

True Rebellion **Titus 1:10-16**

When we were in PNG, we were at a college with staff from different countries.

- There were Melanesian faculty members from various parts of PNG and the Solomon Islands.
- There were white-skin faculty members from New Zealand and Australia and Canada and America.

There weren't very many of us white-skinned – but we did come from different places. I once asked one of the students how they coped with the different accents and he said "What accents?". It was a good time to be there with the Kiwis because it was when Australia won the Rugby World Cup and the Bledisloe Cup.

Different nationalities are stereotyped in different ways. As Americans travel the world, they have a reputation for being loud and pushy and demanding and acting as if they own the place. The Americans at our college were fairly mild in that regard. However, we came to the conclusion that the way we Australians see and think about Americans – that's how New Zealanders think of Australians. It'd be a sobering thought – if they were right.

But how'd it be if your national reputation was that of the people from Crete.

Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons.

As you travelled the world, who'd put you up in their hotel for the night? And it was one of their own prophets who said this. It's not as if this is some outsider trying to bring their national pride down a peg or two – this was one of their own. And now Paul's gone and quoted it in this letter that's part of our Bibles. And he's quoted it in a

letter that's to be read to Cretans themselves. What's the deal? Is Paul being racist?

Those who Oppose the Truth

We need to back up a couple of verses to see the quote in context. Verse 9:

He [that is, the elder that Titus appoints] must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it. For there are many rebellious people, mere talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision group. They must be silenced, because they are ruining whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach – and that for the sake of dishonest gain.

One of the tasks of the elders is to refute or prove false those who oppose the truth of the gospel. We touched on that last week. Now Paul describes in a bit more detail some of those who oppose sound doctrine and why they're a problem and what's to be done about them.

He begins with quite general terms.

- *Rebellious* – insubordinate; defiant; those who don't submit to God and His word; they don't submit to the truth of the gospel.
- *Mere talkers* – their talk's empty and has no value; it can't provide life for those who listen to it.
- *Deceivers* – what they say deceives because it's not true; thus, it misleads those who pay attention to it; they're led into error and not truth.

They're fairly strong words. You may even think they're politically incorrect words. You may react against them.

It's worth asking: Do these people think of themselves this way? And the answer is: Probably not. If you asked these false teachers to describe themselves, what words would they use? Sincere, dynamic, motivational, honest, life-changing, genuine, vibrant, earnest, full of life. No negative vibes for them.

The point with false teachers is that they don't usually know they're false. They think they know the truth and they want to share that truth with others. Sure, there are exceptions. Some people deliberately teach something they know is wrong to make a quick buck. Some people are that callous. That may even have been the case here – Paul talks about *dishonest gain* at the end of verse 11. But most false teachers are quite sincere in their approach – they believe they're teaching the truth.

So, an important question for us is: Who corresponds to these sorts of people today? If Paul looked at our situation and wanted to warn us about rebellious people and empty talkers and deceivers, who'd he have in his sights? The Jehovah's Witnesses? The Mormons? The liberals who deny the resurrection and Jesus' miracles? Those preaching the prosperity gospel? Those promising indulgences? These people are all sincere in what they believe. They think they're teaching the truth. Yet, they rebel against the truth of the gospel. Their message is deception.

But I don't think we should stop there. Think more broadly.

- What about the advertisers who preach that you're missing out on life if you don't buy this product?
- What about the economists who preach you must

increase consumption so everyone can gain a higher standard of living?

- What about the lifestyle gurus who preach more and better possessions is the secret to happiness?
- What about the philosophers who preach the separation of religion as a private matter only – so that you don't have to bother about your religion changing you from fitting into popular culture?

Do you think of these people as rebellious, mere talkers, deceivers? Or have the politically correct gurus stopped you thinking in such negative, black-and-white terminology?

Sure, false teaching that twists the essential elements of the gospel is destructive of people's salvation. If you teach people they can get right with God on the basis of something other than Jesus' death for their sins, you're simply deceiving them and preventing them seeking the salvation God freely offers. But that's not the only option for destroying people's salvation. False teaching that presents a whole different gospel – such as the gospel of materialism – that too will destroy people's salvation. Old Testament Israel struggled with idolatry – with false religion – and failed time and time again. Idolatry's still alive and well. People still look for the answers to life apart from God. People still encourage others to look for the answers to life apart from God. It's rebellious, mere talk, deception. And perhaps worst of all is the one that suggests you can have both – that you can be a materialistic Christian. Jesus said you can't – you can't serve both God and money. You can only serve one God.

Paul gives some more hints as to the nature of this false teaching on Crete. He refers to *the circumcision group* in

verse 10 and *Jewish myths* and *the commands of men* in verse 14. The way he talks about *purity* in verse 15 suggests this was also involved somehow. What are we to make of all this?

First, there's a danger that we see the word *circumcision* and think immediately of the problem in Galatia. There, Jewish people wrongly taught that Gentiles needed, not only to believe the gospel, but also to be circumcised, to become real Christians. Paul wrote strongly against that false teaching. It's possible that's the problem in Crete – but I don't think it's very likely. The Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 settled that issue. That was well and truly past by the time Paul wrote this letter. The problem probably kept popping up after that from time to time, but all people had to do was refer back to the Council's decision. So, I think the phrase *circumcision group* here probably refers simply to a Jewish group.

Secondly, these Jews are into *myths* and *the commands of men* and *purity*. It sounds similar to the problem Paul writes about in 1 Timothy – you can read about it in 1:3-5 and 4:1-5. It had to do with myths and genealogies and meaningless talk and teaching the law and forbidding people to marry and ordering people to abstain from certain foods. When you turn over to Titus 3:9 it sounds even more similar:

But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless.

Yet, having said all that, it still leaves us fairly much in the dark. What were these guys doing with the genealogies? Were they inventing stories about these unknown guys? Were they finding secret meanings to their names?

Were they finding hidden codes in the number of years these guys lived? Were the commands of men in Titus to do with marriage and food? Or were they different? Was everyone forbidden marriage or only certain people? Which foods were forbidden and why? We just don't know – and to speculate about it may be to engage in one of the foolish controversies Paul tells us to avoid!

In the long run, the exact nature of this false teaching isn't important in terms of getting the main point of this passage. All false teaching is rebellious, mere talk and deceptive. Elders must have a firm grasp of the truth, not the false teaching. Elders must refute whatever false teaching comes along on the basis of sound doctrine. It's not a matter of saying:

- Ah this stuff looks like what Paul was talking about in Titus. I must make sure I silence these guys.
- This stuff over here doesn't look like this rubbish about Jewish myths. It's some other form of rubbish. I can let it go unchallenged.

False teaching is false teaching. It's rebellious and empty and deceptive. It's all to be stopped.

They must be Silenced

That's what Paul instructs Titus in verse 11.

They must be silenced, because they are ruining whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach – and that for the sake of dishonest gain.

When you think through what Paul's already written in verse 10, it's fairly obvious why such people should be stopped. Rebellious, empty talk, deceivers – they're quite negative words. You don't really want such people left loose in a community. They could do a lot of damage if

people paid attention to their false teaching.

Now Paul adds to that: *ruining whole households*. How did they do that? Two main possibilities suggest themselves.

- First, if they taught people to abstain from marriage because of some notion of purity, and if people thought that resulted in greater godliness or a more important spot in heaven, that could very well divide households. Married people might now abstain from sexual relations in marriage. Even further, they may even take the option of divorce for the sake of achieving this supposed greater godliness. That would be a specific way the specific false teaching mentioned in 1 Timothy may end up dividing households.
- Or secondly, it may be a general comment that applies in all situations of false teaching. Whenever people accept false teaching over true teaching, they're ruined. The gospel says: This is the way to God. That's true teaching. Someone else comes along and says: No, no – this other thing's the way to God. If you follow that false teaching, you won't get to God. Thus, you'll be ruined. And if the whole household went with the false teaching together (which was often the case in the ancient world), then the whole household would be ruined.

Thus, the false teachers need to be silenced. How?

- Do you lock them up in prison so they can't have access to other people?
- Do you cut out their tongue to stop them speaking?
- Do you take away their right to hold their own views and their right to free speech?

All those have been tried at various points in history. I don't think they're what Paul had in mind here. I doubt Titus had the civil authority to do those sorts of things. They're to be silenced by rebuke. They're to be silenced by the teaching of sound doctrine – that is, the teaching of the truth.

John Stott tells the story of a book, *Supernatural Religion*, published in the 1800s. It attacked the credibility of the early church fathers. It got rave reviews. It quickly went into several editions. J.B. Lightfoot published a series of articles that thoroughly exposed the book's many errors and demolished its arguments. The second-hand market was soon glutted with the book.¹ That's the ideal. Unfortunately, it doesn't always work that simply – think of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*.

The Nature of Cretans

Now, it's in that context that Paul quotes this more general statement about Cretans. Verse 12:

Even one of their own prophets has said, "Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons." This testimony is true. Therefore, rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith ...

What's Paul saying here? Is he saying all Cretans are like this? I don't think so. Paul recognises the ability of God to change the sinful heart.

- He believes God's done that for the Christians he's left behind on Crete.
- He believes it's important Titus recognise that change in the men he appoints as elders. He most definitely doesn't want the elders to live up to this

¹ John Stott, *The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus* (BST; Leicester: IVP, 2004) 179.

national reputation.

But, in relation to these false teachers, Paul says they do exhibit these so-called national characteristics.

We struggle with this language. We've been trained not to use it. We're taught to say nice things about others – even to think nice things about others. We're taught to believe in the underlying essential goodness of people. We're taught to blame any lack of goodness on other things – their upbringing, their environment, the government – as if these other things aren't like they are because of the humans involved. And so, when the false teacher comes along, how do we think?

- They're such a nice person – they seem genuinely interested in me.
- They're so clever and well-educated – they've got such a wonderful way with words and they really seem to know what they're talking about.
- They're so sincere in how they talk – they believe they're telling me the truth.

And so, even if we recognise they are teaching false things, we do what we've been trained to do by our own culture – we think nicely about them. We don't see them as truly dangerous – misguided maybe, well-intentioned, very sincere, pleasant, harmless.

Paul calls them for what they are: liars, wild beasts. Jesus warns of wolves that'll come in sheep's clothing. Our culture teaches us to focus on the clothing – it's such a beautiful fleece they're wearing. How could someone with such a nice fleece possibly be bad? How terrible to suggest they're not as good as they look! Jesus calls them wolves.

What's the greatest threat to true Christianity?

- Long, boring sermons?
- Old-fashioned music?
- Out-of-touch ministers?
- Lack of relevance to modern culture?

The greatest threat to true Christianity is fake Christianity. It's when people think they've got the real thing, but they've been given a counterfeit – because if they think the counterfeit's real, they won't bother looking any further. Paul uses strong words for those spreading fake Christianity – because it's important we understand the true character of this enemy.

If someone wants to pass you a counterfeit \$100 note, what do they do? Do they come up to you and say:

Look mate, I've got this counterfeit note here. It's a real beauty. Have a feel of it. Have a good look at it. Isn't it the best counterfeit you've ever seen? I'll swap it with you for a real one.

Of course not. They simply give it to you as a real one when they're buying something. They don't draw your attention to the fact it's fake.

That's how false teachers work. They don't come up to you and say:

I want to tell you a few lies. Believe these lies and you'll go straight to hell.

They don't get followers that way. To do it properly, you've got to convince people it's the real thing – and that means having an excellent covering of sheep's clothing. It means not drawing attention to the lies as lies.

True Christianity

Throughout the history of the church, probably the most

successful form of false teaching has been to add something to the gospel. The gospel is that God's done it all for us.

- He made the rescue plan in the first place.
- He set the plan in motion.
- He died for our sins.
- He forgives us our rebellion.
- He gives us His Spirit to make us the people He wants us to be.

Some aren't satisfied with that. They want to contribute in some way. And so they say: That's fine as far as it goes – but, if you want to be a real Christian, then you must ... The first example of this was in Galatia. There the false teachers claimed: if you want to be a real Christian, then you must be circumcised. Paul wouldn't have a bar of it. He wrote strongly against such false teaching – and used some strong language to describe the false teachers themselves. That hasn't stopped others trying the same tactic – trying to add something that people have to do. For some it's been baptism; for some it's been receiving the proper sacraments; for some it's been speaking in tongues; for some it's been some special baptism of the Holy Spirit experience.

It seems likely that something similar was going on in Crete. Halfway through verse 13:

Therefore, rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith and will pay no attention to Jewish myths or to the commands of those who reject the truth. To the pure, all things are pure, but to those who are corrupted and do not believe, nothing is pure.

It's hard to be sure exactly what's being taught – but it seems to have something to do with the commands of

these teachers and something to do with purity. Perhaps they said something along these lines:

It's good you believe the gospel – but, if you want to be a real Christian or if you want to progress to the next level, then you have to follow this command so you can be further purified.

I don't know what that command was. It may have been to do with some form of ritual washing or baptism. It may have been to do with abstaining from marriage or abstaining from certain foods – like in 1 Timothy. It may have been something altogether different. The exact details don't matter too much – because the truth remains the same no matter what.

Paul says: *To the pure, all things are pure.* In other words, your purity's something Jesus does for you. In yourself, you're filthy through and through. That's your sinful, rebellious state – nothing you can do to improve that. But, if you trust Jesus, then you're cleansed. What's more, you're thoroughly cleansed. There's nothing you or anyone else can do to make you more cleansed than what Jesus has done. You can't improve on it. You can't make it better. You can't be more cleansed than cleansed.

But, if you don't trust Jesus – if you don't believe the gospel – then it doesn't matter what you do, all you'll succeed in doing is adding to your filth.

- Wash yourself with the Mediterranean Sea, it won't cleanse you.
- Live celibate for the rest of your life, it won't cleanse you.
- Walk barefoot from one end of Crete to the other, it won't cleanse you.

It doesn't matter what external action you do, it won't

cleanse you. The filth's on the inside – the corruption's internal – only Jesus can cleanse it.

That's the nature of the gospel. It's what God's done for us. The only appropriate response is to trust God – to believe that God has in fact done it for us. If I want to add anything to that and think that I can improve ever so slightly on what God's done or contribute a little bit extra to what God's done – no matter what it is – I'm no longer trusting God. And that's the very essence of rebellion – I'm rejecting what God says and setting up my own rules and regulations in place of what God says.

And so, Paul concludes in verse 16:

They claim to know God, but by their actions they deny Him. They are detestable, disobedient and unfit for doing anything good.

Some more strong words.

False Teaching Today

How much do we pay attention to this threat of false teaching today? As you read a passage like this, what's your reaction?

- Paul's a bit racist – how could he make such arrogant comments about these people?
- Paul should have learnt to be more politically correct – no wonder he got into so much trouble using inflammatory language like this.

If that's our reaction – or something along those lines – I think we're in trouble.

- We're in trouble because we're sitting in judgment on God's word. We think more of the standards of our culture than we do of God's standards. We

want God to conform to the rules of our culture rather than conforming our culture's rules to God.

- We're in trouble because we've sidetracked the main teaching of this passage. This passage is a very strong warning about false teachers and how destructive they are and we're too busy thinking about racism and political correctness. And while we ruminate about political correctness, people are destroyed by false teaching – maybe even we ourselves are destroyed by it.

I don't like the idea of having to confront false teachers. I don't like the idea of having to confront anyone. That's my personality. That's my learned style of behaviour. On top of that, dealing with false teaching's so unpopular. We don't like people who criticise others. We don't like people who rock the boat. We hate the feelings of disunity that result. Nothing could be more important than unity, could it? Well, yes – the truth. Being united around a lie won't help you – it just means you're all destroyed together. The truth matters. False teachers matter. We need the courage to confront false teaching when it arises. I need the courage to confront the false teaching that impacts us – not just the stuff that comes from people claiming to be Christians, but also the stuff that we imbibe from our culture.

It's not that we're to go on a witch-hunt. That can lead to its own problems of separatism and lack of true love and judgmentalism and the like. Dealing with false teaching in a loving and godly way takes great wisdom. But it must be dealt with. The consequences of failing to deal with it are eternally disastrous.