

The Need For Reminding Elders

by Ron R. Ritchie

A group of our elders got together recently out of concern for how you, the flock of God, should respond to certain current political events, such as the nuclear freeze issue, the homosexual rights issue, etc. Should we march in protest or should we talk to individuals? Christians are struggling with the problem of how to live in a godless society. Times are so fickle, just when you have one issue squared away another problem surfaces. Thus our elders are constantly searching the Scriptures, asking questions, listening to our questions and seeking to come up with sound doctrine to enable us to walk as godly men and women in an ungodly society. They published a paper entitled "A Christian's Response To Controversial Issues." That was another attempt on their part to make sure that we walk in righteousness. As you listen to them, they say the same thing over and over again so that we will get it right. They wish we would get it right the first time, but we are not made that way so we need our faithful elders to remind us of the truth in a loving and patient way.

The apostle Paul's letter to Titus sets forth the qualifications for godly elders in the church of Jesus Christ. The apostle left Titus on the island of Crete so that he would "set things in order that remains, and appoint elders in every city." Paul then went on to list the spiritual qualifications for eldership. Elders are not chosen because they are popular, loving, sweet, or reasonable. They are chosen by the Holy Spirit because they have certain gifts and a certain lifestyle. Paul then lists the areas in which elders are to function, and Titus is instructed to be a model for these elders whom he chooses by the Spirit of God.

The first area was teaching. Elders were needed who would exhort in sound doctrine from the Word of God, in contrast to the false prophets, the Judaizers and the Pharisees who were misleading the church in Crete. Secondly, there was a need for shepherding elders who would guard and feed the Flock of God. Today we want to look at the need for reminding elders; elders who will encourage believers in how to live a godly life in an ungodly and corrupt society. We must remember that none of these things can be accomplished in the "flesh." "Sound doctrine" would hold that "we are not adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God." (2 Cor. 3:5)

1. The Need For Elders To Remind Us How To Live In An Ungodly Society 3:1-3

Remind them to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed, to malign no one, to be uncontentious, gentle, showing every consideration for all men. For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another.

Here Paul instructs Titus to remind his flock, first of all, to submit to and obey everyone in authority over them. At this time, the Roman Empire was ruled by Nero, one of the cruelest Caesars ever, who would soon bring havoc to the Christian church. Despite that, however, Paul's instructions are, "Be subject; submit yourselves as Christians under that rule, and do it voluntarily--choose to do it." Some segments of the Jewish nation were seething in insurrection against the Roman Empire at this time. One group, the Zealots, vowed to submit to no king but Yahweh. They refused to pay taxes, and went about the country, murdering and assassinating in an effort to make civil government impossible. The Cretans, likewise, detested the Roman government. One of the church fathers wrote, "Cretans are notoriously turbulent, quarrelsome, opposing all authority, involved in insurrection and murder . . ."

How are Christians to respond to such a government? The apostles Paul and Peter have left clear instructions concerning the Christian's place in the community. There is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist are established by God. The Roman government, in this context, was ordained of God as an instrument to save the world from chaos. The Christian's job was to help the government accomplish its task of justice, order and peace, not to hinder it. Christians are to avail of the resultant time of peace to spread

the gospel. While there are times when Christians are to obey God rather than man--and we know there are consequences for those decisions--generally speaking they are to accept all power and authority in life as from the Lord.

Christians . . . be ready for every good deed

Then Paul exhorts Christians to "be ready for every good deed." That seems to be the theme of this letter. "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them." (Eph. 2:10) In Acts 10:38, speaking of Jesus of Nazareth, Peter says, "You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed him with the Holy Spirit and with power and how he went about doing good . . ." What a wonderful testimony we could have in our community if we were known as men and women who always seemed to be doing good--as Jesus did.

"Malign no one," Paul says, i.e., do not blaspheme God, the king, the authorities, rulers or magistrates whether they are Christian or non-Christian. Actually, we are to pray for them. The Cretan Christians should be "uncontentious," i.e., they were not to have a sense of invincibility. That does not mean Christians are not to stand up for justice; rather they should do so within the established laws of the land. They were to be "gentle," i.e., showing a sweet reasonableness about them, to be forbearing, not insisting on the letter of the law, but looking at facts, remembering human weakness all around them. They were to show "every consideration for all men," i.e., to be meek, which is strength under the control of the Holy Spirit. This attitude should be directed toward the common people as well as those in authority. The Lord Jesus Christ lived under the same government as the Cretans, always trusting upon the Father to bring about perfect justice.

Then Paul identifies himself fully with the Cretans in the words, "For we also once were . . ." Paul never forgot who he was before Jesus Christ met him on the Damascus road. He identified with those who were struggling in darkness, sin, shame and guilt. Thus he is a great example to us not to look at our neighbors in a judgmental way but to remember what God has done for us and then reach out to them in mercy, love and patience--the qualities we now have through the mercy of God that we did not have before.

Then Paul reviews, in an unselfrighteous way, some eight sinful characteristics of the Cretans. "We were foolish" (senseless); "disobedient" (hard-hearted); "deceived" (by the power of the great deceiver, the prince of this world); "enslaved to various lusts and pleasures" (hedonistic); "spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another." A few months ago my son Rodd and I found a very nice length of rope lying on the road. I stopped the car, picked up the rope, threw it in the trunk and drove away. I felt very excited about it. God was so gracious to give me a free rope! I drove about a mile and noticed in my mirror a white pickup truck speeding behind me. I thought, "I'd better pull over so he can get by; he must be in a terrible hurry." But rather than passing me he began to force me right off the road; then he pulled up in front of me and jammed on his brakes. Two men jumped out of the truck and started cursing and screaming at my son and me. They opened the trunk of my car, grabbed the rope, cursed me again, then accelerated away, dumping gravel all over my car. There was dead silence. Then my son said, "Dad I wish we had a gun." "Make that a shotgun," I said, "because I want to get them both with one shot!" I know how to take revenge. In my past I had been experienced in night-time raids on people like that. I knew exactly how to blow this guy's truck up, how to shoot up his house with a shotgun. I knew exactly how to wreck him at work. I knew all that once, before the Lord had set me free to not live like that anymore. I turned to my son and said, "You know, son, what we can be thankful about is that they have to live like that all the time but we have been set free from all that. We don't have to live like that anymore. We are free to walk in newness of life."

Thus Paul instructs Titus to remind his flock to submit to rulers and authorities, to be ready for every good deed, and to put off their former ways of living in sin and darkness.

2. The Need For Elders To Remind Us Of The Kindness Of God Our Saviour 3:4-7

But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that being justified by His grace we

might be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Underline that word, "but." It is the most exciting word in the whole New Testament because it signifies the change in God's heart toward man who was rebelling against him and walking away from him. "But . . ." God did four wonderful things. First, he sent his Son, "but when the kindness of God," i.e., when the goodness of God's heart expressed itself in action. Only the Living God could do this. He is not like the fickle Roman and Greek gods. He is the Creator in whom all goodness and truth finds its source, and he is our personal Savior. If we really understood that our lives would be radically different.

Secondly, we see that God "saved us" through his Son. I John 4:8-10 says, ". . . God is love, by this the love of God was manifested in us that God has sent his only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." This is not a love that he simply talks about, but a self-sacrificing love that has changed the lives of those who have accepted it by faith. And God did not save us "on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness." "There is none righteous, no not one," Romans declares. No matter what you have done or are thinking of doing if you do not know Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior all your good works are for nothing. Outside of Christ there is no righteousness. "Not by works of the law, since by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified." (Gal. 2:16) "The law was given to us to give us the knowledge of sin, not salvation." (Rom. 3:20) Man will not be declared righteous before God for anything he does. I asked a man on an airplane during a flight to Washington, "How do you expect to get to heaven?" He looked at me and said, "By keeping the ten commandments and the golden rule." "What's the golden rule?" I said. He didn't know it! He had forgotten the golden rule! Keeping the ten commandments or the golden rule will not get you into an eternal relationship with God.

We are "saved . . . according to his mercy"--according to the tender affection, love and mercy of God for helpless sinners. In reality, all of us should be going to hell for we have all sinned against God. It is the mercy of God that stopped man's slide toward utter separation from him.

How did he save us? . . . "by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit." In Acts 15:7-9 Peter is sharing his heart about the Gentiles at the Jerusalem Council, saying, ". . . that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the Word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he also did to us . . . cleansing their hearts by faith," i.e., washing their hearts from the defilement of sin. "Regeneration" means to be born again, to have your heart cleansed, washed, regenerated by the work of the Holy Spirit. Not only is regeneration a change in our moral and spiritual character, but it brings a whole new life because of the "renewing of the Holy Spirit." The Spirit was first given at Pentecost to all the new believers, and now he is given to each one of us in each generation so that we can cope with reality, to constantly renew our minds so that we will be able to make righteous choices.

"He saved us . . . by the washing of regeneration and the renewing of the Holy Spirit." God offered us salvation in such a way that we who were dead in our trespasses and sins, who had no ability to make the choice, were awakened in our spirits so that we could hear the Word of God, and in doing so our hearts were strangely moved to believe that Jesus Christ was the Savior of the world. For the first time we had a choice to accept Jesus Christ into our hearts and repent of our sins, then the Spirit flooded into our hearts and gave us the power to cope with reality. The early church had a problem with these words, which they took to mean that one was regenerated, born again, when one was baptized with water. Augustine wrote, "Unless there is water baptism, you cannot be saved." The Catholic church picked that up and inserted the word "water" here, saying we had to make the invisible reality, our new birth, visible by means of water baptism. But if you do that, why not also put circumcision in this passage, too? We are saved by grace alone--not circumcision, not water baptism. Those are the outward signs of the inward reality.

The third thing Paul mentions that falls under this word "but" is that God gave his Holy Spirit through his Son, "whom he, God the Father, poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior." God the Father poured out the Holy Spirit on all those who place their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The moment we accept Jesus Christ we are filled with the Spirit who comforts US and empowers us with spiritual gifts so that we are able to function in a corrupt society.

Fourthly, "being justified by his grace we might be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life." God the Father counts our sins to be Christ's and Christ's righteousness as ours. He declares us righteous because of Christ and his grace, then justifies us in his sight of God, and fills our hearts with a sense of eternity. If you have accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior you are going to live forever. Romans 8:16-17 says, "The Spirit Himself bears witness with one spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow-heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him." You will take off the clothes that do not fit eternity and walk into another room and God is going to have a new body for you ready to deal with eternity.

The result of this new life in Christ and the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit is that we should live a godly life in a godless society.

3. The Need For Elders To Remind Us To Engage In Good Deeds 3:8-11

This is a trustworthy statement; and concerning these things [the things in verses 4-7] I want you to speak confidently, so that those who have believed God may be careful to engage in good deeds. These things are good and profitable for men. Reject a factious man after a first and second warning, knowing that such a man is perverted and is sinning, being self-condemned.

Paul urges Titus to speak with confidence so that the believers in Crete will be careful to get involved in good works that will bring honor and glory to God.

Secondly, Paul tells Titus, "shun foolish controversies and genealogies and strife and disputes about the Law." They are unprofitable and worthless. While good works are profitable, these things are not. They are a waste of time. Then, "reject a factious man after a first and second warning, knowing that such a man is perverted and is sinning, being self-condemned." Paul is saying to beware of men like the Judaizers and the false prophets. If they continue upsetting homes and families, then go to them in love twice (Matt. 18) and warn them, but if they do it again, that means they are sinning and they are already self-condemned, so reject them."

Paul is satisfied that he has covered all the bases concerning the problems within the church on Crete, so he closes the letter with a gracious sign-off.

4. Grace Be With You All 3:12-15

When I send Artemas or Tychicus to you, make every effort to come to me at Nicopolis, for I have decided to spend the winter there. Diligently help Zenas the lawyer and Apollos on their way so that nothing is lacking for them. And let our people also learn to engage in good work to meet pressing needs, that they may not be unfruitful.

Tychicus was a faithful friend of Paul. He served with the apostle during his first and second imprisonments. Apollos, that mighty man of the Scriptures (Acts 18) who worked with Paul in Corinth and Ephesus, is still with him. Paul is sending either Artemas or Tychicus to take over from him so that Titus could join him for the winter months in Nicopolis, on the west coast of Greece. He urges Titus to take care of the needs of Zenas the lawyer and Apollos, who will also be coming through Crete. Then he adds yet another word about good works. This is his fifth reminder to the Cretan Christians to "engage in good works" so that "pressing needs" might be met.

Paul closes the letter with the words,

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

The church of Jesus Christ on the island of Crete, as well as his church in every nation and every generation since Pentecost until Christ's second appearing, needed and needs:

1. Godly elders, appointed by the Holy Spirit, who will, by the power of the Holy Spirit, faithfully function

as,

2. Godly teachers, using the Word, to 1) exhort in sound doctrine; 2) refute those who contradict;

3. Godly shepherds who will guard, feed and guide the flock of God to live godly lives in an ungodly society;

4. Godly reminders who will have the love and patience to repeat over and over again,

* how to live in a godless society;

* based on the kindness of God our Savior and his love for mankind;

* demonstrated by sending his Son to save us and his Spirit to empower us;

*until we experience the fullness of our eternal life;

* meanwhile, until he comes, he will help us learn to engage in good deeds.

For reasons not entirely known at this time, God has blessed us with godly elders who are faithfully teaching, shepherding, and reminding us of sound doctrine.

We need to have hearts full of thankfulness, and we need to encourage them by applying sound doctrine to our lives by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Finally, we need to pray daily for these men and their families that they will remain faithful to our Lord Jesus and his flock.

Jim Stump, would you please close in prayer.

Father God, what a joy it is to be with the body here this morning. Thank you so much for the shepherds that you have placed among us who have led us by example, not by attempting to exercise authority over us. Thank you for your Word that exercises that authority over us. Thank you for our Lord Jesus Christ, who exhibited his awesome love by dying on the cross for each one of us so we could know you in an intimate and personal way. Father, lead us out from here to be servants to those around us; to exercise your love to those with whom we come in contact. We thank you for what you are going to do through us and in our lives this week, because we pray these things in the powerful name of our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

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