

Titus 3: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Titus chapter 3. Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarrelling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people. For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others, and hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared, 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, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that being justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. 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, but avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless.

As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him. Knowing that such a person is warped and sinful, he is self-condemned.

When I send Artemis or Tychicus to you, do your best to come to me at Nicopolis, for I have decided to spend the winter there. Do your best to speed Zenos the lawyer and Apollos on their way, see that they lack nothing, and let our people learn to devote themselves to good works, so as to help cases of urgent need, and not be unfruitful. All who are with me send greetings to you.

Greet those who love us in the faith. Grace be with you all. From the Apostle Paul's teaching concerning appropriate behaviour in the household in chapter 2 of Titus, in chapter 3 he moves to the more general behaviour of the church and society.

This presumably is teaching that they had received before, so Titus' duty is to remind them of it, rather than that of laying a foundation. Once again, Paul's teaching here might indicate a particular concern for the public image of Christians in the society at Crete. In certain respects, Christians need to stand out, yet in other respects they need to fit in, to be people who are not troublemakers, rabble-rousers, discontents or revolutionaries, but upstanding members of the society. They are to be submissive to rulers and authority, to obey those things laid upon them by the government, but also to be a public-spirited people. We might here recall the prophet Jeremiah's instruction to the captives in Babylon, in Jeremiah chapter 29 verse 7, but seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. Similar teaching is elsewhere in Paul's writings, for instance in Romans chapter 13 verses 1 to 7, and then elsewhere in the New Testament, in places like 1 Peter chapter 2 verses 13 to 17. Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor's supreme, or to governors are sent by him to punish those who do evil, and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God.

[3 : 35] Honor the emperor. As a people, Christians need to avoid slander. Perhaps Paul has in mind the bad mouthing of authorities that people can so often engage in. Appropriate Christian submission to rulers and authorities requires, among other things, according them appropriate respect in the way that we speak about them. Christians are to be a peaceful people, avoiding quarrels among themselves, or getting entangled in those of the wider society. Here we might also think back to the way that Paul has previously described the opponents of Titus and Crete. Contentious people who are marked out by their quarrelling. Rather than such characteristics, which ultimately flow from pride, Christians should be distinguished by being conciliatory, by being considerate, forbearing, tractable, and then also humble and meek. Such humility and meekness will extinguish many conflicts before they even get started.

These virtues need to be exhibited in all of the Christians' interactions, both within the church and with people outside of it. The grounds for this sort of behaviour are found in the work of God, a work of God by which we were delivered from a former manner of life and transformed so that we might live differently thereafter. Verses 3-7 provide the basis for the statement of verses 1-2.

It is a great before and after statement, beginning with a characterisation of our former manner of life and then speaking of the means by which we were delivered from it. It rules out salvation by works of righteousness before describing the means by which God saved us and then the end for which he did so. Verses 4-7 are all a single sentence in the Greek. As Philip Towner notes, Paul's characterisation of Christians' former manner of life could be clustered under three headings, ignorance, which includes foolishness, disobedience and being led astray, followed by bondage, being slaves to various passions and pleasures, and then finally hatred, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. Once again we might see something of the shadow of the opponents in Crete here. Deliverance from such a manner of life would require a number of different things. It would necessitate revelation and knowledge to address the ignorance. It would require redemption and deliverance to address the bondage, and it would require a new principle of love to address the hatred. That need for a new principle of love is perhaps where the accent of Paul's teaching is most strongly placed. The sort of society that arises when people practice that former way of life is one of deep antagonisms and tensions between people. People are always trying to get advantage over others, resenting others, being bitter towards them, or malicious and vindictive in their intentions.

Mutual hatred is the operating principle for life in this manner of society. One of the things that Paul diagnoses in the false teachers that he challenges is that behind their teaching one needs to recognise these dynamics at work. They are not merely concerned about ideas and truths. Scratch the surface and you will see that they are being driven by these dynamics of hatred.

Salvation for Paul is an epiphany. In verse 4, But when the goodness and lovingkindness of God our Saviour appeared, this is something that we've seen in the preceding chapter, in verses 11 and 12, For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age.

[7 : 03] The language of verse 4, goodness and lovingkindness, is the sort of language that in Paul's day would have been particularly associated with the benevolent ruler. This benevolence of God the Saviour is something that leads to our salvation.

Paul explicitly excludes anything in us that might have merited God's action of salvation. God's salvation is purely of his own mercy. Works, whether works of the Jewish law, or more general ethical behaviour that might be practised by certain Gentiles, is ruled out as a basis for God's salvation. Elsewhere in the Pauline corpus, his focus is generally particularly upon the Jewish law. Here, and on a few other occasions, it becomes clear that Paul's point is more generally applicable. For instance, in 2 Timothy chapter 1 verse 9, who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works, but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began.

And then in Ephesians chapter 2 verses 8 and 9, for by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing. It is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Some have seen in verses 4 to 7 a possible baptismal hymn. Raymond Collins, for instance, argues that if we remove some of the clauses concerning justification, which Paul has added to the hymn to unpack his point, we will see that it has a natural poetic form in the Greek.

Salvation here occurs by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit. This expression could be read in various ways. It could be read like, through the washing of regeneration and through the renewal of the Holy Spirit, or it could be read more with the sense, through the washing that brings about regeneration and renewal, given by the Holy Spirit.

[8 : 51] In the first case, there are two distinct operations. In the second, there is a single washing by the Holy Spirit, which involves both renewal and regeneration. The washing of regeneration could refer to the act of washing, or it could refer to the place of washing, the laver, for instance.

We encounter such language elsewhere in the New Testament, for instance in Ephesians chapter 5 verses 25 to 27. Also in 1 Corinthians chapter 6 verse 11.

And such were some of you, but you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. Within the wording of such verses, we might hear Old Testament prophetic statements concerning the new covenant being echoed.

For instance, Ezekiel chapter 36 verses 25 to 27. Such a statement clearly brings together images of water, the Spirit, and renewal.

A similar conjunction of imagery can be found in Jesus' teaching to Nicodemus in John chapter 3, where we also have the element of rebirth present. You must be born again by water and the Spirit.

[10 : 38] Elsewhere in the New Testament, we might think about places like 2 Corinthians chapter 5 verse 17 for themes of renewal. Or in Romans chapter 6 verse 4.

We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

The redemptive historical underpinnings of all of this might be seen on the day of Pentecost, as Christ baptises his church by the Holy Spirit. How then should we understand the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit?

Some, like Towner, have seen this as a metaphorical reference to the work of the Holy Spirit. However, with perhaps the majority of commentators, I believe that this needs to be related to baptism.

This, of course, is not to pit baptism against the Holy Spirit. Rather, baptism is a means by which we enter into full enjoyment of the life of the Holy Spirit. It is in baptism that God confirms and seals to us what he has already granted to us in quickening us to newness of life.

[11 : 46] In this respect, baptism might be compared to a coronation. Although the king's accession to the throne might occur upon the death of the former monarch, the coronation is the public validation of his sovereignty, his entrance into the full enjoyment of his new office, and the open and public recognition of his new status.

The person who has been converted to belief in Christ, but has never been baptised, is fundamentally stunted in his Christian growth. He might be compared to the child that has been adopted into a new family, but does not get around to taking on his adoptive family's name, nor is he entering into full fellowship with his new siblings, or eating at the family meal table.

In the New Testament, baptism is not so much a work that we do, but rather an act of God's grace and assurance to enrol and confirm us in the fellowship of his Son, marking out our very bodies by a sign of Christ's death and burial, so that we might be assured of sharing with him in resurrection life.

Baptism brings us into a full participation in the life of the community formed at Pentecost, as Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 12, verse 13, For in one spirit we were all baptised into one body, Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, and all were made to drink of one spirit.

Seen this way, baptism, which Paul presumes as being received and lived out by faith, is the definitive event that can stand for the whole realities of regeneration and renewal that are brought about by the gift of the Holy Spirit.

[13 : 13] It is in baptism that the faith of the convert enters fully into its re-birthright. As such, baptism can be a powerful and effective symbol of the entire reality of God's grace that has led us to that point.

The gift of the Spirit is received through the work of Jesus Christ our Saviour. It is through Christ's ascension that the Spirit can be poured out at Pentecost. Having received this wonderful new standing before God purely on the basis of his grace, God's purpose can be achieved.

We are now heirs according to the hope of eternal life. This great work of God's goodness in salvation is the basis for our transformed manner of life. For Paul, it is imperative that people live this out.

This transformed manner of life is the purpose of it all. To the extent that a transformed manner of life is not being lived out, salvation is not being experienced. In verses 9-11, Paul returns to the question of the false teachers in Crete, instructing Titus more directly in how to deal with them.

He must beware of engaging with false teachers on their own terms. Dubious speculations, arcane knowledge and esoteric teachings are dangerous. As the false teachers in Crete are handling them, they draw people's attention away from the clarity of the gospel and the faith that corresponds to it.

[14 : 30] The false teaching Paul describes here is similar to that described in 1 Timothy 1-3-4. 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.

Titus needs to be wise to the false teachers, recognising the deeper moral rot that often lies behind the facade of the false teaching. There are persons who by their very nature stir up divisions, because they are arrogant, sinful and warped, as he goes on to describe them.

Such persons need to be dealt with in a manner akin to Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18-17. If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone.

If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.

If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Paul's instruction to Titus here seems to follow the same pattern.

[15 : 45] Those who reject the earlier warnings need to be excommunicated. Paul concludes by giving instructions to Titus concerning future plans. Paul will either send Artemis or Tychicus to him, and at that point, Titus needs to come to join him in Nicopolis, a city on the west coast of Greece.

Zenos and Apollos will also accompany one of these men, and they need to be helped on their way, provided with hospitality while in Crete, and given the resources for the next leg of their journey. The practice of hospitality in the early church was one of the reasons why they had such an effective network of churches.

The frequent movement of ministers and missionaries around this network also greatly strengthened the witness of the gospel. The church that it produced was far more tightly knit. Before he signs off, Paul gives Titus yet one more reminder that the Cretans and Christians more generally need to devote themselves to good works.

Here, however, he probably has the more immediate need of the travelling ministers in view. He closes the epistle as he usually does, with final greetings. Such exchanges of greetings, not just between Paul and Titus, but between their respective communities, was another way in which stronger bonds within the early church could be forged.

A question to consider. The form of life that the church is to practice is founded upon God's own action, which reveals in turn his character.

[17 : 11] After experiencing the salvation of God, God's action and character becomes the basis of our own action. How does God's action and character revealed in his salvation help to explain the mode of life that is practiced within the church?