

If there is going to be a war, men must be ready to fight. The first engagement of the American Civil War - the battle of Bull Run - illustrates this only too well. When South Carolina fired on Fort Sumter early in April 1861, both the North and the South hurriedly prepared for war. By early July, each side was ready for war and certain of an easy victory. When the Union (North) General McDowell spoke to his troops on the eve of battle, his only fear was that the enemy would be unable to put up a good fight. Since a Union victory seemed inevitable, the battle was treated as the social event of the summer. The next morning, the ladies and gentlemen of high society packed their hampers, piled into carriages, and rode to Bull Run for a picnic.

But the day turned out to be anything but a picnic. The scene of battle was one of unimagined chaos and horror. The commanders were not accustomed to warfare on such a grand scale. The fighting was fierce until General Stonewall Jackson led the Confederate (South) soldiers on a bayonet charge. The Union army was routed, with 3,000 soldiers left dead or wounded on the battle field. The socialites from Washington ran for their lives. Their army had been soundly defeated because it was not ready to fight.

Paul did not want Timothy to go so unprepared into battle. He knew that the spiritual war between God and Satan is no picnic, but a struggle to the death. So he ordered his young assistant to prepare for spiritual combat: "fight the good fight" (v.18). Paul speaks to Timothy partly as a father in the faith, but especially as a general: "Timothy.....I give you this instruction" (or charge) (v. 18). These are Timothy's marching orders, for Paul's charge is Timothy's command. Spiritually speaking, Timothy was no longer a civilian but a soldier in God's army. And since he is a minister of the gospel he is not simply a foot-soldier, but an officer.

His military orders are "in keeping with the prophecies once made about you" (v.18).

What is Paul referring to? Most likely, Paul was referring to something that happened at Timothy's ordination.

Later in 1Timothy 4:14, we will learn that Timothy was given a spiritual gift "through a prophetic message" at his ordination ("when the body of elders laid their hands on you"). Timothy's call to the ministry was affirmed by a prophetic word. He had the confidence of Paul, the endorsement of the church, and the confirmation of the Holy Spirit.

#### 1. Don't Fight the Bad Fight

What is this "good fight"? The expression "good fight" implies that some fights are not good. Throughout this letter, Timothy is repeatedly warned against the dangers of needless warfare. He should stay away from issues that promote controversy (1Timothy 1:4). As an elder in the church, he must not be quarrelsome (3:3). Indeed, anyone who has "an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words" is a false teacher (6:4). The Bible warns against such disputes because most Christian fights are bad fights. Quarrels and controversies are perennial dangers for the church. Most of the wars the church wages turn out to be civil wars - most of the casualties come from friendly fire.

A fight over a doctrine not essential to the Christian faith is usually a bad fight. Every biblical truth needs to be taught, discussed, believed, and practised. As Christians in Australia at this time we should fight to preserve marriage as defined in the Bible for the good of our nation. But not every biblical truth needs to be argued for in every situation, and no Biblical truth should ever be defended with a contentious spirit. Church traditions often make for bad fights, too, as do practical matters with little spiritual consequence.

There have been bitter disputes over matters such as the colour of new carpet in the church and whether to have fresh flowers every week in church.

How can we tell the difference between a good fight and a bad fight? Ask questions like these: Will this issue matter a year from now - is it really that important? Am I enjoying this dispute, in a perverse sort of way? Am I fighting for myself, or for others? It is one thing to defend someone else's spiritual interests, or the glory of God himself - it is very different to look out for your own interests. Do I find myself trying to justify my actions, either to myself or others?

## 2. Fight the Good Fight

There are plenty of bad fights, but there is only one good fight - which is why Paul refers in v.18 to the good fight. The warfare he has in mind is the defence of the central doctrines of the Christian faith. This letter began with Paul urging Timothy to oppose false doctrines. The good fight is the fight for sound theology. So when Paul proceeds to talk about "holding on to faith and a good conscience" (v.19), he draws a clear contrast with the false teachers he described back in v.5 as letting go of "a good conscience and a sincere faith".

The good fight is the struggle to defend those doctrines which are essential to the Christian faith. This includes doctrines like the reality of the Trinity, the deity of Jesus Christ, the necessity of atonement for sin, the sufficiency of Christ's death on the cross, the efficacy of faith alone for justification, and the infallibility of Holy Scripture. Such deep and central theological truths are worth fighting for. Paul's command is a reminder never to take sound doctrine for granted. The people of God have never been able simply to rest in the faith - they have always had to fight for it. We see that throughout the pages of the Bible. Almost every New Testament letter is concerned with sound doctrine. The subsequent history of the church is largely a story of doctrinal confrontation. We see it in the Council of Nicea (AD 325) which defended the doctrine of the Trinity, in the council of Ephesus (AD 431) which defended the sovereignty of God's grace against the man-centred doctrines of Pelagius and the Councils of Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451) which settled the deity of Christ.

In the Middle Ages, the way of salvation came under attack, which eventually led to the Holy Spirit reforming the church in what we now call the Protestant Reformation. Scripture had to be defended as the only standard for faith and practice (*sola scriptura*). Christ had to be defended as the only mediator between God and man (*solus Christus*). Faith had to be defended as the only instrument of justification (*sola fide*). Grace had to be defended as the only power of God for salvation (*sola gratia*). And all these doctrines had to be defended in order to promote the greater glory of God, who alone is worthy of praise (*solus Deo Gloria*). The history of the church confirms the necessity of Paul's charge to Timothy. Until Christ returns, the people of God will be engaged in a perpetual war against unsound doctrine. The Christian faith always needs to be defended, not only from paganism, but especially from heresy. Whereas persecution often ends up helping the church by advancing the gospel, heresy always harms the church and hurts its ministry.

There is an inevitable and perpetual warfare between truth and error. Timothy needed to brace himself for the fight - and so do we. So what is our good fight? First, it is the fight for biblical inerrancy. The Westminster Confession in its first chapter states that "the authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, does not depend on the witness of any person or church, but entirely on its author, God (who is truth itself), and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God". Students and teachers in some evangelical seminaries and churches these days hold more loosely to the orthodox doctrine of Scripture, in some cases drawing a spurious distinction between infallibility and inerrancy, or else advocating interpretations that call biblical authority into question. There continues to be a crucial need to teach and defend the truth that the Bible is the written Word of God. Second, there is the fight for salvation through Christ alone. So-called post-conservative evangelicals are increasingly open to the idea

that Jesus Christ is not the only way to salvation. He is a way but not the way. Some leaders in the so-called emerging church are de-emphasizing the blood atonement of Jesus Christ. Therefore, we must continue to defend the truth that Paul teaches in the very next chapter: “there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 2:5). Third, the good fight is for justification by grace through faith alone. As we saw last year in our series on Paul’s letter to the Romans, the Bible teaches that sinners are declared righteous in the sight of God solely on the basis of the righteousness of Christ, imputed to them by faith. The biblical doctrine of justification continues to come under attack and we must defend it strongly. In short, the battles the church must wage in the 21st century are battles it has always waged. They centre on questions like “What is the Word of God?” “Who is Jesus Christ?” and “What is the way of salvation?” The good fight for the Christian faith must always be waged. The reason we must fight is that we have an enemy - Satan. That enemy has received his death blow at Calvary, but he will not be conquered until the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The good fight is not simply a matter of faith - it is also a matter of practice. Paul charges Timothy in v.19 to hold on to “faith and a good conscience”. Since a good conscience comes from a good life Timothy must practice what he preaches. Christian life is as important as Christian faith, and the defence of sound doctrine is a matter of practice as well as belief. These two virtues - faith and a good conscience - are joined together 3 times in 1 Timothy (1:5, 1:19, 3:9). They belong together. If a water molecule loses its oxygen atom, or a hydrogen atom, it is no longer water. In the same way, if a Christian loses faith or conscience, he or she is no longer living as a Christian. Faith and conscience go together in several ways. Obviously, false doctrine leads to moral failure. Wrong views about God’s Word lead inevitably to wrong practices. But the reverse is also true: a bad conscience often leads to bad doctrine. Calvin went so far as to say that “a bad conscience is the mother of all heresies”. People often try to justify their sins, and when they do, their bad behaviour leads to false doctrine.

### 3. Shipwreck!

What happens when Christians let go of their faith or their practice? Paul ends his charge by getting specific and giving 2 tragic examples of men who were notorious in the Ephesian church: Hymenaeus and Alexander. Hymenaeus is mentioned again in Paul’s second letter to Timothy, where he says that “Hymenaeus and Philetus.....have wandered away from the truth. They say that the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some” (vv.17-18). Alexander may be mentioned elsewhere as well, for Paul complains that “Alexander the metalworker did me a great deal of harm. The Lord will repay him for what he has done. You too should be on your guard against him, because he strongly opposed our message” (2 Timothy 4:14-15). This may or may not be Alexander the Jew, who tried to speak during the Artemis riot in Ephesus in Acts 19:33-34.

What Paul says about these men is that by rejecting faith and a good conscience, they “have shipwrecked their faith”. For this reason he “handed (them) over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme”. By calling what they did a “rejection”, the Bible makes it clear that these men made a deliberate and conscious choice to repudiate the Christian faith. The result was a shipwreck. Eventually their own teaching became blasphemous, and they were guilty of the defamation of God’s character.

Hymenaeus and Alexander seem to have lost their faith. What does this say about the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints? What does this say about Jesus’s assurance: “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand” (John 10:27-28)? If Hymenaeus and Alexander have lost their faith, how can anyone be certain of salvation? One way of handling this difficulty is to point out that Hymenaeus and Alexander did not shipwreck “their faith” by “the faith”, as the Greek has it. The Bible never claims these men to have had saving faith in the first place. A better way of handling the difficulty, though, is to recognize that there was still hope for Hymenaeus and Alexander. Paul of all people knew that it is sometimes possible to survive a shipwreck (see 2 Corinthians 11:25).

(1 Timothy 1:18-20; Matthew 18:15-20)

It is also worth noticing that the sin these men committed - namely, blasphemy - was one of Paul's former sins (1 Timothy 1:13). Paul knew that it was possible to be forgiven for blasphemy as well as saved from a shipwreck.

All this helps explain why Paul handed Hymenaeus and Alexander "over to Satan". The phrase - "over to Satan" refers to church discipline. It was carried over from the Jewish synagogue and refers to the correction of sin. Church discipline includes everything Jesus described in Matthew 18:15-20. In the end a church member who refuses to repent of his sin must be put outside the church: "and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector" (Matthew 18:17). The decision to remove someone from the fellowship of the church is sometimes called "excommunication". The former church member is barred from receiving the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. It also removes him or her from God's care. Paul had excluded Hymenaeus and Alexander from the church, which was considered a sanctuary from Satan's power. It is instructive to remember how much Job suffered when he was handed over to Satan, or to remember the Corinthians who fell sick or even died because they were abusing the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:30). Hymenaeus and Alexander were exposed to similar dangers when they were handed over to Satan.

All of this was done for the spiritual benefit of Hymenaeus and Alexander themselves. Paul excommunicated them so that they would "be taught not to blaspheme". Out in the world, away from the fellowship and care of the church, they would be taught - instructed, trained and corrected - not to blaspheme. It was Paul's fervent desire that God would bring Hymenaeus and Alexander back to himself. Discipline is not intended simply to punish sin, but also to restore the sinner. It is not intended to harm, but to heal. When it is used properly, church discipline maintains the glory of God, the purity of his Church and the keeping and reclaiming of disobedient sinners.

It is sobering to realize that pastoral work sometimes includes putting sinners outside God's protection so that they might be saved. Ministry is not easy. But then, warfare never is. As Christians, we must never forget that we are soldiers. Paul stayed in the army until the end of his life. By the end of his second letter to Timothy, he was a veteran of many campaigns. As his second letter draws to a close, he writes the dying words of a general to his second-in-command: "The time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day - and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing" (2 Timothy 4:6-8).

How wonderful to be able to say at the end of your life: "I have fought the good fight". But it will be even better still to receive the spoils of battle. For Christ, our Lord and Saviour, must win the war, and all his soldiers will wear the victor's crown. William Walsham How wrote a great hymn for soldiers who have retired from the gospel campaign - "For All the Saints".

Amen

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