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# The Challenges We Face: A New Generation of Gospel Ministers Looks to the Future

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“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” [2 Timothy 4:7] Writing to Timothy, the Apostle Paul was able to look back on his ministry and declare satisfaction that he had finished his course. Paul would be the first to insist that his entire ministry was evidence of the grace and mercy of God, but he was assured that, by grace, he had finished his race.

Paul’s statement of completion must be the goal of every Gospel minister. Our calling is not complete until we, like Paul, can know that we have finished our course. For most of us, the race still lies before us, and that makes our goal even more urgent.

When asked about my hope for the future of the church, I point immediately to the corps of young ministers now entering and preparing for ministry. One of the great counter-intuitive developments of our times is the rise of a generation of young ministers who are committed to the faith “once for all delivered to the saints,” and who are eager to run the race to Christ’s glory.



What challenges lie ahead? The race this new generation is called to run will include several unavoidable challenges that will demand the highest level of biblical fidelity and theological courage, matched to keen cultural sensitivity and a deep love for human beings caught in the maelstrom of late modernity.

### **The Question of Truth**

Amidst the debris of postmodernism (a movement that has basically run its course) stands a great ambivalence about the nature of truth. The great intellectual transformation of recent decades produced a generation that is not hostile to all claims of truth, but is highly selective about what kinds of truth it is willing to receive.

The current intellectual climate accepts truth as being true in some objective sense only when dealing with claims of truth that come from disciplines like math or science. They accept objective truth when it comes to gravity or physiology, but not when it comes to morality or meaning.

One result of this is that we can often be heard as meaning less than we intend. When we present the gospel, it can easily be heard as a matter of our own personal reality that is, in the end, free from any claim upon others. In other cases, this generation will confront an open denial that any truth can actually be known, except by means of empirical science or similar sources of knowledge.

Beyond this, our truth claims are claims of *revealed* truth. The modern mind is shocked to incredulity when we make clear that we claim knowledge revealed to us in written form by supernatural revelation.

In other words, this generation will face the continual challenge of making clear that the gospel is not merely interesting, not merely meaningful, but *true*.

### **The Gospel and the Church's Mission**

Younger evangelicals are now engaged in a great conversation about the nature of the church's mission in the world. In the main, I see this as a very positive development. But, if we are unwilling to discuss this together, we will see the development of a division within the ranks of younger gospel pastors.

Some of the confusion has to do with language. Some are speaking of the church only in reference to its congregational expression, while others are speaking more generally of faithful Christians.

The church is charged with one central mission – the gospel and the making of disciples from all the nations. But those disciples are to be taught all that Christ commands, and that requires the demonstration of the gospel in acts of justice and righteousness that reveal the presence of Christ’s kingdom.

At least some younger evangelicals indicate the temptation to redefine the church’s mission so that it no longer centers in evangelism and conversion, leading to discipleship and faithfulness. On the other hand, some seem to insist that the gospel lacks clear kingdom implications.

Thankfully, most in this generation are concerned to find faithfulness in all that Christ has commanded. This generation needs to invest deeply in conversation about this challenge, and to avoid simplistic and reductionistic arguments, much less misrepresentations of the arguments in play.

### **The Necessity of Getting the Story Right, Right from the Start**

Some issues arise again and again, leaving no generation untouched. The continuing debates over evolution and Genesis are evidence of this pattern, with a score of generations forced to deal with the question of beginnings.

The current debates among evangelicals have reached a vital point – the intersection of Genesis and the gospel. We must affirm that the gospel requires a clear affirmation of the historicity of Adam and Eve and the historical reality of the Fall. The Bible’s metanarrative of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and New Creation requires the historical reality of God’s work in every movement of the story.

The Apostle Paul makes the historicity of Adam – and his federal headship – central to our understanding of the gospel. Those who insist that evangelicals must accommodate the gospel to the prevailing evolutionary dogma are actually insisting that the gospel be denied. If we get the story of the gospel wrong in the beginning, we will have what Paul condemned as *another gospel* in the end.

### **The Binding Authority of Biblical Sexuality**

Perhaps the most heated issues of our time are connected to the radical transformation of human sexual ethics and behavior that marks the modern age. The accelerated pace of moral transformation in the realm of sexual ethics is unprecedented, with personal autonomy deployed to subvert the received morality.

This presents gospel ministers with an excruciatingly difficult set of challenges. Many people fully accept that they have the sole right to define themselves in terms of gender,

sexual identity, and sexual behavior. Many Americans, caught in the cultural revolutions of our time, hear any refusal to condone their chosen sexual identity or behavior as oppression, intolerance, or hatred.

The church, like the Bible, is not primarily concerned with human sexual behavior. Our main concern is to seek the glory of God in all things, and to bear witness to the saving power of Christ's gospel. But the Bible makes clear that God's glory is inherently connected to our sexual behavior and our identity before the Creator. Furthermore, the gospel requires a clear understanding of human sinfulness, including, very specifically, sexual sins.

One thing is clear – the church has to learn how to speak honestly and courageously about sexual morality, but also to speak with true gospel humility. In other words, we must make clear that we are not moral superiors speaking to moral inferiors, but those who have been redeemed by God's grace pointing others to his grace to us in Christ.

### **The Exclusivity of the Gospel**

In this age, few are offended by the claim that Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. The problem comes when those last words of Jesus are cited: “no one comes to the Father, but by Me.” [John 14:6] The temptation to avoid the offense of the particularity and exclusivity of the gospel is powerful. Given the hatred directed toward any exclusive truth claim – much less *this* exclusive truth claim – many are tempted to embrace some form of universalism or inclusivism.

But the problem is clear – the New Testament excludes any inclusivist or universalistic rendering of the gospel of Christ. We are simply left no option but the full force of Christ's claims. If we are not faithful in defining the gospel, we will avoid offending people at the cost of misleading them – a failure with eternal consequences.

Of course, this generation of gospel ministers will face challenges yet unknown. But, at the same time, it is inconceivable that these current challenges will become less pressing any time soon. The road ahead will require gospel faithfulness at every turn.

That has been true for every generation of gospel ministers. The real question is this: Will this generation finish the race? By God's grace and to his glory, I am confident they will.

