

**PROGRESS**

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Lifelong growth  
for gospel workers

Adrian Reynolds

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The Hub Conference was launched in 2013 by the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (FIEC) as an annual conference to help men and women find clear routes into Independent church ministry. For those `just looking` as well as those `just started`, The Hub aims to be one means of support and advice on a possible journey through training and into gospel ministry.

Led by experienced gospel workers from the FIEC, and supported by leaders from colleges and courses, The Hub provides Bible ministry and a wide range of seminars on ministry-related issues.

It is out of this annual conference that this series of books was born. It occurred to the organising committee that these seminar topics could provide a helpful resource for anyone involved in gospel ministry, whether or not they attended The Hub or entered paid Christian ministry. In addition, the hope is that these books might also help pastors and leaders in discipling members of congregations for leadership and ministry.

Someone once described theological books as 'a "college of teachers" committed to helping you do your best to handle the Word of truth'. We hope this series will play a small but significant part in that library of wisdom, at whatever stage you find yourself.

Today in the secular world, 'in-service training' (INSET) and 'continuing professional development' (CPD) are all the rage. Yet this is not a new idea. The idea of continual progress and development lies at the heart of Christian discipleship and leadership, and this is something that Adrian Reynolds is passionate about. Having heard him teach on this subject, we're thrilled that it is now in book form.

Every Christian would do well to feast on this short book, but particularly those in leadership. Full of practical wisdom from the Scriptures and the experience of years in Christian leadership, this is the kind of book that you can return to repeatedly as a stimulus and encouragement to growing as a Christian servant.

**Trevor Archer and Dan Green**

*Series editors*





9 September 1986 was a great day. Aged just 17 I passed my driving test (first time, since you asked, thank you). It was a few years back now, but I can still remember the elation of thinking, 'This is it! No more L-plates. No follow-up tests. No annual renewals. It's all done!' I've been driving a car ever since and I've never quite lost that boyhood enthusiasm for the feeling of being behind the wheel.

This positive feeling is enhanced by knowing I will never have to take another driving test. I know that in some serious situations I might be required to retake my exam, but I have no intention of breaking the law. So, all other things being equal, I can look forward to years of motoring ahead of me, safe in the knowledge that Her Majesty's Government considers I am qualified to be in control of a class B motorised vehicle.

It would be easy for me to be complacent. After all, I have a licence. I have a car. I have insurance. I'm all set. I don't need anything else. I've done all the learning I need to do. Now I simply need to enjoy the experience.

That's a nonsense, of course. A learner driver – as all the insurers will tell you – is a significant risk on the road. Until they have a little more experience and, arguably, a little more maturity, a learner is nowhere near as safe

as a long-qualified car owner. But the fact remains that there are no more practical tests to pass and no more theory exams to take. The work is largely done.

I've been preaching since I was 18. I've been involved in church ministry of one kind or another since the age of 21, most recently in a full-time capacity for the last 18 years. I've done all the formal training I'm ever likely to do. I've taken all the exams I'm ever likely to take. And it would be easy for me to think, 'This is it! I've made it!'

Sure, I will pick up things along the way and – like my driving – there's no doubt that in a few years from now I will be an older (definitely) and wiser (hopefully) pastor. That's how things happen. But short of this gradual organic growth, I don't need to actually do anything else, do I? The only kind of training I am interested in now is the training *I* give to *others*. That's how it should be, isn't it? Nope.

Christian ministry is littered with the skeletons of leaders and gospel workers who thought they had arrived. They are scattered widely and liberally: those with failed marriages; those with ministries destroyed by sin; those who became sermon hacks and embraced laziness; those who found their joy in serving self or sin rather than the people God placed in their care.

Christian ministry – if it is to last and, dare I say, be used by God – needs to be characterised by progress.

## **Progress in life**

'Progress' is the watchword of this short book and it is the watchword of the Apostle Paul. In general terms, it is an attitude he embraces himself. Just a couple of examples will suffice to show how this theme infuses his every thought:

**Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize (1 Cor. 9:24–27).**

Or similarly:

**Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus (Phil. 3:12–14).**

The apostle is a fighter, not just for others, but for his own soul. He longs to grow. He longs to develop. And remember this is the Apostle Paul we are talking about! This is the mighty preacher; the miracle worker; the missionary to the Gentiles who faced shipwrecks and beatings and more. Yet he is never satisfied with what he is as a believer.

For sure, the virtue of godly contentment is much underrated. Christians today are wallowing in discontent. We always want more – more of this; more of that. Egged on by the advertising industry, we're rarely satisfied with what God has given us. And yet, ironically, the one area where we often seem content is the one part of life where the Scriptures urge discontentment – our spiritual state.

Which of us will have the word of 1 Corinthians or Philippians on our headstones? Not many, I expect. Amongst the saccharine eulogies that pass for funeral sermons, how often do you ever hear, 'He was never happy with his Christian faith and always wanted more'?

### **Progress in ministry**

For those called to Christian work, this theme of progress is doubly important. For what is at stake is not only our own walk with our Saviour Christ Jesus, but the very effectiveness of our ministry. Yes, that's right! It sounds alien to our ears. After all, we know the gospel is all of grace and we know that people are

saved not by our own efforts but by the gracious love of God. And yet, Paul is clear: there is a link between our own Christian state and the effectiveness of the ministry he has given to us:

**Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers (1 Tim. 4:16).**

I don't believe – given everything else he has written – that Paul is establishing here a new paradigm of ministry which is entirely based on the godliness and effectiveness of the leader. That would be to misread Paul. Rather, he wants young Pastor Timothy to know that his own spiritual state and the fruitfulness of his gospel work are not disconnected.

Of course, it is possible to find examples of ministries which have flourished under patently ungodly leaders. But, as they say, exceptions prove the rules. In fact, earlier on in this passage, Paul is more explicit about the attitude that Timothy is to pursue. The passage is worth quoting in full as it will become the basis for the rest of this book:

**Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity. Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. Do not neglect your gift,**

which was given you through prophecy when the body of elders laid their hands on you.

Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers (1 Tim. 4:11–16).

### **Deliberate progress**

Note again how 'progress' is Paul's watchword. This letter is written to a reasonably young (though not inexperienced) pastor called Timothy. We're not to think that Timothy is in Pastor Kindergarten. He's spent years on the road with the apostle – sometimes with him; sometimes left behind to complete a task; sometimes sent ahead as a pioneer. And now he's entrusted with the missionary centre that is the church in Ephesus.

This is no fresh-out-of-college whippersnapper with skinny jeans, a check shirt and a big wristwatch. He may be young, but he is not inexperienced. And yet, Paul still urges him to progress. Timothy, he says, make sure you keep growing. Don't leave it to chance. Don't assume it will just happen. Make a deliberate effort to grow.

The language is strongly intentional: 'be diligent' and 'give yourself wholly' and 'watch ... closely'. Timothy

cannot assume it will just happen. He cannot sit on his hands and think that if he just keeps his head below the parapet he will make the grade.

I love military history, and in particular naval history. In the 18th and 19th centuries, once officers were made lieutenants in the Navy, they didn't have to do anything else to get promoted to admiral except stay alive. Promotion was strictly on a first-come, first-served basis. A monthly list was produced setting out all the officers in order of seniority. The man who was made captain a day before you would become an admiral before you. It was an inflexible system.

We tend to think of our spiritual walk in the same way: that it will just happen; that it's just a question of time. I will be more godly in a few years. I will be a better preacher or Bible study leader in a few years. I just will: that's' how it is.

Such an attitude belies Paul's urgent call to progress. And this growth that Paul urges on Timothy is two-fold. The subject matter of verse 15 is almost certainly related back to the whole of verses 12–14. Most commentators agree that 'these matters' (v. 15) in which Timothy is to progress are the example of godliness that he is to live (v. 12) as well as the gifting he is called to exercise (vv. 13–14).

In other words, grow in godliness and grow in gifting. These are to be the marks of a good gospel minister,