

Introduction

A few weeks ago I forwarded an article to all of you from Charisma News. In it, Deborah Hamilton quoted George Barna about how 90% of pastors refuse to preach the whole counsel of God. They are scared to preach things that may offend people. Barna says, "Controversy keeps people from being in the seats, controversy keeps people from giving money, from attending programs."

Barna added that many pastors are afraid to get involved in political issues because of the controversy it might create. And, he added, "Controversy keeps people from being in the seats, controversy keeps people from giving money, from attending programs."¹

In Acts 20, we have the account of Paul meeting with the elders from Ephesus. He tells them that how they know how he served with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon him through the plots of the Jews, and how he did not shrink back from declaring to them anything that was profitable. He preached repentance to both Jews and Greeks, and told them to place their faith in Christ. Paul did not shrink back from preaching anything that was going to be profitable. He was not concerned about filling seats or offering plates.

(Acts 20:18-21) "And when they had come to him, he said to them, "You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time, {19} serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews; {20} how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, {21} solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ."

A few verses later Paul says that he "did not shrink back from declaring to them the whole purpose of God." Paul preached the whole counsel of God. He was in the 10% in Barna's survey that was willing to preach the whole counsel. What was it about Paul that made this difference?

(Acts 20:27) "For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God."

In 1 Thessalonians 2:4-6 Paul says that they (Paul, Sylvanus, Timothy) have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so they speak not as pleasing men but God who examines their hearts. Paul did not seek to please men, and he did not seek glory from men, but only the glory of God. When a pastor is only concerned about pleasing God, he will preach what pleases God. When a pastor only seeks glory from God, he will preach what brings God glory.

(1 Thessalonians 2:4-6) "but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing men but God, who examines our hearts. {5} For we never came with flattering speech, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed-- God is witness-- {6} nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others, even though as apostles of Christ we might have asserted our authority."

¹By Deborah Hamilton, Charisma News, <http://www.charismanews.com/us/...>

Paul makes another big statement in this passage. He says that they have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We cannot gain the approval of God by seeking glory from men. Our approval comes from God and our service is to God.

In 2 Corinthians 13:7, Paul stated that he was not trying to appear approved to them. He was not concerned about the appearance of being approved. He was concerned for the Corinthians, that they would do what is right, even if it appeared that Paul was unapproved. It is not the appearance of being approved that makes us approved. Many people can put on a good show of outward appearance. However, the Lord looks at the heart. He assays our work and will commend those whom are approved.

(2 Corinthians 13:7) "Now we pray to God that you do no wrong; not that we ourselves may appear approved, but that you may do what is right, even though we should appear unapproved."

If we are going to be entrusted with the gospel in the East Mountains, we must also be willing to preach the whole counsel of God. We must be God-pleasers, not men-pleasers. But, in order to be entrusted with that responsibility, we must be approved by God. This morning, I want to talk to you about being approved to God. First, we will look at the definition of being approved. Second, we will look at some ways in Scripture that we are approved by God.

1. The Definition of Approved.

The word approved is used nine times in Scriptures, once in the Old Testament and eight times in the New Testament. The phrase approved by God or approved in Christ is mentioned several times in the New Testament, and that is what we want to look at. The Greek word is dokimos, which means tested or approved. It is translated as approved all seven times that it is used.

Dokimos; Strong's G1384; tested, approved; [From G1209, Dechomai, to receive or accept]

In Romans 12:1-2, Paul tells us not to be conformed to the world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our mind so that we can prove the will of God, that which is good, acceptable, and perfect. The word used for prove is dokimazo, which comes from dokimos. It implies that there is a testing involved or proving before something is approved.

Dokimazo; Strong's G1381a; to test, approve, to examine, or analyze; from G1384 (Dokimos)

This thought of testing before being approved is also seen in 1 Timothy 3:10, where Paul teaches that deacons were not to be installed into office until they have been proved (dokimazo). Once tested and approved, they are eligible to serve the church. What is it that they are tested in? Paul does not specify the tests, but in context, they should be tested to see if they are faithful, if they are good managers, and if they are above reproach in their character and family life.

(1 Timothy 3:10) "And let these also first be tested (proved – dokimazo); then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach."

All of us are exhorted in Scripture to prove and test ourselves. In 2 Corinthians 13:5, we are exhorted to examine or test (dokimazo) ourselves to see if we are of the faith. In Galatians 6:4, we are told to examine or prove (dokimazo) our work.

(2 Corinthians 13:5) "Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine (dokimazo) yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you-- unless indeed you fail the test?"

(Galatians 6:4) "But let each one examine (dokimazo) his own work, and then he will have reason for boasting in regard to himself alone, and not in regard to another."

Today, I want to look specifically at how we are approved by God. In 1 Thessalonians 2 that Paul was approved by God. He also mentions in Romans 16:10 that Apelles is approved in Christ. He does not mention how, but only that Apelles is approved. Paul also shared with the Corinthians that his approval did not come of himself. He said, "for not he who commends himself is approved, but whom the Lord commends." Our approval by God is exactly that. Our approval comes from the Lord. There are a number of ways that God uses to approve us.

(Romans 16:10) "Greet Apelles, the approved in Christ. Greet those who are of the household of Aristobulus."

(2 Corinthians 10:18) "For not he who commends himself is approved, but whom the Lord commends."

Many churches have an approval process for their leaders. In the United Christian Church, the elders are voted on each year. In order to maintain their eldership, they must have a seventy-five percent approval. If they fall below that, they are removed from eldership. This purpose of the rule is to bring accountability to the eldership. However, in Scripture, it is not the congregation that puts in elders. It is not through the congregation that get the approval of God. The result of this practice is men who are men pleasers, and are reluctant to share the whole counsel of God.

2. Ways of Being Approved by God

What are the ways that Paul and Apelles were approved. What are the ways that we are approved by God? There are a number of ways that we find in Scripture. We will look at three specific ways that we are approved by God. These include being approved through trials or tribulations, our work, and the word of God.

A. Approved through trials. James tells us that once we have persevered through trials, we will be approved. Once we have been approved, we will receive the crown of life. We find that trials in our life are part of the proving of our faith. Dokimos, which means tried or approved, implies a test or assayal. To assay something is to put it to a test. A jeweler will test metals and jewels to see if they are genuine. God uses the trials in our life to assay our faith. He uses it to approve us. Once we have been approved, we are promised the crown of life.

(James 1:12) "Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he

will receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to those who love Him."

G1384. dokimos, dok'-ee-mos; from G1380; prop. acceptable (current after assayal), i.e. approved:--approved, tried.

One of the trials that we have are divisions or factions. When there are factions, those whose faith is not genuine, who have faulty foundations, or who are fleshly and immature in their faith are revealed. The mature believers seek unity and peace and are approved through this particular type of trial. Paul addresses this in 1 Corinthians 11. He says that he heard there were divisions which existed among them. Because there were divisions, there must also be factions among them, in order that those who are approved will become evident. Those who are mature and seek unity and peace will be approved. Those who are irreconcilable will also become evident.

(1 Cor 11:18-19) "For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you; and in part, I believe it. {19} For there must also be factions among you, in order that those who are approved may have become evident among you."

There are a number of ways that factions and divisions can be dealt with. Probably the best is to go to those in authority and submit to their decision. In Luke 12:13-14, there was a conflict in a family over an inheritance. The one who felt he was not getting his fair share came to Jesus and asked Him to get involved. The problem was that Jesus had not been appointed as the authority, so Jesus replied, "Man, who appointed Me a judge or arbitrator over you?" It is the right question. The man had the right idea, go to one in authority, but the authority needed to be agreed upon by both parties. My experience has been that generally people involved in divisions and factions will not submit themselves to those in authority, and often will not submit to a common arbitrator either.

(Luke 12:13-14) "Someone in the crowd said to Him, 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.' {14} But He said to him, 'Man, who appointed Me a judge or arbitrator over you?'"

In a church split that happened to my first church plant, there was a group of folks accusing the wife of one of our leaders of having a Jezebel spirit. There was much damage and harm done. The group that was accusing would not submit to me as the pastor. I told them that the lady did not have a Jezebel spirit, and gave them scriptural understanding of the Jezebel spirit. But, they knew more than their pastor about "spiritual matters" and would not submit to my counsel to them. They also would not submit to the apostolic network that we were part of. They were right in their own eyes and would not submit to anyone. Their divisiveness and rebellion caused much harm to many folks. Their attitude is common to those who are causing divisions, whether in a church, business, or in a home. There is usually pride and rebellion involved. Our response in conflict is very important. We are told in James to submit to God, resist the devil, and he will flee from us. In conflict, the devil stirs things up. It is important to submit to God, and to those in authority that God has put over us.

What is it that God is wanting to do through these trials and tests that all of us face? He is looking for blameless character. He uses these trials to sand off the rough spots in our character. In 2 Timothy 2:15. Paul gives us several insights into how we are approved. Shame implies that we

have done things that are shameful, disgraceful or not appropriate. Shame is associated with character. One who is approved by God has no need to be ashamed. His character, reputation and actions are above reproach. His character is blameless. As we face the various trials in our life, they are to produce in us joy, wisdom, and maturity.

(2 Timothy 2:15) "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth."

James tells us to consider it all joy when we face various trials. Why? Because it is through these trials that God matures us. It is through these trials that He gives us endurance and wisdom. It is through these trials that He makes us perfect and complete. It is through these trials that He brings about proven character. We become approved of God through these trials.

(James 1:2-5) "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, {3} knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. {4} And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. {5} But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him."

Paul also addresses this in his letter to the Romans. He says that we should exult in our tribulations because they bring about perseverance and proven character. The Greek word for proven is dokime (Strong's G1382), which is another form of dokimos. It means the process or result of trial, proving, or approval. These trials or tribulations are part of the process that God uses in our lives to bring about character. We become approved of God through responding properly to these trials. We should exult in trials knowing that these are opportunities for us to show our character.

(Rom 5:3-5) "And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; {4} and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; {5} and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us."

In Romans 14:15-21, Paul shares on how to live with weaker brothers. He exhorts us not to do anything which would cause our brother to stumble. He says that the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness, joy and peace in the Holy Spirit. He goes on to say that he who serves Christ in this way is acceptable to God and approved by men.

(Romans 14:15-21) "For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died. {16} Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil; {17} for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. {18} For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. {19} So then let us pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another. {20} Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense. {21} It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles."

What is it that makes us approved? Men and women of God who are approved will pursue the things which make for peace and building up of one another. It is having blameless character. The character of those approved to God is righteousness, joy, and peace.

B. Approved through our work in the Lord. Paul mentions that we are to present ourselves approved to God as workmen. When Paul gives the qualifications of an overseer, he says it is a fine work that he desires to do. Church leadership is work. It is a lot of work. If people are not able to do that work, they should not serve in the capacity of an overseer in the local church.

(1 Tim 3:1) “It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do.”

In that same passage, when Paul addresses deacons, he says that they must first be tested. If they are tested, and found to be beyond reproach, they can serve as deacons. I believe that one of the tests is faithfulness. When a person is given responsibilities in the church, are they faithful in handling those responsibilities. Our work assignments in the church are a test. We prove our character before God by how we handle our responsibilities.

(1 Tim 3:10) “These men must also first be tested (dokimazo); then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach.”

In 1 Corinthians 3, Paul writes that “each man’s work will become evident.” How will it become evident? He says, “for the day will show it, because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test (dokimazo) the quality of each man’s work.” Our works are a way of assaying us. Our works will be tested and will be approved or not. If our works remain, we shall receive a reward.

(1 Cor 3:13-14) "each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it, because it is to be revealed with fire; and the fire itself will test (dokimazo) the quality of each man's work. {14} If any man's work which he has built upon it remains, he shall receive a reward.”

This is in line with what Peter says to pastors that do a good job, that once approved we will receive the crown of glory.

(1 Pet 5:4) “And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.”

Those who are given charge of the affairs of the church have a serious responsibility. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3:10-11 that we need to lay a proper foundation, and that foundation is Jesus Christ. Then, he says that we must be very careful how we build on that foundation. These are people that we are dealing with. These are precious souls that belong to the Lord. As pastors, we are under-shepherds. The sheep belong to the Chief Shepherd, who is the Lord. We must be careful how we build.

(1 Cor 3:10-11) “According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master

builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it. {11} For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.”

Karen and I poured our lives into our church in Atlanta. When Kathleen got leukemia, and it became apparent that I needed to be with her, and could not pastor any longer, we had to close the church down. That bothered me, and I hated to lose a reward for the work that I had done. The Lord comforted me by telling me that the church organization had been lost, but the church was His people. My investments into their lives was not going to be taken away; we would be rewarded for our work.

C. Approved through handling accurately the Word of God. The final characteristic that Paul gives in 2 Timothy 2:15 of someone who is approved of God is that they handle accurately the word of God. Being able to teach, reprove, and exhort people the word of God accurately is a necessary qualification of church leadership.

I like the way that the King James translates 2 Timothy 2:15. It reads, “study to shew thyself approved to God...rightly dividing the word of truth.” In order to handle accurately or rightly divide the Word of God, we must study the Word of God.

(2 Tim 2:15) “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”

Having daily devotions is wonderful and necessary for our relationship with Christ. However, that in and of itself will not make us approved to God. For us to be approved to God, we must diligently study the word of God.

The writer of Hebrews said that many of the people should have been teachers, but they were not. They still needed someone to teach them the elementary principles of the word of God. They needed milk, not solid food. He said that “solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.” If we are going to be approved to God as workmen, who handle the word of God accurately, we must have our senses trained through practice. It is regular, consistent study of God’s word that helps us to train our senses.

(Heb 5:12-14) “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. {13} For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. {14} But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.”

I became a Christian right before my Sophomore year in college. After I graduated, I turned professional. I was still a young believer, but I knew that there was a calling on my life. I knew that I was called to pastor. I did not know how it was going to come about. I did not know how the Lord was going to use me, but He had given me a love for His word. He put in me a desire or aspiration to be an elder. But, there was a huge gap between my calling and my knowledge and experience.

In 1994, I met a pastor named Jim Elliff. He was pastoring a small church called Florida Shores Baptist Church. Karen and I were led by the Lord to join that church, and Jim began to invest in my life. He took me through the books that he had used in seminary and taught me the basics of preaching. I learned how to find the big idea or the main idea of a passage, and how to tie all the supporting ideas to the main idea. I learned how to use different study tools, like a concordance, dictionary, and lexicon. I learned how to illustrate passages. He also taught me different Bible study methods. These have proved invaluable to me. But, knowing these things did not make me a good preacher. It was applying them. It was studying and preaching that honed my skills.

Do you know how to take a passage apart, and find the main idea. Do you know how to put a passage back together and properly illustrate it? Do you know how to use different Bible tools? If not, are you willing to get training by those who can help you become a preacher of the word? Are you willing to get training to help you become a better teacher? Are you willing to submit to constructive criticism to help you improve? These are things that we must do if we are going to be approved by God as workmen, who handle accurately the Word of God.

What are you studying right now? What things have pricked your interest that you are diving deeper into? What is it that you have been taught lately? Are you being a good Berean and examining and studying the Scriptures to see if they are so? Are you practicing and training your spiritual senses to discern good and evil? The elders of the church must be people who are apt to teach. They must be able to rightly divide the truth, and this comes by studying the word of God.

Conclusion

We have seen that it is important for leaders to be approved by God. There are many self-approved people today, but how many of them are approved by God. Spiritual leaders must be people who are God-pleasers, not men-pleasers. They must be people who seek His glory, not the glory of men. They are people who are approved by God.

God takes each of us through different experiences and processes to help us grow. All of us go through trials and tests. What trials and tests have you been going through? Are you handling them with righteousness, joy, and peace? Are you handling them with humility? Are you learning to reconcile and work things out, or are you harboring unforgiveness and bitterness? Are you demonstrating proven character? As leaders in a church, God requires us to have proven character, and trials are one of the primary ways that God teaches and approves us.

All of us have been given work to do, and our work will be tested. Are we being faithful in the work that we have been given. Are we working with wisdom? Are we being careful how we build? Are we planning our work carefully? What is the quality of our work? Will it stand the tests that it will face?

Finally, as leaders, we must be students of God's word. We must study to show ourselves approved by God. What are you studying? Are you looking for opportunities to teach and to preach? Are you asking for help so that you can develop your teaching and preaching skills? Could God say to you this morning that you are approved by Him, as a workman, who handles accurately His word? As leaders, we must be approved by God, not men.

EMV Approved of God as Leaders

Introduction (Acts 20:18-21, 20:27, 2 Cor 13:7)

- Paul was approved by God to be entrusted with the _____ . (1 Thess 2:4-6)
- Paul did not please _____ , but _____ .
- Our approval comes from _____ and our service is to _____ .

1. The Definition of Approved. (Rom 12:1-2, 1 Tim 3:10, 2 Cor 13:5, Gal 6:4, Rom 16:10, 2 Cor 10:18)

- The Greek word is dokimos (Strong's G1384), which means _____ or _____ .

2. Ways of Being Approved by God

A. Approved through _____ . (James 1:12)

- One of the trials that we have are _____ or factions. (1 Cor 11:18-19)
- One way to resolve divisions to go to those in authority and _____ to their decision. (Luke 12:13-14)
- God uses trials in our life to bring about proven _____ . (2 Timothy 2:15, James 1:2-5, Rom 5:3-5, 14:15-21)

B. Approved through our work in the Lord. (1 Tim 3:1)

- Deacons must first be _____ (1 Tim 3:10)
- Our works will be tested with _____ . (1 Cor 3:13-14, 1 Pet 5:4)
- We must be careful how we _____ . (1 Cor 3:10-11)

C. Approved through handling accurately the Word of God.

- In order to rightly divide the Word of God, we must _____ the Word of God. (2 Tim 2:15)
- To handle the word of God accurately, we must have our senses _____ through practice. (Heb 5:12-14)

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