

# MATURING IN CHRIST

*Gareth Higgs*

My former teacher used to enjoy reminding us in the Christian Union at school that, of every hundred people, one of them might read the Bible, but ninety-nine would read the Christian. It's a sobering thought, but the reality is that people are watching and taking note of how we act and interact with others. That's even more the case in any emerging group that may attract suspicion - people keep their eyes on such groups, to make sure they don't upset the status quo too much. Paul was all too aware of this dynamic when he writes to Titus in the first century. He reminded Titus of the importance of sound doctrine (v. 1), and then speaks of how this is lived out.

## OLDER PEOPLE

His first instructions are to 'older people' (v. 2) who in the first century could well have meant anyone over the age of thirty! Such people receive instruction because they are to set an example to others. You will notice the similarity in the commands here to those for elders (1:7-9): be sober, worthy of respect, self-controlled, evidencing maturity of faith, love and perseverance. Older women are to be reverent, careful in how they speak and live, not being addicted to wine but teaching what is good. Because they are living free from the temptations of the world, they are able to mentor and train others in living free.

## YOUNGER PEOPLE

Younger people are empowered with responsibility also. Younger women are to love their households (v. 4), (remembering of course that in the New Testament, love is much more action than feelings), to be self-controlled, to be 'busy at home' - literally 'home-makers'. I'll reflect more fully on male and female related roles later, but it's worth remembering here that Paul is simply wanting to affirm the cultural norm and endue it with purpose - people should fulfil their responsibilities whether they be in the workplace or the home with care and honour - rather than make a universal statement about gender roles in the world of work and home. Young men too should be self-controlled and not easily carried away. In all of this, Paul remains concerned for the reputation of this small embryonic community. He doesn't want them to attract unwarranted attention and be snuffed out before they have had a transforming impact on society around them.

## THE EXAMPLE OF TITUS

In all of this, Titus is to set an example not just in teaching but in conduct (v. 7). This is humbling reading for any of us who are in leadership roles of any kind within God's church. He is to be full of integrity, diligent in God's work, careful about what and how he speaks; his inner life, which must be formed by 'sound doctrine' must overflow into how

he acts. Jesus echoes these principles in his teaching in Luke 6:45 '...for out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.'

## FOR REFLECTION...

- **If people were 'reading you' rather than the Bible - what would they see?**
- **What stands out for you in the commands given to people amongst whom Titus ministers?**
- **How can you ensure that your life presents a good example to others?**

## SLAVES AND WOMEN

It's important, given the political and social times in which we live, to give some more careful consideration to two exhortations that are found in this chapter. Women are instructed to be 'subject to their husbands' (v. 5) and slaves 'subject to their masters' (v. 9). We need some careful exegesis to understand how to apply these tinderbox commands in our context.

Remember how Paul is wanting to safeguard the reputation of an emerging church when he is conscious of how many eyes are upon them. He doesn't subvert the cultural norms here, not because he somehow wants to sanctify them forever, but because he doesn't want the church's work to be thwarted before it has even begun. Slavery was as normal for the first century Graeco-Roman



world as driving a car is for us today. Women were most often understood to be the property of the oldest male relative. Paul isn't making a judgment on the rightness or wrongness of these commands; his focus is that 'no-one will malign the word of God' (v. 5). In other words, the church shouldn't become notorious for what were then relatively minor issues. We know from other parts of Paul's writing (Ephesians 5:22 and following verses and Colossians 3:18 and following verses) that Paul doesn't want to act in a revolutionary manner, yet his giving of commands to women and slaves is to humanise them and 'elevate' their standing in the first century.

This pattern continues for those in slavery. Paul's instructions to slaves are not to draw attention to Christian households through your insolence - be faithful - and therefore through your good conduct, win others to Christ. Christian families and households must, as much as it relies on them, be good adverts for Christ - not causing social disorder or disruption. Such units should be wholesome, respectful and ordered and through such order, the message of Christ will appear attractive in its social context (v. 10).

### GRACE OF GOD

The message of Titus 2 is all about behaving like we belong to Christ and v. 11 reminds us of one of the grand deposits of Scripture and Methodism - salvation is available for all. So, the Christians in Crete should not conduct themselves in a way that makes people turn their back on the great offer of the gospel. That gospel, of God's grace for the world in Christ Jesus, has the power both to save and to sanctify. God's grace applied to us in justification washes us clean of our sin and presents us blameless before God through the self-offering of Jesus on the cross and his wonderful resurrection. Because we have received such grace, we live to honour that grace until the Giver of grace returns (v. 14). The journey of discipleship is not over at the point of salvation. That is really when it's just getting started! It is not that we are 'saved' for eternity so we can do what we like - that is the heresy of antinomianism. Because we are saved by God's merciful

grace, we decide to co-operate with that grace so that he can work change and transformation in us for the rest of our days. God's grace is now journeying with us toward holiness. Saying 'yes' to godliness will mean saying 'no' to some other things. This was as true in the first century as it is now. In first century Crete, saying 'yes' to Christ meant saying 'no' to sacrifices, pagan worship, blood sports etc, bringing with it the risk of cultural shame or disenfranchisement by being one of the 'odd ones' who doesn't fully join in. We face the same challenges today at their core, even if they come in different guises. Saying 'yes' to Christ will mean renouncing other things and may well mean being ostracised, considered 'extreme' or 'religious' or even 'bigotted'. Those slanders are not new, but the way to win back credibility is not to acquiesce to the culture, but to live such fulfilled, godly, wholesome, joy-filled lives that the message of Christ appeals through our witness as well as our words.

God has redeemed us in Christ, and offers such redemption to others. His process of maturing us, like good cheese or wine, may take time, but the end result will be worth it, when the 'tasting' (if you'll forgive the analogy) comes at the day of Christ for which we live in eager anticipation (v. 13). The evidence of such maturing for Paul is in 'doing good', but remember, the order is very clear for Paul. By having our mind and heart renewed by 'sound doctrine' will affect how we live. Godly character always comes from an awareness of biblical truth applied by God's Spirit by God's grace. There is no other additive that makes a nicely matured Christian, just the grace of God continually at work in our souls as we avail ourselves of those time old 'means of grace' - scripture, prayer, fasting, meditation, holy communion, silence and spiritual reading. May God, by his grace, enable us to mature well.

### FOR REFLECTION...

- **Do you look more like Jesus today than you did a year ago? Why? Why not?**
- **What are the things that help you to mature?**



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