

## **Let's have Only God-approved Workers in our Churches**

In both Old and New Testaments the Bible shows us the type of people who are useful in God's hands. The only worthwhile life is a life useful to God. Every other kind of life is meaningless, a sadly depressing waste of time.

Hundreds of years ago when the ruined city of God was being rebuilt, Ezra was a leader God used. God could do this because, "Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel", Ezra 7:10. Note the three ways God's word impacted Ezra's life:

1. He learned what it said and what it meant.
2. He lived it out personally in his own daily life.
3. He shared it with others in ways they could understand and apply to themselves.

In the early Christian church, when Timothy was several years into his ministry, probably still in Ephesus, 1 Timothy 1:3, and when he was about to have a large responsibility put on his shoulders because Paul's death was very close, 2 Timothy 4:6,<sup>1</sup> Paul urged him in a letter, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth", 2 Timothy 2:15.

To give approval means to recognise as genuine, to commend as a good thing; "to have a positive opinion about someone or something, to give official permission".<sup>2</sup>

The Greek word is often used in the testing of metals to show which is real and which is counterfeit.

As Christian workers today we are encouraged to look at ourselves, our lives and our ministries, and to ask: "What does God think about us?" When everything else is said and done, it is only what God thinks that is eternally important. Are we useful to God or are we a waste of time?

When my son John was a small boy he occasionally played with my tools – a hammer, a screwdriver, a pair of pliers. His usually dirty and sticky hands left my tools unfit for me to use

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<sup>1</sup> John Stott *The Message of 2 Timothy* (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press) 1973, Bible Speaks Today, pages 18-20.

<sup>2</sup> *Macmillan School Dictionary* (Oxford: Macmillan) 2004.

in real work! I had to clean them up before I could use them. Does God find our lives ready to be used in His service? Or does He have some cleaning up to do?

At the corner dukkan<sup>3</sup> where we bought our bread in Khartoum North, the shopkeeper sometimes stopped me from buying if the bread was old or damaged. If the bread did not have his approval he would not sell it to me. Does God look at our lives and say, “She is ready and fit to be used” or “I cannot use him to bless others”?

Some workmen work very hard. I visited a S.P.E.C.<sup>4</sup> school being built at Merzook, Thowra. In the hot sun there was a man shovelling mud and hand-moulding bricks. There were two women walking to and fro bringing water in plastic containers balanced on their heads. These people were visibly sweating as they toiled. A pastor, or any other Christian worker, who does not work harder than a labourer is a disgrace to his or her profession. We should work at least as hard as members of our congregations, and arguably much more so. Being a Christian worker is not an easy option for a job. We are accountable to God and must constantly look for His approval.

Throughout 2 Timothy Paul explains how the young man can become more and more what God wants him to be.

### **God-approved workers worship God**

The first key is in 2:24, the descriptive phrase: “The Lord’s servant”. It is vital that church workers see themselves the right way. How important do we think we are?

When you hear sirens in Khartoum and then you see police motorbikes clearing the road, you know some important person is about to be driven by, probably in a flashy car with dark tinted windows. Is it right for the church to have such V.I.P.’s (very important people)? I remember being embarrassed when I visited churches around Sudan. I was given the best comfortable chair to sit on, while most sat on benches. I was given ice cold coca-cola to drink while the

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<sup>3</sup> Small general shop.

<sup>4</sup> Sudanese Presbyterian Evangelical Church

congregation had water. I deeply appreciate Sudanese hospitality. It is great that Sudanese people offer kindness in this way. But, it is wrong for me to expect it, or to demand it or even to require it! As a pastor I am merely, “the Lord’s servant”.

My Master is much more important than me. My position, my status, is of no consequence. I am what I am, and I do what I do, because God told me to. There is nothing special about me. I do not deserve to be treated as royalty. I am a servant who lives to serve my Master – simply doing what I am told to do by Him. I have done it long enough (39 years) to know what my Lord and Master wants in most situations, but He still has some surprises He wants me to learn. Pride is a poison in the church! Humility is a sign of a life of worshipping God. A true Christian worker is concerned about God’s glory, not his or her own.

#### **God-approved workers walk away from fighting**

Verse 24 continues, “the Lord’s servant must not quarrel”. I have never seen a fight between one man. Have you? It is impossible! It takes two to fight.

Our Lord Jesus said, “Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also”, Matthew 5:39. If only this was applied to all of the armed struggles in Sudan! If only this was put into practice during inter-tribal disputes. Sadly, we have to admit also, if only this was put into practice when churches split apart from one another, or even when one congregation divides. What a difference it would make.

We say we believe the Bible, but what we do shows what we really believe. Too many Christians, even church leaders, believe in retaliation or revenge, or believe in striking first to avoid being hit. Sometimes we need to confess wrong attitudes before God, and even own up to fellow believers. Only then can God approve of our attitudes.

Self-control is an evidence of Holy Spirit control. It is our responsibility not to angrily disagree and argue.

In English the word “quarrel” has another meaning as well as this one. The second meaning describes an arrow having a sharp four-edged head fired from a crossbow. Paul would not have had this in his mind, but it may remind us of the damage done to innocent people by unrestrained words fired in anger! When guns are fired from a helicopter or mortar bombs lobbed into a village, often people other than the target are hit and hurt. A wise pastor walks away from quarrels and strife because of the damage they cause.

My good friend, Pastor Alfred William of SIM Arabic Ministries, with whom I had many happy times in Sudan and England before his early death, told me that Sudanese regard turning away from an argument as a weakness. I told him that as I understand the Bible, it is teaching this as godliness and *not* weakness. When it comes to a choice, Christians must obey God rather than their own traditions.

#### **God-approved workers deserve the role and responsibilities they have**

2 Timothy 2:24 continues by saying that the Lord's servant must be “able to teach”. The right person for the right job will be able to do the job well.

Why are we where we are, doing what we do? A workman pastor merits authority to be among the leaders of the congregation, because of his life and his teaching. Our lifestyles and what we say from our pulpits should commend our Christ and show our calling.

People were amazed at Jesus' authority. His interpretation of the Law (the Old Testament Torah) was reinforced by His life and His actions. People heard His message. And people saw His message.

My objective in teaching Systematic Theology at Gideon Theological College when I was there, was never simply to teach a class. I was aiming to influence the whole church in Sudan and the non-Christian population too! Putting the Bible's principles into practice in everyday congregational life I knew my students would grasp how God works.

The most important qualification any pastor or Christian worker has is not a Certificate, or a Diploma, or a Degree of any level. It is a totally open and honest heart, with a life that agrees with what he teaches the Bible says.

The most important examination for the pastor is not written mid-term or at the end of the academic year. It is read by the congregation every day as they watch him living his life at home, at church, in relation to others in the wider world, and so on.

Do we pass this test? When I served Khartoum International Church (K.I.C.) most American's in the congregation called me "pastor", while English and Europeans called me "Colin". We must ask ourselves whether we deserve the titles pastor or elder? My answer would be, "No, I really don't. But by God's grace I am doing the best I can".

#### **God-approved workers warn others in the proper way**

Verse 25, "Those who oppose him he must gently instruct".

When I lived in Khartoum North I would often go for an early morning walk across the Nile bridge to the Omdurman side and back again. The guards used to laugh at this "mad Englishman" in summer clothes while they were there wrapped up in coats and scarves sitting around a burning fire. In turn I marvelled at the fisherman I would see on the river, using their boats and nets to catch fish for a living.

Have you ever wondered why Jesus called so many fishermen to follow him?<sup>5</sup> In England I once heard one say it was because fishermen were used to being disappointed, working all night for little or nothing. Christian workers and pastors are frequently let down. Then it is easy to respond the wrong way with anger and frustration. I know how many times my congregations would ignore the nine good things I had done and would notice only the one bad thing. How should we react to this?

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 4:18-22; John 21:1-14.

When a father is teaching his child to dig the ground, or a mother teaching her child to cook the food, those children will do several wrong things before their lessons are learned. Parents realise this and they accept their responsibility to keep on teaching through all the mistakes that are being made. The Church leader should do likewise. You may well have said, "If you do this, the bad result will be so and so". They do it anyway. Now the worst has happened! Never say, "I told you so". I am so glad my Lord Jesus gives me more than one chance.

At K.I.C. our congregation came from many different denominational backgrounds. There were large cultural differences between us all. When I knew some people would hold opposite opinions to mine and we as a church were going to go in my direction, I would personally try to see the people I knew would be affected. I went out of my way to build friendships with them. I sought to respect them and help them respect me – even though we had our differences. The seeds sown bore fruit as personal respect brought us through many difficult situations. This gentle dealing with people is crucial. Gentleness is mild, soft and temperate. A gentle character is not like either the extreme searing heat of Sudan nor the cold snow that grips Canada in winter. Gentleness is even, controlled, gracious and moderate.

### **God-approved workers watch and wait for God to work**

The reason instruction can be given gently comes from the understanding that it is God who does the real work of the church. The approved pastor or elder is looking for God to work in people's lives and hearts. He does not do nothing while he waits! He works diligently and well. But he trusts his Master to change the situation. He works in partnership with God – and he knows God is the senior partner.

The second church I pastored in England I could not get very far. My wife Brenda and I started an early morning breakfast group and taught them Christian discipleship in all of life. We all prayed together then had breakfast and went off to work. Fifteen years later I could look back and see how God had used the few who were willing to be taught to change the church. (And to change two other churches too). One member of the group backslid away from Christianity and another was called into glory. God did his work! He removed some

obstacles. He enlightened other people. He built His church. “Jesus said, “I will build *my* church””, Matthew 16:18. Those who work with God know whose church it is.

A fruit of the Holy Spirit is patience. I grew ground nuts (peanuts) in my garden in Khartoum. I was very tempted from time to time to dig them up and to see how they were growing. I resisted the temptation, because I knew digging them up to look for any progress would hinder – if not destroy completely – their growth. We must patiently wait for harvests.

Think again of Ezra for a moment. He was ready for service when God's time was right because he had studied the Scripture and put it into daily practice. Let's check ourselves for readiness as we go through these lessons from 2 Timothy. We do not work for our salaries, our housing, or for promotion to being a bishop or moderator. Nor do we work for the praise of our people, or to impress fellow pastors, etc. At the end of every day, when we lie down to go to sleep, we should reflect on six very important words: “Is God pleased with me today?”

A great deal of development is happening in Sudan. Road traffic accidents are getting worse as the roads get better and traffic moves faster. On every car, every truck, every bus and even every donkey cart there are ten, four or two rubber tyres. Every week I inspected the tyres on my car. Were the grooves deep enough to grip the road? Could I see any splits in the side walls that may burst? Had any sharp stone or nail dug into the tyre surface? When my tyres passed my test they stayed in my use. If ever they failed my test, they had to be repaired or replaced. What does God find as He regularly checks us over for His service?

### **God-approved workers find good role models to copy**

Paul wrote to the younger pastor, “You know all about my teaching. my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings – what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra ...”<sup>6</sup> 2 Timothy 3:10-11.

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<sup>6</sup> See Acts 13:13-14:20, which Paul must have spoken of, and read from Acts 16 on, which Timothy witnessed.

Since Paul had heard about Timothy from the disciples in Lystra, Acts 16:1, the two men had travelled and worked together. Timothy heard most of Paul's public sermons. He saw miracles. He noted how Paul dealt with people. Together they faced many and varied situations. Timothy knew Paul spent many hours writing to Christians he was concerned over in other places. He prayed himself, kneeling alongside the more experienced saint.

That kind of training, mentoring, learning from example, is arguably at least as valuable as anything offered by Bible College or Theological Institute, and possibly more so. The word "my" is repeated nine times in these verses: "my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions, my sufferings".<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere Paul wrote to others, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ", 1 Corinthians 11:1; "You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord", 1 Thessalonians 1:5-6.

In 2 Timothy 2:20-21 Paul has written of useful and useless articles, good and bad church workers. In 3:1-9 he has warned about Christian workers who hold a form of godliness, "but deny its power", verse 5. Timothy is faced with a choice. He can copy them or he can copy Paul. The apostle urges his young friend to copy a good model, not a poor one. We must not be influenced by those around us who will lead us astray. He says "you have observed me", 3:10, 14. Three times in this letter Timothy is told to be different from the worldly Christianity around him: 2:1; 3:10; 3:14. It is as if he is told, "This is happening among others .... but as for you, be different. Be approved by God". And here is the challenge to us.

It is always easier to go along with the crowd. When I lived in Khartoum, the traffic police used to change the direction of bridge traffic into or out from the city between 8-10am and 12noon to 5pm. Traffic flowed more easily if everyone was going the same way! But, the God-approved workman is called to be different, to battle against the majority. We must be ready for the challenge.

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<sup>7</sup> 2 Timothy 3:9-11 Revised Standard Version.

### **God-approved workers will face hard times**

“Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted”, 2 Timothy 3:12. When we want to love and serve God, and not to please ourselves, we will suffer for it. “The godly arouse the antagonism of the worldly”.<sup>8</sup> Jesus Christ predicted it would be the same for His followers as for Himself, John 15:18-20; John 16:33.

The godly Christian living among the godless will be persecuted. The godly Christian living among the godly will not – but neither will he influence the world. The godless Christian living among the worldly people will not be persecuted because they will not see him as any different from themselves.

The spiritually qualified and skilled pastor or Christian worker will embrace the cross of Christ in the every day world. He or she will suffer for doing it. My Muslim neighbour helped me with the water company when we had a problem with the supply and the costs. He said to me while helping, “You could bribe and get this done a lot quicker, *but I know that as a Christian you will not do that!*” He had seen my different standards and he expected me to keep living by them even when it would be much easier not to. I accepted the costly and troublesome consequences of my Christian discipleship.

Sadly, persecution often comes from “evil men and impostors”, 2 Timothy 3:13. An impostor is a fake, not the real thing. An apparently Christian minister or teacher, but in fact a false one. They may seem to be successful, perhaps more so than the true Christian teacher. People who are easily led astray like sheep may follow their claims of 100% health, 100% wealth, no suffering, constant victory. It appeals to fleshly desires. Paul reminds Timothy, “I suffered”, verse<sup>11</sup>. “Remember my thorn in the flesh,<sup>9</sup> my bad eyesight,<sup>10</sup> and the times Dr Luke told me I had to rest?<sup>11</sup> Remember when I was beaten by the mob in Lystra?<sup>12</sup> It didn’t stop you joining my team. Don’t let hardship stop you now! Remember when we had nowhere to stay,

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<sup>8</sup> John Stott The Message of 2 Timothy (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press) 1973, Bible Speaks Today series, page 96.

<sup>9</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:7-10.

<sup>10</sup> Galatians 4:15; 6:11; 2 Thessalonians 3:17.

<sup>11</sup> Acts 18:1-4; Colossians 4:14.

<sup>12</sup> Acts 14:19-20; Acts 16:1-3.

no money for food, few friends in hostile towns?<sup>13</sup> I'm writing to you now from a cell in a Roman prison, expecting execution at any time. Timothy, prepare to face hard times. *But as for you, be different from the average Christian leader. Be approved by God*".

### **God-approved workers follow the track that is set down for them**

"But as for you, continue in what you have learned and become convinced of", 2 Timothy 3:14.

Christian leaders should be like good solid railway engines and not like flashy smart cars! Trains follow tracks. The tracks are their foundation. Tracks set their direction. They protect from error. Yes, it is true that they curb some of the engine's freedom, but they also help get people to a safe destination – a lot more than ever can be taken in a car!

The leaders approved by God see this theme in both of Timothy's letters (the following italics are mine): "God's *solid foundation* stands firm", 2 Timothy 2:19. "What you heard from me keep as *the pattern* of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard *the good deposit* that was entrusted to you – guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us", 1:13-14. "Guard what has been *entrusted to your care*", 1 Timothy 6:20. "*Watch your life and doctrine* closely. *Persevere* in them", 4:16. "I give you this instruction ... so that *by following them* you may fight the good fight, *holding on* to the faith", 1:18-19.

A train driver who deliberately left the rails would be dismissed from his job! It would not matter if he thought he knew a quicker way, an easier and less demanding route, a more enjoyable trip, etc. His job is to keep on the tracks set down for him.

### **God-approved workers fearlessly believe in God and His word**

"The holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness", 2 Timothy 3:15-16.

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<sup>13</sup> 2 Corinthians 11:23-28.

Those last four “doing” words describe the job of the pastor teacher. Wisdom comes from the Word and the Holy Spirit. Certificates, diplomas and degrees are worldly recognition, not to be despised but not to be blindly relied on either. I have met godly Spirit-filled men who have Doctorates, Master’s degrees and Diplomas. I have also met worldly men who have the same qualifications. I have met godly, Spirit-filled men who do not have Doctorates, Master’s degrees and Diplomas. And I have also met worldly men who do not have them either.

When selecting a man or a woman for Christian work with its responsibility, the key is not the certificate or piece of paper they possess. It is their evidence (or otherwise) of Christian maturity with spirituality.

Supposing you had a geography lesson at school and you were learning about Australia. Who would you rather have teaching you? Someone who has read a lot of books about Australia or someone who has lived most of his life in Australia, a born Australian? As I read 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy in the Bible I see it is the grasp and application of God’s word in the power of and the presence of the Holy Spirit that makes a man equipped for Christian ministry. That, *and nothing else*.

### **God-approved workers fully carry out their ministry**

Reading good books or magazines will not make anyone “thoroughly equipped for every good work”, 2 Timothy 3:17. The Holy Scripture in the presence and persuasion of the Holy Spirit makes you equipped. They make you ready to do *everything* God calls you to do.

If there is “not enough time” in your life, then either God made a mistake in limiting a day to 24 hours, or you are trying to do something you did not ought to be doing. There is “good” work and there is “bad” work. Things that must be done, and other things. The teaching elder or pastor’s role is described in verse 16, and again in 2:15 as “a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth”. Dare we ask ourselves the question? Are we “approved” or should we be “ashamed”?

In K.I.C. I had a job description – and so did other people. Apart from *encouraging* the youth leaders, the Sunday School teachers, the treasurer, the property stewards, those who gave and administered poverty relief or ministry grants, I used to let them do their own work. And I did my own work. I had almost nothing to do with the young people, the Sunday School, or the money side of the church, unless the people responsible asked me to become involved. That left me free to minister the word of God in the power of the Holy Spirit, from the pulpit to 200 people and across various meal tables one to one or two to two. I thank God for that privilege.

Consider our hands. When they are empty we can use them to do what we want to do. If they are already full and we try to do more, we end up dropping things and we cause damage. To only do what God wants us to do means learning how to say “No”. The person God uses in His service is a person who has learned to say “No” to some things in order to say “Yes” to “every good work”, verse 17. Saying “No” is hard! I recall saying “No” in the same week to ministry in Renk with the P.C.O.S.,<sup>14</sup> speaking at a Spiritual Life conference in Nairobi with S.I.L.,<sup>15</sup> teaching a church conference in Blantyre, Malawi, and taking on more subjects to lecture at Gideon Theological College. My ego wanted to speak at them all. My God had other, and much better, ideas!

We must learn to work for God and not for men. Paul calls the thoroughly equipped person in the ministry a “man of God”, verse 17. Tonight in our beds we should think, “Am I a man (or a woman) of God? Is God saying “Well done” to me?” Then we can ask God what to do tomorrow to make Him even more pleased.

A Christian friend of mine for over 40 years was suddenly taken ill with liver cancer and died. He went into the presence of his Father in heaven while being nursed in the arms of his wife. We played soccer as boys. He served with the London City Mission and as a pastor in Cambridge, England. God called him home, and he went. Would I be ready if God called me today?

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<sup>14</sup> Presbyterian Church of the Sudan.

<sup>15</sup> Summer Institute of Linguistics.

2 Timothy 4 was written and is read anywhere today “In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus”, verse 1. God is everywhere present. He is with you at meal times. He is there when you talk and play with your children. He is with you when you are in bed with your wife or husband. He accompanies your visiting house to house. He kneels with you in your study. He stands by you in your preaching and leading events. It is good to remember that, like your shadow, God is always with you.

Did you know that our shadows make us all equal? They are all black! As children we used to play a game of jumping on other people’s shadows. Our shadows are always with us – only sometimes we do not see them. Like a shadow God is always with us, even if it doesn’t seem like it. Unlike a shadow which changes, lengthening or shortening according to the angle of the sun, God does not change. Right now God knows we are listening to His word explained through this writing, published in Sudan. Christians from different places have made it possible for this to happen. We are the privileged receivers and God knows it. One day He will ask us to tell Him what we have done as a result of this privilege.

### **God-approved workers look forward to eternity**

“In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead”, verse 1. If a man does a good job of work it is right and proper that he looks forward to his payday. He will be pleased to spend what he has earned on food, family, or whatever. For a pastor and a Christian worker the real salary will come the day he stands before the Lord Jesus face to face.

In Sudan I know there are debates over how and what a pastor should be paid. Is it the founding mission’s responsibility? Or the headquarters of the denomination in Sudan? Or the local congregation by themselves? My own experience is of 39 years of Christian ministry, with only 11 having any salary from a church. My wife and I have simply trusted God to provide for our needs through the giving of His people. In Khartoum my congregation paid my house rent and gave me about 40% of what it cost me to live day to day. I paid for my own

travel, healthcare, further education etc. I thanked God for this and I trusted God for the balance needed. I also worked humbly, hard and honourably, so that Christians in the U.K. wanted to support Brenda and me, enabling our ministry.

If I worked for money in this life I would not be a pastor. As a bank manager (the career I was first trained for) I could earn ten times as much. As a teacher (which people said I was a natural at) I could earn six times as much. As a secular writer I could earn three times as much (or even 20 times as much if just one book sold widely). But I served God as a pastor, and now as a writer for Sudan, with an eye on the rewards He will distribute on judgement day. I have to ask myself, have I been a good steward of my Bible College training (which I personally worked for over three years to save up and pay for)? Have I well used the study and prayer moments “full time” ministry provides? It is a longer time than sponsorship of a foreign scholarship! What costs me nothing but costs other people everything is not always good. When God calls me to account, will I be ashamed or approved?

### **God-approved workers carefully listen to the job description**

“In view of (Christ’s) appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge”, 4:1.

A charge is “a person or a thing committed to one’s care”. The word has 34 meanings in English ranging from “a price demanded for an article”, for example the cost of a water melon at the souk; through “to store electricity”, for example charging the battery when the flashlight goes out; to “make a sudden rush or attack upon a person or thing”.<sup>16</sup> To be given charge of something means to be placed in responsibility.

Paul is *not* saying, “Timothy, you need to pay me this money for my advice – this is the fee I charge!” Neither is he saying, “Timothy, you need new batteries to make yourself work better. You are run down so throw the old ones away and replace them with new”. Neither is Paul saying, “Look out, Timothy, I am running so fast at you, I will knock you over!”

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<sup>16</sup> Collins English Dictionary (Glasgow: HarperCollins) 1995.

From various Bible translations and commentaries I looked up I discovered that “charge” in this verse means, Greek *diamartyromai*, “solemnly to testify under oath, referring to the coming judge our Lord Jesus Christ”. It means “I testify earnestly”, “to command by requiring a solemn promise or an oath”. It means “to give a challenging responsibility”.<sup>17</sup>

A biblical example of the word and its meaning is in the parable of the talents, Matthew 25:14 & 19. The Master “entrusted his property” to his servants and later, “settled accounts with them”. Imagine you ask your friend to walk your child along the road to school. You have given them responsibility for your child. You will want to know that they have done what you asked. 2 Timothy 2:14 could read, “Keep reminding reliable men of their awesome responsibilities”.

These are among Paul’s last ever words. He was facing inevitable execution, “the time has come for my departure”, 4:6. The dying man gives his son in the faith the solemn responsibility to do something.

Do we listen to what we are supposed to be doing? What does our Master want? Brenda may ask me to buy from the shop while I am out and bring things home. When I am in the shop I wonder, “What was I supposed to buy? Was it bananas, lemons, yoghurt and bread”? We must not be forgetful Christian leaders. Listen to God. Listen to the denomination. Listen to the congregation. And listen again to God. Do what He says. Know what you are supposed to do and do it. Do not be sidetracked into doing other things. Second best is never as good as the best.

### **God-approved workers let God’s word loose among the people**

“Preach the Word”, 4:2.

The chapter divisions were put into our Bibles in 1560A.D., the work of Robert Estienne, a French printer, for the Geneva Bible. Here they are not very helpful. There is a strong link

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<sup>17</sup> See commentaries on 2 Timothy by John Stott, H.A. Ironside, Thomas Kelly, Donald Guthrie and the Broadman series.

between 3:14-17 and 4:2. "All Scripture is God-breathed" and "Preach the Word". Approved workers preach and teach the biblical message of Jesus.

The primary task of the elder pastor teacher is to plant the seeds of God's word into the hearts of his or her congregation. We are to wash and cleanse our congregations by giving them a bath in God's living water. We must show them by example how to wield the double-edged sword of the Spirit, both in defence and offence.

When I pastored K.I.C. I worked out roughly how to cover the entire Bible in my pulpit ministry, if God granted me 8-10 years there from 1999.<sup>18</sup> In 2001 we were doing the Life of Jesus in Mark's gospel, then Genesis 1-11, followed by 1 & 2 Corinthians. In 2002 we planned the Bible character Joseph, the book of Acts, and meeting all of the Minor Prophets.

Someone may say, "I prefer to be Spirit-led week by week in my preaching". I reply, "I believe I was Spirit-led in working out the plan in advance, and I am open to being led to change anything any week". "Why do you only leave one way for God to lead you? Your way has one opportunity, mine has at least two".

Sadly, many preachers and pastors are not "approved workmen ... who correctly handle the word of truth", 2 Timothy 2:15. Some are lazy. They only scratch the surface of God's word – if they use it at all – speaking their own opinions, denominational dogmas or what will please the influential members of their congregations. God approves only those who plant His seed week by week in the hearts of the people.

A friend of mine was given a cupful of ground nuts. He could have eaten them, but he chose to plant them in the ground. After a while he harvested a sack full of ground nuts. He ate a few, but planted most in the ground. Over a few years he was able to harvest three, five, and ten sacks full of ground nuts. If he had taken the easy option he would have been satisfied for

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<sup>18</sup> God had other plans as I left in 2003 with very poor health. But if I hadn't, this book would not have been published!

a short while. By choosing the hard work option, he is satisfied for life. He is an approved workman.

### **God-approved workers accept all circumstances**

“Be prepared in season and out of season”, 2 Timothy 4:2. Some months are easy while others are tough, but we are not called to an easy work. We are called to work!

Another friend of mine was pastoring a church in London and he had a difficult time. The congregation split amidst rebellion and accusations. (I was too young to know what was going on). The pastor had seen very little fruit in his ministry – although some later “fruit” was me, and several other young people eventually went into Christian work from that congregation. After a while my friend moved to another church as pastor, 200 miles away. This time it was a God-given harvest time. He was the same man, giving the same faithful service. In one time and place he was “out of season”. In the next he was “in season”. In both he served his God.

Verse 5 says, “keep your head in all situations”. Live a balanced life under the self-control of the Holy Spirit. It continues, “endure hardship”. There is no promise of ease or comfort. Timothy had watched Paul suffer. Paul was telling him to expect the same difficult ministry. All the time, “do the work of an evangelist”. Persuade people to trust themselves fully to Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Saviour. “Discharge *all* the duties of your ministry”. Not just the easy ones you like, but all of them!

Problems that are not tackled have a habit of spreading like weeds. Almost every big problem in a church that I have ever come across could have been dealt with earlier, when it was smaller. When you see bindweed in your patch of ground do *not* think, “I’ll take it out tomorrow”. There is huge danger in putting things off. Difficult situations do not normally resolve themselves if left alone. Serve God when you feel like it and serve God when you don’t feel like it! Do God’s work when you do not want to do it, as well as when you do want to do it.

## **God-approved workers live longing for Jesus Christ to return**

Verses 6-8 take us around in a full circle. When the going gets tough in ministry, think of the eternal crown in glory. Paul looked beyond his death to “the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award me on that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing”, verse 8.

That other man may have a car, but will he have a crown? That woman may study abroad and get a high degree, but will Jesus give her a crown? Another family may have a better home, better education and medical care because they are in the city and we are called to serve in the village at the exact centre of nowhere – but we can serve remembering that our Lord Jesus is measuring up a crown to fit snugly on our heads in eternity.

Don't waste your time working for this world's goods. Don't follow worldly patterns for success. Work for heaven's reward. *Follow Jesus Christ*, “Who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising its shame”, Hebrews 12:2. *Follow Paul* who was ready to be “poured out like a drink offering, and the time had come for (his) departure. (He) had fought the good fight, finished the race and kept the faith”, 2 Timothy 4:6-7.

Sudan needs pastors, elders, other church leaders and Christian workers, who are ready, willing and fit for God to use them. What we must discover is, are we ready to be among them?<sup>19</sup>

### **Discussion guide**

*Using this chapter and Scriptures quoted:*

1. “The only worthwhile life is a life useful to God”.

Share what qualities and characteristics you think make a person's life useful to God.

Consider Ezra 7 and Nehemiah 8.

2. Why do some people enter the Christian ministry when they are not called by God?

What can be done to stop this?

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<sup>19</sup> Adapted from three messages on 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy preached at Gideon Theological College, Banat, 30<sup>th</sup> November to 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2000, for a conference where Study Book Sets were distributed to pastors and Christian workers.

Think of how Paul called Timothy to be his helper, Acts 16:1-5; and how he was able to use him, 1 Corinthians 4:17; 1 Corinthians 16:10.

3. Share how the pastor can be a servant, and yet still be a leader.

2 Timothy 2:24; and compare 1 & 2 Timothy 1:1 with Titus 1:1.

4. What is the most important qualification for a pastor? What is his toughest examination?

*Why* are these more important than any academic work?

Note: this does not despise academic work, but does keep it in proper perspective.

5. How does believing that “God does the real work of the church” affect the way a pastor can help his people?

...when he is let down by some of them?

...when he is facing opposition from some of them?

...when he is planning what to do and what not to do?

6. Why is Timothy told to be different from some of the Christian people around him?

See 2 Timothy 2:2; 3:10; 3:14.

Explain how we know who we can emulate (copy) and who we should not.

7. Explain how 2 Timothy 3:12, “Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted”, is a challenge to any Christian to embrace the cross of Jesus.