

Titus 1: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Titus chapter 1. Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God's elect, and their knowledge of the truth which accords with godliness, in hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began, and at the proper time manifested in his word through the preaching with which I have been entrusted by the command of God our Saviour.

To Titus, my true child in a common faith, grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Saviour. 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, if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife and his children are believers, and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination.

For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered, or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined.

He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine, and also able to rebuke those who contradict it. For there are many who are insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party.

They must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach. One of the Cretans, a prophet of their own, said, Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.

[1 : 36] This testimony is true. Therefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith, not devoting themselves to Jewish myths and the commands of people who turn away from the truth.

To the pure all things are pure, but to the defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure. But both their minds and their consciences are defiled. They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works.

They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work. The book of Titus is one of Paul's three pastoral epistles, along with the books of 1st and 2nd Timothy.

The dating of the book of Titus, like the other pastoral epistles, is difficult. Perhaps it was written during Paul's third missionary journey, during his time in Ephesus. The status of verse 5, that Paul left Titus on Crete, need not imply that Paul was actually on Crete himself.

However, in this letter he does indicate a knowledge of the situation there. Crete doesn't appear in the book of Acts until Acts chapter 27, when Paul and his companions go by Crete on their way to Rome.

[2 : 39] Crete had a bad reputation as a culture of sexual license, debauchery, lying and gluttony, all things referenced later in this first chapter. As in the other pastoral epistles, Paul has opponents very clearly in mind.

Titus' opponents on Crete seem to have had a Jewish-Christian background, and there may have also been some ascetic elements within the mix. Of Titus himself we do not know a great deal.

He is referenced in the book of Galatians as a Gentile, Galatians chapter 2 verse 3, but even Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek.

Titus is mentioned on several occasions in the book of 2nd Corinthians, as an emissary of Paul to the Corinthians. In 2nd Corinthians chapter 8 verse 23, As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker for your benefit.

Like the other pastoral epistles, the Pauline authorship of the book of Titus has been disputed. However, when these arguments against authenticity are examined more closely, they are not at all as strong as they might first appear.

[3 : 42] Paul begins the letter by describing himself and his ministry. Here he speaks of himself as a servant of God, language that he does not use elsewhere. Speaking of himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ, Paul proceeds to articulate the purpose and the basis of his ministry.

Its purpose is the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth. The faith of God's elect refers to the belief of the church. God has chosen his people and brought them into participation in the life of his son, and he wants them to be built up in the faith.

The intention is that they rise to their full maturity. One of Paul's fullest statements of what this means is found in Ephesians chapter 4 verses 11 to 16. And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.

Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

The truth into which Paul is guiding the church is one that accords with godliness, or one that leads to godliness, most likely the former. Godliness is the measure and a defining characteristic of the maturity into which Paul is guiding the people of God.

[5 : 24] This is the goal. The basis is the hope of eternal life. Paul situates his message and his ministry within an eschatological frame. The hope of eternal life was promised before the ages began, and now, in the fullness of time, it has been manifested through the preaching concerning Jesus Christ.

Paul's own ministry is an expression of this. He addresses Titus as his true child in a common faith. It is possible that this implies that it was through the ministry of the apostle Paul that Titus was converted.

However, the sonship of Titus, like the sonship of Timothy, might refer more to the way that he is functioning as an apostolic emissary for Paul. Paul had left Titus on Crete.

It is not clear that Paul himself had been on Crete, but he had commissioned Titus with his charge there. There already seemed to be several churches on the island of Crete, and Titus' duty was to put them in some sort of order.

Here, as we also see in 1 Timothy chapter 3, the task of the apostle's representative, seems to involve in large measure the establishment of a new structure of church government. There are clear parallels to observe between verses 6-9 and 1 Timothy chapter 3 verses 1-7.

[6 : 37] The saying is trustworthy. If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.

He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive. For if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil.

Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil. The task of Titus is that of appointing elders in every town.

This is most likely the task of establishing a leader of each town church, rather than lots of isolated household churches, each with their own elders. Paul wishes to establish an elder, or an overseer, within each town.

This figure would presumably have been one of the leaders of the existing house churches. It is imperative that candidates for such an office be of very good reputation, above any reproach.

[7 : 51] They are to be judged by their households. First of all, candidates for such a position have to be husbands of one wife. Perhaps this is designed to exclude converted polygamists. However, it might just be a way of saying that the suitable candidate for such an office must be a one-woman man, a man who is absolutely faithful to his wife.

He needs to have a family whose behaviour conforms with the gospel. In a deeply perverse and pagan society like Crete's, his household needs to be a model household. If his children are given to the ways of the surrounding culture, he will not be able to give the sort of example that is needed.

Likewise, if his children do not respect his authority, if they are insubordinate, his ability to lead the church will be compromised, and it may also be an indication of a failure on his part, that he is the sort of head of a household who provokes his children to anger, or perhaps that he is too weak, or lacks sufficient moral character to set a household in order, the overseer is called to act as God's steward in his household.

While teaching is an essential part of this role, the task of the overseer does not narrowly focus upon that act of teaching. It is better thought of as the task of a guardian or steward.

He needs to manage and oversee the running of the household of God. To fulfil such a role, besides being above reproach, he needs to be a humble man, who is able to exercise control over his passions, his temper, and his appetites.

[9 : 17] He must not be given to anger, or given to much wine, with which violence can often come. He must not be a greedy man, a man who is driven by the love of money. Rather, he must be characterised by a series of positive traits.

Hospitality is mentioned first. Hospitality was absolutely essential to the early church's life. Wealthy patrons and hosts would allow the church to meet in their homes. They would support missionaries.

They would provide a place for missionaries and other Christian ministers who are passing through to stay. The overseer also needs to be someone who loves what is good. He needs to be self-controlled, someone who acts with restraint and a well-ordered will.

A man of prudence, sobriety, and moderation. He must be morally upright, holy, given to the things of God, and disciplined, someone who has a reign upon his appetites and lusts.

From these aspects of the fitting overseer's character, Paul turns to the duties of the overseer. He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught. He needs to be a man of backbone, resolve, of commitment, and conviction.

[10 : 20] The overseer needs to function as the immune system and the backbone of the church in which he serves. If the overseer is weak and compromising, everyone else is weakened by him.

If he, however, holds firm, he makes it so much easier for everyone else to do so. His holding firm in the trustworthy word as taught is expressed both in clear and accurate teaching of the truth to those under his instruction, and also in his ability forthrightly and effectively to rebuke those who go against it.

Such traits of the overseer were clearly needed on the island of Crete. On Crete, there seemed to have been many people, particularly among the Jews professing Christ, who were not submitting to the church or the proper teaching and were spreading empty and lying doctrines.

Strong overseers in each town would be far better situated to silence the false teachers. Their practice seems to have been to subvert the teaching of churches on the household level.

Perhaps we have an indication of such teachers in 2 Timothy chapter 3 verses 6 and 7. For among them are those who creep into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and led astray by various passions, always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth.

[11 : 31] The false teachers were seemingly mercenaries, using their false teaching as a means of getting wealth for themselves. In verse 12, Paul makes a surprising statement. One of the Cretans, a prophet of their own, said, Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.

This statement may be a quotation from Epimenides in the 5th or 6th century BC, the argument of Clement and Jerome. Alternatively, it may be Callimachus from the 3rd century BC in his hymn to Zeus.

Crete had a long-lasting reputation as a society of debauchery, of ungoverned appetites, and of lies and religious falsehoods. In such a wicked society, Christians were supposed to stand out, but Paul here characterises the false teachers as people acting entirely in terms of the regional stereotype.

Several commentators note the liar's paradox in verse 13. A Cretan statement that Cretans are always liars is declared to be true. Paul, however, does not seem to be playing upon that paradox here.

His point is rather to highlight the fact that this Cretan stereotype is not just one given by outsiders. Honoured figures within Cretan society itself have confirmed and validated it.

[12 : 43] The false teachers here seem to be similar to those described in 1 Timothy 1, verses 3 and 4. Paul wrote in that passage, As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus, so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations, rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith.

It is likely that these Jewish teachers were working with certain Jewish deuterocanonical texts and various pseudepigraphical literature built upon imaginations and speculations concerning ancient figures.

Such fanciful, fictional and speculative literature was taking the place of the clear word of God. Along with this, certain ascetic practices seem to have been adopted. Paul's teaching here conforms with what he says in Romans chapter 14, verse 20.

Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. It is not food that makes someone clean or unclean.

Clean, cleanness or uncleanness comes ultimately from the heart. Jesus makes the same point in Luke chapter 11, verses 39 to 41. And the Lord said to him, Now you Pharisees, cleanse the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness.

[14 : 02] You fools! Did not he who made the outside make the inside also? But give as arms those things that are within, and behold, everything is clean for you. And then also in Mark chapter 7, verses 18 to 23.

And he said to them, Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart, but his stomach, and is expelled?

Thus he declared all foods clean. And he said, What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness.

All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person. Among other things, the false teachers in Crete seem to have been trying to manage the uncleanness of the heart merely by the regulation of external objects, treating those foods as if they were the source of uncleanness, rather than the sinful heart itself.

Yet Paul here describes them as detestable, disobedient, and unfit for any good work. Despite this extreme condemnation, though, Paul presents Titus' duty as that of rebuking them, with the hope that they might be sound in the faith.

[15 : 21] For all of his harsh words, Paul has not given up on the possibility of these false teachers being turned around. A question to consider, how might Paul's teaching concerning the overseer here and elsewhere help us in our understanding of the proper role and the suitable persons for the office of the pastor?

