



6. Useless Arguments Titus 3:9-15

I want you to give special emphasis to these matters, so that those who believe in God may be concerned with giving their time to doing good deeds, which are good and useful for everyone. 9 But avoid stupid arguments, long lists of ancestors, quarrels, and fights about the Law. They are useless and worthless. 10 Give at least two warnings to those who cause divisions, and then have nothing more to do with them. 11 You know that such people are corrupt, and their sins prove that they are wrong.

12 When I send Artemas or Tychicus to you, do your best to come to me in Nicopolis, because I have decided to spend the winter there. 13 Do your best to help Zenas the lawyer and Apollos to get started on their travels, and see to it that they have everything they need.

*14 Our people must learn to spend their time doing good, in order to provide for real needs; they should not live useless lives. 15 All who are with me send you greetings. Give our greetings to our friends in the faith. God's grace be with you all.
(Good News Bible)*

In our journey through Titus we have seen how the apostle Paul wanted Titus to deal with some issues with the church in Crete, which were a reflection of where they were then but are problems that are still very much relevant to the church in the 21st century. There are four areas Paul dealt with which I gave you at the beginning of the series.

- Qualifications & responsibilities for elders
- Members responsibilities
- Outlines for godly living/
- Church doctrine to be upheld in order to be pleasing to God

In this final sermon this evening we deal with the last area, concerning the doctrine of the church. We are also going to look at the final greetings which actually summarise where we have been with this epistle very neatly.

What seems at issue here is what much of the letter to Titus has been about. It's about promoting things which will make the church grow – good leadership, the young encouraged by the old, the encouragement of good deeds and now this which focusses on the need to maintain the unity of the fellowship. All these build the body and enhance the witness and reputation of God's people in the community. If we look to the world like a bunch of squabbling, dodgy and selfish people, how does that enhance the work of God? That was on Paul's mind when he urged Titus to stop Cretan Christians acting like Cretans.

So; pointless arguments in the church – what about them?. Since the first century, the church has been characterised by argument. Some issues have been really big. One dealt with here is writ large in the NT – the issue of Jewish believers thinking that Gentiles should take on all the responsibilities of the law and issues surrounding that. It was in many ways Paul's background right from the beginning of his ministry and for that matter Titus too as one of Paul's earliest co-workers. Now at the end of his ministry, Paul still finds these people a pain.

But I don't think he's just referring to the Jewish problem here. He of course refers to the ancestry

bit, and of course the Law, but he also refers to stupid arguments. Useless and worthless he calls them. There are many cases of really important rifts in the history of the church over points of principle, but too often it's been stupid arguments – clashes of personality, what music is played, whether we use technology or not, what we wear, how we say things, what version of the Bible to use. It's amazing what damage this sort of stuff does, just because certain individuals can't see issues for what they are. We've all come across them in the past – always criticising, always back-biting, always challenging the authority of the leaders, always pushing one or two unimportant doctrines at the expense of that which is really essential for faith.

In fact, Paul shows a low level of tolerance towards these types of people because of the damage they do. Let's read the words again: *You know that such people are corrupt, and their sins prove that they are wrong.*

And the issue here is not whether the issues are major doctrinal or moral ones or not. Most are minor in themselves but people pushing these things and making an issue out of a non-issue was creating the problem. Squabbles over minor things can be just as damaging to the unity of the fellowship as major doctrinal error when people push certain things that reflect their personal perspective and prejudice than the word of God. They can be so divisive.

Paul's attitude is quite uncompromising. *Give at least two warnings to those who cause divisions, and then have nothing more to do with them.* Now that sounds a bit different from Matthew 18 where Jesus suggests we should first personally discuss the matter with those who have offended with the aim of reconciliation, then failing that, take someone with us and then only after that to bring the matter to the church – and it's at that point it ceases to be a personal matter and is a matter for the church to deal with.

But Paul here only seems to be suggesting two strikes and you're out rather than three. Bear in mind this is a different situation. People who are causing the damage Paul is talking about are people who have already passed the personal stage and are making their issues public. Quite a few commentators have noted how it is over these doctrinal type issues that Paul is harsh rather than moral issues in this letter to Titus and therefore to Crete. This is what Christopher Harbin says:

For Paul, controversies are to be avoided, and those who create them are to be dismissed from the gatherings of believers. Discipline here focuses on retaining unity in the body of Christ and a reminder that the body exists to serve Him, not our own interests. If we look back to Jesus' words in Matthew 18, the emphasis was on reconciliation and unity among the believing community. The steps of "discipline" were steps that should be taken to restore unity and fellowship among believers. The goal of this practice was to reconcile the believer who was avoiding the call for reconciliation.

In Paul's words here in Titus 3, we have essentially the very same process, albeit framed in the negative perspective. Paul challenges those working against unity, calling them to account for their actions twice before being formally recognized as working against the reconciliation process. It is on this basis that they are to be excluded — they are working against the unity of the body, purposefully creating division. By their refusal to seek or accept reconciliation, they have excluded themselves from the body of Christ. Their being shunned, therefore, is a recognition that they do not desire reconciliation and so have cut themselves off from the Body of Christ. Church discipline here in Titus, then, does not seek division or excommunication. It recognizes that those who work against the unity of the body of Christ exclude themselves.

Verses 12 and 13 are instructions to Titus about people. *12 When I send Artemas or Tychicus to you, do your best to come to me in Nicopolis, because I have decided to spend the winter there. 13 Do your best to help Zenas the lawyer and Apollos to get started on their travels, and see to it that they have everything they need.* As I mentioned right at the beginning, this does appear to be a post-Acts letter where Paul is at large, particularly as Paul mentions a place, Nicopolis, that does not feature in Acts. The language and issues of Titus is also similar to that of 2 Timothy (and 1 Timothy) that suggests they were all written within a close time frame and 2 Timothy reveals

even more non-Acts details that tend to support the church tradition that Paul had post-Acts travels.

Finally Paul sums up the letter with his final instructions which remind us of the central issue of this letter which we had at least three sermons worth on: *Our people must learn to spend their time doing good, in order to provide for real needs; they should not live useless lives.* Some have remarked how this discussion of good works in Titus is un-Paul-like. It's almost more James-like.

But look at the background. Crete was a place where laziness and petty cheating were regarded as the norm – even a virtue. The people of God needed to stand out, both in terms of their personal relationships with one another, and with the world. As I said last week, this was not going to be a token set of acts, but something that came from their hearts, motivated by the grace God had shown them. We need to be people that stand out and reflect the grace shown to us. That's still the challenge for us today.

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