

Marching Orders for a Backslidden Church

Shepherds' Conference

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Bible Text: 1 Corinthians 16:13

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The text I have chosen for this morning is 1 Corinthians 16 verse 13. It is a short but really potent verse near the end of Paul's letter to that troubled church. And this is a verse that outlines itself. Four simple imperatives: be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. And there you have my outline in the exact words of the text itself. Four points, separated by commas.

I chose that text not merely because it sort of preaches itself, but mainly because this year I wanted to bring a word of encouragement and support to beleaguered pastors who are trying to minister faithfully in these troubled, difficult times. It is hard to be biblical and faithful. It is not at all easy.

The church of our generation is shot through with deep seated problems. The evangelical movement in particular is hopelessly confused, divided, frivolous, fleshly, man centered.

Even some of today's best known and largest evangelical churches deliberately seem to cultivate irreverence, superficiality, worldliness, compromise, carnal behavior, infidelity, and sometimes even the rankest kinds of heresy. In a hundred different ways the contemporary evangelical movement is exactly like the church at Corinth. Every problem that plagued Corinth is a hallmark of the culture in which you and I are called to serve Christ.

And I don't know about you, but for me, it's actually a great encouragement to know that every major problem we have to deal with in the church of the 21st century, Paul likewise dealt with in Corinth. His epistles to that church are full of wise counsel and sound ministry philosophy for you and for me and the ministries in which we serve.

And we need to pay close attention to Paul because, frankly, what he says about church leadership and ministry runs contrary to our natural instincts. And Paul's advice to this church is certainly in conflict with the wisdom of this world, the fashions of our culture and even the self styled gurus of evangelical church growth.

You understand that, right? Our whole culture including much of the visible Church is hopelessly confused about spiritual things. Even some of the best known evangelical pundits and pollsters are themselves utterly clueless and they demonstrate their cluelessness by completely rewriting the advice they publish for church leaders every half decade or so. And, frankly, this has been my main message in practically every shepherd's conference for the past 15 years. If you want to have a valid and God blessed ministry, you need to ignore the trends and the text books and pay close attention to the apostle Paul.

Fortunately, Paul makes that very easy for us because he speaks plainly and he repeats himself often. And in our text that is precisely what he is doing. This is Paul's one verse summary of everything he has already said to the Corinthians. Notice, we are just 10 verses from the end of the epistle.

In verse 13, rather, Paul is just trying to tie up loose ends and he is dealing with incidental issues. That is what this chapter sixteen is about.

Notice how the chapter starts in verses one through three. He gives them instructions for a special offering, financial aid for the saints that were suffering from famine and political oppression in Jerusalem.

And then in verses four through six he outlines his travel plans and explains the means by which he intends to have their charitable gifts delivered to Jerusalem. And he assures them, verse seven, of his desire to visit Corinth, but he says he comes he wants to spend extended time with them, not just pass through the city. And he says he can't do that quickly or soon because he needs to be in Ephesus until Pentecost, verse eight.

Timothy, however is coming to Corinth, verse 10. And Paul has encouraged Apollos to visit them as well. Apollos can't come right away either, but, verse 12, he will come when he has the opportunity.

And so in every way he could, Paul was reassuring them of his personal care for them.

We know from chapter four verse 18 and also from 2 Corinthians chapter one that some person or persons in Corinth was accusing Paul of insincerity and untrustworthiness because he had repeatedly been forced to delay his visits to Corinth. And so this long epistle was proof of Paul's heartfelt concern and affection for that Church. And it is punctuated at the end by this whole chapter full of evidences showing how Paul was concerned for the care of their souls. If he couldn't come in person right away, he would send his personal associates like Timothy and Apollos.

Now, for the moment, skip past our text and look at just the second half of this chapter. Paul has a few more personal words of admonition and some words of recognition and words of greeting which he gives them in verses 15 through 20.

And then he takes the parchment from his amanuensis, signs his name and writes in his own hand the closing salutation, verses 21 through 24. And now the epistle is ready to be sealed and delivered.

So looking at this whole chapter you notice that our verse, verse 13 is the centerpiece of Paul's closing admonition to this troubled church. And you are very familiar with the larger context. The epistle itself deals with a long laundry list of problems in that church, division, open incestuous sin that was so brazen even the pagan Gentiles in Corinth were shocked and scandalized by it. There was disorder and gross misconduct even drunkenness at the Lord's Table. They were abusing the charismatic gifts and causing utter chaos in the worship services. They were filing lawsuits against one another in secular courts. This church had major problems of every conceivable kind.

And Paul has already given meticulous answers to all of those problems, plus answers to some other questions the Corinthians had sent to him, questions about food offered to idols, questions about marriage and singleness, questions about doctrine like the resurrection and then questions about spiritual gifts as well. And now he sums up everything he has already told them in a single verse and it is our text.

“Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong.”¹

Four imperatives, all of them with military overtones. Did you notice that? These are Paul's marching orders for that backslidden and dysfunctional church. He condenses the gist of his whole epistle into those four short commandments. Here is the briefest, simplest possible summary of what the Corinthians needed to do in order to address all of the problems in their midst.

Indeed, if they would do just these four things and do them faithfully, every problem that marred the testimony of that church could be solved. It is really an ingenious recapitulation of the various duties Paul had already outlined for the Corinthians. He takes the whole gist of 15 chapters, meticulous teaching all of it, and boils it down to four commands.

By the way, the military tone in this verse is clearly deliberate. These are orders for an army going to combat. Paul is reminding them and us that the Christian's existence in this earthly realm is a battle, not a banquet. We are soldiers engaged in warfare, not merry makers enjoying a party. Do you get that?

Because, frankly, most contemporary Evangelicals don't get it. I am amazed when I see You Tube videos of what is happening in some of the largest and best known Evangelical churches in America. I think some pastors seem to have decided that American Bandstand or Let's Make a Deal is a better model for worship than the New Testament. In fact, if you want to see an extreme example of how bad it gets, do a search at You

¹ 1 Corinthians 16:13.

Tube for Holy Ghost Hokie Pokie. I am not making that up. It is a video from Morningstar Ministries. That is Rick Joiner's ministry. They have a crowd of hundreds literally do the hokie pokie and then they have tearful testimonies about how God used this to heal them. It is filmed with very high production values and the quality of the music, if you like the song about the hokie pokie, is pretty good.

And my point is this is no fly by night anomaly. This represents a sizable and growing district in the current Evangelical zoo. Even some of the more toned down examples I could cite demonstrate that Evangelicals don't really think we are at war against false religion and spiritual lies. Just read the books and blogs who talk most about being missional and culturally relevant and you might get the impression that friendship with the world is the number one goal of the Church. It is not. It is a grievous sin to be avoided. Friendship with the world is enmity with God. The Church is supposed to be an army waging war against worldly values, not Hollywood's welcome wagon.

Post Modern churchmen seem absolutely terrified by the militant language in Scripture, frightened about the prospect of contending earnestly for the faith. After all, you can't contend earnestly for the faith in rationalistic and Post Modern universities and keep any kind of academic respectability. And Christians today have decided they have a better idea. Why not serve high tea and buttered scones and sit down with our ideological adversaries and have a polite dialog with them while we look for common ground that we can affirm together.

That seems so much more civilized and charitable, doesn't it?

Why does the warfare metaphor have to be given so much emphasis? And the answer, of course, is Scripture itself gives prominence to this truth. We really are in a war. It is not a literal struggle against flesh and blood. It is actually something greater, something far more dangerous, something infinitely more serious than any warfare against flesh and blood because what is at stake in this war is eternal.

Ephesians 6:12.

“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”²

And souls are perishing in this conflict, passing into eternal judgment where there is no hope of redemption. It is a somber, profound reality. It is a truth that is not at all consistent with the amusement park atmosphere that so many 21st century churches have tried to cultivate. It is not in any sense harmonious with the spirit of our age. But every faithful Christian must be a warrior.

² Ephesians 6:12.

“For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh,”³ 2 Corinthians 10 verse four, but we fight with weapons that “have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ.”⁴

In other words, it is an ideological battle. Our strategy is to dismantle the false belief systems that keep people in bondage. And our weapon is the truth, specifically the Word of God, the Sword of the Spirit. And the struggle is never ending. Or, rather, our triumph won't be final until Christ himself returns in glory. And meanwhile we are engaged in a perpetual struggle against powerful enemies who are serious even if we are not.

Let me ask you. Does your preaching reflect that? Are you conscious of the battle every time you step in the pulpit? Do you realize that you are not called to be an entertainer? It is not your business to be a precinct boss or a political lobbyist. And I hope you don't think of your task as that of a corporate CEO or a marketing specialist. You are not merely to be an educator or a counselor or a coach either. If God has called you to pastoral ministry, he has called you to be a shepherd in a war zone. And that means, like David, you have to have the courage and the faith and the vigilance to defend the flock against the constant threat of wolves. And you may need to go up against a lion or a bear or even a Goliath. And the weapons God has placed in your hands are sufficient for the task.

Now, look. We are not supposed to be pugnacious. We don't relish conflict for conflict's sake. In 2 Timothy two verses 23 through 26 we are commanded to:

Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may escape from the snare of the devil.⁵

But let's also be aware that not every point that comes under dispute is petty and trifling. Not every debate is a foolish, ignorant controversy because the same apostle who wrote what I just quoted said in Titus one, “For there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers... whose mouths must be stopped.”⁶

Being gentle and patient doesn't mean yielding ground to the purveyors of false doctrine. There are today many unruly or unruly and vain talkers and deceivers whose mouths

³ 2 Corinthians 10:4.

⁴ 2 Corinthians 10:4-5.

⁵ 2 Timothy 2:23-26.

⁶ Titus 1:10-11.

must be stopped. And some of them are authors of best selling books put out by supposedly Evangelical publishers.

But we live in a culture that has lowered the tolerance for that kind of candid discourse to practically zero in the name of a false and phony standard of charity and gentleness. In the past 10 years alone every fundamental doctrine I can think of has been placed on the table for debate within the Evangelical movement. And these are not mere trifles. And yet there is such a paranoia about being too militant. Maybe it is an excessive fear that we might fall into the fighting fundamentalist's spirit that it shocks us nowadays when anyone does rise up in defense of some truth.

You know, one of the favorite slogans of our age is let's just agree to disagree. And then everybody is supposed to put whatever point of truth is under discussion aside and set it aside so it is deemed trivial and unnecessary. And that mentality, a refusal to fight for any truth has done horrific damage to our churches and to the Evangelical movement.

Let's just agree to disagree.

Well, no. How about we agree to argue until one of us actually refutes the other and we come to a common understanding of the Scriptures?

Now I am honestly not pleading for a constant spirit of contention. But the fact is that Evangelicals currently have a lot of house cleaning that desperately needs to be done and a lot of enemies who need to be chased from our camp. Truth has too often been set aside in the name of charity and unity. But throwing truth under the bus is not charitable and it doesn't promote unity.

If you want to see proof of that, just look at the rapid dissolution of emergent religion. Authentic unity is when we all agree and say the same thing and that cannot possibly happen until the people of God and the God ordained leaders of the Church decide they will use the Sword of the Spirit to demolish the ideological strongholds of Satan.

Now this militant language such as we have in our verse is common with Paul. And so it really comes as no surprise here. In chapter nine he used soldiering as a metaphor for Christian ministry.

In that same chapter he also said, "I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air."⁷

In chapter 14 he said, "If the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle?"⁸

⁷ 1 Corinthians 9:26.

⁸ 1 Corinthians 14:8.

And Ephesians six, of course, is all about the Christian warfare. So is 2 Corinthians 10. And the militant theme permeates our verse. Paul himself was a determined warrior, engaged in the most serious of all conflicts for the most important of all prizes. And that reality was never very far from Paul's thoughts. And he is an example of us to follow in that. These are the kinds of commands a typical centurion would give to the men in his charge on the precipice of a great battle.

“Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong.”⁹

And so let's look at those four imperatives one at a time in order.

First, be watchful. Be on the alert. Paul uses a Greek word that speaks of staying awake, being attentive, standing guard. It is a single word in the Greek and yet that same word is used 22 times in the New Testament, often with regard to the coming of Christ.

Jesus himself uses the word six times in Matthew alone, three times in Matthew 24 and 25 when he is explaining end time parables. And his point is an argument for careful vigilance in anticipation of his return.

“Be on the alert,” he says, “for you do not know which day your Lord is coming.”

And he uses the same expression then three times in Matthew 26. In the garden when he says to the disciples, “My soul is deeply grieved to the point of death. Remain here and keep watch with me. Stay awake. Be on the alert.” And there he is talking about practical and prayerful watchfulness. Staying awake and being alert in the face of a danger they didn't see coming even though he had repeatedly warned them about it.

And then Jesus uses the same word twice in his message to Sardis, the dead church, in Revelation three verses two and three which, by the way, is a fitting message for the Church today. He says, “Wake up and strengthen that which remains and is about to die.”

And he uses the same word in the warning to Sardis in the very next verse, verse three of Revelation three. “If you will not wake up,” he says, “I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you.”¹⁰

He says that to a church.

So this is a word with doctrinal, practical and eschatological overtones. And Paul clearly has all of those things in mind in his message to the Corinthians. Stay on guard. Enemies of the truth are already in your midst. You need to strengthen what remains and is about to die and the Lord is coming. That is the exact meaning of Maranatha in verse 22.

⁹ 1 Corinthians 16:13.

¹⁰ Revelation 3:3.

So that is on his mind as well.

The mass of modern and Post Modern Evangelicals simply ignore that command. In fact, I am tempted to say they rebel against it. Many are simply too arrogant to think they need an admonition like this. They carelessly think they are skilled enough and knowledgeable enough to recognize any and every error at its very first appearance and so they have let down their guard.

Mostly, though, Evangelicals simply have no stomach for this duty. And they won't tolerate it even if someone else tries to interrupt the evangelical frat party with shrill alarms even while the frat house is in the process of burning down.

We don't mind reading about Spurgeon's courage and foresight in the downgrade controversy. We just don't want anyone today to exercise that kind of discernment.

In fact, listen to what Spurgeon himself said about that very same phenomenon in his era. He said this. "It is very pretty, is it not, to read of Luther and his brave deeds. Of course, everybody admires Luther. Yes, yes. But you do not want anyone else to do the same thing today. When you go to the zoo you all admire the bears," Spurgeon says, "But how would you like a bear at home or a bear wandering lose in the street?" Spurgeon says, "You tell me that would be unbearable. And no doubt you are right. So," Spurgeon says, "we admire a man who is firm in the faith, say, 400 years ago. The past ages are sort of a bear pit and the iron cage for him. But such a man today is a nuisance and must be put down. Call him a narrow minded bigot or give him a worse name if you can think of one and yet imagine if in those days passed, Luther, Zwingli, Calvin and their compeers had said, 'The world is out of order, but if we try to set it right, we shall only make a great row and get ourselves into disgrace.' So let us go to our chambers and put on our night caps and sleep over the bad times. And perhaps when we wake up things will have gotten better."

Spurgeon says, "Such conduct on their part would have entailed on us a heritage of error. Age after age would have gone down into the infernal deeps and all the pestiferous bogs of error would have swallowed all. These men loved the faith and the name of Jesus too well to see them trampled on."

I love Spurgeon. Nobody today talks about the pestiferous bogs of error, right?

And do you know what? The need for vigilance today is greater than ever, not less. Every biblical description of apostasy and spiritual danger fits our generation perfectly.

Listen to 1 Timothy three verses one through five. You know this text, but just listen to how this describes our age.

“Understand this,” Paul says, “That in the last days there will come times of difficulty for people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power.”

And then Paul says, “Avoid such people.”

Now when that is the precise description of the culture in which we live in and minister, when before our very eyes we can see evil men and imposters going from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived, it is more important than ever to stay alert and on guard against false teaching and against personal temptations and to stay on guard for the return of Christ. It is more important than ever to make ourselves ready for that which is what Paul was telling the Corinthians. “Be watchful.”

First of all, over your own hearts, over yourselves, over your passions, over your words. Be watchful over you way of life. Be watchful over one another lest you fall into sin and temptation. Be on guard against Satan so that we would not be outwitted by him because we are not ignorant of his designs.

Likewise, be on guard against false teachers who lie in wait to deceive and who have already begun to sow their deception in our midst. Be on guard against the world with all its snares and seductions. And above all watch unto prayer and prepare yourselves for the Lord’s return.

All of that is packed into this one word admonition, watch.

Incidentally, with regard to the eschatological significance of that command. He is not saying, “Make dispensational charts or obsess over trying to match today’s news headlines with every point of Bible prophecy.”

He is saying simply this. “Live as if you believe the Lord could return at any moment.”

And that includes all these other aspects of prayerful and polemical vigilance. Both the Lord and the enemy are at hand. Stay on the alert.

And then Paul says, number two, “Stand firm in the faith.”¹¹

Now notice that first command, “Be watchful,” anticipates Paul’s closing salutation in verse 22.

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 16:13.

“Be watchful... if anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed. Maranatha. The Lord is coming.”

This second imperative is an echo of the closing verse of chapter 15, one of my favorite verses in the Bible, 1 Corinthians 15:58.

“Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”¹²

Now, let's face it. Steadfast immovability is one of those virtues that has lost its luster in these Post Modern times. You know, epistemological humility is the new supreme and cardinal virtue. We are supposed to refuse to be too certain or dogmatic about anything. Epistemological nihilism is really the new humility. Strong convictions, the very thing Paul calls for here, those are out. If you don't undergo some kind of major paradigm shift in your theology and your world view every few years or so, you are not only hopelessly behind the times, you are incurably arrogant also.

That is why according to any Post Modern way of thinking dogmatism is to be avoided at all costs. Diversity is to be cultivated no matter what. And tolerance means never having to say you are wrong.

Listen. That is not humility. That is unbelief. It is not arrogant to have firm, immovable, biblical convictions. In fact, it is our duty to be precise and thorough in our doctrine and to come to strong, mature, biblically informed convictions. Paul even named this as one of the necessary evidences of authentic faith.

Colossians 1:23.

“If indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard.”¹³

We are not to be like children tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, Ephesians 4:14.

Stability is a good and precious virtue, a necessary virtue for church leaders especially.

Peter in 2 Peter 3:17 wrote, “Take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability.”¹⁴

Watch out for those who under go regular predictable major paradigm shifts in their thinking and their teaching every few years. Avoid people like that. Double minded men are unstable in all their ways.

¹² 1 Corinthians 15:53.

¹³ Colossians 1:23.

¹⁴ 2 Peter 3:17.

Yeah, but isn't it wrong to be obstinate and inflexible?

Well, it certainly can be. But do you know what the Bible identifies as the very worst kind of stubbornness? It is the stubbornness of refusing to be steadfast in our commitment to the Word of God and our conviction that the Word of the Lord is true.

Listen to this description from Psalm 78 verse eight of a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation whose heart was not steadfast.

So you could be stubborn and not steadfast and you can be steadfast and not stubborn.

Verse 37.

“Their heart was not steadfast toward [God]; they were not faithful to his covenant.”¹⁵

That is the height of arrogance.

“Stand firm,” Paul says. And that is a command. “Stand firm in the faith,”¹⁶ the faith. That definite article is significant. There is only one true faith and if your faith in Scripture isn't strong enough even to affirm that fact without equivocation, you really need to ponder carefully what Paul is saying here because in all likelihood that question will be put to you by an unbeliever. Is conscious faith in Jesus really the only way to heaven? And you need to be ready to give an answer.

I am amazed and appalled at the parade of Evangelical celebrities who have flubbed that question on *Larry King Live* or other national platforms.

And, by they way, if you ever go on Larry King, he will ask that question. He does it every time. I don't know how an Evangelical could go on and not be prepared to answer that. It happens all the time.

In fact, since we have such a large auditorium full of pastors and church leaders, let me say this with as much grace as I can muster. If you are one of those who undergoes regular, world view size shifts in your thinking, if your message changes every time a new fad or a new best selling book comes along, if you are by nature fascinated with new perspectives and radical doctrines, get out of the ministry, please.

People like that only sow doubt and confusion. The man of God is supposed to be like a tree planted by rivers of water, steadfast, immovable, growing in a steady, constant fashion, rather than lurching wildly from one point of view to another all the time. He should be full of life and energy, but staunch and unwavering in his faith.

¹⁵ Psalm 78:37.

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 16:13.

And, of course I am not suggesting it is always wrong or inappropriate to change your mind. Sometimes even on the big issues. You may have heard me making the case somewhere that if you are an Arminian you ought to rethink your soteriology and adopt a more biblical point of view.

I personally experienced exactly that kind of large scale theological shift a few decades ago and some years before that while reading Warfield's *Studies in Perfectionism* and comparing that with Scripture, my whole understanding of sanctification got an overhaul. And there is nothing wrong with that as long as you don't become addicted to the idea of remodeling your doctrine just for the sake of having something new to play with all the time. Bible doctrine are not Lego bricks, toys you can tear apart and put them in any shape you want once you get tired of what you have built.

We are not supposed to be like the Athenian philosophers in Acts 17:21 who would spend their time, Scripture says, "in nothing except telling or hearing something new."¹⁷

The goal of our study should not be the constant shifting of our beliefs, but Christ like steadfastness, solid, settled, mature convictions.

And let me add this. If you do abandon Arminianism and become a Calvinist, if you leave one eschatological position and take up another one, if you undergo any kind of major doctrinal shift, don't suddenly act like that point of doctrine is more important than all the others. Don't start preaching on it constantly to the exclusion of everything else. But spend some time settling into your new convictions before you pretend to have expertise you frankly haven't had time to develop.

I think that is the tendency of fresh Calvinists to become cocky and obsessive about the fine points of predestination and that is one of the things that makes Calvinism so odious to most non Calvinists.

I knew there would be a guy who would say that.

But don't do that. If you shift your opinion, learn what you believe before you begin to make it a hobby horse. That is not a sign of maturity and you are not truly steadfast in the faith until you are truly mature. In fact, let's be clear about that. What Paul wants to see here is not the ability to argue with zeal and vigor in point of a favorite point of view. Immature college kids can do that better than anybody else.

What Paul wants to see in the Corinthians is firm belief, settled assurance, confidence in the truth of God's Word and an unwavering heart. In short, spiritual maturity. And that is not an easy thing to come by in a culture like Corinth where the fads and the fashions of this world seem to have more appeal than the eternal Word of God.

¹⁷ Acts 17:21.

Listen to what Charles Hodge said about this command. He was commenting on this verse. He said, “Do not consider every point of doctrine an open question. Matters of faith, doctrines for which you have a clear revelation from God such, for example, as the doctrine of the resurrection—that is what Paul talked about in chapter 15—these are to be considered settled. And, as among Christians, no longer matters of dispute. These are doctrines embraced in the creeds of all orthodox churches, clearly taught in Scripture so that it is not only useless,” Hodge says, “but hurtful to be always calling them into question.”

“Stand firm in the faith,”¹⁸ Paul says. And if you are tempted to tone that down, apologize for it or explain it away because it conflicts so dramatically with the Spirit of this age, then you need to repent of that attitude and ask God to give you more conviction and more courage, which takes us to the third in this series of imperatives.

“Act like men.”¹⁹

Literally, “Be men, or be manly.”

You know the TNIV, that is the translation that is notorious for trying to sidestep masculine pronouns and male oriented words simply says in this verse, “Be courageous.”

And that is an important aspect of what Paul is saying here, but it is not the full gist. Paul uses the Greek verb ἀνδριζομαι (an-drid’-zom-ahee) in the middle voice which is another one word imperative here that he is telling them, “Be, you be yourselves manly.”

It is hard to make it into a one word command in English. Literally it means, “Play the man.” Or, in modern terminology, “Man up.” It is a word that speaks of masculinity as opposed to femininity. He is not saying be grown ups rather than children. He is saying, “Act like men, not like girls.”

And, frankly, that was a fitting charge to give to the Church at Corinth. It also fits a large segment of Evangelicals today.

Be courageous. That is certainly an aspect of what Paul means, but this is really bigger than that. He is commending all of those characteristics that we think of as masculine rather than feminine even though it is not politically correct these days to say that. Paul is sweeping up and including in that command attributes like courage and strength and boldness, stoutheartedness, heroism, daring, gallantry, basically machismo.

Now, there is, of course, a more pedestrian aspect to the true idea of machismo and it is the idea of work. When God created Adam, remember, he made him to work, to tend the

¹⁸ 1 Corinthians 16:13.

¹⁹ Ibid.

garden. Even before the fall. That is something to remember in this age of leisure. All those other aspects of manliness, those are sort of post fall thins. Adam didn't particularly need to be staunch in opposing evil because there was no evil. But he had to work hard and that is something to remember in this age of leisure. We need to be redeeming the time. We can't exclude that from this command.

But remember that this context is militant. This is first of all a call to arms and a summons to battle. He is saying, "Fight like me. Defend the faith in a manly way."

That is, I think, the cardinal idea here.

Now it is worth noting that this verse is written to the whole church. This is not addressed to men only and much less does Paul single out only the elders or the church leaders. This applies to every Christian. There is a sense in which even the women in Corinth needed to cultivate the strength and fortitude of a warrior like Deborah in the book of Judges.

But if this applies to everyone in the Church, it is the particular duty of the elder and the pastor to model this spirit of viral, vigorous, vigilant faith, steadfast and courageous.

And I love it that Paul has no scruples about connecting those ideas with manliness. Act like men, masculinity. That is certainly one of the missing qualities of the Church today

You know, the old King James Version of this says, "Quit you like men."²⁰

And I am afraid that some time in the late 20th century or so, a lot of Evangelical readers mistook the message and thought it meant, "Quit being men."

Several books have been written analyzing the feminization of Evangelical churches. I gave a lengthy message on that very subject two years at a Grace Church men's conference. And that message is online if you want to download it.

I will forewarn you. A lot of people got offended by what I had to say which is a totally new experience for me.

But I think it is an incontrovertible fact that the typical Evangelical church of this generation has become weak and womanly. Church goers demand that their preachers be soft and dainty, especially when they are dealing with hard edged truths. If you don't sufficiently tone down every severe text or hard to receive doctrine in the Bible, you can bet the tone police will write you up for that infraction before you can get from the pulpit to the front door.

²⁰ Ibid.

You know? All the rough edges of every truth have to be carefully sanded smooth and painted in pastel tones. We have traded up to, you know, cushy seats and instead of hard benched pews. And we expect our preachers to fashion their message accordingly.

None of this sinners in the hands of an angry God stuff. And, instead, today's Evangelicals favor feminine themes. You know, let's talk about our emotional hurts, our personal relationships, our felt needs. We are hurting people.

And the Church has begun to look weak and effeminate, frightened, sissified, like a bunch of fopps and milk sops.

And we are supposed to be soldiers.

We are told relentlessly that we have to be always agreeable no matter what, you know? Seeker sensitive, gender neutral, effervescent, transparent, sentimental and delicate in everything we say and do.

Those sound like rules for figure skaters, not warriors.

We are warriors in the army of Christ.

Now, these trends have received an awful lot of attention in recent years and more and more people are recognizing the problem. The Church is not reaching and ministering to men. We are actually driving them away. But those who see the problem more often than not have really bad solutions. You know? Let's have the men's Bible study over beer and cigars and poker games. Or get your men watching cage fighting and develop a taste for blood sport. Or go out in the woods and you put on war paint and perfect the art of the primal scream. You know? Salt your vocabulary with a sailor's favorite expletives or my favorite, my personal favorite, live action role playing or [?] where you dress up like a knight or a gladiator and assume that persona out in a vacant field somewhere with other people who are doing the same thing.

Right.

Dress up and pretend. That's the way to be masculine.

None of those things comes anywhere close to the essence of true, viral, masculinity. In fact, those all are the kinds of things little boys do. Paul has none of those things in mind when he tells the Corinthians to man up. He is telling them to be simply and straightforwardly bold, sober minded, mature, committed to their calling, like soldiers.

Be valiant soldiers in the battle for truth.

You don't have to take up smoking to swearing or get a tattoo on your arm to fulfill that command. You know, those are all external things. They have nothing to do with the kind

of masculinity that Paul is calling for here. He is talking about character and conduct, not the costume you wear.

In fact, notice the two imperatives on either side of this command to act like men. They explain the true gist of it.

“Be steadfast... and be strong.”

Those are character qualities. And sandwiched between them is this. “Act like men.”

So the imperatives in that string of commands basically explain one another. Strength, steadfastness, courage and even vigilance. These are all vital aspects of what Paul means when he says, “Act like men.”

Now there is one more imperative in this verse. And I want to cover it quickly and point you to verse 14.

“Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men.”²¹

And now, finally, “be strong.”²²

It is not enough just to be bold. Christian soldiers need to be strong in order to withstand both opposition and persecution. If you are going to enter the battle in earnest, you will need to be able to endure antagonism, derision, controversy, contempt and abuse of every kind. It will come at you from the intelligentsia and the dregs of society alike.

Worldly governments, the common people and the academic elite of this world will conspire together to oppose us just like they did Christ.

Jesus himself said, John 15 verses 18 through 20.

If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.²³

2 Timothy three verses 12 and 13.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ John 15:18-20.

Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while [at the same time] evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.²⁴

If you are faithful, you will be persecuted. And in this worldly realm, you can pretty much count on one thing. Those who persecute you will go from bad to worse. Things are not getting better in the world. And that is why we need to stay on guard.

You need strength to stand in the battle.

Paul here is not talking about physical strength. Again, the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh. This is still talking about character. And what it requires is strength of character, integrity combined with unflagging persistence. You must have that in order to triumph in the battle Christ calls us to fight.

And Christ himself supplies that strength through is Holy Spirit to those who obey him faithfully.

In the words of Colossians one verse 11, we are “strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy.”²⁵

Philippians 4:13.

“I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”²⁶

“Therefore be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might.”

That is a command. It is not an option. It is what God demands of all believers and especially the shepherds of the flock.

Now let me quickly in closing call your attention to verse 14 because this is the vital punctuation mark to everything we have been talking about.

Verse 14.

“Let all that you do be done in love.”²⁷

That is an echo and a summary of 1 Corinthians 13 where Paul gave them an extended discourse on the qualities of love.

²⁴ 2 Timothy 3:12-13.

²⁵ Colossians 1:11.

²⁶ Philippians 4:13.

²⁷ 1 Corinthians 16:14.

Now lots of people are tempted to read verse 14 as if it nullified everything we have just said in verse 13. It doesn't. Jesus fulfilled every quality outlined in verse 13 to the uttermost. And if you don't believe me, read John MacArthur's exposition of Jesus' dealings with the Pharisees in *The Jesus You Can't Ignore*.

Love does not nullify any of the commands of verse 13, but it does define what should be in our hearts, what our motives should be as we wage this relentless fight against the ideological strongholds of Satan.

We need to remember that the whole point of tearing down those strongholds is the liberation of people who are held in bondage by them. And, therefore, everything we do, watching, standing firm, showing manly courage and determination and drawing on the Lord's strength, all of it should be done in love.

It is, after all, the love of Christ that sought us and called us and compelled us to enter the battle alongside him in the first place. The love of Christ constrains us to be watchful, to stand firm in the faith, to act like men and to be strong.

Let's pray.

Father, we confess that by nature we are not strong. We are not the kind of men we are supposed to be. We are too inclined to sloth and indifference, too concerned about the opinions of others, not captivated enough by the glory of Christ. We are too much men of our culture and not enough men of the Word. Even the best of us falls far short of the perfection of Christ. But that is the goal we aspire to. That is the prize we pursue. Make us men of courage, vigilance, of strength, honor and truth. And give us grace to stand strong even in a hostile world for the glory of Christ in whose name we pray. Amen.
