

Now Behave!

Titus 2:11-15

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Continuing with our series based on some of the letters in the New Testament, today we come to Titus. The Letter to Titus presents itself as having been written by Paul to one of his former companions who is now leading churches and missionary efforts on the island of Crete. Hear now these words of instruction:

Titus 2:11-15

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

Declare these things; exhort and reprove with all authority. Let no one look down on you.

For the Word of God in scripture,
For the Word of God among us,
For the Word of God within us,
Thanks be to God.

Two words, and one exclamation mark, to summarize the Letter to Titus: Now behave! This author comes across as a stern parent, though the core message is that in response to God's grace, we should be zealous for good deeds, living self-controlled, upright, and godly lives.

The book is about proper order for leaders, the church, and the home. This letter provides instructions on appointing elders and bishops for the church and their qualifications. Titus is warned about false teachers who are trying to deceive the people, and he's told to rebuke the deceivers "sharply."

Titus is also supposed to teach his congregants how to live good lives. There are specific instructions for old men, wives, young men, and slaves, with an emphasis on obedience and submission to authority. Also enumerated are a number of good behaviors such as controlling passions, being gentle, and acting courteously. The letter also adds that we should "avoid stupid controversies" and speculations.

So, if you were here last week when I preached on the Letter to Philemon, you might be confused. The Letter to Philemon promotes a new social order based on radical equality. Instead of telling people what to do, it encourages them to freely choose the right thing. Instead of telling slaves to submit to masters and wives to husbands, the Letter to Philemon treats all people as partners together in God's mission, of equal worth and dignity, thus subverting hierarchy and patriarchy.

You might then be wondering, can these two letters be written by the same person? After all, both claim to be written by Paul the apostle. Yet, the social relations described in Titus sound less Paul and more like the ideals of family life promoted by the Roman empire, as influenced by Stoic philosophy. What's going on here?

Well, you wouldn't be the first to ask such questions. In the ancient church, some wondered if Paul really authored the Letter to Titus. At the beginning of the 19th century, Friedrich Schleiermacher was the first modern scholar to speculate that some of the letters attributed to Paul might not have been written by him. That conclusion that has now received widespread agreement among biblical scholars.

Strong consensus exists that Titus, along with First and Second Timothy, were probably written by some second century church elder making a claim for Paul's authority in order to give his own advice to churches.

So, that would explain why this letter contains such a different social vision than what we read last week. At best, this author is trying to give churches advice on how to avoid persecution given their social environment. But at worst, this author comes across as supporting the status quo of social life in the empire, with its patriarchy, slavery, and economic exploitation. Which puts this letter at odds not only with Paul but the overwhelming tradition of the New Testament.

In the early centuries of Christianity there were many debates around questions of equality, leadership, and church order. Bart Ehrman writes:

Paul's churches split in lots of ways. . . . Some Pauline Christians thought women should be treated as equals and given equal status and authority with men, since Paul did say that 'in Christ there is neither male nor female.' Other Pauline Christians thought that women were equal with men only "in Christ," by which they meant "in theory," not in social reality. These Christians were keen to tone down Paul's own emphasis on women, and one of them decided to write a set of letters

In the long run a view very much like that of the author of Titus gained power, with the more radical interpreters of Jesus and Paul sidelined for much of Christianity's history. Robert E. Goss calls Titus "a tremendous power play within the history of the Church" and one with long lasting, negative consequences.

What, then, are we to do with Titus?
Do we think this letter contains any word for us?

As I pondered these questions leading up to writing the sermon this week, I thought of our Puritan ancestors. Look again at the description of upright living and social and family order described in Titus, and it sounds very like the Puritans.

The Puritans believed that we are called by God to live virtuously and that our personal virtue has implications for the family and wider society. A virtuous life is one of “simplicity, modesty, and charity” to quote the historian Amy Kittelstrom.

But there exist a set of interesting historical outcomes to the Puritan way of life. Their emphasis on virtuous living gave birth to democracy, to liberalism, to universal human rights, to our current denomination, the United Church of Christ, and its vision of Christian ethics rooted in equality, freedom, and inclusivity.

How did this come about? Well, that’s a more complicated historical story than I have time for in today’s worship. There are many historians who have treated the matter. I recommend Amy Kittelstrom’s *The Religion of Democracy* as one good recent book on this evolution.

Without getting into all the details, let me sketch a little bit of what happened. One feature is that the Puritans and early Congregationalists understood themselves to be finite Christians who sin. Their finitude and sinfulness affected their ability to know. Therefore, they understood that they only possessed some truth and could not claim full, infallible knowledge. These theological understandings gave rise to intellectual humility, curiosity to learn from others, and critical examination of ideas.

The emphasis on moral virtue also focused attention on improving the self. To cultivate the self meant to grow spiritually, morally, and intellectually. So a life of virtue included valuing education. The Puritans were highly literate, teaching both sons and daughters to read. They read the Bible constantly, while they also read the great classics and the best intellects and authors of their own age. They founded schools wherever they went. Remember that Omaha Public Schools began in the basement of the First Congregational Church.

Over the course of a couple of centuries as the Spirit moved these once very conservative Christians, they developed ideas of tolerance, charity, and freedom of thought. They embraced historical-critical scholarship of the Bible, which taught them to consider questions like “Who wrote the letter to Titus?” They began to ponder whether the ethical commands of a book like Titus are best understood not as absolute moral laws to govern people in all times in places, but as descriptions of a historical context. Ultimately they decided that the Letter to Titus was wrong about slavery, about women, about church organization.

I think we can learn from our forebears how to handle this letter. Much of its particulars about family and society we disagree with, because they do not reflect the best human wisdom and are even contrary to the social vision of the rest of the New Testament.

Instead, I want to suggest two things we can take away from reading the Letter to Titus. First is that we should live virtuous lives as expressions of gratitude for God’s grace. For us those virtuous lives will be more equitable and just, while still being expressions of love, gentleness, and courtesy.

And the second takeaway is that virtuous lives were once before the fertile ground in which freedom and inclusion came to fruition. May our leaders, our churches, and our homes be gardens for the Holy Spirit to bring forth a new and better world in the time to come.