

Threats to Sound Doctrine (Tit. 1:10-16; 3:9-11)

Intro: As I've studied Paul's letter to Titus I have gained a new appreciation for this brief letter. Such letters like this one revealed Paul's deep concern for the churches he had a part in establishing and can give us great insight into what God has in mind for His congregations today as well.

Much of our study has focused on the sound teaching itself which Titus was to deliver to the church. But before we leave this great letter we should learn from the cautions that Paul submits to this younger evangelist.

This epistle was prompted by concerns about unhealthy instruction and the message about "sound doctrine" is book ended with statements about dangers to sound teaching in Crete.

The concern with False Teachers

For there are many rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision, who must be silenced because they are upsetting whole families, teaching things they should not teach, for the sake of sordid gain. (Titus 1:10-11)

Winter points out that in the Roman world there arose a group of sophists who made a living as virtuoso orators. They were a part of the educational structure of the Roman society and people often paid to hear their public orations. In addition, they were invited into homes for instructional purposes. Apparently there existed in Crete a spiritual version of these orators who would ply their trade, but with a religious emphasis. Perhaps they went through Jewish genealogies telling myths they had heard about the names there and/or used the OT Law to raise controversial questions to discuss. Such might have been especially attractive to Cretan Christians since these orators professed to believe in God. However, the dangers were clear to Paul, since these teachers were themselves men of dubious character and whose teaching corrupted these new convert's conceptions of the Christian life. Let's consider Paul's description of them.

Their character

Unruly—unruly, undisciplined, rebellious. These teachers were not devoted to obedience to God but were defiant of God's authority.

Vain talkers—idle talkers. They could say a lot and really say nothing of real substance.

Deceivers—deceivers, misleaders. They moved into a market niche professing to be believers in God, but denying Him by their lives.

They were being deceptive in their pretensions.

Thus, these Cretan false teachers imbibed the spirit of the Cretans themselves (dishonest, self-indulgent, and lazy).

Their motivation

For the sake of sordid gain

These false teachers attach themselves to others with mercenary motives. The ultimate goal of their teaching was to collect a fee for their “instruction”. Thus their motives were corrupt. To the pure, all things are pure; but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled. They profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him, being detestable and disobedient, and worthless for any good deed. (Titus 1:15-16)

Their teaching

*“teaching things they should not teach” (1:11)
proclaimed Jewish myths and commandments of men who turn away from the truth. (Titus 1:14)
Raised controversial questions and focused on genealogies (Tit. 3:9)
Rather than give sound teaching on Christian living that resulted in distinctive living, both their example and teaching gave permission for Cretan Christians to conform to the world.*

Their effect

*Upsetting whole families. The Greek expression conveys the idea of “overturning” in a destructive way. Imagine a family that had been led to serve the Lord now influenced by such a teacher to compromise their lifestyle.
Raised disputes and strife among God’s people. It was inevitable that the things taught and practiced in private find their way into the meetings of the church with the result that there were quarrels and factions.*

The Counter to False Teachers

Appointment of qualified leaders

*For this reason I left you in Crete, that you might set in order what remains, and appoint elders in every city as I directed you, (Titus 1:5)
One of the principle emphases of the epistle to Titus is the stress upon qualified leadership that can teach “sound doctrine” and refute the sources of error that might appear among the congregation. The qualifications suggest a man who is knowledgeable of the word of God and whose life is in accord with it. In particular a qualified leader would be “holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict. (Titus 1:9)
Such leaders would make themselves available to the new Christians to guide them in the right way, so that they would not need to resort to these ungodly sophists.*

Reproof of those who listen to false teachers

For this cause reprove them severely that they may be sound in the faith, not paying attention to Jewish myths and commandments of men who turn away from the truth. (Titus 1:13-14)

At times God's people need to be corrected for allowing themselves to be influenced by wrong-headed ideas. That was a part of Titus' job to convince the erring that they were being misled.

Faithful proclamation of sound doctrine

But as for you, speak the things which are fitting for sound doctrine. (Titus 2:1)

This is a trustworthy statement; and concerning these things I want you to speak confidently, so that those who have believed God may be careful to engage in good deeds. These things are good and profitable for men. (Titus 3:8)

Titus was to be a voice for truth among the church. His teaching would show the Christians how to live in that difficult culture.

Avoidance of the unprofitable teaching techniques

But shun foolish controversies and genealogies and strife and disputes about the Law; for they are unprofitable and worthless.

False teachers effectively use controversy as a way of inflaming people. Titus was encouraged to avoid methodology that would encourage anger and discord.

Rejection of the factious person

Reject a factious man after a first and second warning, knowing that such a man is perverted and is sinning, being self-condemned. (Titus 3:9-11)

The Greek word "hairetikos" comes into our language in the word "heretic" or "heretical" but it doesn't have the connotation of presentation of what is not orthodox. Instead it refers to "an opinionated propagandist who promotes dissension by his pertinacity" (Simpson, quoted by D. Guthrie)

Efforts should be made to warn or admonish, but if the opinionated person shows stubbornness to clear truth, he should be rejected, a word meaning "to be left out of account".

Applications

Churches today need to differentiate between sincere and self-serving teachers.

The church at Crete had the advantage of knowing perfectly what God's will was through the personal presence of the apostle of Christ. We in contrast have the perfect word, but fallibility in understanding it. It behooves us to be careful about "marking" as a false teacher every person who disagrees with us. Is it not possible that the person who we perceive as wrong may be the very person who might lead us to the truth?

We need to respect the good life of all our brothers who teach as evidence of their sincere desire to know and do God's will. All those devoted to the word will display a godly lifestyle even if their understanding is flawed. Jesus Himself urged us to use the "character test" to identify false teachers from sincere students.

Churches need to appoint qualified leaders rather than quarrel about the qualifications.

Isn't it ironic that brethren often divide and quarrel over the thing that was designed by God to protect the church from opinionated dividers and to keep the church from dividing and quarreling! Does it make sense to place the future of the church in the hands of all men in the church regardless of their judgment and lifestyle instead of the best men in the church who know the Scriptures and try to live them!? The qualifications Paul gave did not demand spiritual supermen. In fact, in most cases they simply set apart the faithful men in the congregation over against those who still were struggling with sins prevalent in the Cretan culture.

Churches need to support faithful evangelists who will teach the word of God and learn from their experience in the word; but compare everything to the Scriptures!

It is important that we chose preachers who model godly behavior and who are devoted to word rather than polished orators who may have great style but nothing of substance to say. Many pulpits today are filled with talented story-tellers who teach little truth.

Churches need to develop a spiritual diet of apostolic teaching and not the latest buzz from the brotherhood papers.

Brotherhood papers are often the battlefield for preacher wars over various issues. Churches often import trouble they didn't have by entertaining the latest controversies among the brethren and getting people divided up over questions they didn't even know existed. Is this wise?

Instead of a morbid curiosity about everything controversial, we need a healthy thirst for what the apostles of Christ said! "These things are good and profitable!"

Churches need to protect the church from people who create strife and division.

We need to be more interested in the peace and well-being of the church than numbers and nickels. Often churches are so eager to gain new members that they welcome people with a reputation for being opinionated and divisive.

Churches don't often have the insight to show troublemakers the door, and allow them to spoil the good work that has been accomplished.

Conclusion: I am impressed by the relevance of Paul's message to Titus to our modern situation. Let us devote ourselves to an atmosphere of loving discussion, sound teaching, qualified leadership, and peaceable work together.