

Doctrine and duty in the church

Titus 1

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I'm not sure if you've ever had the experience of looking at something in the world, something that you've completely taken for granted, just because it's always been that way, and wondered why it is the way it is.

Why do we use red to indicate stopping and green to say go?

Why do men wear ties when they are getting dressed up?

Is there a good reason for having Christmas trees?

I mean you could put the presents anywhere couldn't you?

There are a whole lot of questions you could ask in a similar vein about the church.

Why do churches have ministers, or pastors or priests?

Why do they have just one minister, most of the time?

Why for most of history have all the ministers been men?

What sort of people ought to be ministers

if indeed we ought to have them at all?

There are all sorts of interesting questions you could ask.

Does the Bible have anything to say about such matters?

Well actually it does.

It might not give us quite the instructional handbook that some might look for.

But there are three letters in the NT

where the apostle Paul is writing to his junior colleagues about how they are to go about setting up and running churches.

We call these letters 'pastoral epistles'

because the subject matter is about how to pastor churches.

So there are two letters to Timothy and one to Titus.

Paul had given Timothy the job

of helping to guide the church in Ephesus,

and Titus he gave the some job on the island of Crete.

And we happen to be spending the next three weeks looking at Paul's letter to Titus.

Titus was a travelling companion and coworker of the apostle Paul. He took a stern letter from Paul to the Corinthian church, and he worked with Paul on Crete until Paul moved on to work elsewhere and Titus stayed on Crete to carry out Paul's instructions for the church there.

You could break the message of Titus up into three sections which are the three chapters we are looking at.

Chapter 1 Serving God in the church.

Chapter 2 Serving God in the home.

Chapter 3 Serving God in the world.

So today we are looking at how to serve God in the church.

And in particular it's about instructions for leadership in the church.

We must however pause briefly on Paul's greeting to Titus.

As he mostly does,

Paul ties his greeting with the substance of the letter.

So we aren't being sidetracked.

1:1-3 "Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ to further the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness - in the hope of eternal life, which God who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time, and which now at his appointed season he has brought to light through the preaching entrusted to me by the command of God our Saviour."

Wow there's a lot there.

It's Paul's understanding of his job description.

What is Paul's job?

It's to further the faith of God's elect.

God's elect means the people that God has chosen for salvation.

God chooses who he is going to save.
That's important because otherwise Christians could boast
that they were saved on account of their clever decision to choose God.
But God chose us before we ever chose him.
So there is no boasting.
Once God has chosen us for salvation,
he also wants to grow our faith so we can serve him well.
How does he do that?
By the preaching of people like the apostle Paul.
Paul preaches and the Christians on Crete
grow in their knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness.

What's the point of Paul telling Titus this stuff?
Well it underlines to Titus that he Titus has an important job.
God wants the Christians on Crete
to grow in their knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness,
then Titus is now responsible for helping that to happen.
No doubt there were all the usual struggles in the churches on Crete.
Churches are made up of people.
People have issues.
This person will be fighting with that person.
This person is grumbling about that decision that has been made.
This person is upset because that person is not happy.
Wherever there are people, there are issues.
And in Crete it was probably worse.
One of Crete's own prophets has said it:
that is Epimenides about 600 years earlier said,
"Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons."
The apostle Paul says that Epimenides hit the nail on the head.
Can you imagine that there were some issues in the churches on Crete?
You betcha.
And so no doubt Titus sometimes wonders what he's doing on Crete.
He seems to spend too much of his time sorting out people's trivial tiffs.
Is he wasting his time?
Paul wants him to know that it's not a waste of time.
When he preaches the gospel,

or indeed when he irons out some of the difficulties in the church,
What he's doing
is actually helping people come to a knowledge of the truth.
And what is beautiful
is that this gospel message will lead them towards godliness.
The preaching that God entrusted to his servant Paul
is the vehicle which can address the character failings of the Cretans.

So much for the introduction.

Now what does Paul want Titus to do in Crete?

1:5 "The reason I left you on Crete
was so that you might put in order what was left unfinished
and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you."

Paul is no longer on Crete to preach the gospel.

The time will come when Titus needs to do another job for Paul.

But the gospel must continue to be preached.

And for that reason,

Titus must appoint elders in the churches on Crete in every town.

It's clear that the role of elders in the church
is to maintain the doctrinal teaching of the church.

The only instruction for elders about what they must do
can be found in verse 9.

1:9 "He must hold firmly
to the trustworthy message as it has been taught,
so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine
and refute those who oppose it."

These elders are teaching elders.

Their role is to publicly teach the Christian faith.

And there are to be multiple elders in every town.

The question then comes,

"How does this relate to the church of today?"

Today we have usually a single ordained minister
who does the bulk of the public teaching."

We need to recognise what kind of document we are reading here.

This is a letter from Paul to Titus about what to do on Crete.

It's not necessarily designed to be a blueprint for how the church must be organised at all times and places. But it's worth thinking through why Paul might have wanted multiple elders in each town. One advantage of more than one teaching elder is that if one person gets sick or dies, then you can train up someone else to take their place, while ministry continues with the elders who remain. In Titus' day, if you were to rely on one person, it would be very easy for the chain of passing the truth from one generation to the next to be broken. I guess we deal with that in our situation by bringing in teachers from other places when one minister concludes their ministry. Another advantage of more than one teaching elder is that the congregation gets to hear the perspectives of multiple people. No one person has a monopoly on understanding God's Word. Listening to the perspectives of multiple people is a spiritually enriching thing for a congregation. How do we do that today? Not super well. We have some lay people who can preach the word. But it doesn't happen often enough. We also have lay service leaders and Bible Study leaders who can bring their insights to those roles. We do better on that score.

Now you also might ask, "Where does the role of bishop fit into Paul's instructions to Titus?" If you are reading the NIV, you might not see the word bishop in the passage. But actually the Greek word we translate as bishop is there. It's in verse 7. 1:7 "Since an overseer manages God's household, he must be blameless." The word translated 'overseer' is the word for bishop.

But as you read the passage as a whole,
it is clear that an 'overseer' and an 'elder' are one and the same person.
Elder refers to their status as a person of respect in the community.
Overseer refers to the role they have in governing the community.
But they are the same person.
And there are multiple overseers or bishops if you like in each town.
Sometimes this is taken as evidence
against the practice of our church in having bishops.
I think we need to remember a couple of things.
It's inevitable over time that structures will become more formalised.
The churches that Paul was writing to Titus about
were just in the initial stages of their lives after being planted.
Over time there would be a need to have some formal links
between the churches in the various towns on Crete.
There are a number of ways you could achieve this.
One way is to elect someone
who you might see as like the bishop of today.
Another way would be to have some kind of Presbyterian structure
where the elders of the churches in each town met together
to make decisions relevant to the life of the church on the whole island.
Paul is not laying out for Titus how this is to be achieved in this letter.
There's a reason for that.
At the time of writing the letter,
Titus is fulfilling that role!
The word overseer might not refer to a bishop as we know them today.
But the job Paul is giving Titus
is very much the job of a bishop of today.
He is the one who is governing all the churches on Crete
for a period of time.
And who really knows what arrangements were set up when Titus left?
I think we ought to read this
as giving the church a fair bit of freedom in how it organises itself.
Some churches might want a person in charge like a bishop.
Other churches might want a committee in charge like Presbyterians.
Still other churches might want the congregations in each town
to be independent of one another.

It seems to me that it's quite possible to serve God faithfully under any of these structures.

Now we must turn to the heart of the matter.

Paul only has one thing to say about what the elders do.

They must hold firmly to the trustworthy message, encourage sound doctrine and refute false teaching.

But the bulk of his selection criteria are actually about the lives of the elders.

One thing about what they do.

Lots of things about how their lives must be.

1:6 An elder must be blameless and faithful to his wife.

If you read it in the original language it says he must be husband of one wife.

That leaves it open to the question of whether it is talking about marital faithfulness as in the NIV translation or whether it is talking about banning polygamy.

Well there's no evidence that polygamy was practiced in the first century in Crete. So it's probably better to see it like the NIV as commending marital faithfulness.

However you read it,

I think it's important not to be very wooden and inflexible about how you apply a couple of words that come without a long explanation about details.

I've heard of African contexts where polygamy was practiced, where men who wanted to be elders in the church had to banish all but one of their wives.

I'm pretty sure that causing great grief and pain in established family structures was not Paul's intention.

He wanted to elders in the church to be upstanding citizens, men whose lives would reflect well on the gospel they proclaimed.

I think it's both possible to believe that God's ideal is for monogamy, and to believe that in a culture where polygamy is practiced,

we can allow a generation or two
for that practice to be transformed by the preaching of the gospel
without causing great heartache and disruption in families.

Similarly with faithfulness in marriage.

We have a situation in our church
where a member who was regarded as an elder in the church
has been rejected as an elder by his son.

Why?

Because more than a decade after his wife left him,
and not as a result of any infidelity on his part,
he got remarried to a believing wife.

The son's argument
was that his dad was no longer the husband of but one wife.

Well that seems a very inflexible reading of the verse to me.

I think Paul is making general comments
about the kind of life Christian leaders are to have.

And none of it should be read with total rigidity.

I mean who can say that their children are never open to the charge
of being wild and disobedient?

All of our children are sinners
because they are the children of sinful parents.

But clearly some children are out of control,
others are just occasionally a bit naughty.

I think we can see what Paul is ultimately driving at in verse 7.

"Since the overseer manages God's household, he must be blameless."

There's a connection between your management of your own household
and your management of God's household.

God's household is very important.

You wouldn't want to give the job of managing God's household
to someone who hasn't proved themselves capable
of managing their own household.

So the point is, God is a faithful God.

Leaders in his household should be faithful people.

If they've been unfaithful in their marriages,
that probably rules them out.

A leader in God's household
needs to be able to pass on the Christian faith.
If they haven't been able to do that with their own kids,
they are probably not the right person
to be given that task with other people.
If their own children are out of control,
are they going to be able to keep God's household in order?
If they are a bully, or have a quick temper, or get drunk regularly,
or can't be trusted with money,
that's not going to work in leadership of God's household,
so they are not the right person for the job.
But with anyone you are considering,
they aren't going to be perfect.
It's not a case of as soon as there is anything against someone,
you would rule them out.
Otherwise you would have no leaders in the church.
It's about a balanced and wise overall assessment.
Is this someone whose character commends them to the role?

And we mustn't forget the positive qualities that are commended either.
You can see those in verse 8.
"Rather, he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good,
who is self controlled, upright, holy and disciplined."
Hospitality is important
because God showed love to us while we were still strangers to him.
Hospitality is mimicking God's character.
And the other qualities are qualities of Christian maturity.
At this time, I can't help but see Queen Elizabeth II in that description.
Self controlled, upright, holy and disciplined.
If the fruit of the Spirit are not growing in your own life,
you can hardly commend them to others.

Here are a couple more questions
that might stick out to you as you read this.
These elders are described as men.
Is that something

that is a result of the culture of Crete or the ancient world?
Or is it something that should apply in God's church everywhere?
I'm not sure it's possible to answer that question just from Titus.
Compared to Australia today, the ancient world was a place
where women were less likely
to occupy positions of leadership in the community more generally.
If Paul were writing to Titus in Australia today,
would he modify this aspect of his instructions?
Personally, I don't think he would modify it.
But I make that judgement based on what he writes in 1 Tim and 1 Cor.
I don't think you can say that using only Titus.
Of course in saying that,
I realise that I am out of step with the Anglican Church in Melbourne.
That's Ok,
you don't have to agree with every decision your denomination makes,
especially if you have good reason from the Bible.
We need to decide
whether the issue is important enough to part company.
In this case, my view is that it is not.
Hence I am still here.

The second question that might occur to you
is how do we deal with a situation
where these instructions for appointing elders
have been ignored by the church.
So for example, the Archbishop of Perth has recently ordained someone
who was living with his girlfriend for the bulk of the time
he was studying at Theology College prior to ordination.
She has also recently appointed a man to be precentor in her Cathedral
who is in a same sex relationship formalised by a civil union in the UK.
I don't think it's having a wooden inflexible reading of this chapter
to regard those situations are grossly violating the standards
that Paul gives Titus for choosing elders in the church.
This is not being blameless and faithful to his wife.
What do we do when the church we are part of
strays so far from the clear teaching of the Scriptures?

I mean this is important, right?

This is all about, in the words of verse 1,
furthering the faith of God's elect
and their knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness.
It's no small matter.

Well that's why Gafcon was formed.

Because leaders of the church from around the world
regarded passages of Scripture like this one as important for the church.
As not something that we as God's people
have the freedom to disregard.

And yet, because of the structure of the Anglican Church of Australia,
what happens in Perth
does not have any bearing on what might happen here in Melbourne.
It's a strange world that we live in.

We'll be discussing that
with the Sudanese Church in Cranbourne this afternoon.

But to draw from Paul's instructions to Titus,
in 1:10-11 it tell us that rebellious people must be silenced.

If you are in the situation Titus is in,
sometimes you can silence false teaching
by simply appointing leaders who will teach the truth.

But sadly sometimes things do get to a point
where the only way to silence false teachers in your church
is to withdraw from the organisation that the false teachers lead.

That's a very serious step to have to take.

But in the most serious of situations,
sometimes it is the right step.

As I finish,

let me pray for the leaders and elders of our church.

