

Passing the Baton: the Key to a Successful Relay Race

By Bob Young

Across the centuries, God has entrusted to his church the mission of taking the gospel to the world. God gives the 21st century church the same commission and mission. We are called to run the race faithfully, realizing that we are only a small part of God's relay team. Successful relay team runners know three things—how to receive the baton from the previous runners, how to run well, and how to pass the baton to the next runners.

Paul's second letter to Timothy contains instructions that reflect Paul's intense desire to pass the baton of faithful mission and ministry to his son in the faith. Three things are in view: getting the baton, running the race, passing the baton. As he approaches the end of his life, Paul is thinking about how the mission can continue. This article lists ten key "relay" principles from 2 Timothy. One could call these the "Ten Commandments for a Successful Relay Race." The church must get this right!

Use the blessings and gifts God gives you (1:4-6)

Among the things Paul mentions in the text are the love and concern of our spiritual parents in the faith, the prayers of others, a heritage of faith, and gifts that others have helped us receive and develop. Among our gifts are the opportunities God gives us for involvement in his work and to share the good news. It is the responsibility of each Christian to develop the gifts, skills, and abilities God gives. We have been brought into the relay through the efforts and encouragement of others; let us think about how and to whom we can pass on the same blessing.

Live according to the spirit that God gives you (1:7)

God gives a spirit that overcomes fear through power, love and self-control. The Christian who lives above fear, guided by the presence of God's spirit, is able to bless those he or she touches and shares faith both by example and in word. Successful relay running is all but impossible for one who constantly thinks about what could go wrong rather than focusing on the great potential that lies before us in God.

Do not be ashamed (1:8-12)

Some are ashamed of the message; some are ashamed of their relationship with others who are not considered important or valuable by the world. Fear of suffering keeps us from passing on the message of the gospel. God's power is sufficient to overcome our shame. Faith that leads to total confidence in God is an antidote to shame. The message is never successfully relayed by fearful, ashamed persons.

Retain, teach and carefully guard through the Spirit the healthy words of the gospel (1:13-18)

While this is the responsibility of Timothy in this context, every Christian should live by God's holy, healthy words, developing faith and love, rejoicing the presence of the Holy Spirit, and defending and protecting the precious message that has been entrusted to us. This is especially

important because some will depart from the truth. Let us help one another be true to this commitment. The relay demands that we help others who are part of the race.

Recognize the multi-generational nature of faith (2:1-19)

Paul urges Timothy to be strong and to share the message with faithful servants who can share with others, and thus the relay continues. This commitment requires hard work, training, and endurance. Above all it requires remembering God's faithfulness. Handling God's word correctly passes on the message accurately and carefully avoids wrangling about words and irreverent word overflow. God's word is firm.

Be a servant who focuses on the needs of others (2:20-25)

Being a servant requires preparation, it also requires perspective. It is the pursuit of God's things and the avoidance of worldly quarrels and controversies. Above all, it is the love of those who oppose us, seeking their well-being even above our own. The sacrificial heart seeks to help others. Such a spirit is contagious and encourages others. This is an important step in a successful relay.

Expect difficult days (3:1-9)

The gospel does not advance unopposed. The enemies are numerous, and even those who have begun the Christian walk have numerous temptations. Purity is not easy. The message is easily contaminated. The ultimate test is not in appearing to be righteous or pious; the ultimate test is in demonstrating the power of godliness in our own lives and actions. Those who successfully handle life's challenges also provide an example for those who come after us in the relay.

Follow the example of others who are grounded in God's word (3:10-17)

Paul calls on Timothy to follow his example, and to remember the word that guides and equips for the relay. God has provided all that is necessary.

Be diligent to fulfill the ministry God gives you, always sharing the message (4:1-5)

One can hardly miss that the relay continues because the message is shared. A relay runner can do lots of good, even essential, things, but it finally comes down to the race. The race is won when as many as possible cross the finish line. All of the good accomplishments along the way do not matter at all if the race is not won.

Keep your eyes on the final goal (4:7-8)

Paul's final instructions for the relay can be summarized in this phrase: keep your eyes on the goal.