

**THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD**  
Arlington Presbyterian Church (PCA)

***Stealth Christianity***  
2 Timothy 1:8 (578)  
September 9, 2001

There he stood on the side of the highway. A thin man, salt 'n pepper hair slicked back, dressed in a brown, what-appeared-to be, double-knit suit with a wide, cheap-lookin' tie. Probably the first cousin of some East Tennessee Pentecostal snake-handler, with Bible in hand, he was preaching his heart out. Unfortunately, his intended audience, zooming past him at 55 miles per hour with windows up and air-conditioners on, never heard a word he said.

In 1999 Julia and I spent the month of July at Ridge Haven, the PCA conference center in western North Carolina. Ridge Haven is southwest of Rosman, which is southwest of Brevard, which is southwest of Asheville. On several occasions, upon entering Brevard on Highway 64, we passed by the street preacher. The first time I saw him, I have to admit a few unwelcomed thoughts flashed across my mind. I'm a theologically astute Presbyterian. That guy's probably a ranting, raving holy-roller. Unbelievers laugh at Christians because of fanatics like him. In the not too distant past both the man and his activity would have been a source of lingering embarrassment for me. But not this time.

You see, during July of 1999 God was dealing with me about my own testimony before the world. He was planting seeds that would sprout and grow into the EE ministry which is now in place in our own church. Externally my response to this man was unremarkable. I never stopped to meet him and inquire into the gospel he was preaching. One Sunday after church we saw the man and his family at Wendy's but, even in the face of Julia's urging, I failed to go up and introduce myself, to thank him, to fellowship with him for a minute, and to encourage him in the work. I am shamed at that failure even today. Even so, something was different this time. I **did** identify with him. I sensed a real connection with this

brother and with the work in which he was engaged. I never heard a word he said but his mere presence out there beside the highway challenged me. I took courage as I saw him standing there bearing that solitary witness. His speech was a rebuke to my silence. His upheld Bible ... a rebuke to my own lack of confidence in the Word of God.

I thought of this experience when I read our text for the morning – **II Timothy 1:8**. ***Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, or of me His prisoner; but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God.*** Verse 8 is composed of two clearly discernable clauses. The first is a prohibition – *do not be ashamed*. The second is a positive instruction – *join with me in suffering*. These two describe a man's **observable** relationship to the gospel. You are either *embarrassed by* the gospel or you are *engaged in* the gospel. The Bible opens up no middle ground on which to stand. My sermon has two parts corresponding to the two clauses which make up this verse.

What does it mean to *be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord*? This *testimony* is, of course, the gospel. The essential features of the gospel which Paul preached are these : *Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures ... He was buried ... and He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures (I Cor. 15:3-4)*. The message of the Bible is that **God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe (I Cor. 1:21)**. But not all see it or receive it as such. **I Corinthians 2:14**, *But the natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them*. Now we know that a man in his natural, unrepentant condition is a slave to sin (**Rom. 6:17**), is unable to submit to God's law (**Rom. 8:7**), and is dead in sin (**Eph. 2:1**). Every faculty is touched by sin – his will (**John 5:40**), his understanding, his heart (**Eph. 4:18**), his mind, and his conscience (**Titus 1:15-16**). The gospel is designed by God to have a calculated, devastating impact upon the heart and mind of the natural man. The gospel is offensive in that it is intended to humble the pride of man. The gospel

strips him of his ground for boasting. *For by grace you have been saved through faith ... not as a result of works, that no one should boast (Eph. 2:8-9). For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace ... Where then is boasting? It is excluded (Rom. 3:23-24, 27).* The gospel shatters any idea that man is good. *THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE ... THERE IS NONE WHO DOES GOOD (Rom. 3:10, 12). Isaiah 64:6,* could not be more graphic, *And all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment.* MacArthur says, “The gospel exposes man’s sin, wickedness, depravity, and lostness, and it declares pride to be despicable and works righteousness to be worthless in God’s sight” (*Romans*, p.50). Consequently, the gospel is generally hated and despised among men. It is an unattractive, intimidating, and repulsive message. In brief, the gospel awakens all the enmity (hatred and ill-will) of the carnal mind. We are loathe to be associated with anyone or anything which elicits that sort of response from other people. We feel shame because the gospel is a source of humiliating disgrace, censure, and reproach.

In Paul’s mind shame for the gospel manifests itself in two primary ways. Phillip Towner explains them like this : “The temptation Timothy faces is to take the course of least resistance, which means in the face of opposition to **keep quiet** about the gospel ... [In addition] failure to **identify fully** with the crucified One and the message about Him was to be ashamed of Him ... Failure to identify openly with Paul, who suffered imprisonment in Rome for his faithfulness to the message about Christ, also amounted to shame for the gospel” (p.162). So, these two things – **silence** and **distance** – are the signatures of stealth Christianity.

Stealth technology is a fascinating thing. A radar antenna sends out a burst of radio energy which is then reflected back by any object it happens to encounter. The metal body of an airplane is very good at reflecting radar signals, and this makes it easy to find and track airplanes with radar equipment. The goal of stealth technology is to make an airplane **invisible** to radar. Most conventional

aircraft have a rounded shape. This shape makes them aerodynamic, but it also creates a very efficient radar reflector. The round shape means that, no matter where the radar signal hits the plane, some of the signal gets reflected back.

A stealth aircraft, on the other hand, is made up of completely flat surfaces and very sharp edges. When a radar signal hits a stealth plane, the signal reflects away at an angle. In addition, surfaces on a stealth aircraft can be treated so they absorb radar energy as well. The overall result is that a stealth aircraft can have the radar signature of a small bird rather than an airplane. A stealth Christian is one who consciously avoids **detection**.

Did you know there are stealth followers mentioned in the Bible? Of the multitude it is said in **John 7:13**, *no one was **speaking** openly of Him for fear of the Jews*. In Mark's account of the arrest of Jesus, he notes, [the disciples] *all left Him and fled (14:50)*. Peter is the classic example of a stealth disciple. **Luke 22:54-57**, *And having arrested [Jesus], they led Him away, and brought Him to the house of the high priest; but Peter was following at a **distance**. And after they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and had sat down together, Peter was sitting among them. And a certain servant-girl, seeing him as he sat in the firelight, and looking intently at him, said, "This man was with Him too." But he denied it, saying, "Woman, I do not know Him."* **John 19:38** mentions Joseph of Arimathea as *being a disciple of Jesus, but a secret one, for fear of the Jews*. In **II Timothy** it seems that distancing themselves from Paul had reached epidemic proportions among his associates. Even here in **II Timothy 1:15**, Paul reminded Timothy, *You are aware of the fact that all who are in Asia turned away from me, and then in 4:16, at my first defense no one supported me, but all deserted me.*

These Biblical examples confirm the two signatures of stealth Christianity – silence and distance. In the first, the believer remains **mute** when he has an opportunity to speak for Christ. In the second, the believer maintains a safe

**distance** between himself and those persons or situations which might force him to account for his faith or pay some price for it. This is what we are not to do. What we are to do is to ***join ... in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God.***

Jesus Himself taught that those who have embraced the gospel, who live out the gospel unequivocally (leaving no doubt) in the world, and who seek to communicate the gospel to lost men are the targets of the enmity of the carnal mind. Jesus said in **John 15:20** ... *“Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A slave is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you.”* Indeed, Paul reminded the Philippians, *to you it has been granted for Christ’s sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake (Phil. 1:29)*. Beloved, the fortunes of those who embrace and follow Christ will be the same as those of Christ Himself. The *hostility* which Christ *endured by sinners against Himself (Heb. 12:3)*, His followers will, to varying degrees, likewise experience. These are not theoretical possibilities. These are not imagined dangers with no basis in reality. They have occurred throughout church history and continue even today. And here’s the point. The Spirit of God is saying that this suffering is to be **borne**; it is to be **endured according to the power of God**. But He is saying more than that. This suffering is to be **accepted**. It is to be **welcomed**. It is a path to be deliberately **chosen**.

Now, I do not lay awake at night fearing that the Gestapo will arrive, break down my front door, and haul me and my family off to some concentration camp. There are Christians in the world today who must face such things. Many are experiencing terrible suffering. But what kind of difficulty might we, in this church, in this city, in this time legitimately expect? I think you may expect a measure of **isolation** from co-workers and family members. You may be treated like you have an infectious disease. This isolation may deteriorate to the point of **estrangement**. Some will experience the sting of **verbal criticism and ridicule**. Some will know the simple shame of **rejection** when a friend or acquaintance

just says, “No, I don’t want to hear about your faith or your Jesus.” Maybe you will just be **dismissed** as a useless relic.

What kind of activity will bring this on? The antagonism of unregenerate men is aroused as we deliberately seek to **advance** the gospel (**1:11-12a; 2:2-3a, 8-9, 25-26; 3:10-12; 4:2, 5, 15, 17**). We pose absolutely no threat otherwise. When an element of **militancy** (aggressive action) is introduced into your Christian life everything changes. Something will happen when you, in obedience to the Master, seek to advance the gospel by sharing your faith with others (**Rom. 1:18; II Tim. 4:14-15**); pursuing a distinctly counter-culture lifestyle (**Matt. 5:10**); rejecting the values embraced by an unregenerate culture; loving others sacrificially (**Heb. 10:34a**); dealing with your sin and the sin of others as if it was a bad thing (**John 7:7**); pursuing and insisting upon sound doctrine (**II Tim. 4:3**). This is what it means to suffer **on account of the gospel**. You will either be ashamed of the gospel or you will engage in the advance of the gospel. No middle ground. Death, loss, suffering, rejection, criticism, sacrifice, witnessing. I’m not sure I signed on for **that** kind of Christian life. Well, the easiest way to miss it is to shift into and live in a spiritual stealth mode. The alternative is full identification with the gospel and with those who are seeking to advance it.

One last question. Why did Paul write this to Timothy personally? I want you to engage in some personal reflection as we consider this question. Based upon the Biblical record, Timothy must have been an extraordinary individual both in terms of his character as a person and his competence as a pastor. An occasional stealth approach to your work and witness doesn’t mean you aren’t saved or aren’t being used by God. But this doesn’t mean that Timothy necessarily possessed the courage of a “Braveheart.” We know that Timothy, by reason of internal constitution and external circumstances tended to the timid end of the spiritual boldness spectrum. Based upon my own pastoral experience I tried to speculate as to what this might look like in Timothy’s case. He may have been a true introvert – delighting in and energized by solitude. He may have

possessed a genuine distaste for conflict and disharmony. He may have been hesitant to confront individuals and been less than aggressive in holding them accountable. He may have been a sensitive sort who did not handle negative criticism well. Difficult pastoral situations probably kept him awake at night and caused his stomach to churn. His may have been the tendency to wilt in the heat of opposition to his message, manner, and ministry. In short, there was probably a certain reserve and lack of confidence which was just part of who Timothy was as a person and a minister. Paul probably detected a certain lack of confidence in the power of the gospel possibly manifested in Timothy's preaching and in his personal evangelism. He may have been reserved when it came to taking risks.

Paul was Timothy's spiritual father ... his mentor. Like a good coach, Paul knew well Timothy's skills, strengths, weaknesses. He knew well the personality and tendencies of his protégé. Timothy would have to summons a measure of resolve which did not come naturally and which pushed him out of his comfort zone. Paul knew that in order to meet the challenges of the ministry Timothy would have to look outside of himself for strength and courage. Indeed, he would have to depend upon the resources of God the Holy Spirit. So what he tells Timothy and what he is telling you this morning is found in **II Timothy 1:7**, *For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline.* Christian assume the responsibilities. Perform the duties. Do what you have been called to do in the power of the Holy Spirit. ***Do not be ashamed of the gospel but suffer for the gospel according to the power of God.***