

The Spirit of Doxology in A Pastor's Life

By Irwin J. Habeck

“Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen” (1 Tm 1:17). With this doxology Paul bursts into his charge to Timothy to counteract those who were teaching another doctrine (v 3), to bear in mind the “lawful” use of the law, and to learn from Paul’s own experience how gloriously grace can operate in the case of those who have used the law to expose themselves as sinners. Immediately after the doxology he returns to the matter at hand. But when he was recalling what the Lord had done for him, there was such a surge of admiration and gratitude in his heart, the spirit of doxology was so close to the surface, that he could not contain himself. He had to break forth in a doxology. It was not strictly in the context of his charge to Timothy, but, as Jesus said: “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh” (Mt 12:34). Such a spontaneous doxology occurs again in the sixth chapter of 1 Timothy (vv 16–17), and we find doxologies in some of his other letters as well. We might say that the spirit of doxology was always present in his heart and that it took only a slight impulse to cause it to break forth in words. This spirit of joy and gratitude and enthusiasm within inspired him to labor “more abundantly” than all of the other apostles (1 Cor 15:10) and to be deterred by no opposition, persecution, or pain.

There is danger that we who have been entrusted with the public ministry might not always be buoyed up by a like spirit of doxology. There is the danger of professionalism, doing what our ministry calls for because it is our job. Sunday is coming, so we have to write a sermon. Our members are sick, so we have to visit them. A class will be assembling, so we have to show up and teach them. We shall take care of whatever comes down the assembly line. We have done it before, we know what is expected of us, and we do it. Our performance remains on the horizontal plane, the upward glance is rare. There is little difference between our attitude and that which the farmer shows when milking time has come and he goes to milk his cows. This is not written in a judgmental attitude. Rather, we have tried to supply concrete examples of the professional approach that we might look at ourselves to see whether any of it has insinuated itself into our ministry, whether we have lost something of the spirit of doxology.

Closely related to the spirit of professionalism and perhaps even more common is the spirit of frustration and self-pity. We get up in the morning after an uneasy night’s sleep, think of all that we have to do today, and are tired out before we have set our hand to any task. Ahead of us we have classes to teach, calls to make, meetings to attend, sermon preparation to undertake. Our schedule haunts us. There are duties to perform, and we can’t find a time slot in which to perform them all. We come to the end of the day and reproach ourselves because this mission call, this discipline call were not made, this letter which should have been answered yesterday still has not been answered. We feel harassed no matter in which direction we may look. How can there be a spirit of doxology?

How did Paul get that way that the spirit of doxology was always in his heart and needed only the slightest provocation to have it become verbal? Basic was that of which he speaks in verse 15: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief.” Paul was not one to blame his sins on heredity or environment. He accepted full responsibility for them. “(I) was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious” (v 13). He called himself “the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God” (1 Cor 15:9). He put himself down lower “than the least of all saints” (Eph 3:8). But then he looked up to Jesus. He came into the world to save even him. He left His “radiant throne on high” to take “upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men.” “He humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross” (Php 2:7–8). He endured the agony of the cross. He experienced the horror of being forsaken by His God. And all this to save even Paul. He wiped out the dark stain of every one of his sins and the blemish of the sinfulness of his nature. He removed the curse of condemnation which the law of a just God had pronounced upon Paul and opened heaven for him. How amazing such grace was. Because the wonder of it all gripped his heart, it was upswept with the spirit of doxology. This spirit never paled. It was there when as a comparatively young man he wrote to the Galatians:

“(He) loved me, and gave himself for me” (2:20). And it is there still when he near the close of his career as “Paul the aged” (Phm 9) penned the words of the doxology with which we have prefaced this presentation.

If we want to capture the spirit of doxology, we shall follow his lead and go back to the basics of our faith. Paul did not let them become “old hat” for him nor do we want to let them become “old hat” for us. After all, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is even more overwhelmingly great today than it was yesterday. For since yesterday we have added new sins to the record which was far too long even yesterday. We do not want to let the confession that we are sinners become a mere formula which can be repeated thoughtlessly. We want to be specific. What were my most recent sins? What thoughts and desires arose in the secret recesses of my heart? These sins too deserved the wrath and punishment of God. They make the guilt which we confess when we say, “I am a sinner,” all the more severe. But it is still true: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” He saved even me. Oh, what love! Oh, what a treasure of blessings is ours! Thus we are caught up in the spirit of doxology.

There was something more that kept the spirit of doxology strong in Paul’s heart. Had he been assigned to a place behind all of the rest whom Jesus had saved because the grace of Jesus had to be extended to its utmost limits to take care of saving a sinner as great as Paul, he would still have had cause to be filled with the spirit of doxology. But the Lord had taken him and even entrusted him with the “ministry” (v 12). The Lord had a new and important work to perform. The time had come to put into action His eternal plan to bring the Gentiles into His church. And whom did He pick to put this plan into effect? Paul! Who would ever have imagined that the Lord would take a man with Paul’s record and not only save him but even make him an apostle? Paul could never think of having been entrusted with this great privilege without being upswept by the spirit of doxology.

Our form of the public ministry may not be as historic as was Paul’s. But when we think of how much grace had to abound to save us from our abounding sins, is it not astounding that the Lord went even further in our case and entrusted us with the ministry? Here are those whom Jesus calls His lambs, His sheep. They are so dear to Him that He was willing to die for them. He bought them with His own blood. And here are we. If a checklist were placed before us of all of the sins which are forbidden by God’s law, it is frightening to think of behind how many we would have to place a check in admitting that we were guilty of that sin too. And yet the Lord not only saved us from them all, but in spite of them even entrusted us with the ministry, with some form of caring for His flock. If there is anything of which it could ever have been said that it is unbelievable but true, this is it. When we thus exult in the grace which has entrusted us with the ministry, we are filled with the spirit of doxology.

When that spirit fills our hearts, we shall be uplifted beyond the merely professional attitude in our ministry. When we write a sermon, we are not just tackling a job that needs to be done. We are doing something for our Lord, for Him who came into the world to save us at the cost of His own life. For Him we want to do our very best. Not only has He saved us, but He is even permitting us to serve as His heralds, His ambassadors. What an incentive for us to do our best and to do it eagerly. So it will be with every phase of our ministry. We shall not only see the task which we are performing, but shall pause before we undertake it to recall who we are and whom we are serving. Then what we do will not be just a routine performance, but a service rendered in the spirit of thanksgiving, a spiritual sacrifice offered to our Lord.

The crowded schedule will still be there, but its weight will be far lighter. The eye sees more than the tasks, it sees Him who assigned them and marvels because He has assigned them to the one to whom He has chosen to assign them. The schedule becomes not a mere listing of jobs that need to be done. Rather, it opens the eyes to see how for that one day alone the Lord is setting many opportunities for doing good works before one who would be capable of doing not even a single good work ever unless the Lord had made him what he is, “his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them” (Eph 2:10). If we look at our schedule in that light, how inappropriate it would be to complain that the Lord has swamped us with opportunities for doing good works. The spirit of doxology will move us to welcome them and in retrospect to include them also with all that in future contemplation rekindles the spirit of doxology.

If we ever catch ourselves beginning to look upon our work as a drab routine or feeling sorry for ourselves because so much work is expected of us, the antidote is to take time for quiet reflection upon the grace that saved us and the added grace which made us ministers, until the spirit of doxology stirs within our hearts. Yes, so necessary is this spirit for continuing joy and enthusiasm that we would be wise to reserve a place in each day's schedule for some moments of meditation, even if we have to rise earlier to find them. For this is a blessing of which we do not want to deprive ourselves: the spirit of doxology in a pastor's life.