

TITUS: Truth And Proof

by Ray C. Stedman

Titus, one of the young men who accompanied the Apostle Paul on many of his missionary journeys, first came to Christ as a Greek in the city of Antioch. At the time this letter was written, he was on the island of Crete, just south of Greece.

The church in Crete was probably begun by Paul and Titus after Paul's first imprisonment in Rome. As far as we can tell, Paul was released from that imprisonment, recorded at the end of the book of Acts. You may recall that he had expressed the desire to go to Spain, and many scholars feel that after his journey to Spain, he and Titus went to the island of Crete and began the church there. As he tells us in this letter, he left Titus there to:

... amend what was defective, and appoint elders in every town as I [Paul] directed you. {Titus 1:5b RSV}

This letter provides an interesting little insight as to what went on in the early church, as the apostle travelled about and sent these young men as apostolic delegates to do special work for him in various places.

In the background of this letter, we can discover the character of the Cretans. In one of the most unusual passages in the New Testament, the apostle quotes from one of the ancient writers of his day, a secular Greek poet who describes these people among whom young Titus had to labor. He says,

One of themselves, a prophet of their own, said, "Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons." {Titus 1:12 RSV}}

Paul is obviously writing a private message to his son-in-the-faith, Titus, and wants him to understand the formidable nature of the problem he is to resolve. He is dealing with people who are characterized in these three ways, and he underscores this by saying, "This testimony is true," {Titus 1:13a RSV}. These people are like this. And as we look at the message of this letter, we see that these three characteristics of the Cretan people seem to be described and amplified in various passages. For example, Paul says about certain ones,

To the pure all things are pure, but to the corrupt and unbelieving nothing is pure; their very minds and consciences are corrupted. They profess to know God, but they deny him by their deeds [they're liars]; they are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good deed. {Titus 1:15-16 RSV}

Now this was the kind of society in which the Christian church was living, and this was the kind of national character that Titus was up against. Here were people whose minds and consciences were corrupted -- they profess to know God, but they deny him by their deeds.

He also calls them "evil beasts," that is, they were like animals in their attitudes toward one another. That theme is amplified in chapter three, where the apostle says,

But avoid stupid controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels over the law, for they are unprofitable and futile. As for a man who is factious, after admonishing him once or twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is perverted and sinful; he is self-condemned. {Titus 3:9-11 RSV}

These words are referring primarily to those who at least professed to be Christian, but who were reflecting the attitudes of the world around.

When the church has a problem, it is because the world is invading the church instead of the church invading the world. The gospel is intended to be a disturbing element, to change society. Therefore, whenever the church is true to its authentic message, it is always against the status quo. The church is a revolutionary body -- it always has been -- and we can thus be very much in sympathy with some of the revolutionary movements of our own day. But the difference is that the church challenges the status quo with the power of God, something that no other organization or group can do.

Now what would you do with people who acted like animals, snarling and griping at one another, people who engaged in stupid controversies and quarrels over the law, and who were factious one with another -- how would you handle people like that? And that was not all; these people were further characterized as "lazy gluttons," easy-going, pleasure-loving people. This too is amplified in chapter three, where the apostle speaks not only of them, but also of himself and of all men as they are before they become Christians. Here is an amazing description of the world as God sees it:

For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by men and hating one another; {Titus 3:3 RSV}

This is the kind of a world into which the apostle sent this young man, with the power of the gospel.

Now the basic need of these people was to have "sound doctrine," a phrase that occurs several times throughout the letter. Paul knew that to change society, people must be told the truth -- this is the problem with men and women everywhere. This is why they walk in darkness and act like animals, tearing one another apart and hating one another -- because they do not understand themselves or the world. So you have to begin by teaching them truth.

Along with that is another very basic need -- the matter of "good deeds." That phrase appears five times; chapter one closes with that idea, "unfit for any good deed," {Titus 1:16b RSV} Then in chapter two, "Show yourself in all respects a model of good deeds, and in your teaching show integrity, gravity, and sound speech," {Titus 2:7-8a RSV}. And chapter two also closes with that idea, "to purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds," {Titus 2:14b RSV}. In chapter three it says, "be careful to apply themselves to good deeds," {Titus 3:8b RSV}, and once again, "let our people learn to apply themselves to good deeds," {Titus 3:14a RSV}.

Isn't this what the church is looking for, what the world is looking for? Sound doctrine -- good, solid teaching, straight from the shoulder revelations of truth -- and good deeds to back them up and prove the reality of the teaching. Now, first, as to doctrine, the apostle emphasized several points. To begin with, they had to be clear about the basis of men's salvation. How do you change human hearts? Today we are still striving to change people's nature by education, by legislation, and by a change of atmosphere or environment. But as someone has well said, "If you bring a pig into the parlor, it won't change the pig, but it will certainly change the parlor!" And this is the problem here; so they needed to know the truth about salvation. In chapter three the apostle says,

... but when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, ... {Titus 3:4-5a RSV}

He saved us. He saved us! He is the only one who can. He saved us -- we did not save ourselves. In fact, he goes on to say that:

... not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, ... {Titus 3:5b RSV}

Everyone tries to do good deeds. But good deeds will not save you, and the apostle makes that clear. Only the Savior can save; and he goes on to point this out:

he saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit, ... {Titus 3: 5 RSV}

He makes us over from the inside; he does not patch us up from the outside. He does not give us a new leaf to turn over, or try to bolster up our moral courage a bit, or get us to try a little harder, but he changes us by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit.

Psychology is absolutely helpless when it comes to that kind of a procedure. But the gospel does what neither psychology or anything else can do. The supreme message of the church is to declare and proclaim this great good news that there is a means of being regenerated and renewed in the Holy Spirit,

which he poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life. {Titus 3:6-7 RSV}

Now when the Bible speaks of hope, it does not speak of only a faint possibility, the way the world speaks of hope: "I hope I'll be rich some day," or, "I hope I'll be healthy." But when the New Testament speaks of hope, it is a certainty: the hope of eternal life rests upon the One who came to give us eternal life, and we are justified by his grace.

Now beyond these fundamental facts of the gospel, these Cretans needed to learn some truth about present conduct. In chapter two, in connection with the coming of the gospel, Paul writes:

For the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men, [that is, all who believe] training us to renounce irreligion ... {Titus 2:11-12a RSV}

Psychologists are telling us that many people, especially young people, are suffering from "future shock." That is a kind of emotional reaction that sets in when someone contemplating the future sees it as hopeless, with no possibility of accomplishing anything. And many young people today are giving up on the future, saying, "What's the use?"

But here is the answer to that despair -- "awaiting our blessed hope." What a phrase to set against that other -- "future shock" and "blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ," {Titus 2:13b RSV}. Do you see how clearly Jesus is called God in this passage? There is one Savior, and it is Jesus Christ who is the great God who will appear in glory to set right the things that are wrong in this world.

Next, these Cretans needed to learn something about the church order, and in the opening chapter Paul indicates that he had left word with Titus to appoint elders whom he later calls "bishops;" they are the same -- "elders" refers to the man, "bishop" to his office. And he gives qualifications:

... if any man is blameless, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of being profligate or insubordinate. For a bishop, as God's steward, must be blameless; he must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of goodness, master of himself, upright, holy, and self-controlled; {Titus 1:6-8 RSV}

Where do you find such men? Well, Paul expected to find them in Crete, and he expected to find them among those who had once been characterized as liars, evil beasts, and lazy gluttons. This is the change the gospel makes, and he did find them there, because Titus was sent to put them into office to carry on the work of the church. In this way, the church becomes a sort of therapy group, introducing into the community at large the healing virtues of love and light and grace that will gradually transform a community. That is what a church is sent to do.

Finally, these Christians in Crete needed to know something about civic responsibility:

Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for any honest work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all men. {Titus 3:1-2 RSV}

What a contrast that is with some of the activities that are carried on today in the name of the church! But the church is exhorted here to recognize that the authorities are in some sense the ministers of God, sent and used by him to maintain order, and that there should be courtesy and obedience in every area in which the law speaks, except in those areas where it definitely challenges a spiritual precept or ungodliness: to repudiate it, to use our minds and wills to say no to these things.

...and worldly passions, and to live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world, ... {Titus 2:12b RSV}

Not in the church, but in the world -- in the midst of the business of life, in the midst of commerce and trade, and all the usual enterprise of life -- that is where we are to live sober, godly, upright lives. This is truth that they needed to know.

And third, they needed to know truth about a future expectation, and he goes on in that same passage,

... awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, ... {Titus 2:13 RSV}

Now, turning to the need to have good deeds, there is some practical advice here for various age groups: older men are told to,

... be temperate, serious, sensible, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness. {Titus 2:2b RSV}

Then there is a word for older women:

... to be reverent in behavior, not to be slanderers or slaves to drink; they are to teach what is good, and to train the young women to love their husbands ... {Titus 2:3-4a RSV}

That is the task of older women -- to teach the young women how to behave themselves, and to be good wives, and further,

... to love their husbands and children, to be sensible, chaste, domestic, kind, and submissive to their husbands, that the word of God may not be discredited. {Titus 2:4b-5 RSV}

How practical this letter is! And yet, as the apostle gives these practical guidelines, he is in effect quietly injecting into this Cretan community a power that would soon become a vital factor in changing the whole life of this island.

Finally, as the apostle closes with some personal words of admonition and advice, we have a glimpse into his own life. He says,

When I send Artemas or Tychicus to you, do your best to come to me at Nicopolis, for I have decided to spend the winter there. {Titus 3:12 RSV}

Nicopolis was on the western shore of Greece, just across the Adriatic Sea from the heel of the Italian boot. The apostle was apparently writing this letter from Corinth, and was sending two young men down to replace Titus in Crete, so that Titus could rejoin Paul. Later we read that Titus went on up to Dalmatia, on the northern coast, sending Zenas, the lawyer, and Apollos on their way (perhaps to Alexandria, which was Apollos' home), and the apostle admonishes Titus to see that they lack nothing.

Then he closes the letter as he opened it; he says, "And let our people learn to apply themselves to good deeds." {Titus 3:14a RSV}. How did he open the letter?

Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, to further the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth which accords with godliness, ... {Titus 1:1 RSV}

There is the theme of this letter; truth which matches up with godliness; sound doctrine and good deeds going hand in hand. And the basis of it, as we have already seen, is "in hope of eternal life which God, who never lies, promised ages ago ..." {Titus 1:2 RSV}.

That promise is found in Genesis, where God promised before Adam and Eve were driven out of the garden that there would come a redeemer, who would bring life to men (Gen. 3:15), and this is the reference that Paul makes here. Then he speaks of the method by which it would come: "at the proper time manifested in his word through the preaching with which I have been entrusted by command of God our Savior," {Titus 1:3 RSV}. If your life has been changed at all, it was by preaching, by hearing this delivering word set forth; and when you believed it, you found that you, too, experienced the washing of regeneration and the subsequent renewing, the continuous renewal, of the Holy Spirit.

Prayer:

Our Father, we are encouraged again ourselves, as we look at this letter of Paul's to Titus, to adorn the doctrine of God in these days. Generation after generation of Christians have lived and died since those days, but the world is still here, and the promises are still here. And this is our day, Lord: you have called us to be saints, to be members of the Body of Christ, as these early Christians were. Grant to us courage and strength, steadfastness and vision, and faith, that we may manifest these truths clearly in our hour of human history. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

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