

Weekly Encouragement

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Scary People

By Rev. Peter Eng

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"God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control," Paul urges Timothy ([2 Tim 1:7](#)) ESV

I wonder what give cause for fear or timidity in Timothy's ministry. Nero's increasing hostility against Christians would be one reason for fear. This is seen in Paul's reminder to Timothy *"not to be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in the suffering for the gospel by the power of God"* ([2 Tim 1:8](#)).

There is also something about Timothy as a person that would benefit from Paul's encouragement. Paul reminds Timothy *"to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power"* ([2 Tim 1:6-7](#)).

Timothy has potential that is not fully realized. Paul asks him to fan it to flame.

The path from potential to realization of great power is obstructed by fear. It is likely that Paul's encouragement to Timothy is occasioned by Timothy's own fear even more than by what persecution might bring.

This is not the first time Paul is urging Timothy to realize his potential. In an earlier letter, Paul says, *"Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young"* and he adds the same exhortation, *"Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message and when the body of elders laid their hands on you"* ([1 Tim 4:12-14](#)).

The first time Paul asks Timothy to realize his potential, he says "Don't let anyone look down on you." The second time, he says, "God has not given us a spirit of fear but of power." This suggests to us that something is keeping Timothy from realizing his potential. I like to suggest to you that that something is really scary people in the congregation. Some people are making Timothy fearful.

Anyone who serves Christ in the church knows how the spirit of fear can impede our joy and service. Fear of inadequacy, fear of criticism, fear of breaking some cherished taboo said or unsaid, fear of being labeled, are all possible reasons for crippling fear.

In a conservative church, fear of being labeled a liberal keeps us from innovation and creativity. In a more liberal church, fear of being labeled narrow-minded keeps

us from a strong message that the lost need Jesus. In an evangelical church, fear of being labeled charismatic causes us to neglect the powerful working of the Holy Spirit. In a charismatic church, we pretend to speak in tongues even when we know it is only gibberish because we fear folks will say we don't have the Holy Spirit. These are just my speculations of what can happen, for it is apparent that I cannot be in all these situations all at once.

I muse that among the gifts of the Spirit in the Bible, there isn't one called the gift of criticism. Of course, when we criticize others, it is always constructive criticism. When we identify problems, real and imaginary, we are filled with a sense of cleverness, of pride, of one-upmanship. When we tell others about what another Christian is doing poorly, and the other person agrees with us, we feel even better. And somehow we can always justify our backbiting criticism.

This unlovely talent alone is enough to create fear among Christians. Many of us need approval, and while we serve God with motives as pure as we can muster, criticisms can make us fearful, and we shrink from bold service. And when criticisms come, the devil never fails to whisper, "So why are you doing this? You are not paid for this. Why put up with it?"

Is it interesting that Paul does not chide Timothy for failure in boldness. More criticisms rarely encourage boldness!

We have received criticism. That is for sure. Our tendency is to give as good as we get. Yet Paul gives as a wonderful example. We do not see a rebuke for the church at Ephesus nor criticism towards Timothy. Paul simply encourages Timothy to boldness, and reminds him of what God wants to do through him.

I know there is much I need to learn from Paul's example as the encourager. I fall far

short because I cultivated the penchant for, and skill in, criticism for many years, thinking it some worthwhile talent when it is only a base impulse to elevate self and demean others.

Far be it from me to suggest you may sometimes be like me. Yet, knowing our sinfulness; I would be remiss not to invite you to join me as I work to replace the untalent of criticism with the gift of encouragement. I want no part in promoting a spirit of fear within God's community through labeling people or criticizing them. We have opposition enough outside.

What joy to serve the Lord in power and not in fear!

Note: The ESV is used unless indicated otherwise.

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Rev. Peter Eng is an ordained minister from the Reformed Tradition, but he is truly global in perspective. He served the Lord in various capacities starting from his teenage years in the 70s. His undergrad studies were done in Singapore, his grad studies in the USA, and post-grad studies in the United Kingdom, with additional post-grad research in Germany.