

# Reflections on Titus 1:1-4, Part 1

## Elders and God's Elect

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The opening sentence of Paul's letter to Titus, when stripped to its grammatical core, is a simple greeting:

Paul to Titus: Grace and peace.

But Paul embellishes it richly, summarizing the content of his letter:

Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth, which accords with godliness, in hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began and at the proper time manifested in his word through the preaching with which I have been entrusted by the command of God our Saviour;

To Titus, my true child in a common faith:

Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Saviour. [Titus 1:1-4, ESV]

We may be tempted to skip over these words quickly, passing over the formality at the beginning of the letter, and moving on to its substance. But that would be a mistake. These verses are key; the rest of Paul's letter is commentary.

## Paul

*Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ...*

Paul begins by introducing himself. Isn't that strange? Paul and Titus have worked together for about two decades. Paul took Titus along when he and Barnabas went to see the apostles in Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> He sent

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<sup>2</sup> Galatians 2:1

Titus to Corinth do deal with some issues there. His heart was comforted when he met up with Titus again.<sup>3</sup> He was not unknown to Titus. So why introduce himself?

Paul is Titus' mentor. He is about to charge Titus with choosing elders for the churches on Crete. He begins by drawing Titus's attention to what is most important about Paul and his ministry because he wants Titus to follow his example. Later he will tell Titus to look for elders who share this faith and perspective.

Paul had an impressive resume. He was a Jew, a descendant of Abraham. He studied under Gamaliel the first, successor to Rabbi Hillel as the top professor at the top Hebrew school of the time. He was a Roman citizen. He was an entrepreneur able to set up shop in a new town and support his whole team. He saved the crew of a storm-tossed shipwreck. He was converted and commissioned by Jesus himself. He healed a lame man. He cast out demons. For preaching the gospel, he was imprisoned, beaten and stoned nearly to death. He started new churches in town after town. Wow!<sup>4</sup>

And yet, he did not boast about any of that. He simply identifies himself as a "servant of God" and an "apostle of Jesus Christ"—a servant and a messenger. He set aside his pride. He counted for nothing his ancestry, education, skills and accomplishments. He knew the first will be last and the last will be first<sup>5</sup>; that the one who wants to be greatest must serve others and become a slave—God's slave<sup>6</sup>. In accord with what Jesus taught, Paul did not rejoice that the spirits were subject to him, but rejoiced that his name was written in heaven.<sup>7</sup>

He did not dwell on his gifts, spiritual or others. His authority came from just one fact: he was a servant of God, called to do whatever God asked of him. He did not first identify his gifts and then find a place to use them. No, he identified his boss and submitted to do his assigned work, humble to the point of physical danger.

Contrast that with today's celebrity culture. Enter any Christian bookshop today and peruse the publishers' descriptions of their authors, often featuring their educational credentials, ministry successes

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<sup>3</sup> 2 Corinthians 7:6,13

<sup>4</sup> Acts 9:1-19, 14:8-10, 14:19, 16:15, 16:24, 16:37, 18:3, 22:3, 27:13-44

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 19:30; 20:16

<sup>6</sup> Luke 22:26

<sup>7</sup> Luke 10:20

and words of admiration from many luminaries. Publishers want celebrity authors. And many congregations want celebrity preachers. But God calls his shepherds to be humble, obedient servants. That was enough for Paul and that is enough for us.

## The Elect

*...for the sake of the faith of God's elect ...*

Paul's mission was for the sake of God's elect.

He preached the gospel to everyone. But when some rejected its message, Paul did not call a meeting of his team to discuss what had gone wrong and how they should adjust their techniques to achieve better results. He moved on to teach those who accepted the good news.<sup>8</sup> By preaching to all, he discovered who was receptive to the gospel. Then the bulk of Paul's work was teaching those who accepted his message.

This fits with the teaching of Jesus. He instructed his disciples to leave a town which rejected their message of repentance, shake its dust from their feet, and move on to the next town.<sup>9</sup> He also taught the parable of the sower to illustrate that some who hear the word will reject it, some will turn away after initial enthusiasm, and some will grow in faith and fruitfulness.<sup>10</sup>

This implies that some unbelievers are elect, though they have not yet heard the gospel. And some who attend church and believe now may yet fall away. Paul was willing to teach all who were willing to hear because they included the elect. But he was not willing to exhaust himself preaching to those who rejected his message.

Paul never doubted his message. Although he spoke in ways sensitive to the context of his hearers, he did not change his message to get a better response. He trusted the Holy Spirit to awaken the interest of his hearers chosen by God.

We take great comfort in knowing that God chooses his elect. Whether someone comes to faith does not depend on our technique or our intellect or our mood. His Spirit works in the hearts of those called to be

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<sup>8</sup> for example, Acts 13:48

<sup>9</sup> Mark 6:11

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

his. We are merely responsible for obeying him in how we live, teaching his truth, refuting errors and loving those he has chosen.

## The Mission

*...for the sake of the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth,  
which accords with godliness, in hope of eternal life...*

Paul centred his mission on the maturity of God's elect. He understood that accepting Jesus as Saviour is not the same as being a mature follower.

Notice that Paul mentions four dimensions to Christian maturity. First, they must have faith in God. They must trust Him and reject other sources of security. Second, they must know the truth and reject falsehoods. Third, they must live consistently with the truth and their trust in God, rejecting the behaviours of their worldly neighbours. Finally, they must live in hope of eternal life. I'll reflect on these four marks of Christian maturity in part 2 of these reflections. For now, notice that he expects God's elect to grow. He is not content to hear they now believe Jesus was sent by God to save us. He devotes himself to building them up.

Becoming a mature Christian takes teaching, testing and time. Jesus's disciples are good examples. After three years of following Jesus and being taught by him, their commitment to him was not in doubt. But their understanding of the gospel and what was expected of them was still poor enough to disappoint Jesus. Maturity came after much teaching, watching, experience and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Paul himself prepared for three years before beginning his missionary work. He needed time to deepen his understanding of the truth.

We are not better than the apostles. We, too, need time to grow into Christian maturity. Growing in Christian maturity and becoming more fruitful are the goals of every believer. And that was the central goal of Paul's ministry.

# God

*...which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began and  
at the proper time manifested in his word  
through the preaching with which I have been entrusted  
by the command of God our Saviour;*

Then Paul lays the foundation of the message he preaches. God never lies. God made promises. And God fulfills those promises.

That is why the Scriptures are useful for teaching, reproof and training in godly living. They show God is reliable.

Paul was God's servant ministering to God's elect. And what was he to do? By God's command he was entrusted with preaching the word of God. Notice two things. First, his preaching was a trust. It was a privilege and he was held accountable for his preaching. The opportunities to preach were not so that he could please the crowds, burnish his own brand or advance his career.

Second, God gave Paul the word he was to preach—the word of eternal life promised and the word revealed in Paul's gospel message of Jesus, crucified and alive again.

I am struck by how much New Testament teaching consists of showing that Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promises made centuries earlier. Paul preached from the Old Testament to prove God keeps his promises and that Jesus is the Jewish messiah. Therefore, Christians also can depend on the promise of eternal life God makes to them. Modern preachers who preach almost exclusively from the New Testament deny their congregations much comfort and assurance.

In doing what God asked him to do, Paul did not only preach to crowds in public. He also taught from house to house,<sup>11</sup> visiting homes to teach individuals and families. And so it is with us. Not all elders are preachers. But all elders are to teach God's elect and help them grow in Christian maturity.

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<sup>11</sup> Acts 20:20

## Titus

*To Titus, my true child in a common faith*

There are many proverbs about parents and children. In English we have “like father, like son” and “the acorn does not fall far from the tree.” I like the Egyptian proverb, “the son of a duck knows how to swim.”

Paul is Titus’s spiritual father. What has he to say about his spiritual son? Just like he did when writing about himself, he zeros in on what is important: Titus should follow Paul’s example and be faithful to their common faith.

When writing to the Corinthian church, Paul boasted of Titus, his younger partner, and how Titus cared for the Corinthians.<sup>12</sup> But now, when writing to Titus, there is no boasting. Titus, too, needed to set aside his own ambitions and pride to become a simple servant and messenger, finding his identity in the gospel.

Later in the letter, Paul extended this view to other elders. When discussing their qualifications, he writes they must be able to teach, but makes no reference to their other secular attributes: their skills, education, previous success, wealth or popularity. Instead, he insisted they not be arrogant, know God, understand the truth, and show it by how they live. They must be servants.

## Blessing

*Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Saviour.*

Paul is not yet finished embellishing his simple greeting. He turns it into a blessing. Titus will not be able to accomplish what Paul is about to ask of him without God’s blessing. The responsibility is heavy. Choosing one bad elder can draw many new believers away from the gospel.<sup>13</sup>

God’s grace is necessary to exercise good judgement, to make those called to be elders willing to serve, and to avoid self-doubts. Paul is reminding Titus of a basic truth: he does not do God’s work alone.

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<sup>12</sup> 2 Corinthians 8:16, 23; 12:18

<sup>13</sup> Sean Nolan wrote, “It’s better to do ministry understaffed than wrongly staffed. Better to have a shortage of elders than to publicly call a shepherd who hasn’t shown tangible fruit in caring for the sheep.” <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/wait-ministry-grateful/>

And in the face of opposition and anxiety, Titus needs the peace only God can provide. As Jesus promised, “I will give you rest.”

Paul is aware that Titus needs encouragement for the tasks ahead. So he reminds Titus of the blessings he has received and the blessings which will embrace him in the future. Servants do not work alone without the Master’s support.

## Us

What does Paul’s message mean for us? Let me consider four ways Paul’s greeting helps us.

First, it informs us how to conceive the role of the elder. Paul uses the word elder to mean a person appointed in a local church to be responsible for nurturing the Christian maturity of God’s elect. Most churches call this role pastor or elder. Some use the words deacon or minister.

Our pastors and elders are to be servants and shepherds. They are to help believers become more mature. None of us are good-enough Christians. Our elder’s job is to know us and disciple us to more faith in God, to more knowledge of the truth, to more loving, godly lives, and to a joyous hope of eternal life. This can be done by preaching, individual conversations, group studies, or observing mature role models.

In their helpful book, *The Trellis and the Vine*,<sup>14</sup> Colin Marshall and Tony Payne point out that ministry includes two kinds of work: tending the vine (evangelism and discipleship) and building a trellis to support the vine dressing (managing the organization). Often, especially in older churches, more effort goes into maintaining the support structure. The elders become managers concerned with finding Sunday School teachers, hiring staff, setting parking policies, fundraising and approving staff proposals. But those tasks easily distract from shepherding God’s elect. We should expect our elders to be shepherds first.<sup>15</sup>

In 1656 Richard Baxter wrote *The Reformed Pastor*<sup>16</sup> in which he describes in detail the various stages people can go through on the road to maturity in Christ and how pastors and elders can be helpful on the

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<sup>14</sup> Matthias Media, 2009.

<sup>15</sup> As John Benton wrote, “Leaders, coping with secular jobs as well as church commitments, are usually very busy men with pressurized lives. They can be, what I term, ‘armchair elders’. Their focus tends to be on the decision making of the elders’ meeting, not on being among the people to care for them. They are managers rather than shepherds.”

<sup>16</sup> I recommend the version abridged by Tim Cooper, published by Crossway in 2021.

journey. He did not want a congregation to be so large that the pastor could not visit each home at least once each year. In today's larger churches, that visitation work can be divided among the pastors and the elders.

Second, it helps us choose which church to join. No one is a good-enough Christian. At all stages of Christian maturity we need to change. It is wrong to expect a church to accept us as we are, never expecting or asking for change. So we should join a church where the pastor and elders are committed to the growing maturity of each other and all the members.

We now live in a world that has turned against Christianity. As Carl Trueman wrote, "The era of non-committed Christians is coming to an end." This is a great opportunity for the church; members will be more open to receiving Biblical teaching, repenting and nurturing a faith that will stand firm in the face of persecutions small and great. When looking for a church to join, seek out a church whose elders are willing to take up this task. Avoid churches that assume people will not change, appealing to those who just want to be comfortable at church.

Third, Paul's description of the elder's role affects how we choose our pastors and elders. In his letter to Titus, Paul goes into considerable detail about the qualifications for elders. They must be able to teach and they must be living examples of maturing Christians. To be able to teach and advise others, the elders must know what the Bible teaches. They must also be able to recognize and refute falsehoods.

We need role models to follow as we mature as Christians. Paul was a role model to Titus. Titus was a role model to the elders he was about to appoint. When choosing elders, let us ask if they can be role models. Are they humble servants? Do they love God's elect? They cannot lead where they have not trod.

Fourth, Paul's description of the elder's role controls how we relate to our elders. If we believe we are good-enough believers, we deceive ourselves and will resist being taught anything new. But the church is where we grow as believers. We must expect to repent of sin, learn new truths, change bad habits of living and to increasingly lift our eyes from the world to the kingdom of heaven. It will make our elder's job much easier if we actively look to our elder for help in maturing as Christians. When a friend shares a bit of internet wisdom with us, shaking our confidence in the gospel, do we turn to our elder? When a colleague asks us a difficult ethical issue, do we ask our elder for help? When our elder wants to visit us, do we willingly open the door?

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## **Afterwords**

In part 2 of my reflections on Titus 1:1-4, I consider Paul's four marks of Christian maturity. What does it mean to be a mature Christian? How do we nurture Christian maturity?

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