

Church Matters
Studies in Paul's letter to Titus
The Noble Work of Elders
Titus 1:1-9 October 8th 2022
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Do you remember watching morning worship during lockdown? As soon as the Youtube Countdown clock started to sound, we'd call everyone into the lounge, "wonzy and all" and for the next hour we'd watch the pre-recorded service together. Those were strange days! There was a novelty about it, but we all knew that it wasn't as things should be.

So too, when we read about the church on the island of Crete, we know that this is not how church should be—not because they were all watching online—but because the church was in complete disarray!

The churches on Crete

To start with, making everything worse than it would have been, was the corrupt nature of the population on the island! "Even one of their own prophets (that is a native of Crete) has said, "Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons."

There are other ancient writers who confirm that the people who lived on the island of Crete were a wild bunch! Polybius, Cicero, Livy and Plutarch—all of them—confirm this analysis, "Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons." So Paul isn't slandering the Cretans—he's telling the truth.

Wonderfully, many of these lazy lying, evil brutes had come to faith in Christ! But they brought something of their backgrounds with them, because we don't change overnight when we're converted: sanctification, becoming like Jesus, takes time!

That's the first problem on Crete: the new Christians came from a disorderly background...

Add to the mix lots of false teachers on the island, especially from a Jewish background (verses 1,1,14). They were teaching error: Jewish myths (verse 14) - fanciful stories about ancient heroes and preaching man made rules "don't wear these clothes" "don't go to these places." Some foods in the OT were pure/clean and some were impure/unclean. Under the New Covenant all those distinctions have gone! Now, all things are pure (remember the vision Peter had on his way to Joppa, Acts 10?) The minds and consciences of these false teachers were corrupted! (verse 15) They were teaching for money. These teachers were peddling their false doctrines to get money "give me a dime, I'll tell you a story." Verse 11 "and that for dishonest gain." There are many false teachers out there today, who peddle their error for financial gain, especially among the televangelists: One of them asked his TV audience a few years ago, to help him fund a new private Jet, costing \$54 million dollars! "I really believe" he said with a straight face, "that if the Lord Jesus Christ was physically on the Earth today, he wouldn't be riding a donkey, he'd be in an airplane flying all over the world."

The false teachers were evil, since it is bad trees that bear bad fruit, “rebellious” (verse 10), “detestable, disobedient and unfit for doing anything good.” (verse 16)

What a mess! You've got unruly people to start with on the island of Crete, then you've got false teachers spreading error, from house to house and this mix was resulting in the ruin of many households (verse 11). Spiritually, it's a war zone! Disarray, confusion, mayhem, and the spiritual ruin of Christian households!

How do we explain such ecclesiastical pandemonium?

Young churches planted in non-Christian fields are often messy. Whenever the Gospel is preached in new un-evangelised fields, mess is common. We see that in the church at Corinth for example. And my guess is that in the years to come, if we evangelise in new areas, we could well see the same kind of disorder, here in the UK. But a second, deeper explanation for this Cretian commotion is this: whenever the truth is preached, Satan seeks to destroy that work. If churches water down the truth, soft-peddle unpopular truth, round off the edges, Satan leaves that church alone, but if a church is faithful—as Paul had been on the island of Crete— then Satan, who hates the truth, will seek to destroy it. The great Victorian preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon was faithful to the truth – not surprising then that he was slandered all over London, “Men cannot say anything worse of me than they have said. I have been lied about from head to foot and misrepresented to the last degree.... none can damage me much more.”

Jesus encourages us to think of slander as a badge of honour: “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.” (Matthew 5:11)

So the situation on Crete is messy. What was the solution to all this spiritual confusion and disorder? The appointment of elders, verse 5.

The new elders, along with Titus must restore order. Verse 11, “silenced” means—literally gagged, prevented from speaking in the meetings! Verse 13, “rebuke sharply,” sharply as with a knife— a rebuke with a sting!

One of the roles of elders is to order the church, so that the community can live in peace and grow in grace. But it's not their only role, look at verse 9.

#1 Elders are called to protect the flock from unruly behaviour

Schoolteachers—what happens if a few children in your class are disruptive? Disorder spreads to all the kids, and no teaching can be done. One bad apple...

What would happen if Titus just let things continue on the island of Crete? The little churches would be overrun by heretics, young lambs would be devoured; and before long there would be no true church on the island; and all of Paul's evangelistic work would have come to naught.

No, Titus, you and these new elders must protect the flock, and the way to do that is to appoint elders who will chase off wolves and rebuke disorderly folks. In our own evangelical setting, unruly behaviour is most likely to come, not from false teachers, but from wolves. You do hear of churches in the UK who are troubled by false teachers, but it's far more common to hear of churches who have been attacked by a wolf.

We all need to beware of false teachers—and elders especially need to be alert to heresy—but we need to be more aware of wolves.

Beware of wolves! In Acts 20, Paul warns his Christian friends at Ephesus, “I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock.” (Acts 20: 29) Let me tell you what happens when a wolf attacks a loving united flock, I have seen this with my own eyes. How can we spot one?

Wolves dress in sheep's clothing. On the surface, a wolf, appears to be a very nice man—even a spiritual man! (All the wolves I have met have been charmers!)

Wolves have no care for sheep. They're only interested in mutton and wool. A wolf's only interest in the sheep is what he can get out of them; he's after power, influence, status, and so on.

Wolves use flattery and slander. Wolves have two crude weapons in their armoury—flattery and slander. They start with flattery, “You are a wonderful Christian.” The wolf is laying a trap, he's gathering together a faction.

Let's all learn to discern between flattery and encouragement. When someone encourages you, the motive is to build you up, when someone flatters you, the motive is to use you.

Once a wolf's got you in his gang, he then uses slander. He begins to tell lies about others in the church, and especially the elders. He's trying to separate you from the church, separate you from the godly leaders, and get you to join his gang. Be warned!

If a wolf is left unchecked, lots of lovely, innocent believers in the flock will be mauled. The task of the elders is to chase away wolves or to kill them—metaphorically, of course!

When I look back on my ministry, one of my greatest regrets is not having spotted wolves soon enough, so I say to my fellow elders and to all of you—don't be suspicious of every outsider—not at all, but do be alert, this is the path of wisdom:

Be on your guard against wolves. Do not be surprised if the elders have to rebuke people from time to time. Thank the Lord for your elders and pray for them as they protect the flock against false teachers and wolves.

#2 Elders defend the truth from false teachers (verse 9)

The second role of elders is to defend the truth from false teachers. Verse 9, “encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.”

An elder should know the truth well enough so they are able to detect error and refute it, argue against it, correct it, demonstrate where it is wrong.

I’ve thought a lot about this one this week. And I have wondered why false teaching hasn’t been much of a problem here at MPC. And I have two reasons, what do you think? First, there are many mature believers in the church, scattered throughout the home groups—which is where error is most likely to come up—that they would correct the error? Second, by preaching the Word of God on Sunday mornings, error is chased away. As the “sword of the Spirit” is wielded on Sundays and in home groups, Satan’s heretical lies are put to flight.

Someone once asked Charles Spurgeon how he would defend the Bible, “Defend the Bible? I’d sooner defend a lion. You don’t need to defend a lion, just release it from its cage and let it roar.”

Churches that release the lion from its cage every Sunday morning and let it roar in the home groups will have far less trouble with error than churches that tag a five-minute sermon at the end of a jolly sing-song. But there is no place for complacency, only constant and prayerful vigilance will keep a church safe from error.

The biggest danger we face today is from false teacher online. Can I encourage you, before you start listening to any podcast online to ask an elder about it—is it sound? Is it reliable? That’s how to protect yourself from false teachers.

#3 Elders encourage the flock with God’s Word (verse 9)

And finally, elders are called to encourage the flock with the Word. I trust that happens through our home groups which are led by elders, and I hope it happens here on a Sunday mornings. Are you encouraged by the Word of God on Sundays? I hope so! And I trust it happens one-one too.

Last Sunday, Joshua and Gill got married in the USA. A happier couple you could not find! Before they got married, I spent around 10 zoom sessions, going through what the Bible teaches about Christian marriage. That’s what elders do— they apply the Word of God to the life situation, in this case Christian marriage.

What are we to expect of our elders? That they protect the flock from unruly behaviour, that they defend the truth and that they encourage with the Word of God.

Have you put yourself under the spiritual care of the elders? There is in the NT no such thing as a Christian who is on their own, doing their own thing. Every NT Christian, is found in a church and

under the care of its elders. Perhaps you have been hurt in the past; don't allow past hurt to hinder present obedience. Spend some time with us and I hope you will discover loving shepherds.

Will you pray for your elders? So that we might become more like the Great Shepherd of the Sheep.