
Rejecting the Heretic

“A man that is an heretic after the first and second admonition reject” (Titus 3:10).

Sometime ago a well dressed ex-prize fighter walked into a swank hotel in downtown Seattle. As he cruised into the dining area he was petrified by the sight of a young hippie displaying his contempt for the establishment. The hippie was attired in the traditional uniform of dirty, disheveled clothing and scraggly hair. The nausea was intensified by the way he was sprawled over the seat with one putrified foot protruding obnoxiously over the back of the booth. In the meanwhile, “Mr. Fist” was frozen in his tracks and delirious with rage. Somehow he managed to contain himself but later confided to me,

I felt like walking over to that hippie and ripp'n a few punches into 'em just to teach 'em how he ought to behave in a nice restaurant.

It does not take much imagination to realize that the manager of the restaurant was probably quite grateful that the proposed lesson in etiquette did not take place. It probably would never have occurred to the average bystander to teach manners by such a straightforward approach. Usually we think of a fist-throwing melee as a little incongruous with the teaching of charm, to say

nothing of the decorum and dignity of a plush dining room. With a little reflection most of us would conclude that though the provocation was extreme and unjustified, the prescription proposed would have been more bizarre and inflammatory than the problem itself.

The strange humor of this incident is analagous to many situations which we face within the framework of modern Christianity. Too often we seek to solve our problems by "ripping a few punches" into the brethren who are "unChristlike." By the time we "show 'em how they ought to behave," we have ignited a wide variety of carnal reflexes and strewn about a good many splinters. Almost every community is plagued with a posse of self-appointed vigilantes who "protest" the truth by "lynching" heretics and who "preserve the peace" by slinging a few verbal punches at the "troublemakers." Perhaps it is time that we scrape aside some of the wreckage and debris created by the "peace patrol" and sit down for a junta with Paul.

The divine instructions about rejecting a heretic are found in the Book of Titus. Perhaps a background of information regarding this young evangelist would enhance our understanding of his instructions. I once thought that "rejecting a heretic" demanded sharp and semi-belligerent behavior. I felt that to be loyal was to be mean and vice versa. Now I am not so sure. The epistle to Titus was written around A.D. 65 or shortly thereafter. By this time Titus was a veteran with many years' experience in the cause of Christ. Much of this experience was related to the promotion of Christian unity. His debut upon the stage of divine history came in Jerusalem in conjunction with the Jerusalem Council and the controversy which raged over the subject of circumcision. Perhaps no issue in the history of Christianity was ever more vigorously contested or hotly debated, and perhaps none was ever more significant.

At this juncture the eyes of the Council were focused upon Titus who was made conspicuous as an exemplary convert from the Grecian world. The fact that Titus was not compelled to be circumcised was used as proof that no one had to be. The dissension was aggravated by false brethren who crept in like spies to destroy Christian liberty. Titus could not give place to these false brethren, but neither could he overcome them with evil. The only weapons at his disposal were characterized by goodness and truth. We may never grasp the full emotional impact of this controversy, but we can at least discern that Titus

was developing a temperament that was forged in the furnace of affliction. He was learning the hard way that "the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient . . ." (II Tim. 2:24).

A few years later we find Titus at Corinth dealing with the difficult and delicate problems of a divided church. The reference to him in II Corinthians 12:20 is particularly interesting for it reveals some indication of the severe problems which he encountered. A congregation that is characterized by "debates, envyings, wraths, strifes, backbiting, whisperings, swellings and tumults" presents a quagmire of complex and complicated problems. Paul's personal attitude and strategy is reflected in his first letter.

Up to this very hour we are hungry and thirsty, ill-clad, knocked about and practically homeless. We still have to work for our living by manual labor. Men curse us, but we return a blessing; they make our lives miserable, but we take it patiently. They ruin our reputations, but we go on trying to win them for God . . . (I Cor. 4:11-13, Phillip's).

The fact that Titus was sent to Corinth as Paul's personal representative indicates that he shared Paul's philosophy on how to deal with troublemakers (II Cor. 12:18).

With this brief background behind us, let us focus upon the particular situation which Titus faced in Crete. Crete is a large island in the Mediterranean between Syria and Malta. It is about 160 miles long and 35 miles wide at its broadest point. In ancient times the island was inhabited by a diversity of races, and it has always been characterized by tribal warfare and internal strife.

It is probable that Christianity came to Crete as the result of its citizens who were present at Pentecost. It was some thirty years later when Titus arrived to "set in order the things that were wanting and ordain elders in every city" (Tit. 1:5). It isn't hard to imagine a great deal of ignorance and hide-bound tradition on the part of people who have existed within the framework of Christianity for three decades without pastors to superintend the flock and probably with little instruction in the Word.

These problems were compounded by the presence of false teachers who subverted whole houses for "filthy lucre's sake." These deceivers were predominantly "of the circumcision." They may have been some of the same "false brethren" whom Titus met in Jerusalem many years before. At any rate, Titus was well qualified to exhort and convict the gainsayers and to sharply

rebuke as the occasion demanded. He was by precept and example to demonstrate how men ought to behave themselves in the house of God.

The Cretans were not necessarily an affable and charming audience. One of their own poets had pictured them as "liars, evil beasts and idle gluttons." These outrageous characteristics contributed to an already alarming picture. By the time you start with a nation characterized by strife . . . then stir in a generous amount of false teaching and let it simmer unsupervised for thirty years, you have already got plenty of trouble. But when you add lying, slothful gluttony and the temperament of wild beasts to an already explosive concoction, you have what might be described in the vernacular of modern youth as "something else."

Is it fair to ask what Jesus would do with such a miserable situation? The prophet Isaiah depicted the ministry of our Saviour in these words, "A bruised reed shall He not break, and smoking flax shall He not quench . . ." Careless and indifferent people would break and abandon the reed that was bending low, but Jesus would not. Lesser men would snuff out and leave the smouldering wick, but Jesus would not. The ministry of Jesus was to bind up and heal the bruised and broken lives that others would destroy. He came to bring light and hope to the smoking ashes of a dying faith. He did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

Those who were whole had no need of a physician. It would have been easy for Titus to shake the dust from his sandals and search for greener pastures. He could have "ripped a few punches" into the heretics and washed his hands of the whole affair, but true men of God do not behave like hirelings. Titus could not abandon the sheep of the Lord to ravenous wolves. The good shepherd should be willing to lay down his life for the sheep. Like a nurse who cherished her children, he was to be gentle and concerned. Rivers are crooked because they take the easy way around every obstacle, and Titus could have become crooked in essentially the same way.

But now let us again narrow our vision and focus upon the particular word which is translated as "reject" in the King James Version. W. E. Vine in his *Word Studies* lists four separate words which are all translated as "reject" in the authorized version. Each of these words possessed its own unique personality and is explicit in its descriptive character. One word, for example, is the Greek word *ekptuo* which literally means "to spit out . . ." To

pronounce it sounds like what it is. If I were guessing, I would have imagined that this is what God wanted Titus to do to the heretics.

The word, however, which the Holy Spirit directed to Titus is unbelievably mild. It is the Greek word "paraiteomai" which means "to beg off" or "ask to be excused." It is the same word used in Luke 14:18-19 regarding the great supper to which the invited guests would not come. They with one consent began to "make excuse." Thayer states that the word basically means "to ask alongside" and lists such meanings as: "supplicate," "shun," "avoid," "beg pardon," etc.

Here is God's way to handle the factional. First of all you avoid foolish questions and anything that would tend to stir up strife; but if someone persists in trying to divide the brethren, they are to be warned twice and then shunned. When they dog your steps, you are to politely "beg off" and "supplicate." The Revised Version puts it this way:

. . . avoid stupid controversies, genealogies, dissensions and quarrels over the law, for they are unprofitable and futile. As for a man who is factious, after admonishing him once or twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is perverted and sinful; he is self-condemned (Tit. 3:9-11).

How wise and practical is the admonition of the Spirit and how wonderful is the restraining power of love. When we became the "children of God," we became "peacemakers" at the same time. We buried our pride and our desire for revenge in the grave of Christian baptism. The gaze of the world is transfixed upon us in wonder because we love one another. We pray even for our enemies and are content to surrender our cloak and go the second mile. Gone is the desire to slug it out with the enemies of tranquility. We talk to the factious a time or two and turn them over to Jesus. If all the brethren behave in like manner, the danger to the community of Christians is greatly diminished. A one-man faction is seldom a serious threat.

The presence of heresy presents an interesting medium by which the approved of God are made manifest (I Cor. 11:19). Heresies appeal to men who are void of the Spirit (Jd. 19). Factions remove the carnal from the body of Christ in much the same way that boils remove poison from the human body. Those who are not approved seek out schism like vultures flock to the rotting carcass of a dead animal.

In the meantime the approved are clinging only to Jesus and

thus are made manifest. After the factious have been warned, they are to courteously be consigned to God who is perfectly capable of delivering the godly out of temptation and of reserving the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished. We do not presume to punish sinners personally for "vengeance is mine . . . saith the Lord" (Rom. 12:19).

Michael, for example, would not even give the devil a railing accusation but said, "The Lord rebuke thee" (Jd. 9). How dare we speak so harshly to any man for whom Christ died? Consider again these inspired words of Timothy:

. . . have nothing to do with silly and ill-informed controversies which lead inevitably, as you know, to strife. And the Lord's servant must not be a man of strife: he must be kind to all, ready and able to teach; he must have patience and the ability gently to correct those who oppose his message. He must always bear in mind the possibility that God will give them a different outlook, and that they may come to know the truth . . . (II Tim. 2:23-25, Phillips).

Paul — The Peacemaker

Paul said, ". . . Be ye imitators of me even as I also am of Christ . . ." (I Cor. 11:1).

Damascus

. . . the Jews took counsel to kill him, (Acts 9:23).

Jerusalem

And he spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus, and disputed against the Grecian Jews: but they went about to slay him (Acts 9:29).

Antioch

But the Jews stirred up the devout and honourable women, and the chief men of the city, and raised persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them out of their coasts (Acts 13:50).

Iconium

But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles . . . and when there was an assault made both of the Gentiles and also of the Jews with their rulers, to use them despitefully, and to stone them, they were aware of it and fled (Acts 14:2-6).

Lystra

And there came thither certain Jews from Antioch and Iconium,

who persuaded the people, and having stoned Paul, drew him out of the city supposing he had been dead (Acts 14:19).

Thessalonica

But the Jews which believed not moved with envy, took unto them certain lewd fellows of the baser sort and gathered a company and set all the city in an uproar and assaulted the house of Jason and sought to bring them out to the people (Acts 17:5).

Berea

But when the Jews of Thessalonica had knowledge that the word of God was preached of Paul at Berea, they came thither also and stirred up the people (Acts 17:13).

Corinth

... the Jews made insurrection with one accord against Paul and brought him to the judgment seat (Acts 18:12).

In the Temple

... they went about to kill him (Acts 21:31).

Caesarea

Then the high priest and the chief of the Jews informed against Paul and besought him, and desired favour against him, that he would send for him to Jerusalem, laying wait in the way to kill him (Acts 25:2-3).

Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one . . . (II Cor. 11:24).

What was Paul's response? How did the Spirit of Jesus motivate him to act? Are you ready?

I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost, that I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart. For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh: Who are Israelites; to whom pertaineth the adoption and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises (Rom. 9:1-4).

There is no argument against love! Though Paul was in a sense free from all men, in another sense he, like Christ, became a slave to all men. To the Jew he became like a Jew, to the Greek he became a Greek, to the weak he became weak. He became "all things to all men" in order to save some (see I Cor. 9:19ff). He gave his life to Jesus who had smashed down the barriers which segregated humanity "... so making peace ..." (Eph. 2:13-15).

We must not forget, however, that Paul himself was once a persecutor of Christians. His misdirected zeal for God caused him to imprison the followers of Jesus and compel them to blaspheme. *The fact that Saul of Tarsus could be transformed into Paul the Apostle is used to argue that virtually any legalist can be saved!*

And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who hath enabled me, for that he counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry; who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus. This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief. Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might shew forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting (I Tim. 1:12-16).

Thank you Jesus for giving us the story of Saul's conversion as a pattern of your longsuffering! Paul wrote: "Be ye followers (or imitators) of me even as I also am of Christ" (I Cor. 11:1).

Questions for Discussion — Lesson 8

1. What is a heretic?
2. Describe your own mental image of the heretics on Crete.
3. Do we have such "heretics" in our modern world?
4. What application on Titus 3:10 should be made in our own day?
5. Can you think of an instance where patience and love would have prevented a division between Christians?
6. Why did the Jews hate Paul?
7. In what way is Paul an encouraging example?