

Reflections on Titus 1:1-4, Part 2

Christian Maturity

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In part 1, I noted that Paul described the elder as a servant and messenger of God for the sake of his elect's faith, their knowledge of the truth, their godliness and their hope of eternal life. In Part 2, I reflect on these four marks of Christian maturity.

*...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...*

Elsewhere in the New Testament we find similar lists. In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul has three: faith, hope and love. In Hebrews 10 we find a four fold list, which is remarkably similar to Titus 1: drawing near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, holding fast the confession of our hope, stirring up one another to love and good works, and encouraging one another as we see the Day drawing near. I find Paul's list in Titus 1 to be helpful in many ways. In Paul's letters to churches, he mostly builds on these four marks to encourage and exhort them.

In Paul's opening salutation to Titus, he mentions four positive traits of Christian maturity. But there is a negative message with every positive one. Have faith in God and also reject idols and false sources of security. Know the truth and also recognize and refute falsehoods. Live godly lives and also turn from wicked behaviours. Hope for eternal life and also spurn earthly prizes.

In his letters Paul spends time refuting the errors of the gnostics and the party of circumcision. He also wrote that you cannot be Christian and also engage in evil living. So, as we look at each of the marks of Christian maturity, I also will reflect on the negative—what is rejected by each positive trait. It saddens me to see preachers happy to proclaim the positives of the gospel, but who hesitate to denounce the sins of our age. We cannot clearly distinguish the truth from popular errors without explicitly exposing falsehoods and heresies.

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Faith

...the faith of God's elect...

We use the word faith in several senses. It can mean what we believe despite a lack of evidence. It can mean our convictions. It can refer to a religion. But in this passage it is best translated as trust. A mature Christian trusts God, the God who never lies, the God who makes promises and fulfills those promises.

What alternative is there to trusting God? The book of Ecclesiastes offers many examples: we can trust our wealth, our strength, our knowledge, our wisdom, our friends, our business, and so on. But none are reliable. In our times, we are told to secure our future with a good retirement plan, a good education, eating well, the right pills, exercise, social approval and much more. These, too, are unreliable. We must trust only God.

The Israelites sort-of followed God and also worshipped Baal. That did not work out well for them. And in Paul's day, believers were tempted to worship both Jesus and the local Roman or Greek gods. So Paul had to disabuse them of that idea. Jesus spoke against trying to worship both God and money.

God is a jealous God. He does not want us to trust Him alongside other gods. He demands our exclusive trust.

Do we trust God as we ought? One way to determine who or what we really trust is to ask, "What calms my anxieties?" Is it having enough money? Is it confidence in relationships? Is it in having control over a situation? Is it our family history or reputation?

Trusting only God is hard. We are constantly bombarded with messages directing our attention to this or that solution to our problems. If we are concerned about our health, our finances, our family, our jobs, our future, or anything else, the Internet and the people we know stand ready to offer advice. Rarely is that advice, "Trust God."

The disciples, when their boat was swamped, asked a sleeping Jesus, "Don't you care we are perishing?" And Jesus answered, "Have you no faith?"² He also taught that the birds of the air neither sow nor reap but God feeds them. And the lilies of the field neither toil nor spin, yet even Solomon in all his regalia was not arrayed like them.³ Trusting God implies not worrying.

² Mark 4:38-40

³ Matthew 6:25-30

So why are we anxious? Let me suggest three problems which interfere with our trust of God. First, we have not yet learned that God is trustworthy. Second, we are afraid that God might have plans for us that don't fit with our own plans. And, third, we don't want to lose control of our lives—we want to be our own masters, not his slaves. Overcoming these thoughts is hard. History and experience, ours and others', will help. So we need to encourage and strengthen each other.

The first goal of Christian maturity is to trust God.

Truth

...and their knowledge of the truth...

The mature Christian knows the truth. This begins with knowing the Bible. This means knowing the promises of God and the teachings of Jesus and the Apostles.

Jesus quoted from the Old Testament when teaching. Paul quoted Jesus and the Old Testament. The early church fathers, such as Ignatius and Polycarp, taught from the Old Testament, Jesus' teaching and the letters of Paul, all of which are now included in our Bible. The Bible is a reliable guide to what is true and what is not. As Greg Scharf put it, "If the Bible as we have it is not the measuring rod of truth, then we have no fixed point outside our cultural and personal limitations from which to evaluate any idea or practice."

But it is not enough to know what is true. When Jesus taught, he contrasted the truth with the traditions of the Pharisees and scribes. Paul contrasted the truth with the law given by Moses and the teaching of the judaizers and the gnostics. The first centuries of church history are dominated by battles to distinguish truth from heresy. Much later, Robert Baxter, in *The Reformed Pastor* (1656), urged pastors to preach and teach about the "sins of the age." To know the boundary between true and false, we need to be taught what is false as well as what is true.

So what are the sins of our age? What heresies are infecting the church? What unpopular truths do we avoid declaring? The list varies by place and time. Do we teach about mistaken views of sexual purity, marriage, expressive individualism, euthanasia, prosperity gospels, marxism, capitalism, gambling, pornography, hell, heaven, judgement, and false religions?

In our time, most evangelical churches generally teach what is true. But controversial or difficult subjects may be avoided. Paul confronted the judaizers and gnostics. Jesus did not only talk about heaven; he also

spoke often about judgement and hell. Too many preachers today delay talking about sensitive subjects until the issues are impossible to avoid, that is, until after people's beliefs and intuitions have already been shaped by the world.

But we cannot defend the truth and, at the same time, avoid conflict.

It is not enough to mention that some idea is heretical, or that Christians reject it. If someone in our congregation has come to believe one of the falsehoods of our time, the mere mention that we reject the idea will not cause them to change their mind. Instead, they will simply disagree with us. To help someone turn from error, we must explain why the idea is false, and what truths from the Bible it contradicts.

I agree with Diane Knippers when she wrote, "False teaching is like cancer. Standing up against false teaching is traumatic. It is costly, time-consuming, sometimes agonizingly painful, humiliating, and exhausting. But if the church does not aggressively treat the cancer of false teaching at its early stage, it will grow, and it will kill the body."

Theodore White observed, "To go against the dominant thinking of your friends, of most of the people you see every day, is perhaps the most difficult act of heroism you can perform." The maturing Christian needs loving support and patience to turn from falsehoods and embrace God's whole truth.

A mature Christian will stand on Biblical truth and not be led astray by the world, echoing what Charles Colson said, "I think it's far more exhilarating to stand on a belief that has survived 2,000 years of persecution than to flit from one fad to another." Or as Athanasius declared, "If the world is against the truth, then I am against the world."

Godliness

...which accords with godliness...

For Paul, knowing the truth is intimately tied to living a godly life. For example, in his letter to the Ephesians, after discussing true doctrine for three chapters, Paul begins the fourth chapter with, "I **therefore** urge you to walk in a manner worthy of your calling." And in Romans 12 he urges us to be transformed by the renewal of our minds, discerning God's will and rejecting conformity with the world. It is by godly living that we demonstrate that we trust God, that we know the truth and that we eagerly look forward to eternal life.

Godly behaviour can be summarized in one word: love. In several places the New Testament expands what love means by citing behaviours to be put to death and listing behaviours worthy of our calling.

In Colossians 3, Paul lists what to cast off: sexual immorality, impurity, evil desires, covetousness, anger, malice, slander, obscene talk, and lies. Jesus also taught his disciples what defiles us: evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness.⁴

Paul's list of godly behaviours in Colossians 3 includes: compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, bearing with each other, forgiving each other. Other lists are longer or shorter, but they are all expansions of the basic command to love each other.

Besides these basic godly behaviours, we are also instructed to teach and admonish one another, to sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, to offer hospitality and to pray without ceasing. And to do all these things with thankfulness.⁵

These behaviours signal Christian maturity. These behaviours are built up on a foundation of trusting God and knowing the truth. But, because they contradict worldly advice, which tends to selfishness, they require us to encourage and admonish each other, and to be good examples to each other.

There are two specific situations we need to address. The first is persecution. The world in which we live had a positive view of Christianity as recently as the 1960s. Since then the view has turned neutral, and more recently, negative.⁶ Remembering how things were, we may be tempted to become angry and to fight for the restoration of society's acceptance of Christianity. But the Bible teaches us that persecution is the normal reaction of the world to God's people and his truth. We need to prepare to live out the truth in the face of increasing pressures to follow the ideas and behaviours of the world.

The second is the temptation to defend the truth in the style of social media—with anger, vitriol, impatience, cancelling individuals, and promoting hatred. That only hardens people's attitudes and creates bubbles of group-think. A better approach is to win over the misled with love and patience. An excellent example of how this is done can be found in the conversion of Rosario Butterfield. She found

⁴ Mark 7:21-22

⁵ Colossians 3:16; 1 Peter 4:9

⁶ Aaron Renn, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2022/02/the-three-worlds-of-evangelicalism>

the truth through the patient and loving hospitality of a neighbour.⁷ It saddens me when Christians attack each other with no attempt at love. We need not destroy each other. We need not prove to the world how right we are. We need to be godly even when we disagree with each other.

The mature Christian is conscious of the need to live a godly life each day and in each human relationship.

Hope

... in hope of eternal life...

The fourth mark of the mature Christian is the hope of eternal life.

When we use the word hope, sometimes we mean “against realistic expectations.” But Paul here uses the word hope to mean a confident expectation that the God, who does not lie and has kept earlier promises, will also keep the promise that Jesus has gone to prepare a place for us and will give us eternal life.

Many come to church seeking friendship, or a Sunday School for their children, or because they believe it will help their marriage, or keep their teenager out of trouble. Many churches advertise themselves as being friendly, welcoming, or socially responsible. But far too few declare the benefits of eternal life.

Too often we are motivated by short-term, earthly benefits. But the New Testament offers us persecution on earth and eternal life with glory after we die.

Jesus knew heaven and he knew hell. And he often spoke of both. For example, he spoke of the gulf between them in the parable of poor Lazarus and the rich man who wanted to warn his brothers of the horrors of hell.⁸ Jesus also spoke of the easy road that leads to destruction and the narrow gate and hard path that leads to life.⁹ He told of the merchant who sold all his wealth to buy one pearl of great value. And another who sold all that he owned so he could buy a field containing a great treasure.¹⁰

Earthly treasure is deceptive. And seeking an easy life is a misplaced ambition. As Augustine wrote, “I am telling you how to make profits. Learn how to trade. Do you praise the merchant who sells lead and acquires gold? Then why not praise the trader who gives away money and acquires righteousness?”

⁷ Rosario Butterfield’s testimony: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eykv-3hvFvI>

⁸ Luke 16:19-31

⁹ Matthew 7:13-14

¹⁰ Matthew 13:44-46

Paul counted his ancestry, his skills, his health, his status, and much more as loss, as rubbish, in order to gain Christ. Paul is an example to us of someone who hoped for eternal life and did not expect an easy life on earth.

History teaches us we can rely on God's promise of eternal life. The Bible is full of evidence that God fulfills his promises. Noah's flood happened. The Israelites received the land promised to Abraham. After the exile, God's people returned to their inheritance. Jesus fulfilled the promises about the Messiah, especially that he rose from the dead. Had he not done so, Christians would be the most pitiable people.¹¹ But the evidence for his resurrection is sound. At least five contemporary authors wrote about it and five hundred people saw him alive after his crucifixion. As Charles Colson points out, if he had not really risen, the disciples would have pulled off the most remarkable conspiracy in history—over five hundred people being persecuted, some to death, and not one of them divulged the secret pact. It's unbelievable.¹² So we can recite the creed with confidence, "I believe in...the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting."

The mature Christian is motivated by the hope of eternal life. Even Jesus, we are told by the author of Hebrews, "for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross."¹³ How did Jesus endure the pain of the lash and the agony of the cross? By his sure conviction of the joy of heaven which awaited him.

The pearl merchant, the buyer of the field, Paul and Jesus himself are examples for us. In the words of Helen Lemmel,

Turn your eyes upon Jesus
Look full in His wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
In the light of His glory and grace.

C.S. Lewis observes, "If you read history, you will find that the Christians who did the most for the present world were those who thought most of the next."

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 15:19

¹² Charles Colson, *Loving God*, Zondervan, 1983; pages 61-70, especially page 69

¹³ Hebrews 12:2

The fourth mark of the mature Christian is being seized by the hope of eternal life and a fear of the horrors of hell. It motivates trusting God, learning the truth, living a godly life, and the apparent sacrifices of rejecting the world's wisdom.

US

How can we use Paul's four marks of Christian maturity?

First, we use these marks to examine ourselves. They represent a path to maturity for every believer at every stage of life. No one is a good-enough Christian. We all need to grow.

If you are like me, your maturity is likely to be unbalanced. Perhaps you know Christian doctrine well, but frequently become angry. Perhaps you love others well, but are motivated by earthly goals—eternal life is hard to see, barely visible through the fog of life. Perhaps you believe that God helps those who help themselves. Paul's four marks of maturity can help us identify our strengths and weaknesses.

Having examined ourselves, we need to repent. That was Jesus's frequent message. He told the disciples to preach repentance. God forgives us our sins, but we still need to repent. And, as Tim Challies points out, "repentance without change is dead."

Second, we use these marks to choose role models. We are weak and need encouragement. Role models are a great encouragement. We use Paul's marks to identify those whom we want to emulate. That is both Biblical and practical.

Third, we use these marks in raising our children. What does it profit if they are polite but don't trust God? Or if they know the truth, reject some errors, but cannot control their passions? At every stage of growing up, we can find appropriate ways to lead our children to Christian maturity. Perhaps the best way is being a good example to them.

Fourth, we use these marks when choosing elders and pastors. Paul reminded Titus of these four marks of maturity precisely because Titus was to choose men who had these characteristics and who were able to shepherd others to maturity. So when choosing elders and pastors in our churches, we must not be distracted by other criteria. We must find those who are mature and can help others become mature.

Fifth, we use these marks when shepherding God's elect. When I first became an elder, I visited the people assigned to me with a mentor. I learned the mechanics of the visits, but somehow I missed learning what to look for in their lives. I did not connect the conversations we had with a way to diagnose

their spiritual maturity and to suggest ways that I could help them grow. Paul's four marks would have been helpful.

Paul's marks can help us in discipling all the members of the church. Discipling is not just for the first few years after conversion. When planning or evaluating a discipleship programme, the list will help us find gaps. We may think in terms of classes, Bible studies, or catechisms, but some aspects of Christian maturity may need other ways of being taught. How do we incorporate that into our discipling?

Preachers have different methods for making sure they preach the whole counsel of God. Some preach through whole books of the Bible. Others follow a catechism. But all need a way to stop themselves from preaching the same topics over and over again while leaving others untouched. Paul's marks belong in the preacher's toolbox to make sure important aspects of Christian maturity are not neglected.

Preachers must preach to the whole congregation—both those who do not yet believe and those who are well along on the road to maturity. “Evangelism doesn't create the healthy church; evangelism benefits from the healthy church!”¹⁴

Sixth, Paul's marks of Christian maturity help our elders set church priorities. Paul includes them in this letter to Titus to state his own goals. Paul's goals should be the goals of every elder. Every programme in a church should contribute to helping God's elect become mature. Nothing should be done which holds discipleship back. Together, the marks serve as a checklist to evaluate programmes for strengths, weaknesses and gaps.

Let me conclude by quoting John Newton:

A Christian is not of hasty growth, like a mushroom, but rather like the oak, the progress of which is hardly perceptible, but, in time, becomes a great deep-rooted tree.

Soli Deo Gloria.

Afterwords

Thanks to Jim Williams for reviewing an earlier draft of this essay.

¹⁴ Geoff Bates on Dominic Steele's YouTube program, “The Pastor's Heart”; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=luC14tcLcyE> at 34:42.