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When I send Artemas or Tychicus to you, do your best to come to me at Nicopolis, for I have decided to spend the winter there. Do your best to speed Zenas the lawyer and Apollos on their way; see that they lack nothing. And let our people learn to devote themselves to good works, so as to help cases of urgent need, and not be unfruitful.

All who are with me send greetings to you. Greet those who love us in the faith. Grace be with you all.

Titus 3:9-15 | Avoid Foolish Controversies

Here in our last sermon on this letter of Paul to Titus, I want us to examine the question we had at the beginning, how do churches hold together? Or more broadly how is it that any church or denomination or family or institution is able to hold together? The church in Crete is a perfect example of what would look like a lost cause operation.

These young churches face lots of opposition from inside and out. Crete is a corrupted culture which has crept into the church, with a particular threat from the circumcision party. The Circumcision party is made up of Jewish converts to Christianity who refuse to recognize the fullness of Christ's satisfaction of the law and therefore seek to impose the ceremonial requirements of the Mosaic covenant upon one another and gentile converts. So the threat on the church in Crete is a double threat. They face the licentiousness of the culture which corrupts the character of those within the church and justifies the legalism of the circumcision party.

Our culture, probably like the culture of Crete, would tell you that hierarchy is the problem, and therefore it needs to be eliminated at all levels. If no one is above you, no one can hurt you. But this isn't true, a lack of hierarchy means there is nothing above us which binds us together, and nothing able to settle disputes between us. The problem is not hierarchy, the problem is hierarchy that is not submitted to Christ, hierarchy that thinks it instituted itself and can take any power it desires for itself. But a true understanding of the gospel places us all under God when we realize he saved us, not because of anything we did but only because of his great mercy.

So we are getting a sense of how things hold together. They hold together when they are under Christ in the humility fostered by the gospel. He saved us, that's what holds us together. But this simple reality, although it must serve as a north star for the church, is not easy to preserve. That's why Paul concludes his letter today with a warning for Titus regarding those tendencies and people which can subtly creep in and take the whole thing down. Their weapons are foolish controversies and quarrels.

1. How to Act

Titus 3:9-15 | But avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless.

Paul had called us to remember the free grace of God towards us in the gospel to inspire us towards submission and good works. He instructed Titus that these things are *excellent and profitable*, but today he calls for avoidance of things which are unprofitable and worthless. There are four things listed but there are really two realities that the church was facing.

The text can be read as a call to avoid:

1. foolish controversies *namely* genealogies.
2. And avoid dissensions, *namely* quarrels about the law.

Let's deal with these in order.

Foolish controversies, namely genealogies. The foolish controversies can also be understood as foolish questions. This is similar to the warning that Timothy received from Paul who spoke of those who were

2 Timothy 3:7 | always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth

The purpose of these individuals is to be perpetually sowing doubt by indulging in unanswerable questions. Did God really say? Does the scripture really apply here? Is that what its really saying? You see it looks like a question, but it isn't, its a provocation. The purpose of which is to create the sense of ambiguity where there isn't really any ambiguity and then weaponize it to sow doubt. Of course if really prodded it can always be said its just a question.

So now that we understand the strategy we should understand the content. This sowing doubt was regarding genealogies. Why would that matter? While we don't have the particulars of these debates you can at least see the underlying nature of returning to the old covenant and therefore putting your confidence in the flesh and not in Christ. Here how Paul interacts with his genealogy.

Philippians 3:4-5, 7 If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews...⁷ But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.

All of this speculation about your position in the people of God or your rank among them is meaningless outside of Christ. Only in Christ are we saved and brought into the family

of God. So we must understand this first obstacle is a foolish controversy, which means a perpetual asking with regards to genealogies, which ultimately amounts to a stirring up of doubt as to who is a true member of the people of God and who is not. This produces ambiguity which is weaponized into factions.

Secondly Avoid dissensions, namely quarrels about the law.

These dissensions namely quarrels about the law are likewise directly tied to the circumcision party who do not recognize the total fulfillment of the requirements of the law by Christ. So they become seekers of quarrels. You can see in this the pharisaical tendency to spend so much time in the examination of the minutiae of the law as a means of avoiding the weightier matters of the law. This once again produces ambiguity that is weaponized into factions.

The central claim of this is the requirement for circumcision in order to be included in the church. But this can creep into all kinds of scenarios, of what food you were able to eat and ultimately break the church into those who obey the dietary laws and those who don't. So you might consider the pressure that would mount in such a community that would then be easily torn apart. We get a glimpse into these types of factions and the pressure they produce from Peter's experience in Galatia. While Peter was in Galatia he was honoring the reality of the gospel eating with Jews and Gentiles alike. But then some of the Jewish converts came from James in Jerusalem to Galatia. And suddenly by the pressure of their presence Peter will no longer eat with Gentiles. These quarrels about the law infect and divide. That's why Paul stands in such opposition to them.

2. Patient Decisive Rebuke

Titus 3:10-11 | As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.

Now I hope you understand the delicate nature of this. Because there are these two categories that we must understand that Paul communicates clearly elsewhere. One is the reality that we are all united in Christ's fulfillment of the law. The other is that the Jews were permitted to adherence to the ceremonial and dietary restrictions for the sake of their own conscience. This distinction is permissible in so far as it doesn't violate issue number one. So you can't just go around removing from your church the ones who adhere to these particular restrictions, but you also need to discern if they are actually violating the sufficiency of Christ. You can tell they are violating the sufficiency of Christ by their producing divisions.

The word divisions here is actually the Greek word for heretic. And heretic has a meaning which evolved in the Greek language. At face value it simply means to choose for

yourself. But this grew into an identifier of groups that began to have a negative connotation. It is similar to our word factions. So you're not just looking at someone's plate or dinner guests you're looking for their establishing of factions within the church. When this happens the right response is the very pattern that Jesus lays out in Matthew 18. Also the chapter which includes the parable of the unforgiving servant, which Paul seems to be at least thematically interacting with.

This pattern is of patient and then decisive rebuke. There is a warning, and then another warning and then finally excommunication for the sake of the body. By their resistance to the reality of the sufficiency of Christ, they reveal that they are like an unstable pillar that will bring collapse to the whole house. But they might not be. So they ought to be sought to be brought back into full fellowship under Christ. You yourselves were once led astray.

3. Plans to meet Titus

Titus 3:12-13 | When I send Artemas or Tychicus to you, do your best to come to me at Nicopolis, for I have decided to spend the winter there. Do your best to speed Zenas the lawyer and Apollos on their way; see that they lack nothing.

Paul concludes his letter with some logistical concerns. His plan is to send Artemis and Tychicus to serve in the stead of Titus who would then return to work directly with Paul. They would winter together in Nicopolis as no travel was possible in the winter. The young church could not be left alone yet, but with proper care it one day would be. Paul also requested the service of Zenas and Apollos and required their provision for the journey to be made by the church.

Titus 3:14 | And let our people learn to devote themselves to good works, so as to help cases of urgent need, and not be unfruitful.

Their supplying the needs of Apollos and Zenas is an opportunity for the church to learn to care for one another's urgent needs, and therefore prevent unfruitfulness.

Titus 3:15 | All who are with me send greetings to you. Greet those who love us in the faith.
Grace be with you all.

Finally Paul's greeting I will depend upon as a sufficient conclusion and answer to our broader question. What can hold a group of people together? The Grace of God.