

7 Ways to Strengthen and Develop Younger Believers

By Steve Burchett



At the end of his life, Paul wrote these warm words to Timothy: “As I remember your tears, I long to see you, that I may be filled with joy” (2 Timothy 1:4). When Timothy first joined Paul’s team (cf. Acts 16:1f), Paul was about 50 and Timothy was perhaps 20. When Paul wrote these words of longing to see Timothy, they had served together for over a decade, and Paul was close to death.

Have you ever had this kind of relationship with a younger man or woman in the church?

The New Testament assumes that more seasoned believers will train younger believers. This is not only modeled in Paul and Timothy’s relationship but is called for explicitly in verses such as Titus 2:4-5 where Paul says older women are to “train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled.”

Without godly mentors (whether formal or informal), younger believers often flail around in immaturity and might even fall away from the faith. Paul’s relationship with Timothy provides a helpful path toward strengthening and developing our younger brothers and sisters in Christ.

First, *include younger believers in your life*. “[Timothy] was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him . . .” (Acts 16:2-3). The result was that Timothy joined Paul on his second missionary journey, and they became friends for life. Young believers need to see us follow Jesus and hear us speak of and live out Christ’s words. One summer, while still in college, I spent several hours each week with an older pastor. I vividly remember praying with him for extended periods — mostly listening as he led me into God’s presence. That kind of experience will change a young man or woman.

Second, *utilize younger believers in ministry*. I’m guessing Timothy initially and often helped Paul with menial tasks. Paul also engaged Timothy in more significant responsibilities, such as checking on the persecuted church in Thessalonica (see 1 Thessalonians 3:1-2, 6). We can give younger men and women in the church opportunities to serve in simple and sometimes weighty tasks. For example, if you have a sphere of responsibility that includes making decisions, including young believers in the decision-making process might be possible. For some scenarios, a good question for a young believer might be, “What do you think would

be a critical early step to get this off the ground?” Or perhaps you are responsible for manual labor around the church building or in a church member’s life. Think strategically about giving younger believers the privilege of serving alongside you and sometimes in your place.

Third, *pray for younger believers and tell them you are praying for them*. Paul wrote to Timothy, “I thank God whom I serve, as did my ancestors, with a clear conscience, as I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day” (2 Timothy 1:3). As I reflect on multiple decades of following Jesus, it is rare for someone to say that they are praying for me regularly. I only mention that to highlight this: when someone tells me that he or she prays for me daily or weekly, it is about as encouraging as anything I am ever told. Several years ago, my wife’s uncle said he prays for us daily early in the morning. I’m strengthened even now just thinking about.

Fourth, *speak kind words to younger believers*. I wonder if Timothy heard Paul say things like, “I long to see you, that I may be filled with joy” (2 Timothy 1:4b) and thought, “I feel like such a failure sometimes, yet I bring him joy?” Paul understood this proverb: “Gracious words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body” (Proverbs 16:24). I remember finishing a Bible teaching session at a camp once, and an older man I highly respect said to me, “That was the best breakout session I’ve attended at this camp.” I’m still living off of that encouragement!

Fifth, *speak well of younger believers publicly*. Paul told the Philippians, “For I have no one like [Timothy] . . .” (2:20). He told the Corinthians, “When Timothy comes, see that you put him at ease among you, for he is doing the work of the Lord, as I am” (1 Corinthians 16:10). It is common to hear older people bemoan younger generations. Technically, they might be speaking truthfully about their immaturity and poor decision-making. But does such complaining achieve anything good? These are precious sheep to Christ; he died for them. Speak kind words about younger believers — even promote their ministry! This kind of talk will not only get back to them and bring them much joy and encouragement, but it is also a tremendous way to bring unity to the church.

Sixth, *exhort younger believers*. It is critical to know our Bibles to do this effectively. It is also essential to spend time with younger believers to discern what they need to hear. And how vital it is to do everything else above — including young believers in your life, utilizing them in ministry, praying for them and telling them about it, speaking kind words to them, and speaking well publicly of them — because those practices will make your exhortations stick.

Seventh, *be a godly example to younger believers*. Paul was this type of person for Timothy: “You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings . . .” (2 Timothy 1:8). Hypocrisy will nullify our ministry to younger believers, and might even lead them away from the Lord. We should often pray something like this: “O help me to set an upright example that will ever rebuke vice, allure to goodness, and evidence that lovely are the ways of Christ” (*The Valley of Vision*, Banner of Truth, 2002, p. 227).

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