

Titus: Organizing the Early Church

By Steve Ray

[NOTE: In my articles on the *Pastoral Epistles*, I use each one to relay a theme: *1 Timothy* emphasizes Timothy; *Titus* emphasizes Paul's ecclesiology; *2 Timothy* emphasizes the end of Paul's life.]

Success brings rewards, but it also brings problems and responsibilities. Entrepreneurs are good at starting new ventures, but not always good at managing them. Preaching the good news of Jesus Christ around the Roman Empire was a huge enterprise. And the enterprise bore fruit—fruit that had to be tended. Success must be managed and that requires institutions and delegation. The Apostle Paul learned all this, sometimes the hard way.

Controlling a mushrooming new enterprise is difficult enough but it is even tougher managing it from a prison cell or from a ship tossed at sea. With no e-mail, fax machines or Federal Express communications over thousands of miles was slow and laborious. New news was old news before it ever reached the ears afar off. Problems could fester and spread before a plea could be made or a remedy provided. St. Paul learned all of this, sometimes the hard way.

St. Paul understood delegation which is so crucial to any successful enterprise. Besides being a good manager, Paul had a few loyal fellow workers he could trust. A man once exclaimed, “My friend is no orator; but he will go out with me in any kind of weather.” Titus was like that. When Paul was wading up to his neck in alligators, Titus was by his side. The Church needs her Paul's who can preach and make waves; but she also needs her Titus' who can step into tough situations and calmly bring peace and order.

Titus was such a man and his name is mentioned thirteen times in the New Testament, always with affection and trust—serving with Paul for many years (see 2 Cor 8:16–17, 23–24). Trustworthy men are hard to find, as Paul learned, and Titus was one of the few Paul could trust as his representative and to solve difficult problems. For example, he organizing finances among the unruly Corinthians (2 Cor 8:1–17) and he appointed overseers over the Cretans (Tit 1:5) along with many other diplomatic missions. Handling very sensitive and difficult problems, it seems that Titus was a man of great tact, forceful character, deep holiness, and good organizational skills. He lived up to the meaning of his name “Titus” which means *nurse*—he was tending and healing problems within the Church.

Titus was not Jewish, he was a Greek, and some think he was the brother of St. Luke the physician, another loyal fellow worker with Paul. Titus was uncircumcised which caused no small problem when working among the Jews. It seems he was a test case when Paul and Barnabas took him to Jerusalem and he was not compelled to be circumcised (Gal 2:3). Paul affectionately refers to him as “my true child” which certainly implies that he was converted by Paul's evangelism. And when a child grows up a father is always proud to refer to his son as “my brother” (2 Cor 2:13) and my “partner and fellow

worker” (2 Cor 8:23). How many fathers are proud to include their son in the family business not as a junior but as an equal?

Paul’s brief letter to Titus was one of his severest. It was a good thing the letter was assigned to Titus whose job it was to forcefully apply Paul’s demanding message to a very intemperate group of people. Implementing Paul’s objectives and moral standards required diplomacy and tact and Titus was the man for the job. And what a compliment! Paul wanted the Cretans to faithfully live out the Christian life so he sent Titus not to *talk* about what a Christian should be, but to provide the living *image* of the faith—the living breathing example (Tit 2:7)—Titus himself. Can you think of a higher compliment or a greater responsibility?

Paul had few kind words for the Cretans. Not many today could get away with his “politically incorrect” words. Quoting Epimenedes (600 BC), one of Crete’s own poets, Paul says it is true that the “Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons” (Tit 1:12). The Cretans had a reputation—their corruption was proverbial. “The Cretans,” said Polybius (200 BC), “on account of their innate avarice, live in a perpetual state of private quarrel and public feud and civil strife . . . and you will hardly find anywhere characters more tricky and deceitful than those of Crete” (Endnote: 1). They were so notorious that the Greeks coined a verb *krētizein*, to *cretize*, which meant *to lie and to cheat* (Endnote 2). Paul gives Titus no small job—convert them—“rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith” (Tit 1:13). The epistle is replete with exhortations for self-control and restraint. Titus really had his work cut out for him.

If you had been raised in a culture renowned for cheating and dishonesty, what would you think if the apostolic delegate read his letter from St. Paul aloud and it referred to the God “who never lies”? Ah, this is a good example of how important it is to understand the culture and people to whom the Scriptures were originally written. What did the recipients think? How did *they* understand and interpret the letter? Why would Paul refer to the God “who never lies” when writing to the Cretans? For two reasons: they were liars and their gods were liars and Paul is working to convert them. They should tell the truth and worship the true God who always tells the truth.

In the classical myths, the gods of Greece (and therefore of Crete) were a deceitful and lying bunch. Zeus was notorious for such things as ravishing young maidens and then lying to his wife Hera, denying the evil deed (Endnote 3). Can a people be expected to hold to a higher morality than their gods?

Not only were their gods liars, but the Cretans even lied about their lying gods. For example, they claimed that Zeus’ grave was on Crete. In Crete there was a monument called *The Tomb of Zeus*. Obviously the greatest of the gods cannot die and be buried in a tomb, and a well-known poet quoted this as a perfect example of Cretan lying. In his *Hymn to Zeus* he writes: “Cretans are chronic liars, / for they built a tomb, O King, / And called it thine; but you die not; / Your life is everlasting” (Endnote 4).

Understanding the people and the cultural background of a biblical book helps us understand and better appreciate the teaching and subtleties of the scriptural text. Paul's comment about the Christian God that cannot lie is just one of many examples in Titus. With this subtle jab Paul is challenging the Cretans: "Your gods are evil, you are sinful like your gods—convert!" The people of Crete should follow the true God and live up to higher moral standards.

But when and why was the *Epistle to Titus* written? It was written around the same time as *1 Timothy*, between A.D. 64 and 65, a few years after Paul had been released from two years of house arrest in Rome with a Roman guard (Acts 28:16, 30) and a year or so before *2 Timothy* and his execution. In this short period of final apostolic work there was new ground to conquer and old ground to revisit and strengthen. Including a trip to Spain. Paul traveled through Crete in the Mediterranean Sea (Endnote 5). It was, "the island of a hundred cities" and here Paul left Titus behind "to amend what was defective, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you" (Tit 1:5).

Paul knew he had little time left and was now, as he had been in the past, concerned that the local churches were well established with the same structure and tradition that was mandated for the whole Church (1 Cor 7:7, 2 Cor 11:28). His mind was turning to management, the institution—the Church—that would carry on the faith and the liturgical life of the Church (cp. 2 Tim 2:2). So he wrote to his trusted followers Titus and Timothy to carry on his work and insure it was established under bishops who were self-controlled, mature and sound in doctrine. So in this case, don't pick Cretans who lived up to the reputation of Cretans; pick Cretans who lived up to the example set by Titus.

Judaizers had ravaged many in the churches here as elsewhere, confusing the believers with demands that negated the gospel. Demands of circumcision and adherence to Jewish customs and tradition had been taught to the Cretans and fought by Paul. Those who taught such "Jewish myths" denied God by their deeds and were to be reprov'd (Tit 1:14–16). Then as today, it was crucial to have godly and orthodox bishops. Eusebius writes, "Timothy, so it is recorded, was the first to receive the episcopate of the parish in Ephesus, Titus of the churches in Crete." So, Titus was the first bishop of Crete and had the task of appointing additional bishops who would then appoint subsequent bishops to succeed them.

Paul increasingly desired to see the institution of the existing churches firmly established through the bishops to carry on the moral and liturgical life of Christ in the Church. His time was running short and he knew it. Before long the Romans would again arrest him, transport him to Rome and cut off his head. As a master organizer he had carefully chosen lieutenants who would carry on the work. And carry it on they did. The letter to Titus continually reminds the people of God how to conduct themselves and how the clergy need to be strong in their office of prophet, priest, and king—teaching, sanctifying, and governing the people of God.

Text Boxes:

The churches spread and the structure established by the Apostles and their followers continued into the next generation.

“See that ye all follow the bishop, even as Jesus Christ does the Father, and the presbytery as ye would the apostles; and reverence the deacons, as being the institution of God. Let no man do anything connected with the Church without the bishop. Let that be deemed a proper Eucharist, which is [administered] either by the bishop, or by one to whom he has entrusted it. Wherever the bishop shall appear, there let the multitude [of the people] also be; even as, wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church” (St. Ignatius of Antioch A.D. 106, *Letter to the Smyrnaeans*, 8).

“For [the Apostles] not only had helpers in their ministry but also, in order that the mission assigned to them might continue after their death, they passed on to their immediate cooperators, as it were, in the form of a testament, the duty of confirming and finishing the work begun by themselves, recommending to them that they attend to the whole flock in which the Holy Spirit placed them to shepherd the Church of God” (*Lumen gentium*, 20).

Endnotes:

1. *The letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*. 2000, c1975 (W. Barclay, lecturer in the University of Glasgow, Ed.) (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; The Daily study Bible series, Rev. ed. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press.
2. *The letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*. 2000, c1975 (W. Barclay, lecturer in the University of Glasgow, Ed.) (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; The Daily study Bible series, Rev. ed. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press.
3. Ed. Clinton Arnold, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 3:501.
4. William Barclay, *The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*. 2000, c1975 (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1975), 243.
5. Use footnote if necessary: Romans to show his plan and desire then early sources including Clement to show that he did go to Spain.