

HOW TO MAINTAIN A BEAUTIFUL CHURCH TITUS 3:9-15

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

I grew up in a small Methodist church in northern Wisconsin. Our pastor was shared by two other smaller congregations in nearby towns. I had a positive experience in my church life. I had cousins and friends in the church. I learned Bible stories. I had my first public speaking opportunities there through plays and Christmas dramas. In summer during my seminary years I had the chance to preach in all three churches on a Sunday morning.

It has been sad to see the spiritual decline in the Methodist church. Knowing a little more now about church history I can see that the decline began around 1900 when Methodist scholars went to Germany to study. They came back with doubts about the authority of the Bible and suspicions about the miraculous stories described therein. These ideas gradually spread through Methodist seminaries and to the pastors who were being trained there. We are blessed to have a retired Methodist pastor in our congregation whose convictions about the Bible were not changed by these ideas.

The underlying spiritual rot became more visible during the sexual revolution of the sixties and seventies. In 1971 a pastor in Texas confessed to be a practicing homosexual. He was forced to step down from the pastorate. In 1984 the Book of Discipline in the United Methodist Church was revised to ban "self-avowed practicing homosexuals from becoming members of the clergy." Later an additional provision was added prohibiting Methodist clergy from presiding over same-sex unions.

Methodist pastors kept pushing the limits and breaking the rules so that the rules were ignored. In 2016 the first openly gay bishop was elected to preside over 400 churches in the Rocky Mountain states. By 2019 at a national conference the split became evident within the church. At this St. Louis Conference conservative Methodist churches were given an option to disassociate from the United Methodist Church. By the end of last year some 7600 churches around the country had left the denomination. Many of them have joined a new conservative group known as the Global Methodist Church.

At its height in 1968 the United Methodist Church claimed 10.7 million members in the US. At the time of the split that number had decreased to about 6 million. There are more than 7 million members in other parts of the world. Most of them are theologically conservative. What has happened to the Methodist Church is similar to what has happened to other mainline denominations--- the Anglicans (or Episcopalians in this country), the Presbyterians, the Lutherans, and others. The spiritual failure and decline is a result of the failure to follow the directions in the passage before us this morning. We shall look at it to see how we can avoid a similar fate.

We have come to the last of our studies in the little Book of Titus. I plan next week to go to the Old Testament and begin a study of the life of Joseph. We have seen that this New Testament letter was written by Paul to Titus who was hanging out on the island of Crete in the Mediterranean Sea. Paul encouraged Titus to do what he could to strengthen the churches there. He was told to appoint elders in the various cities. He was encouraged to foster Christian virtues in the face of a culture that was often hostile to the Christian message and its values.

Last week we saw the apostle tell Titus to encourage Christians to be model citizens. He also reminded him that good deeds are the result of acceptance by God, not the basis for it. In v. 5 of this third chapter he wrote, “...**he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy...**” Our responsibility is to put our trust in this Jesus. Now we shall see what Paul tells us about how we can maintain a beautiful church.

I.

First of all, according to v. 9 of #3, we must DEFEND RIGHT DOCTRINE. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. DEFEND RIGHT DOCTRINE) Paul says, “**But avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless.**” The apostle warned Titus earlier in this letter about false teachers. Back in #1 vv. 10 & 11 he wrote, “**For there are many who are insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party. They must be silenced, since that are upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach.**”

We don't know exactly what these deceivers were teaching. The mention of the circumcision party suggests that at least some of them were Jews. We know from a number of places in the New Testament that there were Jews claiming to be Christians who were trying to get Gentile Christians to follow the Old Testament law and Jewish traditions. Paul fought against this Jewish legalism.

The warning in v. 9 in our passage describes a subset of false teaching. Paul speaks of foolish controversies. The adjective is *moros*, from which we get “moron.” We don't know exactly what he was talking about. But Paul said a similar thing in his letter to Timothy, which was written about the same time as Titus. (2 TIMOTHY 2:23) In 2 Timothy #2 v. 23, he wrote, “**Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels.**” The advice is not to get caught up in secondary matters that don't have much Christian importance.

But sometimes Christian leaders have to become involved to avoid divisions in the church. (2 TIMOTHY 2:25) So Paul adds in 2 Timothy #2 vv. 25 & 26, “**...correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, (2 TIMOTHY 2:26) and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.**” Whatever the exact problem was in Ephesus with Timothy or Titus on Crete, the

potential was there to lead people astray. Foolish controversies at least waste time, at worst they lead people into wrong beliefs.

In v. 9 of our passage Paul speaks not only of foolish controversies but also of genealogies. Before the time of Jesus there were some Jewish writers who looked at the Old Testament genealogy lists and made up stories about people in these lists. They picked characters who were not otherwise described in the Old Testament. So what they came up with was fiction. Something like this was apparently happening with some of the Christians on Crete.

Paul then mentions dissensions in v. 9. Some translations use the word “strife.” This is probably more commonly a problem in our churches than disagreements over doctrine. Strife and dissensions may involve personality clashes and different ways of doing things. They may involve disputes over the color of the carpet. Fortunately we dodged a bullet there, didn’t we? Paul’s encouragement is for Titus and other Christian leaders to avoid getting caught up in these things, but sometimes they are unavoidable, and church leaders need to get involved.

The last subject which Paul mentions in v. 9 is quarrels about the law. Given what we know about the early church and the involvement of Jewish Christians in it, the issue probably involved efforts to get Gentile Christians to follow Jewish traditions. Paul made it clear elsewhere that Gentile Christians were under no such obligation. The ceremonial aspects of the law and the necessity for animal sacrifices no longer needed to be observed. Ethical and moral teachings still applied, and Gentile Christians had much which they could learn from Jewish history as recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Getting caught up in these things, Paul says, is unprofitable and worthless. About twelve years ago a professor at Harvard University was given a piece of an ancient papyrus that became known as “the Gospel of Jesus’ Wife.” (PROJECTOR ON--- GOSPEL OF JESUS’ WIFE) It was written in the Coptic language, perhaps in the third or fourth century. One line was translated as “**Jesus said to them, ‘My wife...’**” Some text was missing. Then the next line said, “**She will be my disciple.**” Two lines later the text was believed to say “**I will dwell with her.**”

So some of the scholar types got all excited about this papyrus. Articles were written about it in *The New York Times*, *Harvard Magazine*, *The Atlantic*, and *Smithsonian Magazine*. Some scholars suggested that this was reflective of an early Christian tradition. The woman involved was probably Mary Magdalene. Maybe the early church was suppressing this legitimate tradition. Maybe Jesus did have a wife. Maybe He had children. A couple of years went by, and some other scholars did a careful analysis of the document and concluded that it was all a forgery. The original proponents of this papyrus eventually agreed that it was a fake. It proved to be unprofitable and worthless. Such are some of the pursuits that go on in the world of academia. (PROJECTOR OFF)

As a church and as elders we need to have some awareness of the threats that come from our world and even the supposedly Christian world that would undermine our faith.

It is important to defend basic Christian doctrine. That is how the Methodist Church got messed up. That is why we all voted to add a provision to our church constitution a few years ago to provide a Biblical definition of marriage.

II.

Paul also encourages Titus and other Christians in our passage to PRESERVE UNITY. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. PRESERVE UNITY) What has happened in so many of these mainline denominations is that the preservation of unity has had a higher priority than right doctrine. The idea is that we should not exclude anyone, and we need to let people with all kinds of ideas be part of our group. But if we don't have some basic core beliefs centered upon the authority of the Bible, then we are headed on a downward slope that ends up with the kinds of problems the Methodist Church has.

Given that background, unity is important. Thus Paul writes in vv. 10 & 11, **“As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.”** Jesus Himself stressed the importance of unity among Christians in his high priestly prayer. John's Gospel in #17 tells the story about how Jesus celebrated the Last Supper with His disciples just before His arrest in Gethsemane. In front of His disciples he prayed for unity. (JOHN 17:20) In # 17 vv. 20 & 21, He prayed, **“I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, (JOHN 17:21) that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”**

This unity deal is apparently a pretty big thing to Jesus. Jesus sees it as a powerful witness to the world around us. We elders of the church have a monthly prayer time. The first item on our list is church unity. A lot of people in our world have trouble in getting along with others, Many families struggle with it. People who see unity are attracted to it. From what I can tell our church is doing pretty well in this. I don't sense that we have any big factions or any disputes simmering below the service. May this spirit continue by the grace of God.

How do we maintain this? Paul in our passage says that we need to be on guard for people who stir up division. Occasionally this may involve doctrinal issues. More often the problem may come from people dealing with their own issues--- personal loss, anger, bitterness--- which can carry over into problems in a church congregation.

Paul was probably familiar with the basic guideline which Jesus gave to His disciples. In Matthew #18 vv. 15-17 (PROJECTOR ON--- MATTHEW 18:15) Jesus is recorded as saying, **“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. (MATTHEW 18:16) But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. (MATTHEW 18:17) If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”**

There are lots of things Christians need to just let go. If we Christians become too sensitive, we can find all kinds of slights and inappropriate words and situations of being overlooked that can make us upset. Usually we do better to be quick to forgive and let go and overlook and keep focused on the mission. There are some instances which need to be addressed. Jesus recognized that here, as did Paul. Church leaders need to be on guard for this. Over the course of my two decades here, there have been a few situations in which we elders have needed to address such problems.

The goal is always to restore people who may be straying from the right path. We initially should seek to be kind and gentle. (GALATIANS 6:1) In Galatians #6 v. 1 the Apostle Paul writes, **“Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.”**

For the sake of unity Paul reminds us in our passage that we, especially church leaders, need to address situations where people are stirring up division. For those who remain resistant Paul in our translation says that we are to have nothing more to do with them. Other translations say that we are to reject them. Good Christians differ over what that means. Some say that they should be excluded from communion. Our own church constitution says that the discipline process could result in removal from church membership.

III.

The third factor which our passage identifies as a way to maintain a beautiful church is the need to PROMOTE TEAMWORK. (III. PROMOTE TEAMWORK) Paul writes in v. 12, **“When I send Artemas or Tychicus to you, do your best to come to me at Nicopolis, for I have decided to spend the winter there.”**

Artemas is not elsewhere mentioned in the New Testament. Tychicus appears several times. The first chronological reference to him comes in Acts #20 v. 4. On Paul’s third missionary trip he spends time in Ephesus. There is a riot. He leaves town and decides to return to his home base in Syrian Antioch. (ACTS 20:4) According to v. 4 of #20, **“Sopater the Berean, son of Pyrrhus, accompanied him; and of the Thessalonians, Aristarchus and Secundus; and Gaius of Derbe, and Timothy; and the Asians, Tychicus and Trophimus.”** So Tychicus is a travel companion of Paul. He is an Asian, which means he is from the Roman province of Asia, of which Ephesus is the capital.

A couple of years later Paul is in prison in Rome. He sends Tychicus with letters to the Ephesians and Colossians. (EPHESIANS 6:21) We read in Ephesians #6 v. 21, **“So that you also may know how I am and what I am doing, Tychicus the beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord will tell you everything.”**

So Tychicus is a trusted assistant of Paul. (PROJECTOR OFF) Most of the Bible scholars think that Paul is in Macedonia, what we know as Greece, when he writes this

letter. He is going to send one of these two guys to Crete with this letter. Either Tychicus or Artemas will take over leadership in Crete so that Titus can visit Paul in Nicopolis. (NICOPOLIS) Nicopolis was on the west coast of Greece. It was known as a winter resort city.

Verse 13: **“Do your best to speed Zenas the lawyer and Apollos on their way; see that they lack nothing.”** This is the only mention of Zenas in the New Testament. It is the only mention of a Christian lawyer in the New Testament. The term “lawyer” could mean that he is a Jewish expert in Jewish law, or he was a Gentile who practiced law in the Roman world. The fact that he has a Gentile name could mean that he was practicing secular law.

Then Apollos is also mentioned. That name may ring a vague bell with some of you. He had a reputation for being a powerful Christian speaker. We read about him in Acts #18. (ACTS 18:24) Beginning in v. 24 we are told, **“Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures. (ACTS 18:25) He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. (ACTS 18:26) He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately. (ACTS 18:27) And when he wished to cross to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. When he arrived, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed, (ACTS 18:28) for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus.”**

So Apollos is now involved in other missionary work. He and his lawyer friend Zenas may be coming through Crete on another mission. (PROJECTOR OFF) Titus is encouraged to supply them with whatever they need when they show up. Kind of too bad, isn't it, when a lawyer needs to be helped along by a poor preacher?

The main thing to notice here is that we have a team at work. Paul as an apostle is directing the traffic. Everyone in leadership seems to be getting along, and all of them are focused on the mission of spreading the gospel.

Part of the joy that I have in my job is seeing some of the teamwork that goes on around here. Just this week Carol says that Carolyn wants to donate a bed. Don and I pick it up and bring it to Ethel. Rob is there to help us unload. Ethel donates a bed which we bring back here. Dan has found out that a family from his youth group will have an unfurnished apartment with which they will need help. Bed is set aside for that. The church sign has a bulb that goes out. Mac shows up to fix that and Don helps out. My son Scott's girlfriend has a fall and fractures her skull. Nurse Eva is on the phone with her to make sure that she is getting the best possible care. At Wednesday Zoom prayer meeting Carol updates us on the latest prayer requests. Neighbor Joe asks about a place to store prizes for the car show being planned for this fall. We help him out with that. Money shows up this week donated to our Memorial Fund to help out with special

projects around the church. We find out that a single lady in our church is in need of a used car. Don goes to work on looking for that. Meanwhile a church hike happens on Saturday and the widows' group meets. Music and sound gets planned and organized for today. Sunday school teachers do their job. Other good things go on behind the scenes that I don't even know about. A beautiful church is maintained when people jump in and help wherever they can. What we strive to do is to promote teamwork.

IV.

Then finally in this passage we find a FOCUS ON MEETING PRESSING NEEDS. (PROJECTOR ON--- FOCUS ON MEETING PRESSING NEEDS) That is the message of vv. 14 & 15. In v. 14 Paul writes, **“And let our people learn to devote themselves to good works, so as to help cases of urgent need, and not be unfruitful.”**

Jesus told His disciples in the Sermon on the Mount (MATTHEW 5:16) in Matthew #5 v. 16, **“In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”**

In our passage Paul is speaking to Titus. But he is talking about the need for the Christians of Crete to be involved in good works. He implies that a learning process is involved. (PROJECTOR OFF) We have seen that the people of Crete had a reputation for being self-centered. In #1 v. 12 Paul quoted one of their own leaders who said that the Cretans were liars, evil beasts, and lazy gluttons. Jesus changes selfish attitudes. But He also uses the example of Titus and other godly Christian leaders to get people involved in good works.

Certainly we see elements of that self-centeredness in our own culture. Life is supposed to be about finding our happiness. Retirement is promoted as a time for relaxing and enjoying life and doing what we want to do. That attitude can infect us Christians.

Paul has stressed the importance of good works, not as a way to find salvation, to be accepted by God, but rather as the fruit of salvation. Good works should be the overflow of a life changed by God. In John #15 Jesus used the imagery of a grapevine. He is the vine. If we are connected to Him, we will bear fruit. (PROJECTOR ON--- JOHN 15:8) In v. 8 of #15 He says, **“By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.”** The fruit which we bear reflects our connectedness to Jesus.

Paul in this brief letter has stressed the importance of good works. (PROJECTOR OFF) In #2 v. 7 he told Titus to be a model of good works. In #2 v. 14 he said that Christians should be zealous for good works. In #3 v. 1 he said that Christians should be ready for every good work. In v. 8 he said that Christians should be careful to devote themselves to good works. Now again in v. 14 in our passage he says that Christians should learn to devote themselves to good works.

“Good works” obviously is a broad category. Many things could be categorized as good works. Paul qualifies it a bit by encouraging his audience to help cases of urgent need.

Urgent needs sometimes involve family matters. They might involve financial needs or health needs. Dan Bunch was recently in the hospital and on his death bed. He did not have any family around. We were his family. People recognized that as an urgent need. All kinds of people volunteered to spend time at his bedside. Nurses wanted to know if Dan was the CEO of a company because there were so many people coming in to see him. That care for him was a great testimony.

The apostle concludes his letter in v. 15 with these words: **“All who are with me send greetings to you. Greet those who love us in the faith. Grace be with you all.”** The Christian life is certainly about love and faith and grace.

I got a visit this week from Garrett Holmes and his wife Jessica and two of their younger kids. Those of you who have been around here for quite a long time remember that Garrett was the youth pastor some years ago. He moved up to British Columbia near Vancouver where he pastors a small multicultural church.

In the course of our visit he told me a story which I did not know. Jack Taylor was an elder here for a number of years. He was also church treasurer for a time. He was a single guy who was always on the lookout to meet pressing needs. He was also a team player. As an elder he was concerned about right doctrine. He used to assist me in church membership classes. He was also about promoting church unity.

Jack lived in Henderson. His health deteriorated to the point that it was difficult for him to get over here to church. So he connected with a church closer to his home. He kept up his friendship with the Holmes family. He was aware that their family finances were tight. They ended up with five children. They adopted their youngest son who has special needs as an autistic child. So Jack wrote the Holmes family into his will. When he died a few years ago, their family got a significant chunk of change. Jack met a pressing need. The son whom they adopted was named Jack in his honor. Isn't that a great story?

There are pressing needs all around us. They might be in our own family. They might involve somebody at church. They might involve a neighbor. May God give us sensitivity to the needs around us and wisdom about what we can do to meet them.