

Addressing False Teaching

Titus 1:10-16

This morning we continue our sermon series “A Healthy Church” from Paul’s letter to Titus. We’re going to consider a passage in which Paul urges Titus and the elders at Crete to “silence” those who were teaching false doctrine and disrupting what God was doing in the churches there. In Paul’s mind addressing false doctrine was serious business. A healthy church does whatever is necessary to establish sound doctrine.

We are going to use this passage as something of a case study in addressing false doctrine. This passage exposes the dynamics that come into play whenever false doctrine is introduced into the life of a congregation. It also illustrates how leadership should respond in a healthy church.

Addressing false teaching is very difficult to do well; there are many land mines and pitfalls along the way. There are dozen ways that addressing false teaching can go wrong. So perhaps a couple point of clarification are in order before we look at our passage for today. **First**, when we speak of false doctrine we’re talking about core, essential doctrines of the faith. We’re talking about doctrines related to the core message that a person is saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Just because you and have different understandings of some area of doctrine or practice doesn’t mean that we should accuse each other of being false teachers.

Years ago I was in a Bible study with three other pastors in town. We took a year to study through the book of Hebrews. There were numerous times when we disagreed with each other on the interpretation of specific passages. One issue involved whether somebody who abandoned the faith was ever a genuine believer or not. We all agreed that if a person says, “I don’t believe that Jesus died for my sins” that that person isn’t (present tense) a believer. But we strongly disagreed on whether the person had salvation and lost it or whether the person never had it. Nevertheless we had tremendous fellowship and even unity; and we didn’t call each other false teachers. False teaching involves core doctrines.

Even when you say false teaching involves only core doctrines, it’s not cut and dried. You still need to define what is essential and what is non-essential. Here at Faith E Free our Statement of Faith (found on our web site) articulates what we understand to be core doctrines.

Second, the motivation is the health of the church. Addressing false teaching isn’t a matter of control; it’s not a matter of being right. Remember that earlier in chapter 1 Paul stressed that elders shouldn’t be self-willed or pugnacious; their motivation isn’t getting their own way or winning a fight. Their passion is supposed to be the health of the church and even the soul of the person in error. In a healthy church elders aren’t trying to be “thought police”; rather they’re willing to pay whatever price is necessary so that the church is healthy.

With those points of clarification in mind, let's consider Titus 1:10-16. Let's read the passage and then I'll make a couple of points about the character of false teachers and the character of false teaching.

10 For there are many rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision, 11 who must be silenced because they are upsetting whole families, teaching things they should not *teach* for the sake of sordid gain. 12 One of themselves, a prophet of their own, said, "Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons." 13 This testimony is true. For this reason reprove them severely so that they may be sound in the faith, 14 not paying attention to Jewish myths and commandments of men who turn away from the truth. 15 To the pure, all things are pure; but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled. 16 They profess to know God, but by *their* deeds they deny *Him*, being detestable and disobedient and worthless for any good deed.

The character of false teachers: their lives betray them. (1:10, 16) Paul doesn't mince words when he talks about those who leads others astray (intentionally or unintentionally) from the gospel of Jesus. Here's his description in verse 10:

10 For there are many rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision,

Rebellious means that they don't submit to God or those appointed by God (such as the apostles). They are "empty talkers" in the sense that their words have no real substance; they talk a lot but don't say anything. They are "deceivers" in the sense that they mislead people, making them think and believe things that aren't what they appear to be. When we talk about false teachers we aren't talking about immature believers whose theology needs to be refined. We're talking about people who are confirmed in their rebellion against God and who are settled in their false teaching.

Look down at verse 16. In Crete at least, Paul warned Titus that he was confronting people who actually think they know God. They're self-deceived.

16 They profess to know God, but by *their* deeds they deny *Him*, being detestable and disobedient and worthless for any good deed.

This is consistent with Jesus' teaching on false prophets in Matthew 7: "You will know them by their fruit. . . . a good tree produces good fruit and a bad tree produces bad fruit" (Mt. 7:15-20). It's a sobering thing to realize that our behavior is an accurate indicator of who we are. Jesus and Paul would disagree with someone who says, "I'm really a loving person even though I'm not patient or kind and even though I'm jealous and I hold grudges and I'm easily provoked." No, our deeds reflect the type of person we really are.

False teachers "profess to know God" but their deeds betray them; their deeds tell a very different story. In Titus 2 and 3 Paul will stress that those who truly know God

should be zealous for good deeds. These false teachers didn't bear that fruit. The same is true in our day: you don't only listen to a person's words; you listen to a person's life to discern who and what they really are.

The character of false teaching: it contradicts the gospel of Jesus.

The details change from situation to situation, but the general character of false teaching is that it contradicts the gospel of Jesus. Notice again verses 10 and 11:

10 For there are many rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision, 11 who must be silenced because they are upsetting whole families, teaching things they should not *teach* for the sake of sordid gain.

In verse 10 Paul mentions "those of the circumcision," which was basically shorthand for Jewish Christians who taught that you have to be a good Jew in order to be a good Christian. Specifically, they taught that even if you believe in Jesus, you still have to circumcise your baby boys because that's what the Law taught. They really didn't believe that the new covenant replaced (not supplemented) the old covenant.

It's hard for us to appreciate how difficult it was for Jews in the first century to let go of the Law (old covenant). In and of itself, it was a radical thing to believe that Jesus is the Messiah who paid for sin by His death on the cross. But it seemed downright dangerous to teach that the old covenant is now obsolete - which is what Jesus taught and what the writings of Paul and the book of Hebrews explained in great detail. There were "Jewish Christians" (only God knows their hearts) who couldn't let go of the requirements of the Law (e.g. circumcision, dietary regulations, etc.).

Verse 12 suggests that there were things in the Cretan culture that were especially susceptible to this false teaching. Paul does an interesting thing: he quotes a Cretan "prophet" who makes a scathing evaluation of the character of your average Cretan; then he agrees with his evaluation.

12 One of themselves, a prophet of their own, said, "Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons." 13 This testimony is true. For this reason reprove them severely so that they may be sound in the faith, 14 not paying attention to Jewish myths and commandments of men who turn away from the truth.

Paul was quoting from a man named Epimenides who lived in Crete around 500 b.c. (see Knight, p. 298). His evaluation was that "Cretans are always liars." He was exaggerating for effect, but apparently lying was so engrained in the culture on Crete that the expression "to play the Cretan" (*kretizo*) meant "to lie." Epimenides also pointed out how Cretans were "evil beasts" and "lazy gluttons." One of their own "prophets" had this view of the character of Cretans. Paul's comment was, "This testimony is true."

Paul's point seems to be that since these vices were so engrained in Cretan culture that the believers at Crete needed to be confronted directly and forcefully. Nuance wouldn't work with them.

13 . . . For this reason reprove them severely so that they may be sound in the faith,
14 not paying attention to Jewish myths and commandments of men who turn away from the truth.

Back in verse 9 Paul said that elders need to cling to sound doctrine so that they will be able to "refute those who contradict." Paul envisioned that Titus and the elders he appointed would do this very thing. They were to "reprove them severely" (those who had followed the false teachers) so that they would be "sound in the faith." As we mentioned last week, sound doctrine matters. What you believe about God shapes your soul, determines whether you have peace or anxiety, and informs your behavior.

Notice the specific nature of the false teaching that needed to be corrected: they advocated "Jewish myths and commandments of men." Over time certain Jewish teachers added myths (or legends) as well as manmade commandments to the Hebrew Scriptures. Paul isn't specific here about these legends and manmade commandments, but in a similar passage 1 Timothy 4 Paul gives us an idea of the types of things he might have had in mind. In 1 Timothy 4:1-5 Paul writes:

1 But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, 2 by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron, 3 *men* who forbid marriage *and advocate* abstaining from foods which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth. 4 For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with gratitude; 5 for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer.

The false teachers in Ephesus (where Timothy served) probably had what they thought were good reasons for forbidding marriage and advocating that you abstain from eating certain foods. Whatever their reasonings, Paul pointed out that their rules kept people from experiencing good gifts from God! They had pronounced **bad** something that God had pronounced **good**!

People have all sorts of reasons for adding regulations to the Scriptures. The Pharisees, for example, thought they could build a "fence" around the Law that would keep you from breaking the Law itself. They tried to build a fence around the command, "Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy" with rules about how heavy an object you could carry on the Sabbath and about how far you could carry it. If you followed their manmade rules, you certainly wouldn't violate the command to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy!

The tragic thing about such manmade rules is that they keep people from experiencing God Himself. People get so consumed and preoccupied with things that don't matter that they miss God Himself. False teaching in some way contradicts the gospel

because it claims that believing in Jesus is fine, but if you really want to please God you have to follow these rules (or understand this secret knowledge or whatever). Elders are called to address false teaching because it affects whether or not the church experiences the type of life - eternal life, abundant life - that Jesus secured on the cross.

Verse 15 exposes just how serious false teaching really is. Paul seems to have in mind those who add manmade rules (especially about certain foods being pure and others being impure) to the gospel when he writes:

15 To the pure, all things are pure; but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled.

As we saw in 1 Timothy 4, everything God created is good - whether food or marriage or whatever. Almost anything can be used for evil, but every created thing is good. To the pure (those who have been “purified” by the blood of Jesus - 2:14) all things are pure; believers can enjoy everything good that God has made. [Of course this doesn’t mean that sinful things are pure, as apparently some people have asserted.] But “to those who are defiled and unbelieving” (such as the false teachers Titus faced) “nothing is pure” in the sense that they misunderstand and misappropriate everything in their world. Since “both their mind and their conscience are defiled,” they use something good (like food) to control and manipulate other people. And so their effect on the church was toxic.

Remember Paul’s motivation for addressing false teaching: the health of the church. Paul was zealous to see people grow in faith and “the knowledge of the truth” whereas these false teachers entrapped people in an oppressive, manmade religion. For the health of the church, Paul urged Titus and the elders at Crete to address false teaching. They needed to understand the character of false teachers and the characters of false teaching.

Implications for us:

First, ***our elders need to be willing to address false teaching when/if it arises in the church.*** It’s very tempting to ignore false teaching and hope it goes away; it takes a lot of time and energy to evaluate possible false teachings and errors that surface in the church. It can be exhausting mentally and emotionally. You’re taking a huge risk in evaluating what someone else teaches or advocates; you might even be accused of being a control freak and of having all sorts of other bad motives. But there’s too much at stake to be passive. Paul said this to the elders at Ephesus (Acts 20):

28 “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. 29 “I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; 30 and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. 31 “Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears.

Our elders need to be willing to address false teaching if/when it surfaces.

The other implication is that ***all of us should pour heart and soul into experiencing the truth of the gospel.*** The greatest antidote to false teaching is a widespread understanding and experience of sound teaching. The NT pattern is to receive sound teaching (Rom. 12:7 - from those gifted in teaching), to “let the word of Christ richly dwell within us” (Col. 3:16 - immersing ourselves in Scripture), to speak the truth to one another in love (Eph. 4:15 - talking with each other about the truth), and to live out the truths of Scripture (James 1 - doers of the Word and not merely hearers). In this way sound doctrine becomes the air we breathe. When we understand and experience the truth of Scripture, we recognize error and/or false teaching when it surfaces. We don’t become picky about every little thing others say. But we do have a stability and depth when it comes to sound doctrine. Ultimately our understanding and experience of the truth is the greatest antidote to false teaching.