

The Genuine Life

BY SCOTTY SMITH

With three decades plus change in the pastoral ministry, the gospel seems to be getting bigger and Jesus is appearing more gracious than ever. Maybe that's because I've never been more aware of my brokenness and more disrupted by longings for the day when the already of the kingdom capitulates to the not yet of shalom. Can it really be that we're destined to be as lovely and as loving as Jesus? (1 John 3:1-3). That promise has singular sustaining power when the inward groans of spiritual child-birth feel more like a tumor than a treasure (Rom. 8:22-25).

I also find myself taking less for granted and making more time for gratitude. Being one year shy of my sixtieth birthday, I'm especially thankful for the leaders who give me a tantalizing glimpse of gospel sanity and genuine humility — those jars of clay through whom the aroma of grace is the best apologetic for the resurrection of Jesus. May God increase their tribe. I've never been more impressed with leaders who aren't the least bit impressed with themselves. Put the apostle Paul at the top of that list. His words to Timothy, a son and protégé in the faith, charm and challenge my heart (please stop to read 1 Tim. 1:12-17).

From what seminary did this

guy graduate? Who progressively updates their professional vitae in this fashion? AD 57, "I'm the least of the apostles" (1 Cor. 15:9). AD 60, "I'm less than the least of all God's people" (Eph. 3:8). AD 63, "I'm chief of sinners" (1 Tim. 1:15) I've always been impressed with Paul's keen mind, but now I'm even more impressed with his gentle, humble heart.

Marinating in Paul's doxological confession, I remember with chagrin my first pastorate after graduating from Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia — not to imply that's the only chapter in my years of ministry for which I carry non-condemning grief. I was ordained by the PCUS in 1977 at First Presbyterian Church, Winston Salem, North Carolina. Called to serve as youth pastor, I joined a pastoral staff of graduates from Yale, Princeton, and Union. I soon took on the self-appointed role of theological prosecuting attorney in the kingdom.

Armed with answers to questions few were asking, I was more preoccupied with being right than being caring. Though a commitment to defending the truth and loving well are not mutually exclusive, it seems that spotting heresies required so much less of me than loving people. But over the course of the past thirty years, God

has displayed his perfect patience and relentless providence in enabling me to accept my place alongside of Paul as "foremost sinner." Indeed, His mercy has proven to be more than a match for my heart.

So how would I love to finish the race, and how do I pray the next generation of leaders will begin it? There's no better example than Paul.

Gospel astonishment versus theological cockiness

I learned the lyric of the gospel long before I loved its music. As pastor, husband, dad and friend, living from my head has always been easier than engaging from my heart, and not nearly as messy. But leaders who delight in the imputed righteousness of Christ seem to defend it the best. Paul never seemed to have "gotten over" the hyperabundance of grace, faith, and love given to us in Jesus. While the gospel does free us from childishness, it should make us more and more childlike in awe, joy, and humility.

Chiefrepenter versus former sinner

When, in writing to Timothy, Paul referred to himself as "foremost sinner," he wasn't engaging in hype or hyperbole. His whole body of writing shows us he really meant it. A former blasphemer, persecutor, and violent man was still a current sinner, in need of the mercy and grace of God. Imagine how encouraging and empowering this was to Timothy. His spiritual father lived a life of ongoing repentance before his very eyes. God's perfect patience for Paul must have made it easier for Timothy not to live as a poser or pretender.

When we first planted Christ Community Church in 1986, Dr. Jack Miller preached our constitution service, challenging me and our leadership family to be the chief repenters in the church. When we've forgotten or ignored that charge, our congregation has suffered the most. For what is as insufferable as self-righteous leaders?

Preaching Christ to yourself versus preaching yourself

Paul never used an audience or epistle as a vehicle for self advertisement or personal aggrandizement. He preached Christ, not himself (2 Cor. 4:5), and yet he was constantly preaching Christ to himself. Leaders who make the most

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of Jesus are those who make the gospel the most beautiful and believable. Leaders who preach themselves master the effective technique of transparency, but they remain clueless about the redemptive trauma of vulnerability.

Oh, that the King of the ages might be made visible through an emerging generation of leaders who will live and lead as genuinely as Paul. ✱

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