

# What Does This MEAN?



## Seminary as Boot Camp for Christ's Soldiers

By John T. Pless

The tranquil campus of our seminary in Fort Wayne might not look much like a boot camp, but in reality that is what it is. In 1 Tim. 6:11–16, the Apostle Paul speaks to Timothy as a man being prepared for battle.


Back in 1936, living in the shadow of Nazism, Hermann Sasse wrote, “We come out of a time in which the Church was understood as a place of rest in a restless world” (*Witness*, Magdeburg Press, 2013, p. 195). He noted that Christians of the previous generation had forgotten Jesus’ words that He had not come to bring peace but a sword” (Matt. 10:34). Instead Sasse asserted “They wanted to have the peace of Christ without the harsh war he orders us to enter. They wanted a church where they could save their souls and live undisturbed by the noise of the world. But thereby they forgot the deep peace that the Redeemer of the world alone can give us, and they forgot the real Church” (*Witness*, 196).

What Sasse said so many years ago still rings true today; perhaps even more so as now we clearly find ourselves on a battlefield. No longer does the Christian church enjoy a privileged place in North America. We are all too familiar with the ways that the presence of Christianity is marginalized, long-honored virtues dismissed and religious conviction sequestered to the realm of a private and even toxic sentiment. A few years ago it was popular to speak of the culture wars. But the conflict in which our Lord calls us to be engaged is deeper and more deadly than a clash of cultures. It is, as the Apostle says in Ephesians 6, a wrestling match not between flesh and blood but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over the present forces of evil in the heavenly places. It is to this battle that Timothy, the man of God, is called to stand and to fight as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.

As he had done in Ephesians 6, Paul also uses this military imagery in the Pastoral Epistles. He is, Luther says, like a pious field commander addressing soldiers in battle admonishing them to be bold, courageous and confident. So Timothy is exhorted to lay aside every entangling sin that would ensnare and drag him into certain destruction, to be content and not glued by greed to the riches of this world. Instead he is exhorted to pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness and gentleness. These are the weaponry of our warfare. Timothy is to lay hold of the eternal life to which he was called through the Gospel and confessed before the presence of many witnesses. Only in this confession can he fight the good fight of the faith. And it is only in this confession that you can fight the good fight of the faith.

This good confession was made by our Lord Jesus Christ before Pontius Pilate when He did not deny but confessed that He is the King whose kingdom is not of this world. A good confession is never made up, never simply the assertion of a subjective theological opinion; it is a speaking back to God and to the world the words which the Lord Himself has spoken to us. There is gravity, a weightiness to this confession for it is made *coram deo*, in the presence of God. The auditor of this confession is not just the ears of other people but of the living God Himself. So the question is not what will the world think or how will our unyielding stance be evaluated by the media, but what will the Lord, who judges the living and dead, hear from your lips? “So everyone who acknowledges me before men,” Jesus says “I will also acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I will also deny before my Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 10:32-33).

Such confession is always a matter of the First Commandment. Will you fear, love and trust in God above all things? To cling to the First Commandment is to invite conflict and attack. For even though there is but one true God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—there are gods and lords aplenty in this old dying world that vie to have you aligned with them, fearing, loving and trusting in them rather than the Son of the Father who was crucified for your sins and raised again for your justification.

Paul does not leave Timothy or you without comfort and consolation. His words are far more than a rallying of the troops with a harangue to incite them to face the battle unflinchingly. Paul’s exhortation in 1 Timothy 6 is spoken against this eschatological horizon: “the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which He will display at the proper time.” He is the King of kings and Lord of lords. He alone is the possessor of immortality. He is Light of light and the darkness has not and will not overcome Him. The outcome of this war is not in doubt, for the Lord who will come on what Luther called that dear Last Day has already won the victory by His dying and rising. He has already purchased and won you with His precious blood and innocent suffering and death that, as the Catechism confesses, you might live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness even as He is risen from the dead and lives and reigns to all eternity. 

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