

Dealing with Division

Titus 3:9-15

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We live in a divisive world today. People draw battle lines over any number of issues and defend those lines vigorously. It is amazing what people will fight over. Social media amplifies this tendency. People online tend to deal in hyperbole, and any subtlety or nuance is lost in the noise. I can't tell you how often I've seen people say something along these lines: "This is what I believe, and if you don't like it, you should unfriend me!" This type of attitude is common online, but it often spills over into the way we interact with others in the real world too.

Our passage today speaks to this issue and shows us how we should handle division within the church. There will always be some division with those outside the church, but inside the church we should be striving for unity, even when we disagree. Paul's instructions to Titus are to avoid divisive issues and divisive people. We're going to flesh these principles out as we walk through our passage this morning.

What Not to Do

Paul begins by telling Titus what he should avoid,

⁹ Do not get involved in foolish discussions about spiritual pedigrees or in quarrels and fights about obedience to Jewish laws. These things are useless and a waste of time. (Titus 3:9, NLT)

He tells Titus not to allow himself to get dragged into foolish discussions that cause divisions. Specifically, he mentions spiritual pedigrees and fights about obedience to Jewish laws. Paul doesn't lay out the exact issues he was anticipating, but it seems that some people were trying to draw spiritual significance from their genealogies, whether those were their physical family trees, or their spiritual family trees. Whatever the case, Paul said these debates weren't fruitful and would distract from the primary purpose of Titus' ministry, so Titus shouldn't get involved in them.

The other issue Paul mentioned was quarrels and fights about obedience to Jewish laws. This was a frequent issue in the early church, because the church was trying to blend Christians who came from a Jewish background with those who came from a Gentile background. Jewish identity in many ways focused on following a list of rules that set them apart from the world around them. But the Christian faith emphasized that people are not saved by adherence to a rigid set of rules, but by submission to Christ and reliance upon His grace. This was a difficult truth for many to accept, and was a frequent source of conflict.

So why does Paul tell Titus not to waste his time with such things? Wouldn't there be value in trying to explain these truths to people in the early church? Shouldn't Titus be tackling these issues head-on and trying to help bring people together by working through these theological questions? Why does Paul say it wasn't worth Titus' time?

Notice what Paul said. He said to not get involved in *foolish discussions* or *quarrels and fights*. Paul was not telling Titus that he should avoid talking about difficult issues entirely, but to avoid becoming embroiled in disputes that didn't accomplish anything for the kingdom. He knew how easily Titus' ministry could be derailed if he spent all his time chasing whatever new issue people raised.

When I was in college, I had a group of good friends. We met together each week just to check in with each other about our walk with Christ. One day we started talking about the doctrine of predestination and how we understood it. It quickly became apparent that we couldn't talk about that issue without it becoming divisive. Our solution was simple: let's not talk about that issue anymore, at least until we feel confident we can do so in a productive way. (We were eventually able to talk about that issue helpfully years later.) We were able to remain friends and continue to challenge each other in our faith, we just chose not to discuss that issue together.

When you get several hundred people in a church together, you're going to have differences of opinion. Sometimes people feel very strongly about certain issues. Church leaders are constantly being asked to emphasize a hundred different things. Anyone in ministry quickly discovers they can't please everyone; there just isn't enough time or space. Not every debate is going to be fruitful in the church, and sometimes it's better not to tackle certain issues (at least for a time) until it can be done in a way that is beneficial.

Paul was telling Titus to exercise discernment. Sometimes conversations about difficult subjects are worth having because they bring clarity and help people move closer to the Lord. Other times, people just want to fight. In those situations it doesn't matter how long you sit and talk with a person, you are not going to move closer to resolution. Paul was giving Titus permission to walk away from those situations without feeling guilty. He was telling him that his time would be better spent on trying to teach people the gospel message, not in getting bogged down in the minutiae of individual theological issues.

How should we apply this principle today? Basically, any time our conversations do not lead to greater understanding, greater grace, and greater devotion to our Lord, they're probably not worth having. Let me give you some examples that might fall into this category today.

- If we can't talk about politics without our blood pressure rising, getting angry, or being willing to listen to the other person, then we simply shouldn't talk about it.
- We can discuss and wrestle with how to understand God's plan and purpose for the nation of Israel, but if it just leads to fights, then it's not a helpful debate.
- Christians sometimes waste energy fighting over all sorts of things that have no spiritual significance: the color of carpet, the way we decorate, the way programs are structured, or any other number of side-issues. These fights don't accomplish anything of importance.
- Debates over which translation of the Bible is the "right" one.

Many of these things are important issues. Paul isn't saying we should neglect them entirely, but that if we cannot have fruitful discussions about them, we should just leave these issues on the side. If we are going to fight over these things, then we are going to be distracted from the greater issue: the gospel message. Anything that distracts us from what's really important needs to be sacrificed to keep us focused.

What to Do

The second instruction Paul gives Titus is how to handle those who are divisive.

¹⁰ If people are causing divisions among you, give a first and second warning. After that, have nothing more to do with them. ¹¹ For people like that have turned away from the truth, and their own sins condemn them. (Titus 3:10-11, NLT)

To properly understand this guidance, it's important that we clearly define what a divisive person is, because we are tempted to label anyone who disagrees with us as divisive. At the same time, many churches are held hostage by people who will create problems if they don't get their way. They may have been in the church for quite some time and may even proudly talk about all the people they have run off during that time. Or they may be people who bounce from church to church, leaving a trail of destruction in their wake.

Divisiveness is about the attitude a person has, not the issue they raise. A divisive person isn't interested in trying to find a solution, they are interested in getting their way.

The best way to identify divisive people may be to think about the right way to approach disagreements and then recognize that divisive people are those who don't exhibit these traits. There are several distinctives we should strive for when we disagree.

First, we should be humble. When we raise an issue, we should do so with the recognition that we may be wrong. It's possible that those with whom we disagree see something we don't or that they may even know the scriptures better than we do! The proper way to disagree is with humility, acknowledging that we may not have all the answers, and once we get all the information, we might change our minds.

Second, we should be respectful. A person who enters a disagreement without respect is not working toward resolution; they are gearing up for a fight. Especially within the church, we should recognize that God loves and values every person, and that they are His children. This means we should treat them that way. We should not resort to threats or intimidation to get our way, we should not engage in name-calling, and we should not treat people as though they are stupid. At all times, we should be conversing with each other with respect. If we can't be respectful, then we shouldn't be having the conversation.

Third, we should define winning as being unified, not getting our way. Not every situation is a deal-breaker kind of decision. You have probably heard me say at times, "That's not a hill I'm willing to die on." I have opinions on lots of issues, but most of them are not things I'm willing to throw away friendships over or sacrifice unity over. Now,

there are hills I am willing to die on; the nature of the gospel, who Jesus is, the authority of the scriptures, these are things we should be willing to fight over (and if necessary, divide over), but a lot of things simply aren't worth fighting over. If we come into disagreements with the primary goal getting our way, we've already lost the war. We should be working to make the best decision we can *together*, and be respectful and gracious to one another, even if the decision isn't one we would have liked.

Divisive people do not demonstrate these behaviors. Divisive people are convinced they are right and are unwilling to listen to what anyone else has to say. Divisive people resort to power plays to get their way. They call people names, they spread rumors, they try to build coalitions. They are wedge-drivers, not bridge-builders. Divisive people are only interested in getting their way. They are willing to die on every hill. They will fight to the death over almost everything.

Paul tells Titus to warn such people once, and then a second time, and then have nothing to do with them. How do you do that? If you know that you simply cannot have a conversation with a person without it becoming divisive, simply walk away from those conversations. Refuse to let them start something. Simply stop taking the bait. It may mean ending some friendships, at least until attitudes change.

The most drastic part of this instruction is when someone becomes divisive to the church at large. If you have warned someone about their divisive attitude twice, then the next step is to remove them from the church.

Excommunication is a thorny and oft-misunderstood issue. Many think churches excommunicate people to be mean or hurtful. On the contrary—it's an act of love. It is an attempt to reach a person who is wandering from the Lord and restore them to fellowship. The goal is always repentance and restoration. Excommunication is never intended to be a permanent act, but a step toward a restored relationship.

Paul understood how dangerous a divisive attitude is. We must strive for unity and weed out divisiveness in our churches. This unity is found in mutual submission to Christ, not by insisting on our way. The church will be unified when we are all seeking to submit our wills to Christ's will. That was Paul's goal for Titus, for the church at Crete, and the Church at large.

Concluding Remarks

Paul concludes his letter to Titus with a few remarks that are worth noting.

¹² I am planning to send either Artemas or Tychicus to you. As soon as one of them arrives, do your best to meet me at Nicopolis, for I have decided to stay there for the winter. ¹³ Do everything you can to help Zenas the lawyer and Apollos with their trip. See that they are given everything they need. ¹⁴ Our people must learn to do good by meeting the urgent needs of others; then they will not be unproductive. ¹⁵ Everybody here sends greetings. Please give my greetings to the believers—all who love us. May God's grace be with you all. (Titus 3:12-15, NLT)

Paul wanted Titus to visit him at a town called Nicopolis. Paul planned to spend the winter there and hoped Titus would come to visit him and spend the winter as well. But he also understood Titus was involved in an important work and didn't want to just leave the church in Crete without leadership. So he was planning to send either Artemas or Tychicus to him, so they could take over the work while Titus was with Paul. We don't know anything about Artemas, but Tychicus was likely the same one Paul mentioned in other letters, and was another trusted member of Paul's team. Titus could rest assured that the church in Crete would be in good hands while he was gone.

This reminds us that the church is not dependent upon any one person. God can use anyone He chooses to accomplish His purposes. This is often a challenging truth for pastors and other church leaders. We sometimes get the idea that we are the only people who can do our job, and that if we weren't there then the church would fall apart. Sometimes it feels that way, but it's not true. God can equip and enable many to step into leadership roles as needed. It's easy to get a "Messiah complex" in ministry, but sometimes it's good to hand things off to others and see that while someone else may not do things the same way you would, God can still work through them.

The other instruction Paul gives Titus in these verses is to help out Zenas the lawyer and Apollos as they embark on a trip. We can't be sure if these two men were on Crete as well and were preparing to embark upon a missionary journey, or if there was something else going on, but the point was that Paul was telling Titus he should help out others who were ministering faithfully to the best of his ability.

Sometimes Christians become territorial. We talk about "our church" or "our people", and we don't like it when anyone horns in on what we think is our territory. Admittedly, sometimes people try to grow their church by taking people from other churches. That's not real church growth. Regardless, believers are supposed to work together. It's important for us to look past our own little sphere of influence and see the bigger picture of what God is doing. This is why it's good for us to cooperate with other local churches (provided we can agree on the essentials) and to support mission works both nearby and abroad. These things remind us that the work of the church is bigger than us, and it gives us the perspective we need to truly be unified.

Paul's concluding words show his pastoral heart. He cared for the people of Crete, as he had likely helped to plant this church. He shared his greetings to all the people there who love them. He had developed relationships with these people, and even though they were separated by distance, he still thought about them and cared for them. And finally, he reminded them of God's grace. Paul understood that God's grace was the key that held the church together. It had been his emphasis throughout the letter, and it is fitting that he returned to God's grace with his closing words.

Conclusion

So what do we learn from this passage? What lessons can we draw from Paul's instructions about division?

First, we need to remember what's most important. It is easy for us to get sidetracked today. There are all sorts of voices that are trying to tell us what is important. They encourage us to spend all our time, energy, and money pursuing the latest fad. That is even true in the church! Paul reminds us that the gospel message is of primary importance. Everything else is secondary to the message of God's grace revealed through Jesus. When we find things in our lives that are distracting us from this truth, or when we find things in our churches that are keeping us from the gospel message, we should get rid of them. If we aren't careful, we can allow all sorts of other things to become our focus and distract us from our real purpose.

Second, unity is often hard work, but it's what God desires for His church. Satan wants to divide us, because when we are divided from one another, we are more vulnerable. God calls us to be unified, but we are a group of sinful, selfish people, so we shouldn't be shocked to discover it's not going to be an easy process! Christians often struggle to work together, even though we should be unified in Christ. Nonetheless, we should be willing to do the hard work of working toward unity. This means being willing to listen to each other, even when we disagree. It means showing respect toward each other, recognizing that God loves you as much as He loves me. And it means being humble, recognizing that maybe others may have insights you don't. We should choose to find strength in each other, rather than choosing to see one another as obstacles to be overcome.

Finally, remember that the church is bigger than you or me. Sometimes we allow little things to become big things because we lose perspective about what's really important. Think carefully about what hills are worth dying on. I had a pastor who used to say that when we get to Heaven, we'll all get our theology straightened out. Remember that God is working through other churches and Christians as well—even ones that don't agree with everything you believe! Remember that He is working in parts of the world we've never even heard of! When we keep perspective, it can help us remember what's really important and how to keep the main thing the main thing.

We should have difficult conversations within the church. We should debate difficult issues. We should wrestle with complex theological truths. But we must do these things in ways that draw us closer together, not drive us apart. I like to think about disagreements as like friction. Sometimes friction just generates heat, sometimes it generates light. Ask yourself, is there any light coming from our disagreement? Are things becoming clearer? Or are we just getting hot and worked up? Some fights bring light, others bring only heat. We should recognize which ones are worth having and abandon the ones that only raise the temperature.

God desires us to be unified as we recognize that we are all sinners saved by grace. The good news is that He works through each one of us to accomplish His purposes in the world. Choose to be an active part of the team and see what He'll accomplish through us as we work together for His agenda, not ours!

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