



TITUS

Relevant Pastoral Advice for Today

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December 14th, 2006
PMM 234 Pastoral Theology I
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The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to Titus contains a concise and relevant guide for Titus to address his personal pastoral challenges in his specific place and time. Yet the themes and advice of Paul to Titus in this epistle transcend its time and are relevant to today's Christian church. Indeed the errors and heresies with which Titus struggled have never left the church but merely subsided for a time. Today the church struggles anew with the same issues of church leadership, the shape of Christian life, and the divisive heretics of the church in Crete. The guidance of Paul is just as applicable today as it was then.

Titus was left by Paul to tend the church in Crete. Paul was stretched thin with his struggles in Corinth and so left Titus in his place. Titus was presented with similar challenges as to Timothy. Unlike Timothy who was trying to restore order in Ephesus, Titus was left to establish order in the churches. The Christian communities in Crete lacked solid organization. The initial portion of Paul's epistle then deals with establishing leadership in these fledgling churches.

In order to bolster Titus' status as pastor, Paul's letter transfers to Titus apostolic authority. (1:1-4) His initial salutation dwells on Paul's apostolate (1:1-3) which he transfers by calling Titus "the true son of our common faith." (1:4) This letter was intended to be read before the congregations by Paul's use of the plural "our" (1:4) and the plural second person address of 3:15. An essential facet of the office of pastor is the call, theological education, and ordination. The call comes external to oneself, typically today by a congregation. Theological education usually happens within the context of a seminary. Ordination is the stamp-of-approval by your fellow pastors as having been appropriately prepared for the office. Paul immediately establishes Titus as having accomplished what is necessary to be a true steward of God's mysteries. Modern pastors will do well not to use these qualifications as a license to all sorts of ills but as a reminder of their being placed for God's work. Congregations should also remember that their pastor was called to ministry by the church, taught in God's Word, and tested and approved by his fellow pastors. This gives the pastor an authority to speak God's Word and administer His gifts. Continual doubt and second guessing of the pastor by the laity is not beneficial. Lack of critical consideration of the doctrines exposed in teaching and preaching in relation to God's Word by the laity presents an equally perilous situation.

The first task of the pastor addressed by Paul is for Titus to establish order within the churches. He is to do so by appointing elders (1:5-9). It is clear that the situation in Crete was chaotic. This church had schismatic men seeking to disrupt through warped theology and demonstrative sin. (3:10-11). It had men disobeying their civil authorities. (3:1-2). Corruption, deception, pilfering, slandering, drunkenness, and irreverence are the poisons of the day (2:1-10). Jewish cultural phenomena remain in conflict with the Christian life presented by Jesus (1:10,14; 3:9).

Titus struggled against the pervasive heresy of the day, Gnosticism. The Gnostic false teachers of Crete had a different tact than those of Timothy in Ephesus. These gnostics were largely Judaic as is testified by "Jewish fables" (1:14) and adherence to genealogies and strivings of the law (3:9). The general status of affairs is testified simply in 1:13 "Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons." The pagan environment of Crete was especially vicious (1:5, 12, 13).

While Titus' situation may appear unique, the church situation of today is not far different. The church today encounters schismatic heretics promoting new revelations (*gnosis*) of a pros-

perity “gospel”, enlightened understanding of human sexuality, and anti-instituted propositions about “doing” church. The modern church experiences Christians who are compelled to damage property or hurt their neighbors in opposition to national laws on abortion. The list of anti-Christian vices of 2:1-10 is entirely relevant to the contemporary situation (apart from the exhortation of bondservants.) Paul’s letter to Titus provides a glimpse of the appropriate response to Babylon (the world) knocking at every door.

Paul’s advice to Titus to set the church in order is to appoint as elders men of proven spiritual character. These men are to be blameless (1:6), have a sound and ordered family life (1:6), and be disciplined and have maturity to function as God’s steward (1:7). These men function as bishop, literally “overseer” (1:7).¹ Marks for exemplary candidates include being hospitable, a lover of what is good, sober-minded, just, holy, and self-controlled. (1:8) Above all these men are to be grounded in sound doctrine (1:9). This is their foundation in order that they might be able to refute and silence those who contradict the faith (1:9,11).

Just as relevant then as today, the elders and representatives of the church should fit the profile presented in the letter to Titus. The church is not a democracy. It is ruled by our servant and our Lord, Jesus Christ. Pastors act in the stead of Christ to deliver all His gifts. Elders testify to their faith through a sacrificial service to the church. While serving as “leaders”, they take the form of Christ and become servants, doing the bidding of the lowliest servant, Christ. All laity fall within this inverted hierarchy to serve their neighbor on behalf of Christ and his bride the Church. It is absolutely necessary that pastors demonstrate the roles of service which mimic the ultimate servitude of Christ both in their office and in their presentation of the life of the faithful.

The Lord is teaching through Paul that there is a specific shape to the Christian life. This life is lived in conformity to the sound doctrine they had been taught. The practical working out of the Christian life is informed by and directly corresponds to their faith. When disparity exists between faith and practice, a false testimony is given. This pericope is an echo of Jesus’ teaching concerning what defiles a man (Mark 7:18-23). Those who live with blatant opposition to their professed faith have no means to convict those who contradict the faith (1:9). They present a false Gospel that is words only and has no transformative power for the Christian life. The Gospel which saves and justifies before God does not return void.

This interaction of faith and practice plays out in the next portion of Paul’s letter concerning false teachers (1:10-16). Paul presents similar descriptions of these false teachers as in 1 Timothy 1:3-11; 4:1-11; 6:3-10; and 2 Timothy 2:14-18. In Titus, the description is much more concise. Crete had a bad reputation in antiquity. This is testified by the unique statement to Titus that “Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons” (1:12).² These vices are indeed anti-Christian and would give a false witness to faith.

In Crete as in Ephesus, people claimed to know God (gnosis) but deny him by their deeds (1:9). To compound Titus’ struggles, some false teachers are teaching Jewish myths which are probably allegorical interpretations of the Old Testament (1:14). These Christians of Jewish background, a “circumcision party”, who are promoting a return to the Old Covenant (1:10).

¹ Noteworthy is that Paul refers to these elders as bishops. We should not confuse this advice as an institution of lay ministry.

² Commonly attributed to Epimendides, a Cretan of the sixth century.

They also promoted the speculative theology of the Pharisees (1:14). This probably included laws about fasting and clean and unclean foods. They embraced Judaic tradition in legalistic fashion (1:15). They imposed human commands of abstinence in the name of higher knowledge and so synergized both gnostic and Jewish tendencies. Their teaching reveals their ignorance of God and the impurity of their minds (1:15-16).

Legalism of Old Covenant law is not as prevalent today as in the church at Crete. The church does fight a strong contingent who would suggest that God's creation is not for God's created. They suggest that portions of God's creation remain unfit for our consumption. This pharisaical legalism and strict adherence to tradition has with it a danger of honoring God with lips but not with hearts as enunciated by Jesus (Mark 7:6-8). Indeed all foods are now clean (Mark 7:19). The pure man is a new man in Christ who receives with thanksgiving everything created by God and enjoys it with a clear conscience. The corrupt and unbelieving man cannot feel at home in God's creation because they know neither their Savior nor their Creator (1:16). All hope is not lost for these legalists of then or the legalists of today. By rebuking these false teachers, Paul says they may be restored to faith (1:13).

Paul now shifts from qualifications for elders and the marks of a false teacher to the qualities of all laity within the church. Again Paul speaks of the relation of sound doctrine and practice being inseparably intertwined (2:1). Specific examples are given to older men, older women, young women, young men, and even slaves. Paul is instructing Titus to exhort the congregations to "be who you are!"

A lesson can be learned for modern pastoral practice. The Christian life is a fruit of the Spirit. The Spirit works by the Gospel. The Gospel comes not from within but from God's Word. So, men do not inherently know what shape the Christian life should take. And yet Christian life is woven throughout God's Word and prominently in the second chapter of Titus. Pastors today must as Titus teach the shape of the Christian life so "that the Word of God may not be blasphemed" (2:5). Presenting a Christian vision for the life of a Christian is not ancillary to dogmatic topics of justification, nature of God, and the like. The cross of Christ is the very reality of the new life of the Christian. Those who confess Christ as Lord will see their life take on a cruciform shape. While this life is counter-intuitive and against the sinful human nature, the Holy Spirit works within those of faith to reveal by Word and empower by the saving Gospel to live a life in the shadow of the cross.

For the young men, Titus himself is to give this instruction by his pastoral example (2:7-8). Pastors who defile their office by not having integrity, reverence, incorruptibility, and sound speech give a false witness by their lives. The life of the redeemed is a preachment of God's grace. Even the life of a slave may adorn God as our Savior (2:10). Just as a fruitful tree adorns the soil on which it grows, the Christian life demonstrates the one true faith. In this way the pastor testifies to the truth he preaches. A pastor while living in the same tension of Old and New Adam should demonstrate the cruciform life for his young men, "showing yourself to be a pattern of good works" (2:7).

The qualities of elders and those within the church present a tall order for those struggling under the cross of their old self. Paul directs Titus to not rely on human power to accomplish such transformative lives. While this letter does not offer a lengthy treatment of justification and

sanctification, Paul clearly has a proper understanding of the two doctrines in view. In a brief yet comprehensive statement on God's grace, Paul presents Titus and the congregations with the only source of such transformation (2:10-14). Paul begins with the spontaneous appearance (2:11) of the act of love of Jesus Christ. Those now under God's saving grace have received a training grace (2:12). Under this training grace men are self controlled (sober) and just (upright) and pious (Godly) (2:12). All this is done in view of the fulfillment of the blessed hope of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ (2:13). Paul presents Jesus' act of radical deliverance (salvation) for the redemption of all mankind (2:14) as the fulfilling of the promise to redeem his people and purify them for a life of service to Him (2:14). In short because of the justification of the sinner by Christ they are made new for good works by his Spirit.

It is then the duty of Titus and all pastors to call the unfaithful to repentance, exhorting and rebuking them. Pastors are to do so with all authority so that no one will despise them. By this call to repentance, the pivotal hinge for the baptismal (renewed) life, the man is restored and renewed to faith. With renewed faith, there becomes a practical working out of salvation in life. The lesson learned from Paul is that such expectation of good works cannot come divorced from the grace of God. It is the grace of God which teaches us that good works are desirable. It is by God's Spirit that the daily life of men and women, young and old are transformed from ungodliness and worldly lusts into lives lived soberly, righteously, and Godly. It is by God's gracious gift of His Son that the faithful become living examples of the doctrine they profess. Proper pastoral care convicts with Law when the individual is comfortable in sin and gives the sweet grace of the Gospel when the individual is convicted by the Law. When the sinner comes before the Lord in contrition, the seelsorger gives the healing that only the Gospel can give. Under God's grace and through the guidance of His Spirit the sinner now goes free to sin no more.

In addition to Paul's description of the lives of the faithful within the church, he is compelled to present to the faithful their obligations as citizens (3:1-2). Sound doctrine produces sound civic life. They are to be gentle and have winning Christian courtesy. Engendered in them by goodness and loving kindness of our Savior (3:4) To be gentle is to be one who is above cruel competition. To show all humility or courtesy³ is to say God is the one makes decisions and we leave decisions to him.

Paul bookends his exhortation for good citizenship with a recapitulation of the motives for godly conduct (3:3-8). God's saving act is detailed in the order the Christian has experienced it (3:5-7) Jesus' saving, justifying, and renewing work (3:5-7) equips us for good deeds. (3:8) This is not done by our merit or deserving. There should be no Christian smugness towards those of faith. Christians dare not despise non-Christians. To do so would be to deny them the same mercy that was given to us. While it is apparent the predominate vice of the church in Crete is the absence of Christian living, Paul is compelled to mention Christ's work in greater detail than previously (2:13-14) in order to avoid a tendency towards works righteousness, making the gracious new life of a Christian into a Lawful attempt to justify before God. On the other end of the pendulum swing, Paul is speaking against Antinomians who would suggest that good works are not profitable (3:8). While reliance on works for salvation is error, as pastor to fail to teach about the Christian life and its integral nature as the working out of faith is equally treacherous. Proper

³ Often translated "meekness"

care for the soul is to teach not reliance on works for salvation but comfort in the salvation given by Jesus and its fruit of good works.

The next section concerning response to spiritual error (3:9-11) seems directed specifically to Titus. Titus is instructed to avoid foolish disputes, genealogies, and strivings of the law (3:9). Genealogies and strivings about the law are useful in so far as they are intended to "instruct men for salvation" (2 Timothy 3:15-17). Old Testament history, tradition, and practice serve one purpose which is to point the way to Christ. To place the hearers back under Judaic Law without a Savior is to deny that very Savior. A pastor's teaching and preaching must convey the Old Covenant as pointing toward and fulfilled in Christ. In Christ, we are empowered for every good work including our keeping of God's Law. To place the souls in a pastor's care back under the burden of the Law where grace should abound is to neglect the flock in the most hideous way.

Pastors must not remain silent when false prophets come. He is to reject the one who tries to divide the flock (3:10). A divisive man, a heretic, is one "who creates dissensions and difficulties, in opposition to the doctrine which you have been taught" (Romans 16:17). Titus is not instructed to stone him, verbally slander him, or inflict some other kind of punishment. Titus is to call him to repentance (3:10). The procedure acknowledged here is described by Jesus (Matthew 18:15-17). He must be excluded if he fails to repent, as he is already condemned and can lead others astray (3:11). He will stand before the judgment of God (1 Corinthians 5:5). Proper protection for the souls of the flock and also the care of the false teachers compels the steward of Christ to exhort with all diligence and conviction.

"This is a short epistle, but a model of Christian doctrine, in which is comprehended in a masterful way all that is necessary for a Christian to know and to live." (Luther, LW35:389) Within Paul's letter to Titus in Crete is given a view of the sanctified life of the believer. In order to prevent this Gospel fruit from being made into Law, Paul clearly exposes Christ as the only one who can justify the sinner and "not because of deeds done by us in righteousness" (3:5). The shape of the Christian life is only possible because of God's mercy in sparing the sinner and sacrificing his own son. As testified by Paul, the Christian is "justified by His grace and [have] become heirs in hope of eternal life" (3:8). As with Titus, the church and its pastors today face new Gnostic heresies, fierce anti-Governmental Christians, the worldly wickedness of the unbelievers, neglected church hierarchy, legalism, works righteousness, and rampant heretics. Pastors caring for souls should heed the advice of Paul to Titus. Christians are regenerated individuals whose life now resembles the cross-bearing of their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Proper care for the souls includes demonstrating by the pastor's word and deed the truth and shape of the Christian life. By this others may know that Christians are not another country club, social networking opportunity, or family get-together. The life of service led by the faithful will testify to the life-giving sacrifice of God's Son. This advice was just as relevant then as it is today.