

THE WAY OF FAITH, PART 14: VALIDATION OF MINISTRY

John 5:25-47 (NASB)

David Bruce Linn

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Dr. Alfred Blalock, Chief of Surgery at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine during the middle of the last century, was one of America's great surgeons. He had many accomplishments, but one of particular impact was the surgical correction of what was popularly called "blue baby" syndrome. Some babies are born with a defect in the arteries near the heart and as a result, blood which is supposed to flow through the pulmonary artery and get oxygenated in the lungs is drastically reduced. Babies with this condition have a characteristic blue skin color from cyanosis. Such babies do not live long.

But Dr. Blalock did not work alone. He had a remarkable surgical technician named Vivien Thomas—Vivien with an "e" because he was a man. Apart from Vivien's remarkable aptitude for the mechanics of surgery, he was a skilled carpenter—and a black man with no college education. Thomas began to work with Dr. Blalock when they were at Tulane University in the deep south. It is difficult for us to appreciate just how hard it was for blacks at that time. They were strictly segregated by bus seat, lunch counter, drinking fountain, bathrooms, sports, entertainment, education, and employment. They were scorned.

When Dr. Blalock accepted the position of Chief of Surgery at Johns Hopkins he took Vivien Thomas with him to Baltimore. At that time there were no black people on medical staff, only on support staff. There was overwhelming resistance at Hopkins to permitting a black man to don a white coat and begin to work on the development of surgical techniques. So there were many things to overcome. But good is good! Thomas had a rare aptitude for surgery which was uncovered as Dr. Blalock mentored him. They came to work as colleagues in the surgical lab in contradiction to all of the resistance.

Dr. Blalock also encountered tremendous resistance to developing a surgical procedure to correct blue baby syndrome. The heart was considered sacrosanct, with surgical mortality rates so high that no one thought such surgeries should even be attempted. Beyond these forms of resistance, there was the intrinsic difficulty of continuing to pursue a technique after many failures. You may find this statistic horrifying, but some 200 dogs gave their lives as the team first tried to create blue baby syndrome in a dog, and then repair it. It often seemed like they were getting nowhere.

But finally the breakthrough began to happen. Blalock's brilliant thinking was marvelously wedded with Thomas' remarkable surgical technique. One day Dr. Blalock was practicing the technique Thomas had been developing on one of the dogs and could not do it. Thomas took over and completed the surgery, which was an anastomosis—a connection--of the subclavian artery and the pulmonary artery. When Thomas finished, Blalock felt the work deep inside the dog's chest and exclaimed: "Are you sure you did this, Vivien? This is like something the Lord made!"

And now thousands of babies have had this procedure since the 1940s and been given back their lives. For different reasons, Blalock and Thomas had to decide that they were going to push forward relentlessly with their work, not only with no validation for what they were attempting, but with all sorts

of active resistance. And then the procedure worked! What greater validation could there be? From then on, there was validation every time the procedure was done to save a life. And finally for Vivien, the unlettered black man, the university conferred the honorary doctorate upon him for his work of helping to train several generations of surgeons.

The question of validation also haunts every believer. We are all granted at least one spiritual gift, and are intended by God to use that gift to pursue a ministry of some kind. And yet we wonder if we are making any headway. How do we tell if what we are doing is making a difference? And even in the middle of apparent success, the human soul can still feel a need for validation. We desperately want to know that what we are doing is true and that it matters. Jesus taught about the validation of his own ministry in John 5. Even while we affirm the uniqueness of Christ we can learn from him as our perfect example.

FULFILL THE PREREQUISITES OF VALIDATION

Before we can experience validation in our ministries we must fulfill several prerequisites. The first is that we embrace the principle of greater works. Jesus said: **"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do, he will do also; and greater works than these he will do; because I go to the Father"** (John 14:12).

If we should expect to do greater works than Christ, what can he do? Jesus said: **"Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself; and He gave Him authority to execute judgment, because He is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment"** (John 5:25-29).

It is good that we should look at this statement to see the example of Christ because it reminds us that we are not him and there is no way we can do things which are intrinsic to his divine nature. We will not succeed in trying to "out miracle" Jesus. What then are the greater works? They are the works he does in transforming our lives and the people to whom we minister in his name, because both of these things are done not by brute divine power but by faith.

Embracing the greater works principle by faith means that we acknowledge the unattainable greatness of Jesus Christ—and then act on the reality that it is this very Christ who indwells us. Do you believe that Christ is great in you? What can he do in and through you? Anything he wants! As long as a thing is consistent with his character the sky is the limit. He is the one who has told us to expect great things from God as we minister by faith. This is a prerequisite for validation in our ministries because this is the principle of ministry he wants to validate.

A second prerequisite is that we honestly, brokenly seek the will of the Father, as Christ said about himself: **"I can do nothing on My own initiative. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is just, because I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me"** (John 5:30). Jesus is our perfect example. He wants to pursue true life for you and everyone. This is his mission, and so it must become ours. Will you pursue it? You are surrounded with spiritually blue babies. They won't live long. We will only discover our validation as we deprioritize our wills and prioritize the will of God.

As John the Baptist said with such great clarity: **"He must increase, but I must decrease"** (John 3:30). Fulfilling these prerequisites is the first step in finding our validation in ministry.

REJECT FALSE VALIDATION

These things are prerequisites because we must first be doing ministry in order to be validated in it. But there is also a critical discrimination which must be made between false and true validation. First, Jesus dismissed the idea of self-validation when he said: **"If I alone testify about Myself, My testimony is not true. There is another who testifies of Me, and I know that the testimony which He gives about Me is true"** (John 5:31-32). We must be very careful not to consider our own confidence in our calling and ministry to be the basis for it. On the one hand, we may lack confidence in the face of a true calling and ministry.

The man whom I followed in the pastorate of one church had that situation. When I got there I found some immediate issues which needed intervention. But once the initial crises were finished, I discovered a well-taught, well-pastored, and well-loved church with sound spiritual fundamentals. I found good organization, good relationships with the community, and heard many reports of personal genuineness in Christ. Then why did he leave? I asked. The answer was that he never felt like a senior pastor. You should be very cautious about self-evaluation, especially in light of objective measures of good ministry.

On the other hand, I was on the discipline case of a pastor who had the greatest personal confidence in his own ministry of anyone I have ever met. He was well-trained, very bright, and dedicated. Yet he fought with people bitterly everywhere he went. If the board voted not to repave the driveway, he would repave it and then begin to fight like a bulldog about the rightness of his actions. And he would not stop doing this. The Bible says that an elder must not be pugnacious. My disciplinary mentoring was a total failure. Finally his pastor sat him down and said: "You can never be in pastoral ministry. Find something else and get on with your life."

Secondly, if we should beware of self-validation, then we must also beware of overrating human affirmation, as Jesus said even of a righteous man like John the Baptist: **"You have sent to John, and he has testified to the truth. But the testimony which I receive is not from man, but I say these things so that you may be saved. He was the lamp that was burning and was shining and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light"** (John 5:33-35). Jesus admits the truth of John's affirmation. There is a limited sense in which we should look for confirmation in time and space from the humans around us. But there are many reasons why this might not happen, or we might receive validation when we should not.

Jesus went on to say that even John's testimony was not his true validation, which came from another. That is the relief we can have when the humans refuse to validate a sound ministry. I once mentored a man into ministry for sixteen years. He was an extremely capable person. We did many ministries together, we talked about all aspects of theology and ministry. He eventually became an elder and was a breath of fresh air. He became focused on the ministry problem of how to disciple those who have been influenced by postmodern culture.

One day the elders were considering him for part-time staff when a most disturbing conversation took place. He was sharing his vision and the need for some new patterns of ministry among us. I

thought we were sharing some good thoughts which could be pursued in a wise manner, but one elder piped up and said with great conviction: "Go do that somewhere else." I was stunned, as was the pastoral candidate, who said nothing. I was stunned further when not a single elder spoke to correct that total rejection.

After some further discussion, I realized that no elder was willing to even reframe that negative word. And this was in the face of the manifest blessing of God on this man's life and ministry, his instinctive shepherding of the flock of God, his excellent preaching and teaching, and the fact that he was beloved by the congregation. It took a while, but eventually he was gone. I consider this to have been an utterly false valuation of a man and his ministry. I wish I could have stopped it or changed it afterward.

RECEIVE YOUR VALIDATION IN THE DOING OF MINISTRY

Well, if human validation is fraught with danger, then where can we look for confirmation that we are headed the right way, that our efforts are from God and are meaningful? Jesus said: "**But the testimony which I have is greater than the testimony of John; for the works which the Father has given Me to accomplish-- the very works that I do-- testify about Me, that the Father has sent Me**" (John 5:36). We find our primary validation in the works of ministry themselves. Hunting dogs love to hunt, draft horses love to pull, and servants of Christ love to expend themselves in ministry.

This verse also includes the idea that others will see the authenticity of our ministries, but let us not jump past the intrinsic validation. Eric Liddell said: "God made me fast, and when I run I feel his pleasure." The validation of Christ's identity came through the works that he did, the words he spoke, and the life that he lived among them. Validation came in the doing.

I have to believe that Dr. Alfred Blalock and Vivien Thomas were men who were focused on the wonderful goal of saving lives. But don't you think that by the one hundred and fiftieth failure in the surgical lab, after all of the racial resistance and the backlash from the medical establishment, that the goal probably seemed pretty dim? At those moments we do what we do because of who we are, and we find our validation in the work itself. Dr. Blalock was a brilliant surgeon with a heart for developing new techniques. Vivien Thomas was an African-American man sailing into uncharted territory as he discovered that he had a surgeon's hands.

"Jesus said to them, 'My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work'" (John 4:34). This is your food as well—your confirmation, your validation, your reason to keep going when no one notices what you are doing, when your personal sacrifices frighten even you. How can you know that this is your validation? How does it come to you? Part of it is subjective in nature, though never disconnected from the truth of Scripture. And yet there is a personal aspect of God's affirmation as we do the thing he has called us to do.

I believe that this is what Jesus was saying in the next verses, at least in part: "**And the Father who sent Me, He has testified of Me. You have neither heard His voice at any time nor seen His form. You do not have His word abiding in you, for you do not believe Him whom He sent**" (John 5:37-38). We will talk about the validation of our ministries through the word of God in a moment, but I believe we must acknowledge the subjective work of God within us and others in a direct way. Paul wrote to the Romans to affirm: "**...That which is known about God is evident within them; for God**

made it evident to them" (Romans 1:19). The original Greek confirms that this revelation of God does not just come to all people through the glory of God in creation. It says that the revelation is actually in them, which makes it subjective and personal.

This is how deeds of ministry become food to your soul. God gives you a subjective revelation to bless you. In addition, there is enough information in every human soul that others can see you at work in ministry and—sometimes—perceive the validity of what you are doing.

But finally, it all comes back to the word of God, as Jesus told the Jewish leaders: **"You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life. I do not receive glory from men; but I know you, that you do not have the love of God in yourselves. I have come in My Father's name, and you do not receive Me; if another comes in his own name, you will receive him. How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and you do not seek the glory that is from the one and only God? Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; the one who accuses you is Moses, in whom you have set your hope. For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me, for he wrote about Me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?"** (John 5:39-47).

The subjective validations of our ministries which we receive directly from God all matter or God would not do them, but the final sufficient validation must come from the word of God. The Jewish leaders had a group validation which was of their own making. Jesus rejected this out of hand and insisted that the word of God was the only way for them to know that their leadership was of God—and it was clearly not, since they wanted to murder him! They already had all of the revelation they needed to confirm that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, the Son of God, and Savior of the World.

And so we look to the word of God first and last for the validation of our own ministries. We can know without doubt that we are doing the will of the Father if we are doing what he told us to do. The teachers teach and are affirmed. The prophets prophesy, the pastors shepherd the flock, the elders lead and teach, the evangelists preach and train others, the parents oversee their families, the deacons serve people, everyone uses his or her gift to receive the blessing of validation from the Lord.

This is how you keep from quitting. I know that you feel this way sometimes. Make sure you are engaged in the greater works which Jesus has given his church to do, and that you are honestly, brokenly seeking the will of the Father in all things. Make sure you have rejected the false validation of your own opinion or that of others. And then fix your mind and heart on the validation which comes from the Father as you do the works which he has given you to do as displayed in the pages of Scripture.

Don't quit! There are blue babies all around you and they do not have long to live. The process of helping them find life in Christ will be arduous and costly, but it is their only hope. You will inevitably go long periods of time without the kind of results which bring applause from other people. But once you fix your heart on the applause of heaven, you will never give up. The validation of the Father is in the ministry itself. You can also know that just as Dr. Blalock and Vivien Thomas eventually received accolades for their work, there will come a day of reward for you as well, the most important of which is what your heavenly Father will say: **"Well done, good and faithful servant!"**

[clip SOMETHING_THE_LORD_MADE_validation.avi, 1:57 min., from the DVD of the same name]