

# The Message of Titus: An Overview<sup>1</sup>

Ray Van Neste

**Ray Van Neste** serves as the Director of the Center for Biblical Studies at Union University. He has recently completed a Ph.D. in New Testament from the University of Aberdeen, Scotland and is Assistant Professor of Christian Studies at Union University. He has served in pastoral and preaching ministry in Tennessee, Wisconsin, and Scotland.

## Introduction

Each year as I teach New Testament Survey here at Union University I have my students list the books of the New Testament and answer a few basic questions: Which books do you think you know a lot about? Which books do you think you know little or nothing about? Why do you think you know more about some books than others? Titus never fares well in this basic survey. While this might be expected in some ways, two student responses from this most recent term are especially revealing. One student said she had more exposure to certain books because they have “more value and application than others do.” Titus was singled out as an example of one with less value and application. Another student wrote: “I am unfamiliar with the teachings of Titus and Philemon, possibly due to their short length and lack of profoundly deep insight. (They have insight, just not profound—I’m not degrading any books of the Bible!)”

Aside from the *faux pas* of turning in such statements to a professor who has spent several years of his life studying such “less than profound” books (which made for a good laugh in class) and the problematic view of scripture implied, these statements illustrate the basic lack of awareness of the message of this powerful little letter. Indeed, this lack of awareness is not limited to the church, but I have often encountered it in the halls of academia as well (e.g., those who think of it as only addressing pastors).<sup>2</sup> Yet, this has not always been the view of this letter. Martin Luther, who was willing to criticize some biblical books (e.g., James), wrote concerning the letter to Titus:

“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.”<sup>3</sup> This is a striking commendation for an oft neglected epistle—a masterful summary of “*all that is necessary for a Christian to know and to live!*” I believe Luther is right. He is, once again, a surer guide than our contemporaries, for this letter summarizes the essence of the Christian life, particularly with a view to what the Christian community, the church, is to do. Indeed, I believe the letter to Titus is a tract for our times, and the church today bears the marks of having neglected its message.<sup>4</sup>

The letter to Titus is a discourse on church health. Paul and Titus have completed a successful mission on the island of Crete, and Titus has been left behind to complete the work of establishing the new believers in well-functioning churches (1:5). Paul writes to urge Titus on in his mission and lays out the key issues that need to be addressed in order for these new churches to be healthy and vibrant. In a day when there is much discussion about church growth and church health, a letter in which Paul directly addresses these issues is certainly timely. What is it that will make a church thrive? What are the key issues of concern in Paul’s mind when seeking to establish new churches? The letter to Titus answers these questions.

Before turning directly to the key issues of the letter, one other element of the letter’s setting needs to be noted. These fledgling churches were located on the island of Crete, a place proverbial in the ancient world for its moral decadence. Polybius,

the ancient historian, wrote that it was almost “impossible to find . . . personal conduct more treacherous or a public policy more unjust than in Crete” (*Histories* 6.47).<sup>5</sup> Polybius also states, “So much in fact do sordid love of gain and lust for wealth prevail among them, that the Cretans are the only people in the world in whose eyes no gain is disgraceful” (*Histories* 6.46).<sup>6</sup> Cicero also comments, “Indeed, men’s principles of life are so different that the Cretans . . . consider piracy and brigandage honourable . . .” (*De Republica* 3.9.15).<sup>7</sup> While these quotes come from a time prior to Paul’s ministry, they aptly describe the general view of Crete in the ancient world. The letter to Titus addresses the challenges of establishing churches in a particularly hostile environment.<sup>8</sup> The fact that these fledgling churches exist within a largely immoral society only makes it more relevant to our setting, which is increasingly similar to the Cretan situation.

What then are the key issues needing to be addressed in order to assure the health of these new churches assailed by an immoral milieu? The answer can be found in an analysis of the structure of the letter. I have elsewhere argued in more detail for the following structure of Titus:<sup>9</sup>

- Salutation 1:1-4
- Body of the Letter 1:5-3:14
  - 1:5-9 Body Opening: The need for elders to (a) exhort in sound doctrine and (b) refute opponents.
  - (b) 1:10-16 The problem of opponents
  - (a) 2:1-3:8 Sound doctrine which necessarily includes lifestyles
    - 2:1-10 Lifestyles which correspond to sound doctrine
    - 2:11-14 Doctrinal basis

- 2:15 Summary exhortation
- 3:1-2 Lifestyles which correspond to sound doctrine
- 3:3-8a Doctrinal basis
- 3:8b-d Summary exhortation
- (b’) 3:9-11 The problem of opponents
- 3:12-14 Body Closing: Travel plans with concluding exhortation
- Closing 3:15

If this proposed structure holds, the letter to Titus is a carefully crafted, cohesive document (contrary to the older prevailing view).<sup>10</sup> The structure demonstrates how the pieces of the letter could fit together in the flow of thought. After the reminder of the need to finish what was left undone in the planting of these churches, Paul first mentions the need for elders (1:5-9). The discussion of elders closes with the mention of the need for exhortation in sound doctrine and refutation of error. This introduces what follows. 1:10-16 and 3:9-11 discuss the problem of false teaching (bracketing the rest of the letter body). Within these brackets, there are two parallel sections, both of which begin with a description of appropriate living (2:1-10; 3:1-2) and then ground this lifestyle in an exposition of the gospel (2:11-15; 3:3-8). Thus, there are four key issues discussed here and urged upon Titus (and the Cretan believers) as important for the health of the church. They are the establishment of proper leadership (1:5-9), recognition of and proper handling of error (1:10-16; 3:9-11), gospel-appropriate living (2:1-10; 3:1-2), and a clear understanding of the gospel itself (2:11-15; 3:3-8).<sup>11</sup> These could be summarized as proper leadership, proper discipline, proper living, and proper doctrine.

### **Establish Proper Leadership (1:5-9)**

The first issue to which Paul turns is the need for biblical leadership within the church. Leadership is commonly noted today as an essential element for church health. However, it is instructive to note the picture of leadership given here. We cannot give an extended treatment of the paragraph but will note a few key items.

We might first note a couple of things simply in how the position of leadership is mentioned. While neither of these issues is the burden of the passage at hand, they do illuminate some basic assumptions pertinent for today. First, the terminology used here is not that which is most common in Southern Baptist churches today. Paul refers to those in this office as “elders” and “bishop” or “overseer.” These are by far the more common terms in the New Testament, as the noun “pastor” is only used once in the New Testament for this office (Eph 4:11). This does not mean it is illegitimate to use the term “pastor,” but it does mean that we ought not to balk at the use of this other biblical language as well. More significantly, the wording suggests that the churches would have a plurality of elders rather than a solo pastor, which is more common in our churches. Paul instructs Titus to “appoint elders in every city as I directed you” (1:5). It sounds like there is to be more than one elder in each city, and one would assume that there will be one church in each city as elsewhere in Paul’s ministry. Thus, each church would have more than one elder.<sup>12</sup> This would fit with what we know of Paul’s ministry in Acts. After his initial visit to each city on his first mission journey, Paul returned to each city for follow up and “appointed elders for them in every church” (Acts 14:23). This appears to be Paul’s regular practice in planting churches.

The focus of the discussion of leadership is a description of the type of man who should be appointed to such an office. Commentators often express surprise that the list deals almost exclusively with character qualities rather than job descriptions. However, this should be no surprise. The question being addressed is not, “What should an elder do?” but “What sort of person is qualified to be an elder?” The focus on character is then highly significant as it makes the point that character counts. If these Cretan churches (and ours as well) are going to survive, they must be led by men who exemplify basic Christian character—especially in the midst of an immoral culture like Crete’s or our own.<sup>13</sup> Again, the list here has often been maligned for being so basic.<sup>14</sup> Requiring that the church’s leaders not be drunken brawlers (1:7) does not sound like a particularly high standard. However, taken together, it is clear that what the list requires is proven moral character. There is no place for excusing a moral lapse because a pastor/elder is proficient in his tasks. Character is an essential part of his task. Elders are to model in their life what they teach in their messages. These character qualities are too easily overlooked today. As goes the moral character of the church’s leaders, so goes the church.

In this discussion of character two areas receive special attention. First, there is an emphasis throughout on reputation before a watching world (e.g., “above reproach,” 1:6, 7). It is important that the life of the church leaders be an asset and not a liability in the mission of the church. Sadly, this has been made all too clear by events in recent years. Secondly, there is a special focus on family life with the mention of his marriage and children in 1:6. The picture of an elder is not a man removed from daily

life, but a man who walks in the normal course of life, and does so well, living in accord with the gospel. Leadership ability arises from learning to live life well in light of the gospel; only then can one lead others.

While the bulk of the list focuses on character, the list climaxes with the mention of teaching. It was common in ancient writing to give special emphasis to a certain item in a list by placing it either first or last and then making it disproportionately longer than the other items in the list.<sup>15</sup> This is exactly what happens in 1:9. Whereas the rest of the list consists of one or two word items, this last item consists of 21 words! The other items are simply adjectives or nouns, but this one is a verbal clause with two explanatory purpose clauses. This greater length and complexity sets it apart as Paul emphasizes the teaching role of the elder.<sup>16</sup> Whereas the other characteristics listed are also required of other believers, this aptitude in teaching and refuting is *the* distinguishing mark of the elder.

The first thing stated in this climactic element is that the elder must hold fast to the faithful word (1:9). The verb here (*antechomai*) suggests allegiance and devotion, most likely in this context allegiance to the truth arising from devotion to the truth. Calvin appropriately states, “In short, in a pastor there is demanded not only learning, but such zeal for pure doctrine as never to depart from it.”<sup>17</sup> For churches to be healthy they must be led by men who are firmly convinced of sound doctrine and as a result are passionately committed to it.

This grasp of and allegiance to sound doctrine is to have a two-fold result, positive and negative sides of the same reality.<sup>18</sup> First, in one who would be an elder, his devotion to the truth must result in an

ability to “exhort in sound doctrine.” He must be able to teach purely, the truths of God’s word. No man is truly a pastor in the church of God unless he is a teacher. There is no place for saying that one is a fine pastor but not much of a teacher. Such a statement is akin to saying, “This is a fine car; it just does not run.” If something fails to do that for which it is designed, then it is not “fine”! The office of bishop/elder/pastor, according to this passage, is designed for instructing the people of God in the word of God, because the church cannot operate or grow in any way other than by the word of God. This emphasis on teaching has been the apostolic pattern from the beginning. In Acts 6 deacons are appointed so that the apostles, leaders of the church at that time, might “devote themselves to the ministry of the word and prayer” (Acts 6:2-4). If there is to be any health in a church, the elders must be gifted in and given to the teaching of sound doctrine.<sup>19</sup>

The flip side of expounding truth is refuting error. Indeed, doing the former inevitably results in doing the latter. This is in view in Acts 20 as Paul exhorts the Ephesian elders to “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock” since there will be false teachers. If there is to be health, disease must be detected and dealt with. Stott is instructive as usual when he comments on this verse:

The negative aspect of this teaching ministry is particularly unfashionable today. But if our Lord Jesus and his apostles did it, warning of false teachers and denouncing them, we must not draw back from it ourselves. Widespread failure to do it may well be a major cause of the doctrinal confusion which prevails in so many churches today.<sup>20</sup>

Any true shepherd must warn the sheep

about the wolves, and not simply with general warnings but by pointing out very plainly exactly who and where these wolves are. Only in this way will he “guard the flock.” Shepherd is indeed an appropriate metaphor for this task in the dual nature of teaching, since the elder must both feed the flock and fend off the foes.

Lastly, it must be noted that there is an authority vested in the leadership of the church. This is implied in the call to exhort and refute, but is made explicit in the summary exhortation to Titus in 2:15 (cf. 3:8 as well). Paul tells Titus, “These things speak and exhort and reprove with all authority. Let no one disregard you” (2:15). This is a strong statement. The teaching ministry, including reproving or rebuking, is to be done “with all authority” and no one is to be allowed to ignore it. In an anti-authoritarian age, this is hard for many to accept, but this is exactly what the text says. And, this is not the only such text. 1 Timothy 5:17 refers to elders as those who “rule” (*proistēmi*), and 1 Thessalonians 5:12 calls for proper esteem for those who “have charge over” (*proistēmi*) those within the church. Most explicitly Hebrews 13:17 says, “Obey your leaders and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account.” While it is true that some churches and leaders abuse authority and seek to attach authority to their ideas instead of Scripture, the far more common problem is the failure to hold people accountable to the word of God with authority.

In summary, when Paul assessed the needs of the fledgling Cretan churches, he first directed their attention to their need of leadership, and the kind of leadership needed centers on two things: 1) proven, evident maturity in Christian character and 2) a passionate adherence to sound doc-

trine resulting in the ability to teach this doctrine to others and the willingness to confront any who would distort it. Leaders are to be men who are living examples of the fusion of belief and behavior, those who both preach and practice. This, for the apostle Paul, is leadership.

### **Respond to Error (1:10-16; 3:9-11)**

The closing of the elder discussion leads right into this next issue. The church needs elders who can refute error precisely because (*gar*, 1:10) there are some in the church already who are teaching falsely and are thereby upsetting entire households. While elders have not yet been appointed, false teachers have already arisen. The situation is urgent.<sup>21</sup> What is at stake is not merely some minor interpretation but the souls of men.<sup>22</sup> This is seen by the fact that the description of the opponents climaxes with the assertion that although they claim to know God, they really do not (1:16). Thus they are still in their sins and stand condemned under the wrath of God (cf. 3:11), and apparently they are duping others with this false assurance. The church cannot be healthy if this is allowed to continue.

The seriousness of the situation is reflected in Paul’s response. First, he uses strong and stark language to expose the false teachers for what they truly are.<sup>23</sup> This is no detached disinterested description! This is deep-hearted, full-bore warning in the strongest terms. Though the opponents claimed to teach and act Christianly, Paul describes them as rebellious, empty talking deceivers who are greedy, impure, detestable, disobedient, and worthless for any good deed! When Paul sees false teaching threatening the church, he does not beat around the bush or content himself with mild generalities; rather, he clearly and

plainly calls it like it is (cf. Acts 13:9-12; Gal 1:6-10).

Secondly, the urgency is seen in the response for which Paul calls—“silence” them (*epistomizō*, 1:11) and “rebuke” them (*elenchō*, 1:13; the same word used in 1:9). False teaching must be stopped. There is no toleration of heresy. They are to be silenced, i.e., given no more opportunity to spread their error. Foolish and empty speculations, such as the false teachers engage in, are to be avoided (3:9). Those affected are to be refuted, i.e., the errors of their false teaching are to be exposed and corrected in hope that they will come to the truth and be “sound” in the faith. (1:13). But, those who continue in this divisive behavior after two warnings are to be put out of the church since such a person has shown himself to be corrupt, still in his sins, and has condemned himself (3:10-11).

This is far more diligent and firm than what is seen in most of our churches today and probably would seem extreme to many. Many seem to act as if they think there is no such thing as false teaching today, and, if there is, it is not dangerous. Rather, all we really have are differences of opinion. While certainly there are mere differences of opinion (and there are some who try to label everyone in disagreement with them as heretics), we must be clear that since false teachers appear in practically every book of the New Testament and have afflicted the church across the centuries, then we ought to expect them today too. Spurgeon was right when he commented, “Our sword will never rust from lack of foes to smite.” Furthermore, such false teaching is dangerous. Souls hang in the balance. We must reckon with the reality that there will be people who claim to know God but do not. We, like Paul, cannot be content merely with their profession,

no matter how sincere, if by their actions and belief they demonstrate otherwise. False teaching will often assure people of salvation on false bases, and if we would be truly evangelistic we must destroy those false bases and point to the only sure ground of salvation (see below on 2:11-5 and 3:3-7).

Today, as in this passage, we must speak forthrightly, refute and warn, and be willing to enact discipline. The church (particularly its elders) must expose unsound teaching and behavior and call it what it is. Too often we euphemistically dance around such issues more afraid to offend man than to offend God, more concerned about making people (or ourselves) uncomfortable than about them facing the wrath of God. We must have charity and tact, but love—both for the offender and the rest of the church—would constrain us not to soft pedal sin and heresy. Then, having pointed out wrong teaching and behavior we must demonstrate scripturally why it is wrong and what the truth is, seeking the salvation of the offenders. It is not enough simply to castigate those who are in error and then pat ourselves on our backs for our forthrightness. We must seek to turn people back to the truth (cf. 2 Tim 2:25-26) and to strengthen the church against this error should it ever surface again. Lastly, we must be willing to drive away the wolves if necessary (cf. Acts 20:28-31). Church discipline has fallen on hard times in our day, but the practice is as clearly present in the New Testament (cf. 1 Cor 5:1-13; 2 Thess 3:6-15; Rom 16:17-18) as it is clearly absent from our churches today. The Reformers listed discipline as one of the marks of a true church, and we cannot expect health in our churches today without it.

In summary, then, the second key issue

that Paul addresses for the health of the church is the proper response to error, whether that error be doctrinal, ethical, or both.<sup>24</sup> There will be no health in the body when we ignore diseases that are attacking it. When the gospel is being violated, we must act decisively and clearly.

### **Live Properly (2:1-10; 3:1-2)**

The next two paragraphs in view are basically lists of behaviors. For these new believers on Crete Paul explains what Christian behavior looks like, within the family and church (2:1-10) and in relation to the outside world (3:1-2). For people coming out of an immoral culture (whether Crete's or our own) it stands to reason that it would be very important to explain Christian ethics. The way that Paul addresses the issue shows that he considered proper behavior to be an essential element for these churches' survival. He argues that the way people behave reflects on their own spiritual condition and reflects on the glory of God and His gospel.

The fact that one's behavior reflects on his spiritual condition is seen in the strong and very deliberate contrast between 1:16 and 2:1. This contrast, or its importance, has been too often missed although it is one of the key points of the letter.<sup>25</sup> Having stated that the lifestyles of the false teachers negated any claim, however sincere, to knowing God, Paul now charges Titus to teach the "things which are fitting for sound doctrine." Since what follows is a list of prescribed behaviors, "*things* which are fitting for sound doctrine" in 2:1 must refer to behaviors or lifestyles. Thus, the lifestyles presented in 2:1-10 and 3:1-2 are not merely suggestions, the haphazard adoption of cultural norms, or even cultural accommodation for the sake of mission.<sup>26</sup> The actions and duties listed here

are presented as the way of life that affirms rather than denies one's claim to know God. To fail to live in this way is to throw into question one's salvation, precisely because the grace of God that saves also teaches this lifestyle (see below on 2:11-14). This is then highly significant. For a church to be healthy its members must realize that saving faith leads to a certain way of life (2:1), and they must live in that way. The way we live reflects our spiritual state.

Secondly, the fact that the behavior of professing Christians reflects on the glory of God and His gospel is seen most clearly in the three purpose clauses tucked within 2:1-10. In 2:5 the exhortations to young women closes with the statement, "that the word of God may not be dishonored [or, blasphemed]."<sup>27</sup> The exhortations to the young men and Titus conclude with, "in order that the opponent may be put to shame having nothing bad to say about us" (2:8). Then, the slaves are told that by living in this way they can "adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in every respect" (2:10). These statements lay out the positive and negative impact of the church's living. The way we act matters because our sinful living can bring dishonor on the gospel and will give the opponents of the gospel ammunition. Why should others pay attention to the gospel if its proponents are no different from the rest of the world? When this argument gains traction because of the unruly lives of the church, the word of God is dishonored. On the other hand, if, though we are still imperfect, our lives are being transformed in apparent ways that set us apart from the immoral society around us, then we advance the gospel by showing its worth in one's life (cf. Matt 5:16; Phil 2:15).<sup>28</sup> We overcome by our actions the objections of the opponents of the gospel. Thus we,

frail, wrath-deserving humans, can actually “adorn the doctrine of God our Savior”! What an amazing thought! We cannot add to the beauty of the gospel, but we make apparent and highlight that beauty by living out its principles. It matters how you live. Those who claim the name of Christ are then either eyesores on the gospel or beautiful ornaments.

Two Old Testament characters illustrate this well. The negative side is seen in David’s sin with Bathsheeba. When Nathan confronts David, he says David’s sin “has given occasion to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme” (2 Sam 12:14). This reality is given as the reason for at least part of David’s punishment (cf. Isa 52:5; Rom 2:24; Ezek 36:20-21). On the positive side, there is Daniel. When those envious of him set their political machine in motion to uncover “dirt” on Daniel, it is stated, “they could find no ground of accusation or evidence of corruption, inasmuch as he was faithful, and no negligence or corruption was to be found in him” (Dan 6:4).<sup>29</sup> These men then decide the only thing they could possibly bring against him was his allegiance to his God. Though this leads first to persecution, it finally ends in God receiving praise from a pagan king.

Martin Luther commenting on this passage notes that in the early history of the church the blameless life of the Christians was a powerful witness to the watching world. He writes:

When the Christians were accused before Trajan, Pliny said that there was no guilt to be found among them; they gathered before dawn and were strongly opposed to adultery and violence. It impressed a heathen that Christians lived a chaste and sober life, and he warned Trajan not to punish them. Thus Lucian says that Christians are good-natured, that they trust every-

body, that they are not anxious, that they recognize their own mistakes; and therefore anyone who wants to be rich should go to the Christians. This is how the wicked are compelled by their own consciences to think about Christians.<sup>30</sup>

Luther goes on to say that this was no longer the case in his day, and, sadly, one cannot claim it is the case in general today.

In summary, for the Cretan churches (or any others) to survive their members must live out the practical implications of the gospel. One cannot glibly dismiss the sinful living of professing Christians. There is a level at which such living shows that such people have not truly been converted. Furthermore, our behavior reflects on God for good or ill. If we would be truly evangelistic we must live out the gospel. In doing so, believers, no matter how small their station in life (e.g., slaves in 2:10), have the opportunity to “adorn the doctrine of God our Savior.”

### **Remember the Gospel (2:11-15; 3:3-8)**

The last of the four issues is found in the two doctrinal passages that stand at the very core of the letter.<sup>31</sup> These paragraphs follow the two ethical exhortation passages discussed above and serve as a basis (*gar*, 2:11; 3:3) for these exhortations. Both doctrinal passages focus on God’s gracious act of salvation in Christ.

Both passages are centered on fairly traditional restatements of the work of Christ (2:11, 14; 3:5).<sup>32</sup> In each passage there is a distinct emphasis on grace. In 2:11 the coming of Christ is styled as the appearing of God’s grace. In 2:14 Paul expounds the self-giving of Christ on “our” behalf that “He” might redeem “us.” The focus is clearly on the divine initiative. In 3:3-8, the point of grace is emphasized even more. It is strik-



ing to trace the actors in the sentences through this passage. Humans (“we”) are the subject in v. 3 and the result is dismal. With the shift in vv. 4-5, God (and his attributes) becomes the subject and humans are the object, the recipients of salvation. In 3:5 Paul states clearly that the basis of salvation is not human works but God’s mercy.

The place of these expositions of the gospel of grace is itself instructive. For these Cretan churches to be healthy they must see that the gospel (“healthy teaching”) is to be the proper basis for all they do. As Quinn has remarked, “All Christian life, all activities of every age, sex, and state of life find their taproot in the revelation of the ‘grace of God.’”<sup>33</sup> The gospel is not merely the entry point of the Christian life, but the very heart of the Christian life, enabling and guiding all that we do. This is a basic point of Pauline (indeed, New Testament) ethics, but is too often missed in our churches. When Paul exhorts his readers to humility (Phil 2:1-11), or to giving (2 Cor 8:9), or to forgive (Eph 4:32), or to love (Eph 5:1-2), he points to the cross. Especially here in the Cretan situation, for Paul the answer to antinomianism is not legalism but a true understanding of grace. For the libertine, grace will teach his heart to fear, and for the anxious soul burdened with guilt, grace will its fears relieve. A healthy church will be one that corporately and individually centers itself upon the gospel, seeking for every phase of its life to be an emanation from this gospel.<sup>34</sup>

In these passages, Paul is pointing to the gospel as evidence that belief and behavior cannot be separated. In 2:11-12 the grace of God that brings salvation also teaches a certain way of behavior (“to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present

age”). One cannot claim to be a recipient of saving grace if he is not a pupil of educating grace. The saving grace of God teaches its recipients to say no to sin; thus if we are not learning to deny sin, it is suspect as to whether we have received grace. Of course, while we are pupils in the school of grace, we are not yet graduates! We are not yet perfect, but we are being changed. This point is stated again in 2:14 where the goal of the atonement is stated as redeeming people from lawless deeds, purifying them and causing them to be zealous for good deeds. The aim of Christ’s work is not only to rescue people from hell (as significant as that is!), but also to remake them into God’s own possession free from sin and zealous for good. The atonement itself has an ethical dimension. This effect is seen also in 3:5 when salvation is described as the “washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit.” While some of the specifics in interpreting these clauses are debated, an ethical dimension is clear. God, in salvation, washes and renews His people so that they are different in the way they live, as is suggested by the contrast between v. 3 and v. 4 (“we also once *were*... But ... He saved us”). Thus, there can be no real divide between belief and behavior. That is why gospel-appropriate behavior is commanded of the church (2:1-10; 3:1-2), why the behavior of the opponents exposes them as ones who do not truly know God (1:10-16; 3:9-11), and why the elders of the church must be men marked by both moral character and devotion to the gospel.

It should also be noted that these gospel expositions have a clear eschatological focus. Indeed, in 2:11-14 it is this focus on the return of Christ that is presented as the antidote for sin. Having said in 2:12 that we should learn to say no to sin, Paul

shows us how in 2:13.<sup>35</sup> The language used here is instructive. Paul could have simply said, “by awaiting the return of Christ.” Instead he uses stirring descriptives. We are to be *eagerly anticipating (prosdechomai)*<sup>36</sup> the return of Christ, considering his return “the blessed hope,” longing for the manifestation of his glory because we realize that he is “our great God and Savior.” This is the language of a soul aflame. We are not called to a mere stoicism or asceticism, but are called to set our hearts on a greater desire.<sup>37</sup> This is how grace teaches its pupils to renounce sin, by alluring our hearts with a new and greater affection. For a church to be healthy it must be regularly pointed to the glory of Christ so that its members might long for Him and in that longing be purified (cf. 1 John 3:2-3).<sup>38</sup>

For any church to be healthy it must be rooted in a firm grasp of the gospel. When we lose the gospel or even become “fuzzy” on it, we lose our way. These passages in Titus specifically rebuke the common misconception of the gospel that if one has “prayed the prayer,” “walked the aisle,” been baptized, or joined the church, then one has salvation regardless of whether or not one’s life is marked by gospel character and love for the things of God. In this we are no different from people in the Middle Ages who trusted in rituals, indulgences, and the merits of saints. We have created our own rituals, as ridiculous as theirs, and find to our dismay that they lack any life-changing power. We desperately need a return to “the gospel of the glory of the blessed God” (1 Tim 1:11), the only message which has God’s power to save and to train us for godly living now, in the present age.

## Conclusion

It has been argued that the letter to Titus

consists of four primary sections that contain Paul’s exhortations for the establishment of healthy churches in a difficult, immoral milieu. The four key issues that Paul addresses are the need for godly leadership, the need to deal clearly with doctrinal and moral error, the need for proper living among believers, and the need for a sound grasp of the gospel. These issues remain central for the health of churches today but too often do not receive the attention they need. We need to hear again the letter to Titus.

The message of Titus, put succinctly, is that true belief and right behavior must go together. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “Only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes.”<sup>39</sup> This message is sorely needed today.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>This article is written within the framework of several foundational presuppositions, some of which need to be clearly identified at the outset. First, I remain firmly convinced of the Pauline authorship of Titus as well as of 1 & 2 Timothy. I am aware that this is out of step with the majority of NT scholarship today, but the arguments against Pauline authorship fail to convince me. Second, while the reliability of the book of Acts is widely regarded as suspect, I believe it to be true and faithful, so I make direct connections between Paul’s statements in Titus and the reports in Acts.

<sup>2</sup>John Stott says, “Titus has always been a popular little New Testament document” (*Guard the Truth: The Message of 1 Timothy and Titus* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996] 167). I, however, have not found this to be true in the places I have been. In their brief expositions, Paige Patterson (*Living in the Hope*

of *Eternal Life* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1968] 9) and Stuart Briscoe (*Titus: Living as God's Very Own People* [Wheaton: Harold Shaw, 1994] vii) share my assessment.

<sup>3</sup>Martin Luther, "Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to Titus," in *Luther's Works*, vol. 35, *Word and Sacrament I*, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960) 389. See also his comments in the introduction to his lectures on Titus in vol. 29. I am indebted to my student worker, Matt Crawford, for finding this quote.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Stott's statement: "the apostle's instructions to his trusted lieutenant have extraordinary contemporary relevance" (167).

<sup>5</sup>Polybius, *The Histories*, vol. 3 (trans. W. R. Paton; Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1923).

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Re Publica, De Legibus*, vol 26 (trans. Clinton Walker Keys; Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1928).

<sup>8</sup>The simple fact that Paul sought to establish churches here (note also Corinth) shows that churches are not intended to be little country clubs for our mutual comfort (as is so often thought) but outposts of the kingdom of light in a world of darkness pushing back that darkness.

<sup>9</sup>Ray Van Neste, "Structure and Cohesion in Titus: Problem and Method," *The Bible Translator* 53.1 (2002) 118-133. Further detail is given in "Cohesion and Structure in the Pastoral Epistles," Ph.D. Thesis, University of Aberdeen, 2002.

<sup>10</sup>E.g., see A. T. Hanson, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982). This view has recently found a new and even more extreme proponent in James D. Miller, *The Pastoral Letters as Composite Documents* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>11</sup>The unusually long salutation (longer than those found in any other of Paul's epistles but Romans) should be considered with the other doctrinal sections since the expansion focuses on salvation. For a comparison of 1:1-4, 2:11-14, and 3:3-7 and the striking verbal parallels see Van Neste, "Structure and Cohesion in Titus," 128.

<sup>12</sup>Paige Patterson concurs stating, "Note that the term is plural. Most of the early churches had a plurality of pastors.... This New Testament pattern, which has to some degree been abandoned, needs to be given a careful look by our churches today which would model themselves after those early assemblies" (18).

<sup>13</sup>I. H. Marshall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1999) 148, comments: "What can be said is surely that the desired qualities are those which are expected in all church members, but it is recognised that people often fall short of the ideal and that leaders should be chosen from those who come closest to it."

<sup>14</sup>Cf. M. Dibelius and H. Conzelmann, *The Pastoral Epistles*, trans. P. Buttolph and A. Yarbro (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972) 99; N.

Brox, *Die Pastoralbriefe* (Regensburger Neues Testament; Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1969) 283. In response Marshall states, "this is a verdict typical of Dibelius, who tends to see the general rather than the particular right through the NT" (148).

<sup>15</sup>John T. Fitzgerald, "The Catalogue in Ancient Greek Literature," in *The Rhetorical Analysis of Scripture, Essays from the 1995 London Conference*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Thomas H. Olbricht (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997) 290-291.

<sup>16</sup>The fact that this item functions as a hook introducing the rest of the letter further heightens its importance.

<sup>17</sup>John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, trans. W. Pringle (repr.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003) 295.

<sup>18</sup>Calvin writes, "The pastor ought to have two voices: one for gathering the sheep; and another, for warding off and driving away wolves and thieves" (296).

<sup>19</sup>Some make a distinction between "teaching elders" and "ruling elders" usually based on 1 Timothy 5:17. However, I do not think scripture makes, or even allows for such a distinction. Rather than making a distinction between ruling well and laboring in teaching, I believe 1 Timothy 5:17 defines ruling well as laboring in teaching. One can consult the commentaries for the exegetical discussion. Beyond that verse, though, the key distinguishing trait in the lists of qualifications for elders (Titus 1:5-9; 1 Timothy 3:1-7) is ability to teach. One cannot (or

ought not) hold this office unless he is able to teach. While some elders may teach more than others, there is, by definition, no such thing as a “non-teaching elder.”

<sup>20</sup>Stott, 178.

<sup>21</sup>Gordon Fee’s argument that the Cretan situation is less than urgent is unpersuasive (*1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988] 11-12). Fee states, “False teachers are indeed in evidence . . . but the letter as a whole is not dominated by their presence” (11). Fee is followed to some extent by W. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), cf. 395. However, this misses the fact that the bulk of the letter is bracketed by the discussion of the opponents and all the positive exhortation stands in contrast to them. Marshall recognizes that “the opening theme is the fact of opposition. . . . The fact of opposition runs right through the letter” (23).

<sup>22</sup>While it is difficult to put together a complete portrait of the false teaching from this description, the threat is clear. The essence of the false teaching is that they separated belief and behavior (cf. Mounce, 395).

<sup>23</sup>A number of scholars have suggested that the descriptions of the false teachers are merely taken from the common slurs used in the ancient world by one group to discredit another and we should not expect that these descriptions were actually true of the opponents (e.g., R. J. Karris, “The Background and Significance of the Polemic of the Pastoral Epistles,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 92 [1973] 549-564). How-

ever, the description fits the context well and contains a good deal of local color, so that it is not necessary to see the description as merely conventional (cf. Marshall, 192-93; Mounce, lxxv-lxxvi).

<sup>24</sup>They are usually connected in some way.

<sup>25</sup>Mounce catches the significance of this contrast stating, “Titus 1:16 is the hinge verse of the entire epistle” (395).

<sup>26</sup>Some scholars have seen in this passage merely cultural accommodation. Others, like A. Padgett (“The Pauline Rationale for Submission: Biblical Feminism and the *hina* Clauses of Titus 2.1-10,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 59 [1987] 39-52), have argued that portions of the lifestyles prescribed in this passage are not binding today because they were simply cultural accommodations to avoid scandal and to avoid hindering mission. In addition to the argument given above, Mounce, 417-419, provides a thorough critique of this view.

<sup>27</sup>T. Schreiner suggests this *hina* clause provides the purpose not only for the exhortations to the young women but for all of vv. 2-5 (*Interpreting the Pauline Epistles* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990] 125). If this is true, it only strengthens the argument given here.

<sup>28</sup>Phillip Towner, *The Goal of Our Instruction: The Structure and Theology of Ethics in the Pastoral Epistles* (Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series 34; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989) 195-198, pursues the importance of the church’s behavior for

mission.

<sup>29</sup>It is staggering to think of such occurring today.

<sup>30</sup>*Luther’s Works*, vol. 29, p. 58. Luther’s sources are Pliny, *Epistolae*, Book X, ep. 96; and, Lucian, *Peregrinus*, 13.

<sup>31</sup>Cf. C. Spicq, *Saint Paul. Les Epîtres Pastorales*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Etudes Bibliques; Paris: J. Gabalda et Cie, 1969) 2:635; Marshall, 262. The significance of these passages is underscored by the fact that the especially long expansion of the salutation anticipated the themes found in 2:11-15 and 3:3-8.

<sup>32</sup>Towner, 108-118, and Andrew Lau, *Manifest in the Flesh* (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2.86; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1996) 150-176, examine the traditional base of these passages and how they fit the context.

<sup>33</sup>Jerome D. Quinn, *The Letter to Titus* (Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 1990) 162.

<sup>34</sup>A fine example of thinking deeply about the gospel and applying its truths to practical areas of life can be seen in John Piper’s applications of the doctrine of imputed righteousness to marriage in his book *Counted Righteous in Christ: Should We Abandon the Imputation of Christ’s Righteousness?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003).

<sup>35</sup>I think the participle in 2:13 expresses not merely attendant circumstance (“live godly . . . while awaiting”) but also the means by which believers can find the strength to oppose sin and pursue godliness.

<sup>36</sup>The NAS translation, “looking for,”

may not convey the eagerness of the expectation suggested in the Greek term (*prosdechomai*). Cf. Marshall, 273.

<sup>37</sup>Cf. Marshall, 272: “the renouncing of worldliness is thus not asceticism for its own sake but is an aspect of the path to a greater joy than the world can offer.”

<sup>38</sup>In like manner for our churches to be healthy we must have preaching that is centered on the glory of Christ. We need more men like Samuel Rutherford of whose preaching it was said, “He showed me the beauty of Christ.” See Faith Cook, *Samuel Rutherford and His Friends* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1992).

<sup>39</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R. H. Fuller (London: SCM, 1959) 54.