

# A Charge to the Man of God



THE ABRUPT PERSONAL DESIGNATION “But as for you, O man of God” that opens Paul’s famous charge to Timothy reverses the focus of the apostle’s remarks. He had just upbraided the false teachers of Ephesus for their corrupt doctrine and lifestyles, but now he instructs his godly understudy on how he ought to live.

The title “man of God” was intentionally motivating because it was the customary designation for the great leaders of Israel. “Moses the man of God” was a title for Israel’s greatest leader (cf. Deuteronomy 33:1; Joshua 14:6). Likewise, we read of “David the man of God” (Nehemiah 12:24), and the prophet Samuel was similarly described (1 Samuel 9:6). When Elijah resuscitated the widow’s son, she replied, “Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth” (1 Kings 17:24). Elisha was also understood to be “the man of God” (cf. 2 Kings 4:7, 9). The title *man of God* “connotes one who is in God’s service, represents God and speaks in his name.”<sup>1</sup>

When Paul addresses Timothy emphatically, “But as for you, O man of God,” he got Timothy’s attention. The young disciple knew heavy instructions were to follow. And those injunctions remain the standard for all who are called to ministerial leadership today.

## Summary Admonishments (vv. 11, 12)

Helpfully, Paul’s opening admonishments come in four successive commands that can be remembered under four simple headings—*Flee*, *Follow*, *Fight*, and *Fasten onto*.

*Flee.* Paul begins, “But as for you, O man of God, flee these things” (v. 11a)—that is, flee from the things that characterize false teachers, just described in verses 3–10. Flee the false teaching that marginalized Christ and his teaching (v. 3). Flee petty “controversy and . . . quarrels about words” (v. 4). Flee divisive talk (vv. 4, 5). And flee the religious delusion that imagines “godliness is a means of gain” (v. 5).

Flight as a spiritual strategy was crucial to Paul’s philosophy of ministry. Later in 2 Timothy 2:22 Paul recommends flight as a defense from sensuality: “Flee youthful passions.” It was this wisdom that centuries before had saved the patriarch Joseph from Potiphar’s wife when he left his cloak in her grasping hand and fled from the house (Genesis 39:12). Any attempt to stay and reason with Potiphar’s seductive wife would have been too much for Joseph.

Likewise, Timothy is to flee “controversy and . . . quarrels about words” lest he be sucked into the vortex of such decay. He is also to flee those who are promoting what is today called “the prosperity gospel,” which equates godliness with gain. If we desire to be men and women of God, there are times we must show our back to evil and run as fast as our legs will take us in the other direction. Some who are reading this need to indulge in some sanctified flight!

*Follow.* But the Christian life does not consist only of flight. God’s servants are also to follow hard after spiritual virtues—“Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness” (v. 11b).

The six pursuits here are a poetic summary (arranged in three pairs) of the balanced spirituality of the Christian leader.

He is to pursue “righteousness” and “godliness,” terms that cover the horizontal and vertical dimensions of the Christian life.<sup>2</sup> Horizontally, there must be righteous conduct (uprightness) and fairness in dealings with other people. Vertically, a godly life is called for, which as Paul has said “is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come” (4:8). Both “righteousness” and “godliness” reference observable conduct. They go together and enhance each other, producing a life well spoken of on earth and in Heaven.

Next Paul commends the ultimate Christian virtues of “faith” and “love” (v. 11). *Faith* and *love* are a regular couplet in the Pastorals (cf. 1 Timothy 1:5; 2:15; 4:12; 2 Timothy 2:22; Titus 2:2). Here the emphasis is on faithfulness and love for others.

Last on the list is “steadfastness” and “gentleness.” These are especially helpful ministry qualities. Steadfastness is “won’t quit” determination in the face of opposition to the gospel (cf. 2 Timothy 3:10).<sup>3</sup> Gentleness is the quality of tender, patient self-control in dealing with people amid the difficulties of ministry—strength under control.

So we see that Paul commands Timothy to pursue a balanced spirituality in his ministry persona—righteousness and godliness, then faith and love, and then steadfastness and gentleness.

But what stands out in all of this is the contrasting emphases on fleeing and pursuing. Negatively, we are to constantly flee from evil. But positively we are to keep on pursuing good. The irony is that we humans regularly pursue ends we know are disastrous, and we turn our backs on and flee those things that bring fullness and joy. The wisdom here is so elementary. As John Stott explains it: “We are simply to run from evil as we run from danger, and to run after goodness as we run after success. That is, we have to give our mind, time and energy to both flight and pursuit.”<sup>4</sup>

*Fight.* Timothy is, at one and the same time, to flee and follow (pursue), but he is also to fight—“Fight the good fight of the faith” (v. 12a). Notice: This is not just any fight, but a fight for the faith from which some have wandered (cf. vv. 10, 21), meaning that Timothy is to fight for the essential apostolic faith that is described variously in the Pastorals as “the truth” (cf. 2:4; 3:15; 4:3), “the teaching” or “the doctrine” (cf. 4:6; 6:1; Titus 1:9; 2:1), and “what has been entrusted” or “the deposit” (6:20; 2 Timothy 1:12, 14).

Here in respect to the apostolic faith (the truth, the doctrine, the deposit) Timothy is commanded to “fight the good fight.” The language here is intense. Earlier in 1:18 (“wage the good warfare”) Paul used language that elicited military metaphors. Here the language for “fight the good fight” suggests voluntary athletic agony—the kind that takes place in a grueling race or boxing match (cf. 2 Timothy 4:7; 1 Corinthians 9:24–27).

Anyone who has run competitively understands the intensity insinuated here. You run until you think you can run no more, but you keep on running, until your lungs burn and your feet feel like lead, and then you reach way down and agonizingly increase your speed as you approach the finish line. Those who have put on the gloves also know what it is like to give and receive blows until it takes all you have to keep your hands up.

Significantly Paul did this himself, and so he could say near the end of his second letter to Timothy, “For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (4:6, 7). This call comes to every generation. During the Reformation, Luther did wage the good warfare *contra mundum* at Worms and amid the constant agonies that followed. John Calvin, despite a pitiful multitude of physical maladies that he referred to as a “constant death struggle,” despite the persistent intrigues within the church and without, excelled in the good warfare. In our own century, Gresham Machen, the founder of Westminster Seminary, stood tall in the good fight.

Our generation must contend for the faith. We must not be contentious, but we must fight for the apostolic faith. Doctrine is all-important because it determines the course of our lives. The truth of the gospel is everything—it is the difference between life and death. We must withstand false teachers. We must think clearly as we define our theology. We must never compromise the truth.

*Fasten onto.* As Timothy fights “the good fight of the faith,” Paul instructs him to “take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses” (v. 12b). Timothy already had eternal life, as had been confirmed at his conversion and baptism when he made his good confession.<sup>5</sup>

Eternal life is, obviously, everlasting, but the emphasis here is on its quality. Eternal life is the life of the age to come, which is given only in Jesus Christ. As Jesus explained, “And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3). Timothy, like all believers, has eternal life both as a present possession and as a future hope (1:16 and 2 Timothy 1:10 give the present sense; Titus 1:2 and 3:7 give the future sense).<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, Paul tells Timothy (and by extension all of us) to grab—to fasten onto—eternal life. According to Bauer’s lexicon, the word translated “take hold of ” means “to take hold of, grasp . . . sometimes with violence” or to “take hold of, in order to make one’s own.” The “violence” in the word is seen when it is used to describe how Jesus “took hold of ” Peter as he began to sink (Matthew 14:31) and how the crowd “seized” Paul and dragged him from the temple (Acts 21:30).<sup>7</sup> This is the idea: Timothy already had eternal life, but he is instructed to grab it for all he is worth, to live it to the full.

Best-selling author Annie Dillard heard of a man who, after shooting an eagle from the sky, examined it and found the dry skull of a weasel fixed by the jaws to the bird’s throat. Evidently when the eagle pounced on the weasel, the animal bit onto the bird with determination. Though torn and eviscerated, the weasel refused to let go and became an airborne skull. Dillard reflects:

I think it would be well, and proper, and obedient, and pure, to grasp your one necessity and not let it go, to dangle from it limp wherever it takes you. . . . Seize it and let it seize you up aloft even till your eyes burn out and drop; let your musky flesh fall off in shreds, and let your very bones unhinge and scatter, loosened over fields, over fields and woods, lightly, thoughtless, from any height at all, from as high as eagles.<sup>8</sup>

Just so! We are to grab onto the eternal life that is already ours and ride it for all it’s worth through the ups and downs of following Christ. Eternal life—the knowledge of God the Father and Christ his Son, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the knowledge of sins forgiven, the peace of Christ, the fruits of the Spirit, the joy of service, the love of God—these are things we must grab onto and joyously hold until we arrive in Heaven.

There is such balanced wisdom for Timothy (and for all who would be men and women of God) in these four imperatives. He is to *flee* sin. At the same time he is to *follow* or pursue holiness. While doing these he also *fights* the good fight of the faith, *fastened* with all he has to eternal life.

## An Awesome Charge (vv. 13–16)

These four imperatives set the stage for Paul’s solemn charge to Timothy in verses 13–16.

*Awesome witnesses.* The apostle calls two ultimate witnesses for this charge—namely, God the Father and God the Son: “in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession” (v. 13). It was natural for Paul to call such majestic witnesses because Paul himself consciously lived in their presence.

By calling the Father and the Son as witnesses, Paul meant to encourage Timothy, not intimidate him. He wanted Timothy to be heartened because God is the one “who gives life to all things.” He preserves

and maintains life, and he would sustain Timothy for all his allotted days. Timothy was likewise to be strengthened not only by Christ's presence but also by his example—"who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession." Jesus was the witness *par excellence* (cf. Revelation 3:14). Jesus had already done what Timothy would be asked to do!

*An awesome charge.* Braced by the presence of these two awesome witnesses, Paul delivers his solemn charge: "I charge you . . . to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he will display at the proper time" (vv. 13–15a).

"Commandment" here references Timothy's ministerial calling to uphold the faith—to accomplish what Paul did—"I have kept the faith" (2 Timothy 4:7). This involved the command to "keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers" (1 Timothy 4:16). It also involved Paul's other admonitions: "O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you" (6:20a) and "By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you" (2 Timothy 1:14). Timothy was to cleave to his calling until the return of Christ ("the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ"), which could happen at any time.<sup>9</sup>

Paul summons Timothy (and all spiritual leaders) to a dogged persistence in fulfilling the call to preach and to defend the apostolic faith—to run well to the end, as Robertson McQuilkin's poetry has so eloquently prayed:

The darkness of a spirit  
grown mean and small, fruit shriveled on the vine,  
bitter to the taste of my companions,  
burden to be borne by those brave few who love me still.  
No, Lord. Let the fruit grow lush and sweet,  
a joy to all who taste;  
Spirit-sign of God at work,  
stronger, fuller, brighter at the end.  
Lord, let me get home before dark.

The darkness of tattered gifts,  
rust-locked, half-spent or ill-spent,  
A life that once was used of God  
now set aside.  
Grief for glories gone or  
fretting for a task God never gave.  
Mourning in the hollow chambers of memory,  
gazing on the faded banners of victories long gone.  
Cannot I run well unto the end?  
Lord, let me get home before dark.<sup>10</sup>

*Awesome benediction.* Paul seals his grand charge with a majestic benediction that extols God's sovereignty: "he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen" (vv. 15b, 16).

- "He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords." This sings of his absolute sovereignty over all powers, human and divine.
- "Who alone has immortality." This lifts God up as the bestower of life. We humans are immortal

because we will exist after death, whether in Heaven or Hell. But this is only because he who possesses life has created us so. He is the absolute sovereign of all life.

- “Who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see.” This celebrates his holiness and purity as it is manifested in his glory. All anyone has even seen of this is the afterglow of his glory (cf. Exodus 33:17–23). He is sovereignly beyond all humanity. But he is the One who directs, equips, and uses Timothy in his ministry.
- “To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.” This is a natural doxology for Paul. But whereas normally Paul says “honor and glory” (cf. 1:17), here he prays “honor and eternal dominion,” emphasizing God’s sovereign and everlasting rule.

The message to Timothy is clear: “Though your calling is immense, the God who calls you is far greater—and he will enable you to do it.”

So “man of God” (all who are men and women of God); *flee* evil; *follow* hard after “righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness”; “*fight* the good fight of the faith”; *fasten onto* and “take hold of the eternal life to which you were called.”

And having thus properly *fled, followed, fought, and fastened onto*, accept your charge before God the Father and God the Son “to keep the commandment [your ministerial call to preach the apostolic faith] unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he will display at the proper time.”

*Man of God, do it with an eye to and celebrating the awesome power of your sovereign God who will bring it to pass!* This charge is for all of us!

Fight the good fight with all thy might!  
Christ is thy strength and Christ thy right;  
Lay hold on life and it shall be  
Thy joy and crown eternally.

William Boyd, 1864