

A Charge to Keep

2 Timothy 4:1–5

The history of the church bears witness that in times of revival, when God is near, when the church is holy and most useful to her Lord, when the gospel advances with great power and speed — these times are marked by profound prayerfulness, and faithful, fearless pastors who are **saturated with the Word of God**, teaching and preaching it boldly. It is no wonder, then, the apostle Paul, who is now at the tail end of his earthly ministry, gives Timothy the clear and solemn charge about how he is to wield God's Word and perform his ministry. Timothy is not only Paul's assistant, but a young pastor forging the way for pastors who must follow the Apostle's pattern. Today we consider this apostolic charge to Timothy, and repeat it to you, Brad, as you take up the office of Elder in the Lord's church.

2 Timothy 4:1–5 — I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: ² preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. ³ For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, ⁴ and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. ⁵ As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. **PRAY**

An Accountable Assignment — v 1

In 1 Timothy 1 and Titus 3 the apostle spells out the necessary *character* and gifting of those who serve as pastors and elders. Here he deals with how to *perform* the office of Pastor/Elder. First, the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, the building up of the body of Christ¹ must always be done with a deep awareness of the accountability that goes with it. So in this final letter, Paul charges Timothy — he gives him the solemn accountable assignment — in the presence of God, his person and purpose, in the context of his eternal kingdom, and in the reality of the coming judgment.

Ministry is done in light of the *person of God* — He is righteous and holy – and in light of his *purposes*. He is present with his people, directing and empowering his work. Now, in one sense the elder's job is relatively simple. It is to proclaim that holy God created us for himself, but we rebelled and rejected his lordship. Because Holy God is gracious and merciful God the Son came into the world on a rescue mission, that whoever believes in him might not perish but have eternal life. God, in Christ Jesus,

¹ Ephesians 4:12

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is reconciling the world to himself. This is the Gospel. This is Gospel ministry. We do well to wrestle with the deep truths of God and to discipline our minds to grasp profound theological matters. But when we are dominated exclusively by doctrinal debate, we have immediately gone wrong. Christ came to save sinners. We will be held accountable in light of his person and purpose.

The ministry of elders is done in the context of his kingdom. We are never anything other than undershepherds. We are never the boss, never the star. Surely, no man would take up the work in the office of an elder and attempt to build his own kingdom, would he? We are regularly confronted with men who are building their own kingdom of financial success, influence, power, and popularity. Some were charlatans from the outset; others fell in sinfulness one small compromise at a time. There is an allure to the authority that goes with the office. Remind yourself that the office is always, only about King Jesus, exalting him, and advancing his kingdom. Be on guard against desiring the praise of men; the praise of men belongs to Christ alone. Be fearful of allowing your agenda to find its way into the driver seat rather than the kingdom agenda. He is a jealous God.²

We perform the work of elders in the **reality of the coming judgment**. Jesus is coming to judge the living, and the dead. We will all give account to him – every single soul. So we warn sinners who are careening towards this judgment: Flee to Christ! We encourage repentant Saints with the truth that Christ is returning for his Bride on that Great Day. And while warning and admonishing others, we perform the work in the reality that God holds those who teach to a stricter standard.³

These things are the filter or grid through which all pastoral ministry must pass.

The Resource and Substance of Ministry: God's Word — v 2

Preach the Word. Herald it! While your role may not be primarily oriented to pulpit ministry, the resource for elders and all ministry is the proclamation of the word of God. It is what we have to offer. It is our toolbox. It is the bread with which we feed the souls others. It is the truth that anchors us firmly in reality. It is not our small thoughts or opinions, it is living, active word of God that examines the thoughts and intents of the heart. Whether behind a pulpit, in front of a class, or in a planning meeting, it is the word of God, forever fixed in the heavens, that we proclaim, just as Jesus did. He taught in their synagogues **proclaiming** (same word) the Gospel of the kingdom. Though you have wonderful gifts of administration and good insight, your primary responsibility is the Word of God.

² Exodus 20:5

³ James 3:1

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To those outside of Christ, persuade and implore them to flee to Christ, unleashing the Lion of God's Word to devour their rebellion and call them to faith and repentance. In a time when religious leaders offer thoughts and moralistic advice on how have your best life now, 6 steps to a peaceful marriage, and assure recalcitrant sinners that God just wants to be friends with you as you are, the pastor is to be steeped in, shaped by, and abandoned to God's word so that travelers on the broad road to destruction will have their blind eyes open and flee to Christ. For those in Christ, we study and wield the word of God so that his children move forward in holiness, think rightly about God, and are equipped to effectively do the work of ministry. We tether them with, and in the Scriptures so that they are not blown around by false notions and erroneous doctrine that floods in. When Jesus restored Peter and gave him his simple assignment: Feed my sheep. Let those clear words shape your life and you will be faithful in the performance of your office.

Your work in the proclamation of God's word is to be done in season and out of season. Diligently herald God's word in good times when it's easy and the gospel moves forward speedily. (We pray for those times, but that does not appear to be the time in which we live.) So you are to diligently herald God's word of out of season – in bad times, when it's hard, when it's inconvenient, when it's unpopular, when the gospel is opposed and the message and claims of Christ are despised. The point is that neither the audience nor environment govern the proclamation of God's word. We don't choose to moderate God's Word regardless of cost or perceived receptivity.

The performance of the office involves **reproving**, **rebuking**, and **exhorting** – all using the resource and tool of God's word and the right teaching of biblical doctrine.

To **reprove** is to correct wrong thinking, or refute erroneous philosophies. This is what Paul drives at in Romans 12 where he says, we are to be transformed by renewing of our minds. The word of God teaches us to think rightly, and it corrects us when we don't. The teaching mentioned at the end of v 2 is doctrine. Doctrine provides the framework by which we think rightly about God and ourselves. Proper worship is dependent on right doctrine. Effective evangelism — seeing souls saved from Hell — is dependent on right doctrine. Steadfastly, soberly, skillfully teach sound doctrine.

You are to **rebuke** those who are living in unrepentant sin, bringing the word to bear on rebellious, sinful hearts. It is not an easy part of the assignment, but it is life-giving to those who will turn from death. Sin cannot be managed. We must be called to repent of it. Repentance is life. Rebellion is death.

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To the rest of us in the room, we likely all say “Amen” that the elder is to be bold and fearless in these things. But let’s remember who the target of these things is. It is the members of the body of Christ with whom the elder is to perform these tasks — and I include myself in that number. I am not above anyone, nor is any other elder. My point is that it is easy to see the need for these things in someone else. I tend to embrace it far less when I am the one who has some pet sin I’ve learned to cherish. If anyone responsible for your soul musters the wherewithal to rebuke you for sin, see that as someone who is saving your life. Sin is a cancer that produces death. It must be excised, else you wither and die. Pray that God would give you elders who love you enough to call you from death to life in Christ.

Next, you are to **exhort** – to encourage – those who are discouraged in those who are downtrodden. You are to come along side of them with the word of God, and remind them of the hope of the gospel, the goodness of God, and his love and grace.

Reprove, rebuke, and exhort. You don’t get to choose among these based on your personality or gifts. We are to perform them all equally well, equally diligently, and equally dependent on the Spirit’s power — never with confidence in our cleverness.

And we are to perform this work with complete patience. Don’t you wish he had left the modifier **complete** off. Sowing God’s word into the lives of God’s people is unrelenting. It is to be done with endurance and constancy, with steadfastness and perseverance – particularly in times of troubles or ills. There is a persistent, long-term-ness to tending sheep. You can’t say, “But I already spoke to them twice and they won’t repent!” How many times has the Lord spoken to you about something and you have not reformed? Your steadfast stamina in building up the Body of Christ through teaching and exhorting should reflect Christ’s patient pursuit of recalcitrant souls, including yours.

Faithful Ministry in a Rebellious Generation — v 3–4

Timothy was warned of a spiritually dark time that was coming. We live in a present time of profound spiritual declension. I have already mentioned a generation of religious leaders who offer human wisdom and psychobabble as remedies for the human soul. And people prefer these to the straightforward proclamation of the gospel that brings them to an end of themselves. “If I can make some sort of adjustment... not fundamentally repent of the sin that I love, that’s what I like. No more of the demand to deny yourself.” That is the generation in which we live. But God’s word is the anvil on which false teaching is smashed. We are not outgunned. We are not outmaneuvered. All of the instruction that Paul has given to this point is to assure us that we are equipped to live in the spiritually dark time that has arrived. The proclamation of the gospel exposes sinful passions, illumines the mind to truth, and calls

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sinners to repent from wandering away into myths. God's word is the only thing that will transform disordered passions and desires. And it is sufficient and powerful to do so.

As the word of God is absolutely countercultural and the wisdom of God is opposite the wisdom of the world, so the pastor is to be countercultural and the embodiment of God's wisdom.

v 5 — As for you... there is a contrast from those who will not endure sound teaching, from those who teach to suit their own passions, to those who won't listen to truth and wander into myths... As for you, pastor, always be sober minded. Keep your head about you. Don't be intoxicated by the world and fleshly methods. Don't be cowed into retreating. Don't panic. Though everyone around you may be crying, "When in danger or in doubt, run in circles, scream and shout," you are to be a steady anchor. That steadiness is based in your confidence in the word of God. Those whom you shepherd should be braced by your confidence in, and your obedience to God's word.

As you live counterculturally, as you proclaim an offensive countercultural Gospel that gives life, suffering is coming. Sometimes sheep bite. Endure that suffering. And it certainly looks like our world desires to produce suffering for the one who will not celebrate the great rebellion against God. What are you to do if faithfulness to your office and to the Gospel means that people will come after you to make you pay? You are to endure suffering. And in the midst of it, do the work of an evangelist. You are to continue to proclaim and herald that God is in Christ reconciling the world to himself — including those who would make you suffer. Proclaim that salvation is found in Jesus Christ alone. In so doing, God will use the means of your life and the power of his Word to take out stony rebellious hearts and give them a heart of flesh that loves God. And the fruit of your faithful ministry will redound to the glory of Jesus Christ forever. Fulfill your ministry.

Just to close, how will ministry be fruitful? How will ministry be fulfilled? You will be fruitful in doing what you urge others to do: Abide in Christ. There is no substitute for this. There is no amount of study that equips you to produce fruit through the intellect while not abiding in Christ. If you abide in him and he and you, you will bear fruit. Apart from him, you can do nothing. Fulfill your ministry.

PRAY