

Editorial: Mentors in the Faith

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We all need models and mentors in the faith. The Christian life may seem abstract and disconnected from reality unless we see others living it out in practical and concrete ways. I have never met a believer who loves Christ passionately who has not been shaped and influenced by at least one other believer. If we have grown as Christians, we can likely point to others who lived out the Christian life in such a way that we were inspired to live in a way that pleases Christ.

We will imitate those whom we admire and respect. We naturally want to be like those we look up to. Paul reminds us in Philippians 3:17-18 that it is crucial that we admire and imitate the right people. "Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ" (ESV). We must imitate the right people because enemies of the cross entice us to imitate them.

I have seen students at a college who came to respect and admire a particular professor. The professor was intellectually gifted, witty, and humorous. He had a confidence that was catching. There was a brashness and boldness in his teaching that seemed exciting and novel for students. He debunked the religious and moral norms of parents with such confidence, basing it on his intellectual work.

Choosing the right mentors and models is crucial because most who vie for our attention are not good examples. Many sport stars are not good examples because their heads have been turned by their fame.

Many musicians are not good examples because they do not live in harmony with the gospel. Many actors and actresses are not good examples because they live immoral lives.

Paul reminds us in Philippians 3 that even those who live moral and respectable lives may also function as bad examples. They may be enemies of Christ's cross, working to establish their own righteousness before God instead of trusting in God for their righteousness. The best mentors, in other words, are those who are keenly conscious of their sins, who point us to Christ rather than to themselves. They call upon us to imitate them only insofar as they imitate Christ (1 Cor 11:1).

In this issue of the journal we call to mind those of former days whose lives testified the gospel. Thanks to the work of historians we need not limit ourselves to mentors of the present day. We can stretch back into the past and see how God worked in the lives of those who lived in another place and in another time. We recognize that in the history of the church a great cloud of witnesses has preceded us. We can learn from the controversies and struggles that they faced in their days. We often discover that the doctrinal controversy that seems new to us is not so new after all.

What a help it is to read the stories of Christians who preceded us. Christian biographies reveal to us the strengths and weaknesses of great men and women of God from former times. As we read our hands are strengthened in our conflict against principalities and powers. We see that God worked through earthen vessels of previous days, and receive fresh confi-

dence that he can also use us.

It is my hope and prayer that this issue of the journal will strengthen readers in the faith. Timothy Beougher recounts the pastoral leadership of Richard Baxter, a man who had a passion for the lost and deep pastoral love for his flock. Like Newton, Baxter loved the truth of theology and was committed to living it out in his daily life. John Piper sketches in the story of John Newton, reminding us afresh that God can save the worst of sinners. We are challenged by the tenderness and love of Newton, and recognize at the same time that he was a man rooted in the theology of the scriptures.

Mark Terry relays the influence of Luther Rice in Baptist life. Rice was a man willing to be taught by the scriptures. He was humble enough to change his mind on baptism and became a Baptist. His plan to become a missionary did not materialize, but the Lord used him to energize Baptists in the United States to support missions and education. When we think of Baptists of more recent days, the name of Herschel Hobbs is prominent. David Dockery demonstrates the remarkable influence that Hobbs had on Southern Baptists in the twentieth century. As Dockery says, he was a “preacher, teacher, author, denominational statesman, and pastor-theologian.”

Of course, some leaders are dangerous. Thomas Nettles warns us about this danger in his essay on the life of John Clifford. Clifford was a nice person but doctrinally deviant. We have seen the legacy of such persons in mainline denominations, and in The Southern Baptist Convention as well. Finally, Donald Carson reminds us that doctrinal vigilance is still needed today. The theology of Stanley Grenz attracts many today, but Carson uncovers some

severe weaknesses in Grenz’s proposal for doing theology. Carson’s work reminds us that we study those who go before us so that we will be prepared to tackle the issues that press upon us in our own day.