

TITUS 1:5, 10-2:1 COMPLETING THE WORK

“I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order...

“For there are many who are insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party. They must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach. One of the Cretans, a prophet of their own, said, “Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.” This testimony is true. Therefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith, not devoting themselves to Jewish myths and the commands of people who turn away from the truth. To the pure, all things are pure, but to the defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure; but both their minds and their consciences are defiled. They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works. They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work.

“But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine.”¹

In the message to be delivered this day, I am invoking pastoral prerogative to alter the preaching schedule I set out many weeks ago. I need to preach to myself in order to seek the face of the Lord so that I may know His will and do those things first importance. As was true for the Ephesian congregation which the Risen Christ addressed through His servant John, we need to be confronted with our busyness, which has caused us to forget our business.

Almost one year ago, we initiated services as a congregation of Christ the Lord. As we began our service before the Lord, we chose the name New Beginnings Baptist Church. Throughout the past year, we have invested considerable effort in organisational activities. Though there have been changes in the composition of the congregation, the transformation has been less traumatic than I might have anticipated. Some who encouraged us in earlier days have chosen to invest their energies elsewhere, the demands of a new congregation proving too difficult for them. Others have fallen away from active participation for other reasons of their own. I have no doubt that we will witness further departures by individuals in coming days. Nevertheless, we can testify that God has been gracious to us thus far.

We began under inauspicious circumstances. Disappointed with a demonstration of ungodly behaviour from prominent members of a former congregation, several of us chose to leave them to the mercies of God rather than be divisive. Not only did those prominent individuals dishonour God through their conduct, but the majority of their fellow members acquiesced to their attitudes and actions. When we saw that they were determined to walk in a disorderly manner, we bid them well and ceased fellowship with them.

We did start well, and we have done some things right, but a great work remains before us. It is a common failing of the people of God that they are sprinters when marathoners are required. This phenomenon seems to have been a malady afflicting the churches from earliest days of the Faith. As one example, consider that a major and pressing necessity of Paul's letter to Titus was to encourage him to complete the work he had initiated. I cannot help but believe that we, also, need similar encouragement. Therefore, we shall turn our minds to the words Paul inked to Titus, his “true son in the common faith” [TITUS 1:4a], there finding instruction and strength to recapture our dedication to complete the work.

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Paul speaks first of **A JOB TO BE COMPLETED**. The Apostle reminded Titus that he had been left in Crete in order to “put what remained into order.” We cannot know what specifically remained for Titus to do, but we are certain that he would need to organise churches that had been established and teach those whom God was bringing into the Faith. He would provide structure and healthy instruction for those nascent churches. He would correct the unruly and encourage those who would seek the Lord. Similarly, we have a job to be completed.

The population of the communities about us have grown as oil and gas exploration expands; and the influx of peoples represent in the main men and women of other faiths or of no faith. Perhaps many once attended a church, but their faith has been left behind. The influence of evil in our society has become greater while righteousness has been tarnished through the antics of media superstars and through misrepresentation of truth and distortion of the Gospel by supposed saints. This does not even begin to address the cowardice endemic to modern society. And we ourselves have grown complacent. We need to be stirred up, just as the people of Israel needed to be confronted through Joshua’s challenge [see **JOSHUA 13:1, 2a**], and just as young believers in the early Church were in need of being confronted and challenged to excel.

Timothy needed to be stirred up, and was so stirred in either of the letters Paul sent him. “As I urged you when I was going into Macedonia, *remain at Ephesus*” [1 **TIMOTHY 1:3**]. The young preacher evidently grew tired in the demands of the ministry and required encouragement. “I remind you to *fan into flame the gift of God*, which is in you” [2 **TIMOTHY 1:6**]. Ardour cooled, zeal chilled, and faith needed to be rekindled. If one so obviously blessed of God to assume major responsibilities for direction of a congregation, and if one so closely allied with the great delineator of the gospel of grace, required encouragement to stay and needed to be urged to rekindle the flame, should it be any surprise that you and I also need to be encouraged?

Titus, also, appears subject to discouragement and needed to be reminded of the assignments to be completed. The conquest of evil did not come as quickly as he might have hoped; the advance of the Faith was slower than first anticipated. Perhaps there was more opposition than he had prepared to encounter; perhaps there were more defections among the saints than he had thought would occur. Whatever the reason, he appears to have been discouraged, and Paul found it necessary to remind him of the reason he was left in Crete.

There is a reason for our existence as a Community of Faith. There is a reason for our service both to God, to one another, and to others. There were reasons we initiated our labours, and the reasons have not changed in the ensuing days. Do you remember the reason we chose our name—**NEW BEGINNINGS BAPTIST CHURCH**? I think it good for each of us to be reminded.

We identified ourselves as **NEW BEGINNINGS Baptist Church** because in our heart we saw that God was calling us to a new beginning as His people, and we saw this congregation as providing an opportunity for a new beginning for the Faith in this community. We determined that we would not exalt human opinion over the Word of God, nor would we turn from obedience to the Son of God for personal convenience. We adopted this stance knowing the probable cost to us as individuals and as a congregation.

We determined that we would not permit ourselves to grow content with ministry to one community nor to become complacent with a small ministry which touched a few but ignored the most. Though we do not despise small works, for we ourselves began small and we have laboured in diminished circumstances, we surveyed the area wherein we were located and we saw communities in need of the Gospel of God’s grace. We said, “By the grace of God we will be a church which penetrates every corner of this great northern region with the light of life.” We accordingly adopted the name, **NEW BEGINNINGS Baptist Church**.

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We determined that we would offer salvation as the free gift of God to all who are willing to receive Christ as Lord of life. Likewise, we would hold those who named His Name to accept responsibility to live as twice-born individuals. We would invite all whom God appoints to life to a new beginning as followers of the Lord Christ when they are born again. We would accept one another as members of the household of faith, holding each other accountable to the Word of God and encouraging one another to walk according to the Spirit. We said we would pray for one another and make every effort to build one another. And as God gave us increase, we would endeavour to include each member in the full fellowship of the assembly.

Reviewing the earlier months, I am convinced that we did indeed make a new beginning, but I am equally convinced that we have seen only a beginning; we have not arrived. There stretches before us a great need to complete the work God has assigned. There is a great need to witness to the grace of God, winning the lost and building the saints; we have only begun.

We chose to call ourselves New Beginnings **BAPTIST** Church. It is a trend that an increasing number of churches claim to be “baptistic” in doctrine, but they are loath to declare themselves Baptist. They believe that people will be turned away if they confess to be Baptists. That has not been my experience. I have found that when biblical doctrine is carefully and fully presented, there will always be people attracted by conviction and truth.

It is true that some will turn away; but again it is my experience that those who turn away do not wish to be confronted by any demand for righteousness or nor do they wish to be called to hold biblical truth with conviction. They have a fuzzy ethical view that is sufficiently fluid to fit any mould without causing discomfort. Moralistic and self-satisfied, such individuals do not wish anyone to expose their hypocrisy through speaking with conviction and certainty.

We are a Baptist Church, not because we seek to exclude anyone, but because we hold convictions that are submitted to God’s Word. We stand in a historic and scriptural lineage which we are convinced most closely approximates the teachings of the Bible. I enjoy sweet fellowship with fellow Christians who worship as Presbyterians. I rejoice whenever I am able to worship with those fellow saints who hold Mennonite convictions. I thank God for Pentecostal and charismatic Christians. I give thanks to God for the godliness exhibited within these communions and for the souls won to faith and for the lives moulded through the instruction these churches provide. But I could not be a Presbyterian, or a Mennonite, or a Pentecostal. I have read the Bible and I am convinced by that Word that we who are called by that noble name of Baptist share an oft-neglected heritage of faith and stamina and tenacious adherence to the Word of God as our sole reference for Faith and practise.

As Baptists, we are guided by the Word of God. Where God speaks, we obey; where God is silent, we have freedom. We dare not surrender this freedom for mere convenience. We will fight with all our energies to assure the freedom of others to disagree with us; but we will not surrender our adherence to the Word of God.

We are New Beginnings Baptist **CHURCH**. In the New Testament tradition, we confess that we do not seek an association so much as we seek a shared experience. A church in the New Testament tradition is not so much an organization as it is an organism. Each member of the church has an equal voice in the conduct of the Body; each member is vital to the health of the entire Body. We do not say that each member has one vote, for we are not a democracy, determined to impose the majority will on all. Rather we set as our aspiration to be a fellowship of believers, demonstrating sympathy and consideration for one another and labouring diligently to achieve and to maintain harmony in the Body. We are **NEW BEGINNINGS BAPTIST CHURCH**, and we yet have a job to complete.

We face, as Titus also faced, **OPPOSITION TO RIGHTEOUSNESS [1:10-16]**. Paul cautioned Titus against “insubordinate” people, whom he further characterised as “empty talkers and deceivers.” It is obvious from his words that Paul has in view supposed Christians, professed believers in the Faith of the Lord Jesus; but he characterises these individuals as “insubordinate.” These were people who recognised no discipline but that of fulfilling their own desires; they were unruly, undisciplined, uncontrolled. Moreover, they infested the churches Titus was to serve. Timothy was warned against “certain persons” in Ephesus [1 TIMOTHY 1:3], but Titus is warned against “many who are insubordinate.” Paul was concerned about characteristic features endemic within the membership of the churches of Crete, which in turn reflected some of the outstanding, though not always attractive, features of Cretan society.

As an aside of no small consequence, it is vital for us to know ourselves. It is important for us as a church and as individual believers to face ourselves honestly, recognizing unique social and cultural characteristics that identify us as a people, however unflattering such characterisations may be. We can never minister to the world around us—much less minister to ourselves—so long as we view that world through filters which eliminate or obscure the truth.

The undisciplined, insubordinate individuals whom Paul identified as resident *within* the church in Crete included a number of his own Jewish countrymen. I cannot imagine that the need to speak so bluntly about fellow Jews was an easy thing for Paul; but he did so out of loyalty to Christ and out of concern for Titus, noting that they were “empty talkers and deceivers.” In short, their rebellion was characterised by hot air and lies.

On other occasions the Apostle pointedly addressed such unflattering aspects of his own countrymen. For example, in **COLOSSIANS 2:8, 16-23**, the Apostle exposed Judaizers in blunt terms. He warned, “See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ...”

“Let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.

“If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— ‘Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch’ (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.”

The descent into external religious observance as they moved from passionate pursuit of the True and Living God Himself had lulled Hebrew society into a false sense of security. It was somewhat akin to comfort found in the moralistic/ethical religion that characterises much of contemporary evangelicalism. We must recognise that religion is often the enemy of faith.

In the Letter to the churches of Galatia, the Apostle aggressively attacked the Judaizers. “Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

“You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion is not from him who calls you. A little leaven leavens the whole lump. I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view than mine, and the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is. But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offence of the cross has been removed. I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves” [GALATIANS 5:2-12]!

Paul’s actions serve as a model for each Christian; he feared God far more than he feared the displeasure of any single group of men. Dear people, the God we know and whom we serve transcends culture, and we are accountable first to Him. Be true to Christ and never fear what man may say, nor yet how they may view you.

The hypocrisy and deceit that characterised many believers in the churches of Crete were extremely hurtful, for whole households were being ruined. Perhaps those marked by idle talk and deceit were infected with the malady of pride. It seems likely that they sought to elevate themselves in the eyes of their fellow worshippers. The cult of self-esteem is not a new creation, though the systematic effort to replace humility with prideful self-esteem beginning with the youngest and most vulnerable does appear to be a product of our age.

Errant teaching is at the best ruinous for individuals, and it is disruptive to family life. Christian doctrine is confrontational—it cannot yield on essential truth. Yet out of the mental distress of the challenge of faith grows a new confidence and a new certainty. Any teaching which is harmful to family life cannot be Christian, for the family is the first institution established by God. By this, I do not mean that the family is in some way greater than the church, but I do mean that the church and family should be complementary; and church and family are complementary where true doctrine prevails. It is revealing to discover that Paul uncovers the motives of these rebellious people, exposing them as teaching “for shameful gain.”

Within the church in Crete were religious individuals who presumed themselves to be teachers. They deceived the unwary through lies; and this malevolent ministry was conducted for personal gain or advantage. Are we not afflicted with the same individuals today? When any individual promotes some esoteric experience as superior to faith in Jesus Christ, and that for personal reasons, have we progressed beyond the error Titus confronted? When doctrine becomes subservient to what people feel, we are still infected with the Cretan error. When psychology is substituted for preaching and that for the purpose of personal enrichment, we cannot say that the Cretan error has been eliminated. For all the good which some popular radio and television programs may do, I cannot help but feel uncomfortable at the subtle substitution of trust in man for trust in God; and this is akin to the Cretan error. As horrible as the public blunders of media superstars may be, their errors are multiplied daily in churches throughout this land. Whenever church leaders simper and whimper that they want to feel good and to be affirmed rather than instructed in righteousness, the Cretan error is reborn.

Having acknowledged what Titus knew all too well—the presence of religious error within the churches—Paul persisted by exposing concomitant cultural error. Citing Epimenedes, or perhaps Callimachus’ “Hymn to Zeus,” Paul says of Cretans that they are characterised as “liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons.” Notice the arresting adjectives Paul used—“*evil* beasts,” and “*lazy* gluttons.” The Cretans were so notorious in that ancient world that the Greeks actually formed a noun—*Cretism*, which referred to “Cretan behaviour,” or “lying”; and they likewise coined a verb, “*Cretize*,” which meant “to speak like a Cretan—” in other words, “to lie.” There was extant in the Roman world a proverbial phrase, “to cretize against a Cretan,” which meant “to match lies with lies.” Such was the unenviable reputation of the Cretans.

When Paul speaks of the Cretans as “evil beasts,” he clearly had in view their single-minded pursuit of personal advantage and their utter disregard of any consequences for others. It is possible that lying behind this dark characterisation, this descriptive epithet, was an allusion to the mythical Minotaur, with which all the inhabitants of that island would have been familiar. Half bull and half man, the Minotaur was hidden by Minos in the Cretan labyrinth. Until Theseus slew the monster, Athenian youths and maidens were sent as a tribute every nine years, to be devoured by the Minotaur. Therefore, the Cretans were thoughtless and perhaps even cruel. On top of all this, they were “lazy gluttons,” sluggish, sensual gourmands.

I remember speaking with a very wealthy man just prior to leaving Dallas to come to Vancouver. “Ah, yes,” he said, “there you go to beautiful Vancouver to suffer for Jesus.” In his eyes Vancouver was a beautiful city filled with beautiful people. I was not quite certain how to respond to him, for in a measure that was also my perception. I only knew that I had received a call from God and I had to come. Nevertheless, his joking comments stayed with me, disturbing me whenever I thought about them.

I had been in the Lower Mainland but a couple of years when a preacher from the southern United States came to minister to the congregation I then served. Standing on a mountain overlooking the city, he said, “Mike, it is like ministering in Paradise.” This time I knew how I had to respond. “You know,” I said, “it’s a bit like living in a beautiful cesspool. The people are characterised by a single-minded pursuit of pleasure which always tantalises, but never fulfills. In this demanding setting, I am called to turn men to Christ and to build a church.” I could not help but wonder if I were capable of building a church in paradise.

Paul delivers a devastating verdict! The Cretans represented a lying, selfish, pleasure-loving society, not unlike the society in which we live. In such an environment, Titus was appointed to serve as God’s minister. No wonder that he was considering a change of field. Yet there is something wonderful in Paul’s scathing confirmation of character. If you or I had spoken of such a society on our own initiative, we would have been tempted to say, “Your assessment is correct, the Cretans are hopeless and all men know it. I understand if you should quit.” But Paul, speaking by the initiative of and on the authority of the Holy Spirit, says, “They are bad and all men know it. ***Go and convert them.***” Few passages so powerfully demonstrate the divine optimism of the Christian evangelist. Refusing to regard any man as hopeless, he persists with the message of salvation. The greater the evil, the greater the challenge; and the greater the challenge, the greater the victory.

Titus did face opposition, and it was a significant, soul-draining opposition, but he was not left to his own devices for he was provided **A PLAN TO BE IMPLEMENTED [2:1]**. I confess it to be simple, but I cannot concede it to be easy. Here is the plan: “Teach what accords with sound doctrine.” Let’s break it down, so that together we may learn what God must have in mind for the capture of any society.

As I review this one vital verse, I notice a plan inherent in the apostle’s words. The plan first entails an individual whose life provides a marked contrast to that which characterises the fallen world in which he ministers. Though the Greek is correctly translated “You” in our English version, we have no way to denote the emphatic position and the concomitant contrast. Paul has been confirming at length the less desirable characteristics of Cretan society, and consequently the character of the members of the Cretan assemblies. Now he is drawing a contrast of what that man who would minister in such a setting must be. Though the words are addressed to Titus, you may be assured that they are applicable to every saint, for the goal of Christ is Christian maturity for every child of God.

Every ministry begins with an individual called, consecrated and committed to that work. It is God who calls; it is God who consecrates. But it is the individual who must make the commitment. Though God can and will provide strength, He will not shield us from sorrow. Neither will He shield us from discouragement, from growing weary, or even from opposition. And whatever the ministry He assigns, whether we are given a ministry to the broader Body of Christ or to a narrower segment of that Body, the work will always revolve around the labours of an individual. Do you want a youth ministry? It will entail an individual who says, "This is my calling. God has consecrated me to this work, and to it I shall commit myself." Whether a Sunday School class, a music program, a Bible study outreach, a men's fellowship, a ladies' ministry—all are dependent upon an individual who understands that God works through individuals, though always centering their labours in building the Body.

Again, note the imperative—"teach." Whatever the ministry, ultimately the purpose is to speak, to teach. Why have church picnics if no one is introduced to the Gospel of Christ? Why have outreaches to college students if no one hears the claims of the Faith? Why have recreational outreaches—a softball team or a gym night, if there is no opportunity to speak of Christ? We come to church for a variety of reasons, and we gather in various places and for various reasons throughout the week, but always there must be this commitment to insure that the Word is central, not incidental or even neglected. However sweet the hymns and however inspiring the prayers, we are in need of those who speak; we are in need of instruction.

And we are to speak, that which "accords with sound doctrine." You must teach that behaviour is to reflect what is believed; faith is to inform life. The concept of "sound doctrine" could have been translated as *hygienic teaching*. The concept presented by the Greek is that of healthy teaching. Not all that is taught in the Name of Christ is healthful. Some popular teaching is soul-destroying; such teaching drains the soul of those who are taught so that there remains no vibrancy and no vitality. Though such teachers may gather a crowd, it will produce a church where the Spirit of God dwells in power. Let the individual whom God has commissioned to speak labour to insure that what is said is sound doctrine—hygienic teaching that inoculates the soul against error and makes the scholars strong in the Faith of Christ the Lord.

I do not mean that each of us must be teachers, though I could wish that every one of us were prepared to speak the truth boldly at every opportunity. Nevertheless, each of us is responsible to know what constitutes sound doctrine, and to be able to measure what is taught against the infallible standard of the Word. Each of us is responsible to insure that whatever ministry we participate in presents sound doctrine worthy of Him who has called us.

Should the day come that when I stand to preach and there are no open Bibles in the pews, we will have surrendered our position of usefulness before the Lord Jesus. Should the day come that we are complacent enough to believe the words of the preacher without seeing for ourselves if those things he says are true, we will have forsaken our vision and retreated from the call to stay, to witness, to win the lost, to instruct the saints.

This, then, is the plan we are to implement. As a community of Faith, we are to commit ourselves to ministry. This means that each individual is responsible to permit God to work through him or through her, to accomplish what His Spirit wills us to do. There is no place for that individual who will not serve, for each of us is a minister of the Lord Christ, called to serve in some unique capacity. Whatever our individual ministries, which ultimately comprise our corporate ministry, we must set as our goal the creation of opportunities to speak. And that which we speak must be what is in accord with sound doctrine.

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There is an awesome responsibility placed upon the pastor of a congregation; and the responsibility is greater still when that congregation is situated in a place such as Crete. But the responsibility is no less weighty for each believer to unite to share in the advance of that congregation ministering in such a place. Once that people have united, committing themselves to implement the plan God has given, they can implement their vision. There is a job to do, and there is opposition to be faced; but thank God there is a plan to be implemented. It is time for us to get on with the work. Amen.