

A Church where Kids Thrive

2 Timothy 3

Many of you have heard the story of my church experience as a kid. My family moved from Newport, Tennessee to Hattiesburg, Mississippi in 1969 when I was ten years old. My father accepted a pastorate there. Our church was the kind where you could walk forward during the final hymn to express faith in Christ or join the church. One morning in 1971 a young black man from Nigeria walked forward during the final hymn. Sammy had come to Christ in Nigeria through missionaries that our church had helped support. He was studying at the local denominational college that our church supported. He had been worshipping at our church for a few weeks and now he wanted to join the church.

I'll never forget what happened that morning. When somebody wanted to join the church, the person was introduced and then there was the formality of voting him/her into membership. Nobody ever voted "no" - until that Sunday morning. My dad introduced Sammy and said, "All those in favor of accepting Sammy into membership say 'aye/yes.'" There was a strong vote "aye" (which is Old English for yes). Then my dad said, "Those opposed, like sign." That's when an equally loud chorus of "NO!" was raised to heaven.

That simple vote on whether or not a young black man could join our church set in motion a year-long battle for the heart and soul of our church. My dad was quite socially progressive, especially for Mississippi in the 70s. He and others fought hard and eventually won the fight to accept people of color into membership. But I remember being twelve years old and going to "business meetings" where people stood up and yelled at each other and pointed fingers at each other and used racial slurs. I remember the opposition calling a special meeting while our family was on vacation the following summer and tried to get my dad fired.

As you might imagine, church was not a safe place for me as a kid (for a period of time, at least). I didn't grow up thinking, "I want to follow in my dad's footsteps. My 'dream job' is to be a pastor." I was actually one of the most unlikely candidates to become a pastor. The thought never crossed my mind until I was well out of college. In some ways I came to love the local church and the body of Christ ***in spite of*** my experience as a kid, not ***because*** of it.

The sad truth is that such church horror stories are so very common. The details may be different from mine, but I often hear stories about painful, stressful church experiences people had as kids. Many of you could tell such stories. Many of you would say that it's still incredibly hard for you to be part of a church because of your experiences as a kid.

We want something better for the kids that grow up here at Faith. We want our kids to grow up loving the local church and the larger body of Christ. We believe that such an experience is an important foundation for walking with God for a lifetime. Eventually kids grow up and decide for themselves whether or not they will seek God and stay connected to the body of Christ. We can't guarantee that every single kid at Faith will

walk with God for a lifetime, but we have a tremendous amount of influence in their lives while they're kids.

This morning we are taking a break from our study in Romans to discuss the importance of being a church in which kids thrive spiritually. I will talk "big picture" about becoming the type of church that encourages kids to walk with God for a lifetime. Then our children's pastor, Chris Barker, will talk specifically about some opportunities you will have (especially this fall) to work directly with our kids.

We're going to consider **two passages**. The first describes Timothy's spiritual experience as a child; his experience embodied what we're going for here at Faith. The second passage challenges us to have a common commitment to unity - the type of unity that provides a church culture in which kids can thrive.

An Example: Timothy's Childhood Experience (2 Timothy 3). In 2 Timothy 3 Paul is helping Timothy anticipate how difficult and challenging it will be to remain faithful to God and faithful to his calling as a pastor in Ephesus. In verse 13 Paul summarizes his point by saying that "evil men and impostors will proceed from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived." Timothy lived in a world in which some would increasingly live in ways that are opposed to God. By contrast, Paul writes this in verse 14:

14 You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned *them*,

Paul is able to appeal both to ***the spiritual truth*** that Timothy had learned AND to the ***influential people*** from whom he had learned them. Timothy was probably around 40 years old when Paul wrote him this letter. Over the years Timothy had not only "learned" spiritual truth; he had also "become convinced of" certain things. In other words, Timothy had developed rock-solid theological and spiritual convictions.

The influential people in Timothy's life would have included his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice. Paul makes this comment in 2 Timothy 1:5 about these two influential women in Timothy's life:

5 For I am mindful of the sincere faith within you, which first dwelt in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and I am sure that it is in you as well.

The word sincere is literally "without hypocrisy." Timothy's dad was a Gentile (i.e., not Jewish), but his mother and grandmother were Jewish and had an unhypocritical faith. They didn't go to the synagogue just to give their kids a shot of religion; they went because their faith was genuine. As you know, kids can spot hypocrisy a mile away - in parents and in others. Last summer I read Eugene Peterson's memoir. He was raised in a town in rural Montana where pastors only stayed a couple of years. His family spent a lot of time with the various pastors of their church. His perception was that "outside of Sunday morning. . . none [with one exception] seemed particularly interested in God" (*The Pastor*, p. 3). Timothy had the benefit of a mother and grandmother whose faith was without hypocrisy.

As well, Timothy was influenced by Paul and Barnabas (Acts 14), and later by many other sincere believers. Here in 2 Timothy 3:14 Paul reminded Timothy not only of the things he had learned but also of the people from whom he had learned them. Both are vital, especially in the life of a kid.

In verse 15 Paul mentions that the foundation of truth had been laid in Timothy's childhood.

15 and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.

Ever since Timothy was a child he had known "the sacred writings" (which was a way that Greek-speaking Jews commonly referred to the OT - Knight, *NIGCT Pastoral Epistles*, p. 443). Since childhood Timothy had heard about God creating the heavens and the earth, Abraham being called to settle in Canaan, Moses leading the people out of Egypt, kings such as David and Solomon, prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah. Timothy understood the sacrificial system of the old covenant. Paul's conviction was that such Scriptures give you a type of wisdom that prepares you for salvation. That was certainly Timothy's experience. When Paul arrived in Lystra and explained that Jesus' death was the once-and-for-all sacrifice for sin, Timothy believed. The Scriptures had prepared him to experience salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

In verses 16 and 17 Paul makes a very bold, visionary statement about Scripture in order to challenge Timothy to continue to experience its transforming power.

16 All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; 17 so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

The term translated "inspired" means (literally) God-breathed. The imagery suggests that the Scriptures have come from the mouth of God. This is consistent with the imagery of the Scriptures being the "word of God." "All Scripture" referred to the Hebrew bible in Paul's day. Since the New Testament writings now have the same status as "Scripture" (see 2 Peter 3:16), we understand that both the Old and New Testaments are "God breathed."

The truth that "all Scripture is inspired by God" has many implications for how we approach the Bible (e.g., it's true, it's authoritative, it's w/o error in everything it affirms). But the primary thing that Paul emphasizes in this text is that because Scripture is God-breathed, it is "**profitable**" when it comes to transforming our lives. This is what we'd expect from God, isn't it? We wouldn't expect that God would inspire writings that were good but impotent to change our lives. No, we'd expect that whatever proceeds out of the mouth of God is actually profitable in the sense of being "valuable, beneficial, and useful."

Taken as a whole, Scripture is profitable in four broad ways:

- For **teaching**: Scripture instructs us what we need to know about God and about our relationship with Him.
- For **reproof**: Scripture confronts things that need to change in our lives.
- For **correction**: Scripture shows us the correct way to think and act.
- For **training in righteousness**: Scripture isn't merely "pious platitudes"; Scripture can equip us for real-life righteousness.

If we are teachable and humble in receiving the Scriptures, the result is that we will be adequate and equipped for the good works that God is calling us to do.

Timothy had experienced the profitability of the Scriptures. A key reason why Timothy's heart was "good soil" for God's Word was because he had learned the Scriptures as a kid from people who had a "sincere faith." Their lives weren't perfect, but they were without hypocrisy.

That is obviously what we want for the kids who grow up in this church. We not only want kids to grow up knowing the Scriptures; we want them to grow up believing and loving the Scriptures. We want them to experience the profitability of Scripture. For this to happen, they will need to have parents and teachers investing in their lives who have an unhyprocritical faith. By definition, this isn't the type of faith you can fake.

In a few minutes Chris will come and explain some of the various roles that some of you might play in the lives of our kids. But first I want to share one more Scripture that has a huge bearing on the experience our kids have here at Faith.

A Healthy Context: A Church pursuing Unity (*Ephesians 4:1-3*). This passage speaks about the type of unity that should characterize a local church. He describes the ingredients necessary for deep, substantive unity. This type of unity reinforces and enhances the things that happen in KidMin (and Youth Ministry and women's ministry and men's ministry and life groups and worship). Paul writes:

1 Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, 3 being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

To implore is to beg. Paul was begging them to make unity a priority: be diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit. Because of the indwelling Holy Spirit we have unity; our responsibility is to preserve it. The ingredients necessary to preserve the unity of the Spirit are things like humility, gentleness, patience, tolerance, love and peace. Without these qualities in our fellowship, it really won't matter very much how great our children's programming is; our KidMin will be overshadowed by the anxiety and anger that permeates their parents' lives.

That was largely my experience growing up. I really can't tell you whether we had a good children's ministry. The larger dynamics in the church overshadowed everything else. We don't want our kids to grow up and say, "I'm walking with Jesus in spite of the

church my family attended when I was a kid. . .” We want them to say, “When I heard the message and saw the type of people who believed it, I wanted the same thing for myself.”

Numerous people have pointed that ***most people “belong before they believe.”*** That is definitely true for most kids. The church should be a place where they feel safe and loved and wanted. Pursuing unity the way Paul describes it will help help us become and remain that type of place. When you think about it, why would our kids want to believe in our Savior if our relationship with Him doesn’t make us the type of church where they would want to belong?!?!

This doesn’t mean we need to be perfect or sinless. Kids don’t need to see perfection; they need to see redemption. They need to see how imperfect people respond to their own sin and the sin of others. Our humility and gentleness, patience, tolerance, and love are a good gift to them. Our unity confirms to them that the message we preach actually produces the kind of life that they should want. In this way we become the type of church in which kids thrive.