

Silence detestable church leaders

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Date: 15 October 2017

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[0 : 00] Our reading is the first chapter of Titus, and that's on page 1200 in the Church Bibles. The letter of Paul to Titus, and we start at verse 1.

Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth, which accords with godliness, in hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began, and at the proper time manifested in his word through the preaching with which I have been entrusted by the command of God our Saviour.

To Titus, my true child in a common faith, grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Saviour. This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order and appoint elders in every town as I directed you.

If anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination, for an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach.

He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined.

[1 : 42] He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.

For there are many who are insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party. They must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching, for shameful gain, what they ought not to teach.

One of the Cretans, a prophet of their own, said, Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons. This testimony is true.

Therefore, rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith, not devoting themselves to Jewish myths and the commands of people who turn away from the truth.

To the pure, all things are pure, but to the defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their minds and their consciences are defiled.

[2 : 53] They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works. They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work.

Dorothy, thanks very much indeed for reading. Please do keep Titus chapter 1 open, and why don't I lead us in prayer as we begin. Let's pray together. Psalm 119.

But you are near, O Lord, and all your commandments are true. Long have I known from your testimonies that you have founded them forever. Heavenly Father, we praise you very much indeed that your commands, your word is indeed true, that it lasts forever.

We praise you that you are near to each one of your people who trusts in the Lord Jesus. And we pray now, therefore, please would you help us to hear your near, truthful word, that we might together, as a local church, be transformed by it.

And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Well, if you are a student of the program card, then you'll know that Nigel was meant to be preaching today.

[4 : 19] He got himself double booked, so you have me instead, as we pick up on the second talk in this series of talks in Titus. And the key verse, really, of the letter, as hopefully we saw last week, is chapter 1, verse 5, as the Apostle Paul writes to Titus in the role of troubleshooter.

And he says, chapter 1, verse 5, this is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order and appoint elders in every town as I directed you.

Put things into order. I guess it's the kind of letter or phone call that Brian Hodgson might have received from the owners of Crystal Palace Football Club back in September. Dear Brian, we haven't yet scored any goals in the Premier League this season.

We even lost to Burnley. Frank de Boer has been a disaster. Please will you come and put things in order. And for those of you who are in the know, then there was the beginnings of progress yesterday.

Now, it's clear throughout the letter that Crete was in crisis. There are false teachers, and the danger is that churches will be pulled away from authentic Christianity.

[5 : 39] Just as we might say, in this country today, the church is in crisis. I did a little bit of research this week. I gather that 38,000 people live in Dulwich, West Dulwich, Dulwich Village, and East Dulwich.

Yet, of course, you're bound to ask the question, aren't you, how many of those 38,000 people have even heard the message of Jesus Christ, let alone responded to it?

The solution in first century Crete, just as in 21st century London, is one of strategy. Which may strike us, I guess, as rather odd. I mean, you know, we might expect business leaders to talk about strategy, or members of a sports team, even, to talk about strategy.

But churches, I mean, surely churches just kind of muddle along and do things the way in which they've always done things. No, the strategy, chapter 1, verse 5, is to appoint elders in every town. In other words, the strategy is to multiply churches, to plant churches, not just any old churches, but healthy churches. This, then, is the key to the message of Jesus having an impact.

[6 : 52] An impact in Crete, in the first century, an impact in 21st century London. It is healthy, credible churches, where, as we'll see over the next few weeks, they are churches where everyone in the local church has been and is being transformed by the message of Jesus.

So, where, in the lives of the leaders this week and last week, in the lives next week, as we'll see, of the older men, the younger men, the older women, the younger women, in the lives of everyone, the knowledge of the truth about God is transforming and changing lives.

But, sadly, there is an alternative, which, as you'll see on the outline on the back of the service sheet today, is what we're looking at today, the alternative, and that is a church shaped, not by God's words, but instead a church shaped by the world.

First of all, then, a church shaped by the world. Have a look at verse 12. One of the Cretans, a prophet of their own, said, Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.

It's a verse, isn't it, which looks curiously out of place. The kind of thing, I guess, which you might expect to read in the first century equivalent of the Lonely Planet Guide. You know, if you're planning a holiday to Crete, then this is the kind of thing you must expect to come across.

[8 : 22] This is what the locals are like. So, what's it doing in a section about false teachers? Well, I take it, it takes us to the very heart of what is going on in Crete.

In other words, these false teachers are indistinguishable from the world around them. They are just like everyone else in Crete. In other words, they're shaped by the world.

Now, that is always the way. In the 1960s, John Robinson, the Bishop of Woolwich, published a book, *Honest to God*, in which he called into question the very existence of God.

It caused quite a stir at the time. His central point is very simple. It is that the way people thought about God in the 1960s, in the mid-20th century, has changed.

It doesn't fit anymore. And therefore, the message of the church needs to change as the world changes. In the 1980s, David Jenkins, the Bishop of Durham, said he didn't believe in the physical resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

[9 : 25] His arguments were similar. Here we are at the end of the 20th century. People don't believe this stuff anymore. Therefore, the church needs to get with the culture. Since the 1990s, it's been the Bible's teaching on the roles of men and women, marriage, human sexuality, and gender that have been most frequently under attack from false teachers.

But the logic is the same. It is that we need to keep up with the culture in order to be credible. In other words, we need to be a church that is shaped by and which follows the world.

I don't know if you've seen the Transport for London notice that it's certainly on the underground. I think I spotted it on a bus the other day as well. It simply reads, spotting a ticket inspector is easy. They look just like you. It's rather clever, isn't it? Ticket inspectors don't board a train blowing a whistle wearing bright red suit and hat.

No, they look just like you. They're not easy to spot at all. They dress so that they fit in. And the Apostle Paul wants us to know that it is exactly the same with the false teacher.

[10:42] They fit with the culture. Now notice, will you, that this is an issue for all of us. So just look at the very last sentence of this letter.

The last five words. Grace be with you all. You see, I think it'd be very tempting to think, well, you know, all this stuff in Titus chapter 1 about leadership.

Well, surely that's really for Simon and the church council and the church wardens. And we can really leave it all to them. And therefore, actually, for most of us here this morning, surely this is not really a sermon that is important for us.

It doesn't really apply to us. But Titus chapter 3 verse 15, grace be with you all. You see, this is a letter which was meant to be read publicly to the whole church.

And I take it that is because there are two ways a church will end up being shaped by the world.

The first is a minister or pastor who tries to lead the church in that direction.

[11:42] The second is when a group of people within a church will agitate and push to go there.

And sadly, there are far too many churches where that has happened and some of us know that to our cost.

But either way, it is vital that the church as a whole understands at that point what is happening. In other words, that all of us wake up and smell the coffee.

By the way, it's why Grace Church Dulwich calls itself a conservative evangelical church. It doesn't mean we're all politically conservative, far from it, or socially conservative, far from it.

It doesn't mean that we are stuck in the 1950s. No, it is that we want to conserve the gospel.

Gospel, the word evangelical comes from the New Testament Greek word for good news, for gospel.

We want to conserve the gospel to ensure that it's passed on faithfully to future generations, to ensure that we proclaim it faithfully. In other words, to make sure that we are shaped by the gospel, by God's word, rather than by the world around us.

[13:04] So, first of all, a church shaped by the world. Secondly, leaders who don't teach the truth. In order to grasp the full significance of this, I want us to look back to chapter 1, verses 1 to 3, because you see, what is Paul doing right at the start of the letter?

Why, he's saying, look, there is a gold standard, non-negotiable Christian message. It is the real deal. And as I read these verses again, just will you see that actually Paul couldn't be clearer in the way in which he goes about it.

So, chapter 1, verses 1 to 3. Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth which accords with godliness, in hope of eternal life which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began, and at the proper time manifested in his word through the preaching with which I have been entrusted by the command of God our saviour.

Notice verse 1, he speaks about the knowledge of the truth. Verse 2, which God, who never lies, has promised from way back before time began. And it's this non-negotiable real deal gospel that has now been made known.

Verse 3, not notice through the preaching of Jesus Christ, which I suspect as we read verse 3 we expect Paul to say and he could have said it and of course he'd have been right in saying it.

[14:40] But no, he says, through the preaching of Paul himself and the other apostles, those who were entrusted by God with it.

Which means, of course, that to move away from the teaching of Paul, as sadly many churches have, is to move away from God, to reject the teaching of the apostle Paul, likewise, is to reject God.

You cannot put a cigarette paper between the two. Now, contrast chapter 1 verses 1 to 3 with chapter 1 verses 10 to 16 and the false teachers.

Verse 10, they are empty talkers. The word literally means windbags. They have nothing to say. They're deceivers because they don't teach the truth and therefore they deceive people into thinking they have eternal life when they don't.

Instead, verse 11, they teach what they ought not to teach. And verse 13, they are not sound in the faith that the word literally means healthy. In other words, their teaching is unhealthy. In verse 14, they devote themselves to myths and the teaching of those who have turned away from the truth rather than teaching the promises of God.

[15 : 55] truth. Now, the contrast of what we saw last week and the teaching of a genuine Christian leader could not be more striking, could it?

Chapter 1, verse 9, he must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.

Now, here is one of the new £10 notes with the rather wonderful portrait of Jane Austen on one side.

Now, I imagine that having got this out of the cash machine yesterday, I imagine that if for some reason I doubt it that this was the genuine article, I imagine, at least in theory, that I could go to the Bank of England, I could knock on the door and I could ask to see the original template for this £10 note and the picture of Jane Austen on one side, the portrait of Her Majesty the Queen on the other side.

And then, if I look carefully, I'd see all the embedded security elements in this £10 note and then I could check that I had the same security on mine. Well, in a way, that's just what the Apostle Paul, you see, is doing here as he makes the contrast between the false teachers and what they are teaching and he says compare that with the non-negotiable real deal of chapter 1 verses 1 to 3.

[17 : 41] But notice too, will you, that although these false teachers don't teach the truth, notice they still use religious language, they still sound spiritual. So verse 10, they teach the need for circumcision.

Verse 14, they teach Jewish myths. It may well be from verse 15 that religious purity was one of their selling points, perhaps insisting on the Old Testament Jewish food laws, saying there are certain things you shouldn't eat.

But no amount of outward religious ritual can make you right with God. True purity before God comes from trusting Jesus Christ and him alone.

Paul will go on to say that in chapter 2 verse 14, just have a look at it. Chapter 2 verse 14, speaking of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

Jesus, which means chapter 1 verse 15, if you have put your trust in Jesus and his death on the cross for your sins, then you are pure in God's sight.

[18 : 55] You stand before him as a forgiven person. Indeed, all things are pure. You can eat what you like. But if you haven't put your trust in Jesus, then don't think that by abstaining from certain foods or keeping certain religious rituals and traditions, those things are going to make you right with God.

I went to a day conference for clergy this week. One of the speakers used familiar words, the kind of words I guess that we'd use here on a Sunday morning, words like gospel, mission, Jesus.

He even talked about having life with God. But when you kind of stop for a moment and ask the question, hang on a moment, what does he mean by those words?

What does he mean by gospel, by mission? What kind of Jesus is he talking about? What kind of life with God does he mean? Why, actually, it's very hard to know indeed.

A kind of thin spiritual veneer and no more. You see, it really is not enough to say, as someone said to me a while back, that their new vicar must be a very good thing because he talks a lot about Jesus.

[20 : 15] That really is to set the bar very, very low indeed. Far too low. Leaders who don't teach the truth.

Thirdly, leaders who don't live the truth. I wonder if you're someone who enjoys those spot the difference pictures. Two almost identical pictures, but actually you look closely and in one of them she's got different shoes than the other one.

In one of them he's wearing a tie, in the other one she isn't. In one of them there's a little dog which has a collar, in the other one the dog doesn't, and in one of them the baby is holding a teddy, in the other one it isn't that kind of thing.

Well there are no prizes I think here for spotting the differences between the godly teacher of verses five to nine and the ungodly teacher of verses ten to sixteen in terms of the way in which they live.

So verse seven, the godly teacher does not pursue dishonest gain, but verse eleven the ungodly teacher does, their motivation is greed. In verse eight the godly teacher loves what is good, verse sixteen, the ungodly teacher is unfit for doing anything good.

[21 : 26] In verse fifteen they are defiled and unbelieving, in other words they're not converted, they're not Christians. In summary verse sixteen, they claim to know God, but have a look at verse sixteen because the reality is there is the most enormous gulf between what they claim on the one hand and the reality of their lives on the other.

one another. Now I take it that not every false teacher will look like this in every detail. So I take it they could be charming and delightful, but the point is they don't teach the truth and therefore their lives haven't been transformed and aren't shaped by the truth.

And so what is the result, verse eleven? Well whole families are being upset, their Christian lives ruined. And if unchecked, these leaders will simply lead people away from Jesus and result in the church being shaped not by the message of Jesus, but instead being shaped by the message of the world.

The world will change the church. I wonder if you can relate to these words spoken by J.C. Ryle, the Bishop of Liverpool, over a hundred years ago. He derided what he called jellyfish Christianity, and this is what he told his diocesan conference.

[22 : 57] We have hundreds of jellyfish clergymen who seem not to have a single bone in their body. They have no definite opinions. They are so afraid of extreme views that they have no views at all.

We have thousands of jellyfish sermons preached every year, sermons without an edge or a point or a corner, smooth as billiard balls, awakening no sinner and edifying no saint.

And last of all, and worst of all, we have myriads of jellyfish worshippers, respectable, church-going people who have no distinct and definite views about any point in theology.

They think everybody is right and nobody wrong. Everything is true and nothing is false. All sermons are good and none are bad. Every clergyman is sound and no clergyman unsound. Well, you could say just the same thing today, couldn't you? Now, I hardly need to say it, but of course, there are plenty of churches in London and the UK where the vicars or ministers don't teach the truth about Jesus and don't live the truth about Jesus.

[24 : 07] They simply say what our culture wants to hear. The culture wants to hear the message that everyone goes to heaven. That is their message. The culture wants assurance provided at the grave.

They provide it. The culture wants historic traditions and ceremonies. They acquiesce. The culture wants to change the definition of marriage.

They oblige. The culture doesn't want them to say anything that could possibly offend and they don't. Now I've put a table on the outline there which is really to try and capture what the Apostle Paul is saying in the whole of Titus 1 together.

So the principle is there, chapter 1 verse 1, the knowledge of the truth leads to godliness. There is a gold standard, God-given gospel.

It is powerful, a gospel that both saves for eternity, and changes lives. And therefore you see, what kind of people do you need who are leading local churches?

[25 : 18] Well, you need people who teach the truth and who live the truth. How do you spot a false teacher? Well, it's those who don't teach the truth and those who don't live the truth.

That is Titus chapter 1 in a nutshell. shall. Now, of course, it does not make attractive reading. But of course, it's only once we have seen the dangerous alternative that we'll see how critical it is that we have leaders who both teach the truth and are shaped by the truth.

Rather like ticket collectors, false teachers are hard to spot. Paul is saying, don't look at the externals. We so easily do this.

I think, you know, the vicar's a nice bloke, the music's fun, it's contemporary, there are lots of people at that church just like me, you know, depending on what stage of life we are at.

So easily, just look at the externals. No, says Paul, look at the fundamentals instead. So what do we need to do? Well, chapter 1, verse 5, we appoint godly leaders.

[26 : 35] We plant new churches. Last week's sermon. But this week's sermon, we must do what Paul says needs to be done where there are false teachers.

Verse 11, what does he say? They must be silenced. Verse 14, what does he say? Rebuke them. Now, in the first place, Paul is clearly talking about the local church.

church, in God's kindness, this is not something we have yet had to do at Grace Church. We've been blessed, I think, with a wonderful degree of unity and clarity and focus.

We need to keep on praying for that. But the fact is that plenty of churches do lose their way because they fail to do this at the point where it needs doing. they fail to say something at the point where something needs to be said. Now, as for false teaching more widely, perhaps in other churches or denominations, clearly we cannot silence them, but I take it it would be wrong to ignore them.

[27 : 49] After all, our desire for the false teacher, I take it, should be that of verse 13. That they might be sound in the faith. And therefore, you see, to ignore them is, of course, to be unloving.

Unloving to them because we long that they would come to their spiritual senses and repent, but actually unloving towards one another because it's not making issues clear that need to be made clear.

So here's a question for us to discuss over coffee. Do you think Paul's intolerance of false teaching and false leaders is a good thing?

Do you think that is a godly virtue? Our culture, of course, says that any kind of intolerance is wrong, judgmental even.

But can we see, you see, Titus chapter 1, verses 10 to 16, this is not the Apostle Paul just going off on a rant. Now, where false teachers are concerned, intolerance is a virtue because it is loving.

[29 : 02] Because if you depart from the truth as revealed by the apostles, you depart from eternal life. And rather than being a credible church, which is proclaiming the gospel, the message about Jesus, the message which transforms the world and has an impact on the world, instead you end up as a church which actually is changed by the world and becomes more like the world.

Let's have a few moments quiet for reflection and I shall lead us in prayer. Paul, a servant of God and apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth which accords with Godliness.

Heavenly Father, we praise you for the fact that you have revealed this wonderful gospel to us, that it is possible to stand before you on the final day, pure, forgiven.

We praise you for the death of the Lord Jesus. We praise you for this unchangeable, transforming message of life.

life. And we pray for ourselves, Heavenly Father, please would you help us to heed the warning of Titus chapter one. We pray that we might indeed be a church which continues to be faithful in holding out this one gospel message, that each one of us might be transformed and changed by it.

[30 : 37] And we ask it for Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen.

Amen. Amen.