Despite being under intense gunfire, he climbed what was left of the mast and nailed the colours back to where they were visible everybody. The act proved crucial in the battle and Duncan's forces were eventually victorious. Crawford returned home to a hero's welcome and was given a silver medal and a government pension of £30 per year!

Crawford had guts – and so too had Jesus, when at his trial he "in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession" (1 Tim 6.13). Had Jesus 'played his cards right', he could have provided Pilate with an excuse to set him free. But Jesus refused to back down, even when the odds were stacked unfairly against him. When Pilate asked, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' (John 18.33), Jesus did not deny that he was the Messiah, God's Son. He stood his ground – in Paul's words, he "made the good confession". Or as we could say, he 'nailed his colours to the mast'.

In terms of this series on worship, what is significant is that Timothy too "made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses" (1 Tim.6.12). Some have suggested that the

reference here is Timothy's general witness to Jesus – but the past tense (a Greek aorist) Paul used suggests that he had in mind a particular occasion. Others have suggested that the reference is to Timothy's 'ordination', but there is no evidence that at that time the 'ordinand' had to make a solemn confession of faith in Jesus. Yet another suggestion is that the reference is to Timothy's appearance before a magistrate in a court of law, but this could scarcely be described as a summons "to eternal life". The most natural suggestion is that Paul was referring to Timothy's baptism, for in the early church this was the moment when Christians confessed their faith "in the presence of many witnesses" and in so doing so sealed their "call to eternal life". It is true that the word 'baptism' does not feature, but the parallelism between "you made the good confession" and "the eternal life to which you were called" shows that this confession was made by Timothy at the beginning of his Christian life, and as a result the general scholarly consensus is that baptism is in view. In the early church baptism was the moment when new Christians confessed their faith for all to see. It was then that 'they nailed their colours to the mast'.

Today, in many churches (including Anglican churches who are increasingly welcoming people who have not been christened as a child but who have come to faith) we are seeing people confessing their faith in baptism. Baptism in New Testament terms is the moment when we 'come out of the closet' and confess Jesus for all to see. As the Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Rome, in baptism we are "buried with him [Christ] in baptism, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom 6.4). Baptists would say that we are in effect saying as they go under the water, 'Yes Lord, you died for me', and as they come up out of the water they are in effect saying 'Yes Lord, you rose for me'. And in identifying themselves with the Lord who died and rose, they are in effect resolving to die to self and to live for Christ alone.

Not that Baptists have always understood Scripture aright. In the past at least, there has been a strange reluctance to accept that here in 1 Tim 6.12 Paul speaks of baptism as being the moment when we take hold of God's gift of eternal life. Many Baptists prefer to see baptism as simply an act of obedience to the Great Commission (Matt 28.19, 20). They prefer to understand baptism as an 'ordinance' of the church (something laid down Christ) rather than a 'sacrament' of the church ('an outward sign of an inward grace'). As a result they feel uncomfortable with Scriptures like Tit 3.5 (God "saved us... through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit") and 1 Pet 3.21 ("Baptism.... now saves you – not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience"). Clearly the mere act of being immersed (or sprinkled) does not save: it is the faith which is enacted in baptism which saves.

Although baptism was not a major issue when Paul was writing to Timothy, nonetheless he refers to baptism both here in 1 Tim 6.12 as also in 2 Tim 2.11-13. Baptism remains a great opportunity to 'nail our colours to the mast' and in this way proclaim that Jesus is Lord – Lord not just of our lives or indeed of his church, but also Lord of the world.

1. In *50 Lessons in Ministry*, I wrote: "Baptismal services provide great opportunities for Gospel preaching... Yet in my experience, these opportunities are not always grasped. In some churches the primary focus of a baptismal service is on those being

baptised, with the result that the emphasis is on the call to discipleship rather than the call to repentance.” What do you think?

2. In *Entering New Territory* I quoted the Evangelical Anglican, Michael Green who expressed his willingness to give up infant baptism for one generation, if that were possible! He wrote: “It would clear the ground, and enable us to have a fresh start, with the sign of the covenant marking out believers and their children. For this is the only sort of infant baptism which can be justified from Scripture, or, for that matter, from the formularies of the Church of England.” How do you react? Would we as Baptists then insist that on ‘re-baptising’ such individuals?

## 6. LET’S REMEMBER JESUS (2 TIM 2.8)

“Remember Jesus Christ”, wrote Paul to Timothy (2 Tim 2.8). The place we supremely remember Jesus is at the Lord’s Table. According to ‘the words of institution’ Jesus at the Last Supper broke bread and said “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me”. Later he took the cup of blessing and said, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this in remembrance of me” (1 Cor 11.24,24). Although in 2 Timothy – as indeed in the other ‘Pastoral Letters’ – there is no specific reference to ‘the Lord’s Supper’ (1 Cor 11.20), Paul’s charge to “remember Jesus” inevitably reminds us of Jesus command to remember him. Celebrating the Lord’s Supper is not an optional extra. It is at the very heart of Christian worship. It was central to the worshipping life of the churches in Corinth (1 Cor 11.8) and Troas (Acts 20.7). It was presumably central to the worship of the church in Ephesus. It should also be central in our worship today.

In the church where I worship the main 9.30 Sunday morning service always climaxes with a celebration of the Lord’s Supper – and for that I am grateful. However, in most Baptist churches, communion is not the norm. It tends to be celebrated once a month, or even less often. Indeed, in some North American churches Communion can be a quarterly or even just an annual ‘event’ on Maundy Thursday. I cannot believe that Jesus asked his disciples to remember him ‘just now and again’. John Calvin regarded infrequent communion as “an invention of the devil”. The French Reformed scholar, J.J. von Allmen, was of the decided opinion that “the absence of the Eucharist shows contempt for grace.” Communion may not be right for a civic service or for a ‘seeker’ service, but otherwise it should surely be part of regular Sunday worship.

The Lord’s Supper is a meal ‘in memory’ of Jesus. However, it is far more than a mere memorial meal. For when we remember Jesus’ broken body and his out-poured, we do not just recall that Jesus died for us – rather we experience afresh his death for us. The past becomes present. Here there is a very real parallel with the way in which Jews celebrate the Passover as a ‘memorial meal’ (Ex 12.14). “Each Jewish father (including those who lived generations and centuries after the fact) was to explain to his son that he celebrated the Passover Seder in the way he did ‘because of what the Lord did for me when I came forth out of Egypt’ (*m. Pesachim* 10.5)”. Similarly, as we Christians remember the death of Jesus, the past becomes present and we encounter Jesus. It is not that Jesus comes nearer to us at the Table, but that we come nearer to him. As we gather around his Table we become conscious of his presence with us. To quote Ralph Martin, a distinguished Baptist New

Testament scholar of a former generation. "In remembrance of me' is no bare historical reflection upon the Cross, but a recalling of the crucified and living Christ in such a way that He is present in all the fulness and reality of his saving power". Or in the words of an old communion hymn: "Here O my Lord, I see you face to face; here faith can touch and handle things unseen; here I will grasp with firmer hand your grace, and all my helplessness upon you lean".

However, Paul did not simply say "Remember Jesus Christ", but "Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead". At this point the underlying Greek past tense is highly significant. Paul did not use a simple past tense (the Greek 'aorist') which refers to a one-off action in the past, but rather a past tense (the Greek 'perfect') which indicates a past event which relates to the present. Let me give an example of the difference between the two tenses. If I said 'I married Caroline' and used the simple past tense, it could mean that I had married Caroline, but it would not indicate that I was still married to her; she could be dead, or we could be divorced and both onto our second marriages. But if I said 'I married Caroline' and used the perfect tense, it would mean that I had married Caroline and remained married to her. It is this perfect tense which Paul used here. If Paul had used the simple past tense here, he would be saying "Remember Jesus, who on that third day God raised from the dead - full-stop". It would not be clear that Jesus is still alive. However, instead Paul used the 'perfect' tense, which indicates a past event which spills over into the present. 'Remember Jesus, whom God raised on the third day and who remains forever risen and is present in his resurrection power. Remember Jesus, Timothy, remember that he is with you now.'

The context gives added significance to Paul's charge. Timothy was clearly finding life tough. Paul therefore had urged him to "share in suffering like a good soldier of Jesus Christ" (2.3). Paul's subsequent mention of "Jesus Christ, raised from the dead", is a reminder that "even he had to walk the way of the cross and taste death before being exalted" (J.D.D. Kelly). Jesus is an example of victory after death and Timothy's source of strength: "he who conquered death through resurrection will 'strengthen you' for your task and endurance" (Gordon Fee). These words, although addressed in the first place to Timothy, have a message too for us. Notice too that at right at the very start of this section, Paul had said to Timothy "be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim 2.1). This translation is a little misleading, for the underlying Greek verb is passive, and not active. Literally Paul said: "Be strengthened" in the grace that the Risen Lord supplies. Timothy, there is no need to set your jaw and grit your teeth as if everything depends on you. Instead 'take strength from the grace of God' (REB) and remember that Jesus is risen from the dead." What a difference remembering Jesus can make. All the more reason, therefore, to ensure that Sunday by Sunday we do remember "Jesus Christ, raised from the dead"!

1. What do you understand by the term 'sacrament'? How often do you encounter the Risen Lord at Communion? How important is it to you to remember Jesus at the Table?
2. To what extent do you think that non-church people find the Lord's Supper off-putting?

## 7. LET'S PROCLAIM JESUS (2 TIM 4.1-2, 5)

2 Tim 4.1-5: *In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: <sup>2</sup> proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favourable or unfavourable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. <sup>3</sup> For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, <sup>4</sup> and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. <sup>5</sup> As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.*

My call to ministry was very much a call to preach. Like Jeremiah I felt I could do nothing else but preach: "If I say, 'I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name', then within there is something like burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot" (Jer 20.9). Not surprisingly therefore, when as Principal of Spurgeon's College I was invited to preach at a service of ordination, I often turned to Paul's charge to Timothy to "proclaim" Jesus:

"In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message, be persistent whether the time is favourable or unfavourable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching... Do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully" (2 Tim 4.1-2, 5).

From this charge we discover that preaching in the first instance is 'proclamation'. The New Testament word for a preacher is a 'herald' (*kerux*). When Jesus began his ministry, he came as a 'herald' with good news from God (Mark 1.14). The same word is found here in 2 Tim 4.2: "proclaim (*keruxon*). the message" Preachers have a message to deliver: it is not their message, but God's. As Ben Witherington has shown: "A herald in a city like Ephesus was a person who announced public auctions and sales, new taxes, the manumission of slaves, the beginning of public games, the orders of kings, and the onset of religious ceremonies... He came later to be called the 'town crier'. His role was simply that of announcer... The basic task of the herald was to publicly announce something to people who had not yet heard the news."

According to the NRSV & REB Timothy was to "proclaim the message"; similarly, the GNB says that he was to "preach the message. Unfortunately the translation adopted by the NIV (as also the old RSV) is a little misleading: for the charge "preach the word" has led some to conclude that Timothy was to preach "the Word of God as found in Scripture" However, although the Greek word used (*logos*) literally means 'word', the reference is not to Scripture but to the "message" that preachers are to proclaim; the news they have to share. For Christian preachers the news is about Jesus. Indeed, the other word frequently used in the New Testament for preaching is 'to share good news' (*euangelizo*).

Secondly, preachers are to "be persistent, whether the time is favourable or unfavourable". According to the standard New Testament Greek lexicon the word translated as 'persistent' (*ephistemi*) has here the meaning of 'being ready', 'being on hand'. If that is so, then Paul is

telling Timothy to be always available. According to Ben Witherington, Timothy “is to get on with it and not let circumstances determine whether he does it or not”.

It is possible that the underlying Greek word also has the connotation of urgency (so RSV “be urgent”; REB “press it home in season and out of season”). There is a difference between announcing the Good News of Jesus and announcing, say, that the next train to London will be leaving in five minutes. It’s a nuisance failing to hear a train a station announcement, but at least there will always be another train. But missing out on the Good News of Jesus can lead to tragedy. The Gospel is a matter of life and death; people’s eternal destiny is at stake. Opportunities to share the Good News need to be seized, however inconvenient it may be to the preacher.

Thirdly, preachers are to “convince, rebuke and encourage”. There is no one approach to Gospel preaching, for people have different needs.

1. An appeal to the reason. The word “convince” (*elengcho*) can have the positive connotation of convincing people of the truth as it is in Jesus. An examination of Acts makes it clear that Paul in his evangelistic activity took the mind seriously. For example, at Thessalonica Paul went to the synagogue where “he argued... from the scriptures, explaining and proving”, so that eventually some were “persuaded” (Acts 17.2-3); at Athens “he argued in the synagogues.... and also in the marketplace” (Acts 17.17); at Corinth “every sabbath he would argue in the synagogue and would try to convince them” (Acts 18.4); and at Ephesus he “argued daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus” (Acts 19.9). If this is what Paul had in mind when writing to Timothy, then this means that preachers are to engage in the task of Christian apologetics.
2. An appeal to the conscience. The word “rebuke” incorporates a call to repentance. Those whose lifestyles are clearly contrary to God’s laws, need to be told that God would have them live differently.
3. An appeal to the heart. The word “encourage” (*parakaleo*) from which the term Paraclete is reminder that there in any congregation there are the lonely and the fearful, who need to know that God is there for them – and that there is nothing in this world or the world to come which can separate them from his love.

Fourthly, preaching is also to include teaching: “Proclaim the message... with the utmost patience in teaching” or as the NIV puts it “Preach the word ... with careful instruction” Unbelievers need to hear the good news, and believers need to be taught the faith. However, the distinction between preaching and teaching is not always clear cut: unbelievers need to be taught the basics of the Christian faith, before they can begin to respond: they need to know to whom and to what they are committing themselves. In turn believers also need to be reminded of God’s amazing love for them in Jesus. “Patience”, however is to characterise the preaching and teaching of the Gospel. Patience is required because, as the next two verses indicate, not everybody will respond positively. Furthermore, even those who do respond positively, often need time work out the implications of Christian believing for them.

After a lifetime of preaching, I still believe that preaching is central to Christian ministry. In the often-quoted words of Peter Forsyth: “With preaching Christianity stands or falls,

because it is the declaration of a gospel. Without the faithful proclaiming of Christ in the power of the Spirit. the Church could never have survived.” All the more reason, therefore to “proclaim Christ” today!

1. Henry Ward Beecher, a 19<sup>th</sup> century preacher, complained that “the churches of the land are sprinkled all over with bald-headed old sinners whose hairs has been worn off by the friction of countless sermons that have been aimed at them and have glanced off and hit the man in the pew behind”. How do you listen to sermons?
2. Darrell Johnson, a Canadian preacher, wrote that “Whenever a human being, Bible in hand, stands up before a group of other human beings, invites the gathered assembly into a particular text of the Bible and as faithfully as possible tries to say again what the living God is saying in the text, something always happens. Something transformative, empowering, life-giving happens.” Has that been your experience?