Living with Opposition

Believers are accountable for rejecting false teachers and teachings.

I have spent most of my adult life training future church leaders. One of my great joys as a teacher has been watching a leader-in-training go from a certainty of calling (but uncertainty as to specific role and place) to discover both role and place where the Lord wants the person to serve—whether as a pastor, teacher, missionary, or other leadership role. It is thrilling to see new leaders catch the joy of Christian ministry and begin to experience the eternal reward of participating in someone else’s spiritual growth and training.

Sadly, not all of my students’ stories after graduation always had such positive endings. Some new leaders had barely found their roles and places of service when they collided with conflict. Sometimes the conflicts arose as the result of power struggles within church congregations. At other times, the new leaders found themselves having to confront entrenched doctrinal distortions. Taking a firm stand for biblical truth and faithful holy living was not without its costs for these new ministers. Some found their congregations shrinking; others experienced job termination. All were faced with the stark reality that serving Christ does not exempt Christian leaders from hardship, opposition, or suffering. On the contrary, they must constantly be prepared for the devil’s attacks on them, on God’s work, and on God’s people. It isn’t a question of if the devil will attack, but when and how.

What is true today about Christian leaders living with opposition was true as well in the apostle Paul’s day. In this session’s Bible passage, Paul sought to prepare his missionary coworker Titus for a confrontation with false teachers on the island of Crete. The false teachers had infiltrated many of the fledgling congregations, causing division and strife among the believers. Titus’s assignment was to oppose the false teachers by appointing and training scripturally qualified leaders who would then teach the truth of the gospel and confront teachers who distorted that truth.
UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

TITUS 1:1-16

Paul’s Letter to Titus, along with the two epistles Paul wrote to Timothy, are often referred to as the Pastoral Epistles. These are epistles that Paul addressed to missionary coworkers rather than to church congregations. Most Bible scholars put the timing of Paul’s letter to Titus between the two letters sent to Timothy. Paul likely wrote 1 Timothy and Titus not long after his release from the house arrest in Rome described in Acts 28:30-31. By the time he wrote 2 Timothy, Paul had been imprisoned in Rome again and anticipated that he would soon be executed (see 2 Tim. 4:6-7). When he wrote the Letter to Titus, Paul was still traveling freely (see Titus 3:12) and was urgently trying to strengthen the mostly Gentile churches around the Aegean Sea region.

Interestingly, the Book of Acts does not mention Titus as one of Paul’s coworkers during the missionary journeys. Paul mentioned Titus, however, in more than one of his epistles. For example, Paul explained in Galatians 2:1 that Titus accompanied Paul and Barnabas on a crucial trip to Jerusalem. Titus is also mentioned several times in 2 Corinthians, where he is described as serving as Paul’s messenger and coworker (see 2 Cor. 2:13; 7:6,13-14; 8:16,23). When Paul wrote 2 Timothy, Titus was in Dalmatia, probably at the apostle’s request (see 2 Tim. 4:10).

Although there is no clear record, Paul and Titus appear to have spent some time in joint missionary work on the island of Crete. We learn from Acts 27 that Paul may have been on the island for a brief time when he was being transported to Rome by ship as a prisoner, but there is no indication that Titus was on board or that Paul had any evangelistic opportunities at that time. Nevertheless, the island of Crete, located southeast of Greece in the Mediterranean Sea, was home to an ancient civilization. In Paul’s day, the island was a source of mercenary soldiers and traders for the Roman empire.

Much like the situation Timothy experienced in Ephesus, Titus was faced with false teachers on Crete. These false teachers were probably Jewish converts to Christianity (see Titus 1:10) who were spreading Jewish myths that involved disputes about the law (3:9). They were making inroads into immature Christian families on Crete (1:11). Paul’s solution was for Titus to appoint and train God-honoring leaders for all of the churches. The qualifications for such leaders were similar to the qualifications Paul had given to Timothy for the overseers in Ephesus. The churches on Crete needed qualified leaders who could provide sound gospel teaching and refute the false teachers who contradicted the truth of the gospel (1:9).
EXPLORE THE TEXT

SERVANT’S HEART (Titus 1:1-3)

VERSE 1

Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the faith of God’s elect and their knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness,

Letters in Paul’s day typically began by identifying the sender’s name and role, the name of the person or persons addressed by the letter, and a greeting. Various factors might call for additional information to be included. Paul identified his role (and authority) as a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ. The Greek word rendered servant also means “bond-slave,” someone who was wholly owned by a master—in Paul’s case, by God. Paul was not writing the letter on behalf of an earthly king or to offer his own opinions. He wrote as a messenger of the God who owned him.

Further, Paul identified himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ. The Greek word rendered apostle literally means “one who is sent” on a mission or as an ambassador. In 2 Corinthians 5:20, Paul wrote that he and other gospel ministers served as “ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us.” Paul was not one of the original twelve apostles of Jesus, but he confirmed that the risen Christ had nevertheless appointed him as an authentic apostle (see 1 Cor. 15:9-10; 2 Cor. 1:1; Gal. 1:1; 1 Tim. 1:1).

If Paul added to the opening salutations of his letters, he often did so by introducing key themes he intended to address further in the body of the letter. He thus added to his greeting to Titus that the goal of his apostleship was for the faith of God’s elect and their knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness.

In the New Testament, the term faith can refer either to the act of believing or to the content of what is believed, depending on the context. Here Paul probably was referring to the first meaning, the act of believing in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. The phrase God’s elect had a background in the Old Testament, where it referred to Israel as God’s chosen people (see Isa. 65:9,15,22). Here Paul used the term to refer to believers who had been welcomed into God’s new covenant through faith in Jesus Christ.

In addition, the goal of Paul’s apostleship was for the believer’s knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness. Paul often used the word truth in reference to the gospel. However, the gospel message was not (and is not) merely about the forgiveness of past sins. The gospel is about the forgiveness of sins plus...
the creation of new life—the life of godliness. The phrase rendered truth that leads to godliness could also be translated “truth, which accords with godliness” (see ESV). In either rendering, it is clear that Paul was interested in people’s turning to Christ in faith and then living in godliness.

VERSE 2

in the hope of eternal life that God, who cannot lie, promised before time began.

The connection between this verse and the preceding verse is not clear. Paul may have intended the phrase in the hope of eternal life to further describe his apostleship—that is, it was grounded on the hope of eternal life that God had promised (see Titus 3:7). However, another possible understanding is that Paul intended the phrase to further describe the believer’s faith and godliness. That is, the believer’s faith and godliness are grounded on the hope of eternal life.

In any case, Paul affirmed that eternal life itself was grounded on a promise that God, who cannot lie, made before time began (“before the world began,” KJV; “before the ages began,” ESV). Paul affirmed that God’s promise could be trusted because of God’s truthful and faithful nature.

VERSE 3

In his own time he has revealed his word in the preaching with which I was entrusted by the command of God our Savior:

What God promised He has delivered. Paul moved from what had been decided at the dawn of time to what had been revealed (“manifested,” KJV; ESV; “brought to light,” NIV). What had been promised was the hope of eternal life; what had been revealed was his word, a reference to the gospel.

God revealed the gospel in his own time. Paul used the same phrase in 1 Timothy 2:6 to describe Jesus’ giving His life as a ransom for sinners and again in 1 Timothy 6:15 to describe the timing of Christ’s return. Moreover, God had made the gospel known in the preaching of Paul and other apostles. The Greek word rendered the preaching can refer either to the act of proclaiming the gospel or to the gospel message itself. God had entrusted (“committed unto,” KJV) to Paul both the message and the responsibility of proclaiming the gospel as well as the task of confronting those who distorted the gospel. Gospel ministry was not a life Paul chose for himself; he was called to it by the command of God the Savior. Thus, Paul’s authority as an apostle was from God. Paul used a nearly identical phrase in 1 Timothy 1:1 to describe his apostleship.
PURPOSEFUL ACTION (Titus 1:4-5)

VERSE 4

To Titus, my true son in our common faith. Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior.

After an extended self-identification, Paul identified the recipient of his letter: Titus, his true son in the faith. Paul used this phrase also in reference to Timothy (see 1 Tim. 1:2). The Greek word translated true could refer to a genuine family member or, figuratively, to a person with authentic character. Thus, Paul identified Titus as an authentic believer, coworker, and representative of Paul to the congregations of Crete.

Paul described his and Titus’s spiritual bond as our common faith. The Greek word rendered common can have a negative connotation (“dirty,” “impure,” “unclean”) in some contexts. Here, though, the meaning is “shared.” Ethnically, Paul was a Jew and Titus was Greek, a Gentile. In Christ they shared a deep, eternal bond. They were in the same spiritual family—a family in which “there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female; since you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). Paul likely was continuing to lay the groundwork for refuting false teachers who promoted Jewish legalism.

Paul’s greeting to Titus employed two common terms: grace and peace. In the context of the Christian faith, these terms had taken on new meaning. It was by God’s grace—His unmerited favor—that Jesus provided the way of salvation for sinners (see Eph. 2:8-9). Moreover, all who believe in Jesus for salvation find they “have peace with God” (Rom. 5:1). Titus would need to rely on these spiritual resources to complete the task he had undertaken. Paul reminded him that the resources of grace and peace are gifts from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior.

VERSE 5

The reason I left you in Crete was to set right what was left undone and, as I directed you, to appoint elders in every town.

Paul next introduced the primary purpose of his letter and the reason he left Titus in Crete. Based on the wording of this verse, Paul and Titus evidently had worked together on the island for a time. At some point, however, Paul departed Crete before the pair completed everything they hoped to accomplish. Thus, his parting instructions to Titus were to set right (“put ... into order,” ESV; NIV) what was left undone. The Greek word rendered set right, found only here in the entire New Testament, could refer to finishing what remained of an assigned task or completing the implementation of needed reforms. Perhaps Paul had both of these emphases in view.
Part of the unfinished task on Crete was to establish trustworthy leaders in the various church congregations. Before his departure, Paul had directed (“appointed,” KJV) Titus to appoint elders in every town. The Greek word translated appoint also means “assign to a position of authority” or “put in charge.” The term appears in Matthew 24:45 in reference to a landowner’s putting a servant in charge of the household affairs in the master’s absence. It occurs in Hebrews 5:1, describing the appointment of a high priest to the role of mediator between God and His people, and in Acts 6:3 to describe the assigning of the Seven to carry out the Jerusalem church’s food ministry to widows. Similarly, Paul had put Titus in charge of completing a crucial task. The health of the young churches on Crete was at stake.

The Greek word rendered elders could refer either to older men in general or to the primary spiritual leaders of congregations. Given the requirements listed in Titus 1:6-9, Paul almost certainly had in mind church leaders in verse 5. Interestingly, he made no mention of the office of deacon in his Letter to Titus, in contrast to his directive to Timothy concerning church leaders in Ephesus (see 1 Tim. 3:8-13). Neither did Paul include in the Letter to Titus a requirement that elders, or overseers, must not be new converts (see 1 Tim. 3:6). Factors such as these may indicate that the congregations on Crete were young, small, and able to support only a basic leadership structure.

The phrase in every town indicates there were multiple church congregations on Crete. In most cases, these congregations probably were small house churches comprised of several Christian families. Paul’s use of the plural form elders could indicate there were multiple house churches in each town, and each house church needed at least one elder. Another view is that Titus needed to appoint multiple elders in each house church if possible. Whatever the case, Paul’s primary concern was that Titus appoint only church leaders with proven Christian character.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Elder” on pages 474–476 in the Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded. How does your church go about selecting its primary spiritual leaders? Why are church leaders so crucial to the life and ministry of a church?

OPPOSITION ADDRESSED (Titus 1:10-16)

Having urged Titus to appoint leaders in all of the congregations of Crete, Paul reminded him of the crucial character traits those leaders needed to display.
The qualities that Paul listed mirror (for the most part) those he had instructed Timothy to look for in the Ephesian overseers (see 1 Tim. 3:1-7). The urgency for finding faithful church leaders both in Ephesus and Crete was because of the presence and destructive impact of false teachers (see Titus 1:9).

VERSE 10

For there are many rebellious people, full of empty talk and deception, especially those from the circumcision party.

The word for indicates this verse is a continuation of the thought that Paul expressed in the preceding verse. Timothy urgently needed to appoint qualified elders in all the churches of Crete so that these leaders would be able to “encourage [the believers] with sound teaching and to refute those who contradict it” (Titus 1:9).

Paul knew that wherever churches were planted, whether in major cities or in the small communities of an island nation, believers lived among and interacted with many rebellious people. The word rendered rebellious (“unruly,” KJV; “insubordinate,” ESV) describes one who refuses to submit to authority. Often such unruly people also were full of empty talk and deception—that is, they constantly babbled and lied.

The final phrase in Titus 1:10 reveals that Paul had a specific group in mind that posed a serious problem for the churches of Crete: those from the circumcision party. This description probably referred to Jews who confessed faith in Jesus as the Messiah yet maintained a strong commitment to the teachings and rituals of Judaism. Paul had sparred with members of this group on previous occasions, mentioning them in Galatians 2:12 and perhaps also in Philippians 3:2. In Acts 15:1, Luke referred to “some men who came down from Judea and began to teach the brothers [in Antioch of Syria]: ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom prescribed by Moses, you cannot be saved.’”

The Greek word rendered especially may indicate that the phrase many rebellious people included a number of heretical groups on Crete of which the circumcision party was the primary offender. Certainly we are not to understand that Paul implied all Jewish converts to Christianity were suspect. In Colossians 4:10-11, Paul mentioned several converts from “the circumcision” who served with him and were a great comfort to him.

VERSE 11

It is necessary to silence them; they are ruining entire households by teaching what they shouldn’t in order to get money dishonestly.
The Greek word translated **silence** literally means “put something over the mouth.” Titus was charged with muzzling the false teachers. Paul did not specify the method of silencing, but we can assume that he did not expect Titus to use violence or other sinful means. Paul’s expectations regarding elders was for them to teach sound doctrine and refute false teaching (Titus 1:9). Surely this was the approach Paul expected Titus to use as well.

Titus’s leadership was urgent because the false teachers already were **ruining entire households**. The Greek word translated **ruining** literally meant “to overturn or destroy” something. Paul used the same word in 2 Timothy 2:18 to describe the weakening effect Hymenaeus and Philetus had on the faith of some believers in Ephesus. The reference to **households** could refer either to families within a church or to entire house churches comprised of multiple Christian families. In any case, the false teachers were making inroads on Crete, and Titus needed to respond with urgency.

Paul mentioned also that the false teachers were driven by a shameful motive: **to get money dishonestly** (“for filthy lucre’s sake,” KJV). Paul made the same accusation against the false teachers in Ephesus (see 1 Tim. 6:5). The Greek word rendered **dishonestly** refers to an act that does not meet accepted moral standards and thus was unacceptable. Paul was not questioning the proper financial support of faithful church leaders. Rather, he was condemning insincere ministry motivated solely by the desire for dishonest financial gain.

**VERSE 12**

One of their very own prophets said, “Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.”

Paul reinforced his negative assessment of the false teachers by quoting **one of their very own prophets**. Probably Paul had in mind a well-known philosopher from Crete named Epimenides [ehp ih MEN ih deez], who lived in the sixth century BC. Other ancient Greek philosophers, including Plato and Aristotle, mentioned Epimenides in their writings. Several traditions have been handed down that form the basis for Epimenides’s claim that **Cretans are always liars**. One of those traditions stated that the people of Crete loved to claim the tomb of the Greek god Zeus was located on Crete. Since the claim that a Greek god had died—much less had been buried on Crete—was preposterous, reasonable people of the day concluded that the people of Crete simply loved to lie.

The claim that the Cretans were **evil beasts** may have arisen from tales of brutal battles among opposing cities on the island, frequent piracy along the nearby shipping routes, and the practice of pagan homosexual rites. The origin
of the Cretans’ third characterization as **lazy gluttons** is not clear. However, many ancient writers commented on the Cretans’ lack of self-control and excessive appetites. Their reputation for being greedy was legendary.

**VERSE 13**

**This testimony is true. For this reason, rebuke them sharply, so that they may be sound in the faith**

The words *this testimony is true* indicate that Paul agreed with Epimenides’s harsh characterization. The apostle had already stated that the false teachers of Crete were “full of empty talk and deception” (Titus 1:10) and were driven by the desire for dishonest gain (see 1:11). I do not think Paul meant to stereotype all the people of Crete by Epimenides’s characterization, only his opponents. Nevertheless, Paul knew that all Cretans—and all other people for that matter, including Jews—needed to experience life transformation through faith in Jesus Christ. Otherwise, Titus would have no one to appoint as church leaders and Paul’s command to Titus would make no sense.

Titus needed to **rebuke** the false teachers and their followers **sharply**. The Greek word rendered *sharply* can also mean “severely,” or “rigorously.” The danger was serious; it required an urgent and rigorous response. The pronouns *them* and *they* may refer both to the false teachers and their followers.

Paul went on to remind Titus that while the pastoral rebuke was to be sharp, it was also to be redemptive: **so that they may be sound in the faith**. In 2 Timothy 2:25-26, Paul held out hope that God might grant repentance even to the false teachers in Ephesus. Perhaps that was Paul’s hope for the churches of Crete as well. The phrase *in the faith* refers in this context to the body of doctrine or teachings related to the gospel. Paul’s goal was that Titus’s sharp rebuke would result in repentance by the false teachers and their followers and their return to sound doctrine and Christlike conduct.

**VERSE 14**

and may not pay attention to Jewish myths and the commands of people who reject the truth.

If the false teachers and their followers responded appropriately to Titus’s rebuke, two pieces of evidence would show it. First, they would no longer **pay attention to Jewish myths**. Often these heroic yet silly and spiritually useless tales were built around persons listed in Old Testament genealogies (see 1 Tim. 1:4; Titus 3:9). That the *myths* had a connection, however slight, to the Scriptures may have made them attractive to immature believers. Paul warned in 2 Timothy 4:4, however, that those who gave credence to such silly tales were turning away from the truth.
Second, Christians who repented and turned back to sound gospel teaching would no longer heed the commands of people who reject the truth. This phrase probably refers to the efforts of “the circumcision party.” (See Titus 1:10 and the comments on p. 116.) They sought to require Gentile believers to obey the traditions and rituals of Judaism in order to validate their faith in Christ. Paul was adamant that such teaching was false and dangerous; it was a wicked distortion of the true gospel (see Gal. 1:6-9).

VERSE 15

To the pure, everything is pure, but to those who are defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure; in fact, both their mind and conscience are defiled.

The situation Titus faced on Crete was similar to a situation Paul had faced in Colossae. New believers were pressured to follow Jewish regulations related to purity laws (see Col. 2:16-23). Paul reminded Titus that for the believer in Christ, everything is pure. The bounty of God’s creation is to be received and enjoyed with gratitude (see 1 Tim. 4:3-5). Unbelievers, on the other hand, consider that nothing is pure because their mind and conscience are defiled. They cannot think straight about spiritual matters and remain burdened unnecessarily by guilt that Christ took away by His death on the cross. The cross sets believers free by faith; legalists insist that believers must keep on trying to cleanse themselves by human traditions and rituals.

VERSE 16

They claim to know God, but they deny him by their works. They are detestable, disobedient, and unfit for any good work.

Paul asserted that the false teachers of Crete (as elsewhere) claimed to know God but in reality denied Him by their works. Their efforts to lead Christians into a life of hopeless legalism made them, in Paul’s judgment, detestable, disobedient, and unfit for any good work. Titus needed to silence them and put an end to their destructive influence in the churches.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Paul balanced a need to confront wrong doctrine and a desire to restore the false teachers to sound faith. What are some practical ways that believers can maintain their own sound faith while seeking to restore those who reject the truth of the gospel?