

Theodore Roosevelt & the "Zeal"

by David McWilliams

Note: This article is a combination of an excerpt from David McCullough's biography of the young Theodore Roosevelt, "Mornings on Horseback," and an excerpt from an article entitled "It is Good to Be Zealous" by Michael D. Rankins.

As a very small child Teedie [Theodore Roosevelt] had also experienced a peculiar and memorable fear of church. It was a small incident that, in later years, made an amusing anecdote of the kind every Roosevelt loved to tell. But for him at the time it was no joke and should not be discounted.

Mittie [Roosevelt's mother] had found he was so afraid of the Madison Square Church that he refused to set foot inside if alone and so she pressed him to tell her why. He was terrified, she discovered, of something called the "zeal." It was crouched in the dark corners of the church ready to jump at him, he said. When she asked what a zeal might be, he said he was not sure, but thought it was probably a large animal like an alligator or a dragon. He had heard the minister read about it from the Bible.

Using a concordance, she read him those passages containing the word "zeal" until suddenly, very excited, he told her to stop. The line was from the Book of John, chapter 2, verse 17: "And his disciples remembered that it was written, The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up."

Zeal, like almost all emotional states (including anger), is neither positive nor negative by nature. Zeal is simply "eagerness and ardent interest in pursuit of something" (Webster's Ninth New Collegiate). What determines whether zeal is good or bad is its object. Zeal with the proper focus is to be commended; zeal for the wrong thing is itself wrong.

The false teachers in Galatia were zealous, but toward a bad end. They were eager to turn children of God away from the truth (Galatians 4:17-18). Likewise, those who followed the heretics were zealous, but again to a bad end. They were eager to hear lies rather than truth (Galatians 1:6-7; compare to 2 Timothy 4:3-4). In both cases, zeal was not a quality worthy of encouragement. All of these Galatians were like the devout Jews of whom Paul spoke in Romans 10:2: "For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge." Here again were people who were ardently in pursuit of something, but not according to the path they should have pursued.

There is, however, zeal that is commendable. As Paul said, "it is good to be zealous in a good thing always." Zeal for the cause of the Lord is good (Psalm 69:9; John 2:17). Zeal for good works is good (Titus 2:14). Zeal in repentance and obedience is good (Revelation 3:19). Certainly, zeal for salvation – one's own (2 Peter 1:10; 3:14) and that of others (Colossians 4:13) – is very good. We must be zealous without faltering (Romans 12:11), but we must be zealous for the right things, for the right reasons God will always reward such zeal (Matthew 6:33).

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