

Mentoring—the Incarnate Lesson

By Carrie Cavanaugh

God gave us His word as His revelation of Himself to us. That the God of the universe would make Himself known to His creation is an amazing act of grace. More than a mere letter, when we read God’s Word, through the power of the Holy Spirit, we are actually communing with God Himself. It is for us as real a relationship as it was for the disciples sitting next to Jesus at the last supper. This incarnational aspect of God’s relationship with us is a distinctive of the Christian faith. And it is a model for Christians in their relationships within the body of Christ.

We have many fancy models within the church and the work world for spiritual and professional development, but the organic relationship between an “older” believer and a “younger” believer is one that is tried and true.

In the Old Testament we see the example of Elijah and Elisha. Although we often think of a mentoring relationship as one focused on preparing new leadership, the account of Elijah and Elisha emerges out of the loneliness of ministry on one’s own. Elijah has been faithful to

God even though it made him many enemies. Things were so dire, and he felt so alone, that he despaired of his life (1 Kings 19:4). He cried out to God, “I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The

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Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too” (1 Kings 19:10). What was God’s response? In part it was, Elisha, a successor who would be his helper during the remainder of his ministry (1 Kings 19:16).

Elisha was eager to follow Elijah and he entered whole-heartedly

into the work as indicated by his once and for all disposing of his ox and plowing equipment, the tools of his former work (1 Kings 19:21). We hear little of their time together, but clearly Elijah not only allowed Elisha to come along side him, but they grew to genuinely care about each other as indicated in Elisha’s reluctance to leave his teacher (2 Kings 2:2). When pressed to bid his farewell, Elisha begs for a “double portion of your spirit” (2 Kings 2:9) showing the esteem in which he held his mentor.

Upon Elijah’s departure to heaven, Elisha picks up right where Elijah left off as a prophet to the people of God (2 Kings 2:19). So similar is their ministry that it’s hard to distinguish one from the other.

The New testament depicts a similar relationship between Paul and Timothy. Their relationship was one so close that Paul described him as, “my son whom I love” (1 Corinthians 4:17).

Part of the mentoring relationship between Paul and Timothy included Paul looking out for Timothy’s well-being. He asks the Corinthians, “see to it that he has nothing to fear while he is

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with you” (1 Corinthians 16:20). He also equips Timothy with everything he needs in order to do the ministry God is calling him (such as 1 Timothy 1:18). Paul’s desire is that nothing would impede Timothy’s ministry, not even his age - “Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity” (1 Timothy 4:12).

Paul’s careful grooming of Timothy for ministry paid off - Paul tell the Philippians, “you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel” (Philippians 2:22).

Finally, as much as Paul cared for Timothy, he didn’t selfishly keep him to himself. Instead, he sends Timothy out to carry on the work where it is needed (Acts 19:22).

In 1 Corinthians 11:1 Paul tells the Corinthians to follow him as he follows Christ. He was thus an incarnation of what he was teaching to those believers. Similarly, Elijah was an incarnation of the call to be a prophet for Elisha. And in Paul Timothy had a living, relational

preparation for his ministry. As we look at how God relates to us, we can see how we are to let those who are “younger” be a part of what we are doing and genuinely care for them, and thus they will be prepared to carry on the work of the Kingdom.

Are you purposefully mentoring someone? If not, prayerfully choose someone to take under your wing. Likewise, if you don’t have one or two people who serve as your mentors, don’t be bashful in seeking someone out. What a compliment it would be to them and what a boon to you! In our individualistic western world, it takes a lot of work to make time for these relationships, but God gave us this model as a blessing.