

Stay the course: 2 Timothy 3:14—4:5

by [Barbara Sholis](#) in the [October 5, 2004](#) issue

When I first encountered God's calling me to ministry, I thought of Jacob's encounter at the ford of the Jabbok. While wrestling with me and my hesitations, down along the riverbank, God whispered in my ear, "Barb: If you are going to tell a story, tell *my* story." Ever since that day, honoring that stipulation has been part of the privilege and part of the burden in this vocation called ministry. Timothy, pastoring in the first-century church, might have been struggling to arrive at a similar balance. In this second letter from Paul to his protégé, we observe Paul directing the younger pastor to "stay the course." Paul reflects pastor to pastor about the joy, the burden and the responsibility we pastors accept when we step up to ministry and agree to sacred wrestling with God and God's holy word. (I'm calling the mature pastor/author Paul although scholars doubt that Paul wrote this epistle.)

Paul the teacher pens this letter from his prison cell near the end of his pastoral tenure, offering words of encouragement and practical advice on the day-to-day life of a pastor. Finding myself called to this vocation, I appreciate the authenticity of his guidance. Perhaps, like many of us, Timothy found himself knee-deep in the messiness of ministry. Perhaps he was perplexed about how to pastor the church with all its complexities. By this time, Timothy had been engaged in church work long enough to know he needed the support of colleagues. Feeling a tad melancholy, he might have been staring out of his office window, unable to focus on the task at hand. He decided to write a letter to his friend Paul, soliciting his perspective.

We modern-day Timothys also struggle to pastor, to persevere and remain faithful in the midst of today's doctrinal confusions. Finding ourselves buried beneath a workload of administrative tasks, we forego a week of study and settle instead for a few pithy remarks on Sunday. Perhaps Timothy felt like me, weary from having to face yet another night of my family's frowns when I order take-out pizza or pop microwave meals into the oven: a dinner hurriedly consumed before I return to church for another night meeting.

Paul's letter is intended to encourage tenacity in the midst of momentary disillusionment. The wisdom of Paul's instruction, however, is even more pointed for

the pastor of the 21st-century church, and for flocks that may develop “itching ears.” Paul speaks directly to our alarm as we pastors grow dismayed watching the people in our pews squirm. Many of our parishioners admit that they prefer other teachers, teachers they’re collecting for themselves, teachers who back up one’s desire for unambiguous answers. Our flocks wander off as we shepherds stand by bewildered by the books people are choosing to read, the films they are lauding and the values they are embracing in the name of Christ.

Meanwhile, the mail brings slick advertisements for church growth seminars with promised results. The urge to succumb to promotional claims of success increases as we watch the numbers in mainline pews dwindle, while on the outskirts of town the membership of the “Bible-believing” church swells.

Eventually the words of this pastoral epistle come home to roost. I like the way Eugene Peterson interprets this passage in *The Message*:

I can’t impress this on you too strongly. God is looking over your shoulder. Christ himself is the Judge, with the final say on everyone, living and dead. He is about to break into the open with his rule, so proclaim the Message with intensity; keep on your watch. Challenge, warn, and urge your people. Don’t ever quit. Just keep it simple.

You’re going to find that there will be times when people will have no stomach for solid teaching, but will fill up on spiritual junk food—catchy opinions that tickle their fancy. They’ll turn their backs on truths and chase mirages. But keep your eye on what you’re doing; accept the hard times along with the good; keep the Message alive; do a thorough job as God’s servant.

The campaign for the White House is rounding the bend and heading into the station. There is very little about the political discourse in this election that feels like solid ground. It is difficult to discern what is truth and what is mirage. In Ohio, the two parties and their busloads of handlers have crisscrossed the state looking under every leaf and rock for the elusive “undecided” voter. The barrages of political advertisements have taken their toll. As soon as the voice-over begins, “My name is . . . and I approved this message,” I scramble to find the television remote control and click the off button. Soon and very soon, I tell myself, we will see the end!

In denominational climates too, polarized adversaries posture as they embrace the “correct” values. In the midst of such division, pastors must heed Paul’s advice to Timothy: remain steady in the grounding of the holy scripture breathed from God; stand firm in the examples and teachings of those who have gone before, returning to one’s foundation; create the time necessary for study and prayer. God calls us to keep our eyes on solid teaching when others want to fill up on junk. Pastor Paul reminds us, “But as for you, keep it simple, for yourself and for your people. Announce the Word, whether the time is right or wrong. Challenge, warn and urge your people. Accept the hard times with the good. Be a faithful servant and don’t ever quit.” For God never abandons us in this work of ministry.