

Finishing Well with Sound Doctrine

Warren and I shared a common mentor that you know well—Wayne Shaw—whose passion in later years was to finish well. He brought J. Robert Clinton for a seminary lectureship to address the topic after he published his book, *The Making of a Leader*. In his book he shared the results of his study that only 1 in 3 leaders finish well. That is also the lives of one thousand biblical figures where he discovered that fewer than 30% finished well.

The study defined finishing well as "walking with God in a vibrant personal relationship, developing the potential God has given to its appropriate capacity, and leaving behind an ultimate contribution that is both pleasing to God and established by Him."

Wayne Shaw did that. I was privileged to speak at his Celebration of Life service where I observed that he lived with one foot on earth and one foot in heaven and he was ready to step over to the other side at any time. I want to finish well like that.

When I started out in ministry as a youth minister at Ashland Church of Christ 58 years ago, one of the messages that I frequently preached was based on an outline that I borrowed from someone. I didn't know who until years later in a preaching class with Wayne Shaw when I learned it was attributed to G. Campbell Morgan. I preached this message entitled *The Best Book in the Best Place for the Best Purpose* often to myself and shared it at youth gatherings. It was based on the text from Psalm 119:9-11: ⁹ How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word. ¹⁰ I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands. ¹¹ I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you. (Psalm 119:9-11)

I like the visual images of Eugene Peterson's paraphrase: ⁹ How can a young person live a clean life? By carefully reading the map of your Word. ¹⁰ I'm single-minded in pursuit of you; don't let me miss the road signs you've posted. ¹¹ I've banked your promises in the vault of my heart so I won't sin myself bankrupt. (Psalm 119:9-11, *The Message*)

I knew that Psalm 119 is the longest chapter in the Bible—176 verses—but later learned that in this Psalm the psalmist has written 22 stanzas of a song, an acrostic poem, with a stanza for each letter of Hebrew alphabet. Every line in each stanza of 8 verses begins with successive letters of Hebrew alphabet until he has gone from aleph to tau (a to z). Eight statements beginning with *aleph*, eight beginning with *beth*, eight with *gimmel*, until he finished ABC's or *aleph*, *beth*, *gimmels*. What a masterpiece, but in the midst of its poetry, beauty and symmetry, we must not miss psalmist's point.

He loves the Word of God. In addition to the alphabetic arrangement of this Psalm with 8 verses beginning with each successive letter of the alphabet, he uses at least 8 terms for Scripture. In a nutshell here is what he says in 176 different ways--The laws,

decrees, statutes, commandments, ordinances, words, precepts, and promises assist us in our pursuit of God. Notice his perception of the *best book* is an old testament law perspective. To us this book is the best book because it is gospel, good news, the story of God's redemptive love.

If living according to God's Word is the key for a young person to keep his way pure, I would now say years later it is also the key for an older person to finish well. As Paul wrote his last letter to his young son in the faith Timothy, he was determined to finish well—to fight the good fight, to finish the race, to keep the faith and he wants to be sure that Timothy does the same.

Here is what Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3:14-17: ¹⁴ But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, ¹⁵ and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:14-17)

Timothy got off to a good start by learning and becoming convinced of the holy Scriptures from his infancy and from the instruction of Paul and now he is to continue in what he had learned. The reason Paul wrote these words is obvious but often overlooked. He is not arguing for the infallibility or inerrancy of Scripture. He states emphatically that all Scripture is God-breathed, inspired by the Holy Spirit (the Breath of God). That was the claim of Peter when he wrote ²⁰ Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. ²¹ For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. (2 Peter 1:20–21)

Archaeological, geographical, historical and scientific evidence affirms that the Scriptures are reliable—trustworthy and true. They accomplish what they are intended to do. This library of 66 books written by 40 different authors from three continents and in three languages over a span of about 1600 years is a unified story of God's redemptive love in Jesus Christ (as Warren shared last week in his message on the Simple Gospel). I use the same presentation of Christopher Wright's drama of Scripture in six acts as he shared. All of this brings me to this observation from Paul:

1 The Scriptures are able to make us wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

John Stott observed, "The Bible is essentially a handbook of salvation. Its over-arching purpose is to teach not facts of science (e.g. the nature of moon rock) which men can discover by their own empirical investigation, but facts of salvation, which no space exploration can discover but only God can reveal."

Salvation through faith in Jesus Christ is the reason for studying Scriptures. This was illustrated in an encounter that Jesus had with the religious leaders of his day in John 5:39-40: ³⁹ You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, ⁴⁰ yet you refuse to come to me to have life. (John 5:39–40)

To study the Scriptures as an end in itself is like seeing a sign along the road telling you there is a picnic area or a rest area ahead. But rather than driving the short distance farther for the shade and accommodations you pull over and sit in the shade of the sign as if that is the picnic or the rest area. In reality Jesus not the Scriptures is the picnic; He is the rest for our souls. The Scriptures—Old Testament and New Testament—point us to Jesus the source of our salvation. Paul's second observation is:

2 The Scriptures are useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.

Some people conclude that the Scriptures are too hard to understand so they serve no useful purpose. A few years ago I had a conversation with a man I knew from my ministry while I was in Seminary. I recognized Leonard even though we hadn't seen each other in almost 40 years. I had preached in a Christian Church in a small community not far from Lincoln and Leonard attended the large Lutheran Church in the community. He began the conversation by saying "I remember something you said at our church when you gave a message to our Men's Club. Although he was several years older than me, I admitted that I didn't have a clue what I might have said so he proceeded to tell me. "You said that the same Spirit that inspired the writers of Scripture to write Truth lives in us to help us see the truth of what was written and He doesn't contradict Himself." I acknowledged that is one of my settled convictions and he had quoted my correctly. We have within us the presence and power of the Spirit of truth to help us understand and use for God's glory the teachings of Scripture that He inspired.

Paul is concerned about orthodoxy (right beliefs/doctrines) and orthopraxy (right behavior/living). The Scriptures are useful for teaching truth and refuting error.

The word for teaching Paul used here is used 235 times in the Bible, 45 times by Paul and 6 times in 2 Timothy. Earlier in 2 Timothy 1:13 he wrote What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. (2 Timothy 1:13) In a culture where sick teaching and half-truths were common, Paul is concerned that Timothy hold on to sound doctrine and the whole truth. The Scriptures are the basis for sound doctrine.

In 2 Timothy 16-18 he warns Timothy ¹⁶ Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly. ¹⁷ Their teaching will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, ¹⁸ who have wandered away from

the truth. They say that the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some. (2 Timothy 16-18) When faced with false doctrine and the need to confront error the Scriptures are the basis for rebuking false teachers and refuting error.

The Scriptures are useful for correcting and training in righteousness.

In 2 Timothy 4:1-2 Paul wrote: In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: ² Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. (2 Timothy 4:1-2)

There is a place for correcting which is part of the training process. The word for training used here is *paideia* from which our word for child *pedo* comes. He used a different word for training (*gumnazo* from which our word gymnasium comes) in 1 Timothy 4:7-8:

⁷ Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly. ⁸ For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come. (1 Timothy 4:7-8)

Dallas Willard in *The Spirit of the Disciplines*: “There is an immense difference between training to do something and trying to do something.” Richard Foster used the same language to describe what he saw in a vision for spiritual formation—He saw Christians who were “trying rather than training.” (truth—try to run a marathon; try to play piano)

If we hope to overcome error and grow in truth; if we desire to overcome evil and grow in godliness, then we must constantly turn to Scripture since Scripture is useful for these purposes. That brings me to a final observation from Paul

3 The Scriptures are the primary means that God uses to bring us to maturity.

The intended outcome of Scripture is “so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:17) As a man of God Timothy’s calling was to publicly read, preach and teach Scripture and for that task he needed to be thoroughly equipped or “completely complete.” Being equipped as an artisan skilled in Scripture requires diligent study of Scripture. Paul’s reminder to Timothy is that behind the ministry of public teaching and preaching there lies the discipline of private study and spiritual training. The best teachers continue to be students. They teach well because they learn well. So before we can effectively instruct others in the truths of Scripture we must feed on it and digest it ourselves.

So, do you want to finish well? Then heed these words of Paul: 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) Devote yourself to sound doctrine.