

The Duties of Doctrine: Setting a True Church in Order from the Letter to Titus

Text: Various

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Introduction

Over the past several weeks we have been listening to the Apostle Paul give instruction to Titus. There are several clues in the book, most obvious the plural farewell at the end, that indicate this was meant to be overheard and eventually read and shared by the churches themselves. If we understand this letter correctly it appears that Titus was left behind after a typical Pauline mission trip to solidify the churches in the cities of Crete. Christianity was likely introduced to Crete by converts who were present in Jerusalem at Pentecost. Many of these believers who heard the gospel message from Peter and the other disciples would have eventually returned home and share their new-found faith with friends and family. They would have worked through their Scriptures to apply them to their New Covenant situation. There, no doubt, would have been some Gentile converts to this new faith as well and the work to assimilate them from their pagan past to the worldview of the Bible would have been a considerable task. Then it seems that the churches, the some collections of believers in the towns and cities of the island have been strengthened by a visit by Paul and Titus (and others?) that occurs after the events in the book of Acts.

As Pastor Russ unfolded this letter of instruction to Titus he organized the message of the letter around the theme of a "True Church." His initial working outline was designed for us to hear that "a true church submits to God and obeys the commands in the Scriptures." With this in mind the letter unfolded with this plan. From the first chapter's first four verses we read that "a true church will affirm their central need in all times, in all ages in all cultures." In the next verses from 5-9 we saw that "a true church will seek to have a Biblical and Biblically qualified leadership." Then we closed the first chapter by thinking how "a true church is committed to understanding and defending the truth and confronting those who teach error." We continued into what we have as chapter two and read from the first ten verses, that "a true church does not allow the culture to dictate what the Christian life is to be like but commands what the Bible requires." The next section caused us to examine that "a true church insists that the Christian life is lived by the same grace that saved us." And then the letter concluded with the challenge that "a true church calls for a life that reflects the truths that it teaches."

Tonight I have been tasked with reviewing, highlighting and summarizing this letter in preparation for two “open forum exercises” we will have later in the month. We will see that the right doctrine, the truth, the gospel is intimately connected and flows into duty, conduct and behavior. We will have opportunity for question and answer regarding a couple of practical applications of this Scriptural material found in this short letter to Titus.

I. A “Gospeled” Apostleship (Titus 1:1-3)

From the very opening of the letter we will find a Gospel-centered approach to Paul’s instruction. He begins with a brief “defense of his “Gospeled” apostleship. Let us return first to the opening statement of the letter in the first three verses of chapter 1.

Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of elect and their knowledge of the truth, which accords with godliness, ² in hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began ³ and at the proper time manifested in his word through the preaching with which I have been entrusted by the command of God our Savior;

Paul often opens his letters using the typical conventions of letter-writing to establish much more than merely bringing the opening greeting. Titus knows Paul well. He probably has heard Paul share stories of his conversion and calling many times. He may have heard Paul give a detailed defense of his apostleship to those who would question his authority and credentials. Titus would not have “needed” Paul to explain his situation. That means we should take note of this opening explanation of his apostleship and what it means for the rest of the letter’s intention. So with this Paul states that the purpose for his apostleship is to bring God’s elect to faith. But this apostleship is not only for the “coming to faith” of the believer but also for the “continuing in faith” understanding of the truth. He is speaking of a knowledge that is not only intellectual apprehension but also a fullness of understanding that results from experience. For Paul, in this letter and the ones to Timothy, “truth” is a technical term for the gospel, emphasizing the need to understand the content of the preached message.

The goal of Paul’s apostleship is the personal response of faith, a faith based on accurate knowledge of the truth of the gospel, and a faith that naturally and necessarily shows itself in godly behavior. The purpose of the truth is to produce godliness indicating that right belief and right behavior are inseparable. Christianity is based on the truth of the gospel and demands the response of faith lived out in a godly life, a total commitment of one’s life to God with emphasis on the practical outworking of that faith. Notice the three components here. There is faith (a belief in the gospel), the intellectual understanding of the faith (knowledge of the truth), and the proper behavior that must come forth from faith (godliness). All three are necessary elements in Christianity and constitute the goal of Paul’s apostleship.

II. A “Gospeled Purpose” (Titus 1:5, 9)

Then as Paul unfolds the letter he reveals a “Gospeled” purpose for this correspondence. After the opening salutation in most of Paul’s letters is a thanksgiving/prayer where themes are introduced, but in I Tim/Titus he dives right into business (we should take notice of this, just as in the epistle to the Galatians).

He gives his purpose explicitly in verse 5, with a further elaboration in verse 9.

⁵ This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you—

⁹ He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.

Continuing Paul’s purposes in apostleship is why Titus is serving in Crete and establishing order is part of the unfolding of the gospel in godliness. It is uncertain whether the appointing of elders is part of the “putting into order” or is how Titus is to put into order from the structure of the sentence. The immediate context could imply that the identification of elders is the “how” but I think the context of the entire letter suggests that this is a part of what Titus is to be doing while here on Crete.

Putting things in order is not new to Paul’s instruction for churches. He recognizes “decorum” or a “way of doing things” that should characterize God’s people as they gather, worship and minister as churches of Jesus Christ. Titus would have been well seasoned as to Paul’s desires and designs for this order and this letter assumes he knew as much. What Paul does with this letter is point out some specific highlights pertinent to the Cretan situation. Since we have this letter in our Scriptures, God expects this information and message to be pertinent to our situations as well.

But the beginning of this ordering involves proper leadership. And it is essential that this leadership be rooted in the gospel. As one commentator has said: “The reason for the church leader to be devoted to the gospel as explained by the apostolic preaching is that this enables the leader to encourage people with the correct teaching and to reprove those who disagree. They must first accept the truth of the gospel personally and then out of their conviction confront error and teach truth... Leadership in the apostolic church was largely based on proper teaching.”

There are other characteristics of this “gospeled” leader, but let’s move on to the next point to Titus’ instruction.

III. A “Gospeled” Conduct Among Those Within (Titus 2:1, 11-14)

As we move into chapter two we find that right behavior is intimately connected to and flows from right thinking. In particular right thinking about the intent and content of the gospel itself leads to a “Gospeled” conduct among those within the community of believers. Let’s read chapter two verse one and then move down to a purpose connection in verses eleven through fourteen.

But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine.

¹¹ For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, ¹² training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, ¹³ waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, ¹⁴ who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

The behaviors that align with sound, healthy or proper teaching can only occur in the context of the gospel. The ethics or patterns and principles for living in the letter to Titus as well as the letters to Timothy flow from an awareness of God’s saving work for the believer. Grace can be thought of as a one-word summary of God’s saving act in Christ, given freely to sinners who believe. Grace provides the ongoing empowerment for Paul to conduct himself and expects that to be the case for everyone.

For Paul, not only has God’s grace saved believers, but also has the ongoing task of teaching them to live righteously. Grace “trains” us to live in what accords with sound doctrine. And it is not sufficient merely to avoid and put away evil, but believers must pursue after integrity and holiness with an outlook that embraces the future as well as the present. Our lives presently are based on an eschatological perspective, a hope that is sure. It is the future that is victorious, even though our lives now may seem like a shambles, uncertain, chaotic and pained.

All of the instructions found in verses two through ten should, and indeed can, only occur with the power and orientation of the gospel. But the gospel not only affects our conduct with fellow believers in the life of the church, but also as we live as sojourners in this world. That is where Paul’s instruction to Titus went next.

IV. A “Gospeled Hope” Toward Those Without (Titus 3:1, 4-8)

We come to another imperative in chapter three. Chapter one had Titus to “put in order” and the overall instruction, first by “appointing elders”, then in chapter two he told him to “teach as behavior that is accord with sound doctrine” and now in chapter three is to “remind them to,” in essence, live in way that is a “Gospeled” hope toward those without the gospel and outside of their believing community. So for tonight we will finish with looking one more gospel emphasis from chapter three verses one and two and then from four to eight.

Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, ² to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people.

⁴ But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, ⁵ he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. ⁸ The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works. These things are excellent and profitable for people.

Verses four through seven represent one of the noteworthy “trustworthy” or “faithful” sayings found in the letters to Titus and Timothy. Some scholars think these represent “creedal” or “doctrinal” material that has become known and common among the early Christians that Paul is quoting with approval in these letters. This particular one speaks of the “appearance” of God to “save us”, because of his “own mercy” in a “washing of the Spirit” because of the saving work of Jesus Christ. He bestowed his grace to justify and make us “heirs of hope.” Note the strong gospel orientation to this doctrinal “saying.”

It involves all three members of the trinity. It declares that it is not our self worth or work but God’s plans and actions that accomplish our position. The connection of each prepositional phrase and clause is rich. Let me just read verses five through seven again to highlight the flow:

⁵ he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Paul not only endorsed (or originally composed) this saying, but also “insists” that these ideas are taught, understood and applied for a purpose. Understanding the gospel will have application to life. He states “so that...may be careful to devote themselves to good works.” But these good works are connect to the previous introductory statements indicating he is thinking of works observable to those outside the community, the unbelievers that they live in and among.

Reflect and Respond

As we wrap up tonight, let's remember that the life of a true church is driven by several factors. One is that it is God's plan, outline and order that a church is to be governed and known by. Other culture schemes of governing and practice, of worship and ministry, with improvements and "adjustments" need to be carefully weighed against scripture. Coupled with this should be a commitment to God's word and from the language of Titus, sound doctrine. We also need to be on the lookout for schemes that seem to belittle Bible teaching with phrases that "Jesus unites, doctrine divides," or "we need to just be like Jesus." And thirdly we should be always reliant on God's gospel and grace for the motivation, empowerment and content of our life and living. Other strategies that emphasize plans, steps, techniques need to be carefully evaluated in light of the gospel.

Using a recent commentator to help us close, he points out the same themes from Titus that we have emphasized. I really like his own words so I will give an extended quote. First, in regards to the gospel he says: "At the heart of the pastoral epistles is the gospel of Jesus Christ. God has acted in grace and mercy through the death of Christ with an offer of forgiveness, to which people must respond in faith, turning from evil, receiving empowerment through God's Spirit, and looking forward to eternal life..."

But he goes on to say: "Even as early as the epistle to the Galatians, Paul's gospel was a recognizable entity; Paul argues that if someone preached a gospel contrary to what had been received, that person was to be condemned. By the time of the second epistle to the Thessalonians, Paul could characterize his teaching as "traditions" to which they should adhere and his teaching was to be passed on to other churches..."

And further: "This doctrine applied to everyday life. This is especially evident in Titus. After dealing with the issue of leadership, Paul gives a telling description of the opponents: they claim to know God, but their deeds prove they do not...[Eventually he] is explicit in stating that one of the very purposes for which God saved sinners is so that they would deny ungodly and worldly passions and live reverently, zealous for good works, the very thing for which the opponents are unfit. Right belief must always show itself in right behavior..."

In fact: "Paul does not refute the theological error of the opponents' teaching in detail; his critique centers on the opponents' behavior. There are two underlying premises to this approach: (1) Theology should affect behavior. Christ came to "redeem us from all lawlessness and cleanse for himself a special people, a zealot for good works." The call to godly behavior is not a works-righteousness; neither is it a call to be a good citizen without theological underpinning. (2) A person's belief and behavior are so closely related that behavior reflects belief; the fruit of the tree is a true representation of the root of the tree; it is out of one's heart that one speaks..."

Because: "God has saved believers so that they will be zealous in turning from evil to good. Consequently, the truth of a person's affirmation can be tested by that person's behavior, which either supports or contradicts the person's claims. Positively stated, it is the call of God on a person's life that leads him or her to godly living, even a life of suffering."

May God's call of the gospel to our lives lead us in sound doctrine to faithful duty.

