

## **Removing Divisiveness**

### **Titus 3:9-15**

Within Christ's church, there are disagreements. The vast array of Christian denominations throughout the world testifies to that. I've heard it said there are over 22,000 denominations in the world. I've also heard it said there are over 1000 different sorts of Baptists in the United States. I haven't checked out the accuracy of either of those statements. Nor have I checked out the basis of their calculations – did they, for example, count the Anglican Church in Australia and the Episcopal Church in America as two separate denominations? It doesn't really matter for the point I want to make: the large number of different denominations testify to the fact that there are disagreements in Christ's church. Once there are two denominations in existence, that point's shown.

In one sense, it seems inevitable. We're all different. We have different tastes, different preferences, different cultures. Sometimes those preferences border on being mutually exclusive – like when I think 10:30 at night is a good time to sleep and the next-door neighbour thinks it's a good time to play loud music or have a party. It's not overly surprising that those differences also surface in Christ's church.

But more than that, we're also sinful. The basic essence of sin is when I want to be god rather than allowing God to be God. It's when I think I know best and so don't pay attention to God. When more than one person acts like that, it's bound to lead to division. If I don't want to pay attention to the real God and what He says, why would I want to pay attention to you when you want to pretend to

be God? Why would you pay attention to me when I want to pretend to be God?

How do we deal with our differences? There are two possible extremes.

- One extreme says: accept all differences, no matter what. It doesn't matter what people think or say or do, accept them all. If an atheist wants to join Christ's church and stay an atheist – no problem.
- The other extreme says: accept no one who's different. Be very careful to check they agree with you in absolutely everything. Be thorough about it. We don't want any errors creeping in. And so, every church would have a membership of one.

Neither extreme is Biblical – but where's the right balance?

### **Controversy on Crete**

This sort of thing isn't new. The issue goes right back to New Testament times.

- In the Old Testament, it's pretty clear whether or not you belong to God's people. You're either born a Jew or you're not. If you're not born a Jew and you want to join God's people, you could be circumcised. It was all pretty straightforward – easy to work out one way or the other.
- But how do you work that out in the church? It's no longer a national thing. It's no longer a physical thing. It's to do with having faith in Jesus. What's that look like? How do you work out who's in and out? All sorts of people can claim to believe in Jesus.
  - Some may claim to believe in Jesus and in Zeus – or Diana or the deity of the Emperor.

- Some may claim to believe in Jesus in the sense that He showed them how to earn their way to heaven on the basis of the law.
- Some may claim to believe in Jesus and to think He showed them how to get to heaven on the basis of knowing the secrets of genealogies.

It seems that not everyone was in agreement about everything in the church on Crete. Verse 9:

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

### The Context

Before we go any further, I think it's important to remind ourselves of the context. The chapter begins with directions to Titus to remind the Christians on Crete about how they should be living godly lives. In particular, that had to do with:

- being subject to the authorities; and
- being considerate towards others.

The reason for this is God's kindness and love as shown in Jesus. God released them from their slavery to evil and gave them inner rebirth and renewal. The result (in verse 8) is they can now devote themselves to doing good. This is both *excellent* and *profitable*.

Verse 9 starts with a *but*. Verses 1 to 8 describe the right approach to the Christian life – but there's also a wrong approach. There's stuff that's not *excellent* and *profitable* – but rather it's unprofitable and useless.

- When you understand the gospel – when you understand what God's done for you – that will lead to a devotion to doing good. That's one of the

outcomes in the present of what God's doing in your life.

- These other things – these controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels – they don't lead to that outcome. That's a problem.

### The Problem

So, what are these things? We're not 100% sure. Indeed, I suspect we could have a foolish controversy arguing back and forth over exactly what Paul's talking about here – which would be fairly unprofitable and useless.

- There's a good chance *genealogies* refers to those bits of the Old Testament that we tend to skim quickly – the lists of names where so-and-so begat so-and-so. A whole lot of people appear there without much detail. That hasn't stopped other people making up a whole lot of detail about them and building all sorts of theological systems on the basis of that and drawing all sorts of other conclusions. Documents exist from the centuries either side of Jesus' life where that sort of thing was done.
- There's also a very strong chance that *quarrels about the law* is tied up with the Old Testament as well. I suspect it wasn't the law of the Roman State they were quarrelling about. But exactly what those quarrels were, I'm not sure.

The problem with these things was, I think, twofold:

- First, they distracted people from what they should be about – namely, doing good. They became too busy talking about this speculative stuff and no longer had time to be on about what they should be doing. They're distracted from the centrality of the gospel. They're distracted from living godly lives.

Some people think this speculative stuff in Crete was an early form of Gnosticism. Gnosticism was a philosophy that emphasised having right knowledge. The form of Gnosticism that was one of the early Christian heresies believed that Jesus came, not to die for our sins, but to give us special knowledge that would enable our spirits to have the passwords to get back to God after we died. Their focus was very different from that of orthodox Christianity. Now, if that's the underlying basis of this speculative stuff on Crete – and I emphasise *if* – you can understand it would distract from living godly lives. The emphasis would be on getting the right knowledge – the secret passwords. Right living would be irrelevant to such people.

- The second problem with this speculative stuff is it was *divisive* (you can see that at the beginning of verse 10). It led to quarrels and arguments. Elsewhere Paul writes: Knowledge puffs up (1 Cor. 8:1). It easily leads to feelings of self-importance, intelligence, superiority, arrogance. It feeds the competitive desire within – the desire to think I'm better than you; I've climbed higher than you. This speculative stuff has people focusing on the wrong thing – speculation rather than the foundation of the gospel; themselves rather than doing good.

### The Solution

So, what's the solution?

*Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him. You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.*

That's pretty straight forward.

- You warn him – because he's fallen into error. He may not realise what he's done – what he's doing. Sin can be subtle. The lure of superior knowledge can be subtle. Any of us can be deceived by our sinful natures.
- You warn him a second time – because God is gracious. Remember verse 3. *You too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures.* God was kind to you. God was gracious to you. Your aim is to get him back on track – to get him focused again on the centrality of the gospel.
- But if he doesn't pay attention to the warnings, have nothing further to do with him. Don't move to a third warning. He's dangerous. He's divisive. He's distracting the church from the main thing. He draws others into his error.

Hang on a minute, you say, isn't that in itself divisive? Doesn't kicking the person out make a division between you? No – it recognises and formalises the division that's already there. This person's already divided from you. It's something they've done. They've pursued this wrong teaching. They may have fallen into it by accident, but their persistence after being warned is no accident. It's now a settled decision – something they've chosen with their eyes open.

That's why Paul says they're self-condemned. It's not your decision that's excluded them. Their own refusal to heed the truth and centrality of the gospel is what excludes them. Sure, you've now excluded them from your fellowship – but their persistence in pursuing things

they've been warned about and which cause a spirit of divisiveness in Christ's church, shows they didn't really belong to your fellowship.

### The Implications

So, what implications does this have for how we relate to one another today – and how we relate to other Christian groups? So much to say, so little time to say it.

First, there's a warning not to get distracted by unimportant things. Of course, the things never seem unimportant to those doing the fighting. If Paul were writing this to the 21<sup>st</sup> century Australian church, what sort of things do you think he could have in mind? Maybe he'd point to some of our disputes about Genesis 1. Is it crucial to the gospel whether Genesis 1 is talking about 7 literal 24-hour days or 7 periods of time? The crucial thing is that God created – that this world's here because He made it and thus He owns it and has the right to say what goes on here. Does it really matter how long He took to do it?

- Is it helpful to the gospel for people to spend huge amounts of time researching this and debating back and forth? Maybe in some cases it is. There are non-Christians who are knowledgeable in these areas and they may need Christians who can talk to them on their own level. There may be other reasons as well. So I wouldn't want to be dogmatic about that.
- However, for many Christians this becomes something of a time-waster to distract them from more important aspects of the gospel. They can debate this matter at great length, but don't have the time or inclination to do good to others.
- Moreover, for some of these people, the way they

debate is characterised by divisiveness. They're no longer concerned about godliness in the way they debate. The bottom line is they have to win – often because they think they're defending God. They twist the truth to suit their purposes. They seek to undermine the credibility of their opponents. They're seduced by knowledge – and the personal ego trip it offers. They fail to do good to others. They're content to divide the church.

Now please note what I'm not saying.

- I'm not saying it's wrong for you to have some knowledge about this area.
- I'm not saying it's wrong for you to have an opinion on this issue – maybe even a strong opinion.
- I'm not saying it's wrong for you to talk to others about this issue.

What I am saying is you must be careful how you go about it. What's your real motivation – not the one you use to justify things to yourself – but the real one that's deep down in your heart? If you talk to others about it, do you do so in a godly way – in a loving way – in a way that respects them and doesn't try to put them down? Is your approach to this matter divisive?

What other things do churches fight about these days?

- What colour to paint the church kitchen.
- What brand of data projector to get.
- Whether to have drums in church.
- The style of music.
- What time we should meet.

Now, decisions have to be made about those sorts of things. You do have to paint the church kitchen – and it does have to be some colour. The topic can't be avoided

altogether. But why is it that it becomes such a big deal in some churches? Could it be that part of the reason is because we think this is unimportant – and so we think it doesn't matter if we fight about it! But the same basic attitudes come out.

- I think I know better than you what colour's best.
- I'm more of an expert on the nature of paint.
- I want to get my own way in something in this place – even if it is something as inconsequential as the colour of paint.

We can dress it up in Christian excuses.

- This colour will have a calming effect on people and help us get along with each other.
- This colour is all the rage at the moment and shows outsiders we're with it.
- This colour's a lot cheaper and will let us send more money to missionaries.

And all the time the church is being divided over the colour of paint. We want to do good for ourselves and fail to do good to others.

Secondly, and this is not in this passage – but it needs to be said lest you take this passage as the sum total of all that can be said about this subject – there are some things that need to be fought about. The things Paul mentions in verse 9 are unprofitable and useless things. They're not things that are central to the gospel. It's not worth dividing the church over such trivial and useless matters.

But that doesn't mean everything that comes up for discussion in a church fits into that category. On other occasions Paul gets into quarrels he thinks important. Paul's not saying: Never quarrel. There is a time to argue – when the truth of the gospel itself is at stake.

- And so, Paul argues with Peter because Peter's behaviour suggests to Gentile Christians that they have to become Jews before they can become real Christians.
- Paul has some very strong things to say to the Galatians because they want to add circumcision as a necessary part of becoming a Christian.

Sometimes we may need to divide because the people we're fighting with deny the gospel itself.

Now, baptism's another one of those issues over which Christians have disagreed. Within our church here, we have people who hold to infant baptism and people who hold to believer's baptism. We can get along OK with each other and still fellowship with each other. That's fine. But if someone came along and said:

- Unless you're baptised, you're not saved; or
- Unless you're baptised in a certain way or by a certain person, you're not saved.

Then I'd have a fight with that person. They're adding baptism as being necessary for salvation. That's adding to the gospel. They've made baptism into a gospel issue and they're preaching a different gospel. We have a disagreement over something at the very heart of what Christianity's all about. I can't compromise on something that's at the core of the gospel.

Thirdly, we need to have some level of flexibility about non-essentials. I'm not saying we don't have convictions about these things. We do. We've studied the Bible and we think we know what the Bible teaches. However, other people in the church have also studied the Bible and they come to a different view. I need flexibility at two levels.

- I need to be flexible enough to admit the possibility I'm wrong. My brother/sister is also someone indwelt by God's Spirit and they've come to a different conclusion. It's just possible they may be right and I may be wrong. I need to listen carefully to them – to try to understand exactly what they're saying – to weigh it up honestly. I need to have a greater desire for the truth than to win. That requires humility – the sort of humility Paul encouraged in verse 2.
- Secondly, I need to be flexible enough to relate in a loving and godly way to these people with whom I disagree. That may even involve letting them get their way. I heard of a minister who believed a church should have a plurality of elders. He was at a church where he was the only elder. He was in the process of trying to convince the church there should be a plurality – but, if he failed to do so, he wasn't going to leave the church over it. He'd let them win – and he'd continue to serve the church faithfully as their pastor and sole elder.

When Lesley and I married, we moved to the other side of Sydney and started attending a different church. There was a man in that church who considered himself theologically correct in all things. He wasn't the pastor. I don't think he was even one of the elected leaders. He was more than happy to point out the theological errors of others. He was very sincere about it – his desire was to defend the truth. He was very persistent about it – he thought it important for the purity of the church. Rather than being flexible, he was stubborn. He wasn't good at listening to others. He didn't appear to be open to the possibility he could have misunderstood the Bible.

We weren't in the church very long. Timothy came along and we moved into College – a considerable distance away. That church continued to have problems. Those problems distracted them from their main task.

- This guy had them focusing on trivial things. Sure, they were things in the Bible, but they weren't the central things to do with the gospel.
- And the attitude in the church became skewed. Instead of focusing on doing good to others – on being devoted to living godly and upright lives – the focus shifted to being right. Now, there's nothing wrong with being right – but when that becomes the focus in an unhealthy way, it easily degenerates into arrogance and competitiveness and division.

We need to be careful of that. Getting the truth right must always be in a spirit of humility. It must never be at the expense of pursuing godliness. It must not be done in isolation from being devoted to doing good to others.

### **Back to Doing Good**

Remember, verses 9 to 11 are in contrast with the rest of the chapter. Paul told them what to be like in verses 1 to 8 – the things that were excellent and profitable. Then, in verses 9 to 11, he tells them what's unprofitable and useless. Rather than finish on that negative note, he reminds them again of the good stuff. Verse 12:

*As soon as I send Artemas or Tychicus to you, do your best to come to me at Nicopolis, because I have decided to winter there. Do everything you can to help Zenas the lawyer and Apollos on their way and see that they have everything they need. Our people must learn to devote themselves to doing what is good, in*

*order that they may provide for daily necessities and not live unproductive lives.*

*Everyone with me sends you greetings. Greet those who love us in the faith.*

*Grace be with you all.*

These things just look like the closing personal bits of the letter – and they are that – but they're also a reminder and an application of what he's been on about in the rest of the letter.

First, Paul plans to winter at Nicopolis. That's the time of the year not particularly suitable for travel. Paul would be keen to winter in a place that was strategic for gospel ministry – a central place where he could establish a church and the gospel could radiate out from there into the surrounding areas. He hopes Titus will be able to join him in this ministry – but not before Paul's sent a replacement to carry on the work in Crete. Paul wants to make sure the church in Crete is adequately provided for.

Secondly, he encourages Titus to do what he can to help Zenas and Apollos. Presumably, they brought Paul's letter. Presumably also, they were on their way to minister somewhere else. This is not a case of simple hospitality – it's hospitality for the sake of gospel ministry. It's providing for these two guys while they stopover in Crete – and helping in their future ministry by providing what they need (which probably means money to help them with their upcoming mission).

Part of the reason for this is a training exercise for the local Christians. Paul's told them several times already to devote themselves to doing good. This is the result of the

work of the gospel in their lives. Their faith in Jesus and knowledge of the truth is to lead to godliness in their daily lives. Here's a practical opportunity for them to do just that.

- They can provide for the necessities of these guys.
- They can be involved in this practical way in gospel mission – and thus be productive in the way they live their lives.

It remains the same for us today. We devote ourselves to doing good. We devote ourselves to productive lives. Productive lives aren't those that store up treasure on this earth – by getting to the end of life with a healthy bank balance and a vast array of physical assets – that their lives have been poured into a piece of real estate and producing their own little kingdom. Productive lives are those that store up treasure in heaven – those who invest in gospel work.