

Passing the Baton

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I have tried in some small way to serve in God's kingdom for over 50 years. The years I have left in ministry are fewer than the years I have already spent. I know the challenge of decreasing energy and increasing challenges. I found an article by Frank Viola convicting. I have edited and expanded it here, using my own perspective, illustrations and experiences.

Too many older servants of God fail to pass the baton before they die. At the same time, many younger people are not reaching out to those who are older in order to receive the baton. As a result, our human involvement in God's work too often has to be rethought and reinvented in each generation.

In 2006, I was asked to present a class on 2 Timothy with a focus on passing the baton. A reality of life is that our time here is temporary. Twenty years ago, I wrote an article, "Where Have All the Heroes Gone?" Ten years ago, my article "Cloud of Witnesses" reminisced about my own cloud of witnesses who were my examples and from whom I received encouragement and the baton. Passing the baton paints a picture of a relay race. Passing the torch is a similar metaphor from ancient Greek races where one runner passed a lighted torch to another runner.

As I have gotten older, I have given more thought to the idea of passing the torch of the Lord's work to the next generations. Over the last five years, several of God's great servants have passed on. Some of them never passed their torch to someone younger. This is a great tragedy.

Frank Viola illustrates this point with this story: "I was having lunch with a friend who told me about a dream a Christian had before he passed away. The Christian saw an Olympic runner lying in a coffin with his hands clutched to a baton. His fists were holding the baton so tightly that it was no small task to pry it from his hands." The point of the dream was that many of the Lord's servants refuse to pass the torch to the younger generation.

In my work in the university, we often commented that each person is responsible for developing his or her own successor. Some of God's most effective servants will pass on in the next few years. The question for each person is the same: are you passing the baton to another ready servant or will the work die in your hands?

When a servant of God refuses to pass the torch, it is often due to one of three reasons.

- * Arrogance. The servant thinks too highly of himself. This inflated view blinds him from recognizing and honoring the Lord's calling, gifts, and work in others. Some want, but never find, one is "worthy" enough.
- * Jealousy. The servant is not willing to share the glory with others. When others demonstrate signs of God's gifts and favor, instead of cheering them on, he sees only competitors.
- * Ignorance. The idea of passing on the knowledge and experience of one's ministry to someone younger never comes to mind. Sadly, many good ministries die for lack of passing the baton.

Servants of God who have their egos leveled at the cross are able to deal with these dynamics and are eager to pass the torch on.

Sometimes a servant of God who is unwilling to pass the torch will have it taken by another person whom God desires to use to his glory. Ideally, we who are older willingly pass the torch to our younger companions in ministry. Sometimes, a younger person will grab the torch and continue running. Either case is better for the advance of the kingdom than allowing the torch to go out.

Two challenges—

To me and many others: When God gives you a torch to carry, decide immediately that you will not let personal weaknesses and bad attitudes keep you from passing it to someone else. The torches we carry are not ours—they are gifts from God.

To younger servants of God: be intentional about reaching out to older workers, so when the time comes for them to pass the torch, you will come to their mind.