God’s Firm Foundation Stands

2 Timothy 2:14–26

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Kid Logic

Here is a short list of things children believe with complete confidence: Chocolate milk comes from brown cows. An expensive toy loses every time to an interesting rock. A child writing to Abraham Lincoln thinks to warn him, “Don’t go to a play.” Hot Wheels go faster if you put them in the freezer first. Light-up shoes make you run faster. And when sleep won’t come, the problem is obvious: “My pillow is not working.”

We smile, because we know better. But the reason we know better is that someone taught us how to think. And by the time a child begins school, we have handed them two basic logical structures that shape almost everything in Western thought.

The first is inductive reasoning — a logic ladder. You gather clues, and they lead you to a conclusion. Think of the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus tells the story, and at the end he draws the conclusion: “You go, and do likewise.” Everything before that final line is building toward it.

The second is deductive reasoning — a thesis-driven argument. You state your claim at the top, then support it. Psalm 23 works this way. “The LORD is my shepherd” is the thesis. Everything that follows is argument and evidence: his character is faithful, his past actions demonstrate that faithfulness, his promises give us hope.

We are so trained in these two structures that we read the Bible expecting one of them. But the Bible, both the Old and New Testaments, regularly uses a third structure — one we were never taught in school, and so we almost always miss it.

The Chiasm

Instead of placing the truth claim at the top like a thesis, or at the bottom like a conclusion, this structure places it in the middle. Scholars call it a chiasm. The name comes from the Greek letter *chi*, which looks like our letter X. The writer moves inward step by step, reaches the

center, then comes back out in mirror image. What is said on the way in is said again on the way out, but everything before the center leads toward it and everything after flows out of it.

The point is in the middle.

This structure is everywhere in the Bible. Whole books are organized as chiasms. But because it is not how we were taught to think, we tend to read right past it, looking for a thesis that isn't there or a conclusion that isn't the point.

Our passage in 2 Timothy 2 is a particularly clear example, and walking through it as a chiasm will show us not just what Paul is saying to Timothy but why he says it the way he does.

The Way In (vv. 14–18)

The passage opens with a backward glance:

> *14 Remind them of these things…*

This points to everything we have looked at over the last two weeks. Timothy has been entrusted with an extraordinary inheritance — the gospel, God's redemptive work, salvation, a holy life, life and immortality, and the Spirit. He is called to endure the way a soldier endures to please his commander, the way an athlete endures by competing within the rules, and the way a farmer endures by waiting on the harvest. And he has been given reasons to hold on: the historical reality of Christ (v. 8), the sovereignty of God and the power of the gospel (v. 9), love for others (v. 10), and God's own love for him (vv. 11–13).

Now the journey inward begins.

Don't quarrel. The charge is specific:

> *…charge them before God not to quarrel about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers. (v. 14)*

Do handle the word rightly.

> *Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth. (v. 15)*

Don't indulge in irreverent babble.

> *But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness… (v. 16)*

Then Paul gives a negative example:

> *…and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. They are upsetting the faith of some. (vv. 17–18)*

A word about these two men. Hymenaeus appears in 1 Timothy 1:20 as well, which tells us this problem has not gone away — it has persisted long enough to surface in two letters. The teaching they were spreading was that the resurrection had already happened, that it was purely spiritual and already behind us. If the resurrection is behind us and not ahead of us, then there is no hope ahead. The body doesn't matter. The future doesn't matter. And that is precisely the kind of error that travels fast, because it sounds spiritual while quietly gutting the faith.

What pattern do you see forming in these verses? What is the actual problem Timothy is facing?

Timothy is leading the church in Ephesus, and it has real, structural problems. False teachers are spreading heresy. There is disorder and conflict in the congregation. People are pushing for authority who are still spiritual infants. And all of this is happening in the shadow of the Temple of Artemis, which dominated Ephesus's religion and economy and was shaping how some believers thought about worship and spiritual power.

The truth is under attack. Timothy cannot stay silent. Paul says the false teaching will spread like gangrene if it goes unchecked.

But here is the problem: the fight itself does damage. Paul says quarreling about words "only ruins the hearers." People are watching. And — getting ahead of ourselves briefly to verse 25 — Paul actually has hope even for Hymenaeus and Philetus. He wants them corrected with gentleness, in the hope that God might grant them repentance. These are not people to be destroyed. They are people to be recovered.

So the question isn't whether Timothy should stand for the truth. Of course he should. The question is this: How do you stand for the truth without the fight itself harming the people who are watching, or driving away the very people who are wrong?

If you have spent any time in a church — or in a family, or in an office — you have felt this. The fight over which Bible translation is acceptable. The argument about women's roles. The debate over the use of the Apocrypha. The cultural and political pressures that work their way into congregational life. And you know how these things often end: someone argues until the church splits, or the leadership writes more bylaws trying to manage behavior from the outside, or people simply leave. None of those outcomes is what Paul has in mind.

The Center (v. 19)

Here is the pivot. Here is the heart of the whole passage, the center point of the chiasm:

> *But God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: "The Lord knows those who are his," and, "Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity."*

This is the answer Paul gives to Timothy. But it requires the reader to know the Old Testament to understand it, because Paul is quoting from a story, and the story is the point.

Both inscriptions come from Numbers 16. Korah and 250 leaders rise up against Moses and Aaron. "All in the congregation are holy, every one of them," they say. "Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?" (Numbers 16:3). It is a fight over who is really in, who is really holy, and who gets to say so. It is, in other words, almost exactly the situation Timothy is facing in Ephesus.

Watch what Moses does. He does not argue. He falls on his face (16:4). Then he says, "In the morning the LORD will show who is his" (16:5). In the Greek Old Testament — the translation the early church read — that line is almost word for word what Paul writes: "The Lord knows those who are his." Later, Moses tells the people to depart from the tents of the rebels (16:26). That becomes the second inscription: "Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity."

So when Timothy hears these two phrases, he hears a story. And the story becomes the pattern he is meant to follow.

First: He goes to God before he goes to anyone else. Moses falls on his face before he says a word to Korah (16:4). In the life of a church, that means you pray before you send the email, call the meeting, or talk in the parking lot. The first conversation about the conflict is with God.

Second: He stops needing to win. "In the morning the LORD will show who is his" (16:5). Moses does not try to prove he is right. He leaves the verdict to God. That is what Paul gives Timothy in verse 19: "The Lord knows those who are his." Timothy does not have to sort out who is really in, and he does not have to win the argument. That is a remarkable freedom. If God holds the verdict, you do not have to fight for it.

Third: He is willing to wait. Moses says "in the morning," not tonight. Not every conflict has to be settled in one meeting. This is what Paul means in verse 24 by "patiently enduring evil." The fight that ruins the hearers is usually the one somebody insisted on settling right now.

Fourth: He prays for the people who oppose him. This may be the most striking piece. In 16:22, Moses and Aaron fall on their faces again — this time pleading for the whole congregation: "O God, the God of the spirits of all flesh, shall one man sin, and will you be angry with all the congregation?" And then in 16:46–48, when a plague breaks out, Aaron takes his censer and runs into the midst of the assembly — the very people who had been grumbling against him — and stands between the dead and the living. The leader on his face is interceding for the people who rose up against him.

That leads directly into verses 25–26. In Numbers, God showed who was his through judgment. Paul hopes God will show it another way: "God may perhaps grant them repentance." Timothy is not asking God to swallow up his opponents. He is asking God to rescue them.

And the second inscription: He departs from iniquity and calls God's people to do the same. After Moses falls on his face, God tells him to speak not to Korah, but to the congregation watching — the same hearers verse 14 says are being ruined: "Depart, please, from the tents of these wicked men, and touch nothing of theirs" (16:26). And the people obey.

That is the second inscription. Moses says, "Depart." Paul says, "Depart."

The seal has two sides. The first is God's side: he knows who belongs to him. The second is our side: the people who belong to him depart from iniquity. God holds the verdict. We guard our lives. And notice who the second inscription is addressed to — everyone who names the name of the Lord. Not just Timothy. Not just the people doing the quarreling. Everyone who is watching. The same hearers verse 14 says are being ruined have a word addressed to them too.

This is the center. Now Paul walks us back out.

The Way Out (vv. 20–26)

Remember, in a chiasm, what is said on the way in is said again on the way out — in mirror image. Paul repeats the same moves, but now he shows us what they look like when God is at the center.

A Positive Example (vv. 20–21)

On the way in, Paul gave us a negative example: Hymenaeus and Philetus. On the way out, he gives us a positive one:

> *Now in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver but also of wood and clay, some for honorable use, some for dishonorable. Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work.*

In a wealthy home in Ephesus, the gold and silver vessels came out for honored guests. The wood and clay did the everyday work, including the dirty jobs. Paul's point is simply that every house has both kinds. Every church does too. You cannot control what else is in the house. You can only control yourself: "If anyone cleanses himself…"

That is Numbers 16 again — depart from the tents, touch nothing of theirs. Before you attend to someone else's vessel, clean your own.

And notice what makes a vessel honorable. It is not winning. It is not being right. It is being "useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work."

Flee and Pursue (v. 22)

On the way in, Paul said, "Avoid irreverent babble." On the way out, he says flee. Same idea, stronger word. Don't just avoid it. Run.

> *So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.*

Timothy is young, and in this context "youthful passions" almost certainly means more than the obvious temptations. It includes the young leader's itch to prove himself, to win the debate, to get the last word. Paul never tells Timothy only to run away from something, though. He always tells him what to run toward: righteousness, faith, love, and peace. Peace is on the list. And you don't run alone. You run "along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart." When a church is in conflict, find the people who are praying, not the people who are plotting, and stand with them.

Don't Quarrel (vv. 23–24)

Now we are back at the outer edge, where we began.

> *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…*

Verse 14 says don't quarrel about words, because it ruins the hearers. Verse 23 says have nothing to do with foolish controversies, because they breed quarrels. It is the same warning, in mirror image.

Departing from iniquity includes departing from the quarrel itself. Paul already told us in verse 16 that irreverent babble "will lead people into more and more ungodliness." The quarrel doesn't just hurt the church. It changes the person who keeps feeding it.

But the opposite of quarreling is not silence. Look at what Paul puts in its place: kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil. The Lord's servant still teaches. He just does not fight.

Correct with Gentleness (vv. 25–26)

Here, at the very end of the passage, Paul answers the question we asked at the very beginning:

> *…correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.*

How do you stand for the truth without the fight itself hurting the people who are watching, or driving away the people who are wrong?

You correct, because the truth matters. You do it with gentleness, because people matter. And you look at the people who oppose you the way Paul does here — not as enemies, but as captives. Hymenaeus and Philetus are not the enemy. They are prisoners of the enemy. You do not defeat a prisoner. You try to get him out.

On the way in, Paul said they had "swerved from the truth" (v. 18). On the way out, he hopes they will come to "a knowledge of the truth" (v. 25). Even the false teachers have a way home.

And notice who does the rescuing: "God may perhaps grant them repentance." Timothy cannot argue anyone into repentance. That is God's work. Timothy's job is to be the kind of servant God can use when he does it.

Conclusion

We started with kid logic — chocolate milk from brown cows, Hot Wheels in the freezer. Then we said that by the time we are in school, we have learned to think in a straight line, from thesis to arguments to conclusion. And that is how we tend to fight, too. You make your case, stack up your arguments, land your conclusion, and win.

But Paul does not put winning at the center. He puts God at the center.

The shape of this passage is the message. Everything in verses 14–18 leads inward toward God's firm foundation, and everything in verses 20–26 flows outward from it. When God is at the center, the fight looks different.

Timothy, you do not have to hold the church together by winning the argument. "God's firm foundation stands." It does not rest on you.

"The Lord knows those who are his." So you can fall on your face, stop needing to win, wait for the morning, and pray for the people who oppose you.

"Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity." So you depart from the tents, clean your own vessel, flee and pursue, and correct with gentleness.

Hymenaeus and Philetus said the resurrection was already behind us. Paul says no — there is a morning coming. Moses told Korah, "In the morning the LORD will show who is his." There is a morning coming when the Lord will show it once and for all. Until that morning, we do not have to win every argument. We stand on the foundation and leave the verdict with God.

So this week, when the argument comes — at church, at work, or around the Thanksgiving table — do it in this order. Before you say a word, go to the ground before God. Depart from the tent. And if you speak, speak with gentleness, hoping God will do what only he can do.

> *But God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: "The Lord knows those who are his," and, "Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity." (2 Timothy 2:19)*