

“CRETE: THE WILD WEST OF PAUL’S DAY”  
by Rom A. Pegram (7/17/16)

Folks, last week we began a new series that will attempt to parallel the new church on the island of Crete—with its new pastor Titus—alongside the Church of today. As a reminder, we spoke of building a Christian foundation for community in a world that was anything but... That was the task at hand for the young pastor, Titus, and the task we’re still called to today...

Eugene Peterson describes the work of Titus (NT book) in this way: “I want to characterize Titus’s pastoral task as *developing leadership* that honors the gospel *in community* [italics mine].” So, in a nutshell, our study for the next few weeks is going to be about *getting the community straight* and *developing leadership* that will keep the community on target for many years to come. Let’s begin with the community piece of the puzzle...

Community is what Christ has called us to! God has called us to love him, but not in a lone-ranger kind of a way! God has called us to love him ... while loving one another as well [TUMC Vision = Love first...]. And it’s the foundation for *that kind of community* that we’re supposed to be about as the Church, just as Titus was...

Well, the island of Crete, folks, has been described as a kind of 1<sup>st</sup> century Wild West, ‘a semi-anarchist society (really didn’t care for the ‘law’) without much social savvy—full of independent spirits and do-it-yourself lone rangers’. One could just imagine the people there—those Titus was called to work with—as a combination of Yukon gold-rusher, Texas cowboy, and Montana militia man! These people—these Cretans—are the context into which Paul sowed the seeds of the Gospel ... and Titus was called to cultivate and then harvest those seeds planted in the lives of those on Crete...

A poet of Crete—Epimendes of Cnossus, a religious teacher of the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C., confirmed this ‘Wild West reputation’ when he said (1:12): “Cretans are always liars, pernicious beasts, idle bellies.” (It reads a little different in the NLT version below.) And, their behavior was so well-known in the ancient world that the verb ‘to Cretize’ (Gk. *Kretizein*) was slang for *lying or cheating*! This was the soil into which Titus was called to cultivate the seeds of a new community—a Holy Spirit kind of community! Listen (Titus 1:5-16, NLT):

I left you on the island of Crete so you could complete our work there and appoint elders in each town as I instructed you. <sup>6</sup> An elder must live a blameless life. He must be faithful to his wife, and his children must be believers who don’t have a reputation for being wild or rebellious. <sup>7</sup> For an elder must live a blameless life. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered; he must not be a heavy drinker, violent, or dishonest with money. <sup>8</sup> Rather, he must enjoy having guests in his home, and he must love what is good. He must live wisely and be just. He must live a devout and disciplined life. <sup>9</sup> He must have a strong belief in the trustworthy message he was taught; then he will be able to encourage others with wholesome teaching and show those who oppose it

where they are wrong. <sup>10</sup> For there are many rebellious people who engage in useless talk and deceive others. This is especially true of those who insist on circumcision for salvation. <sup>11</sup> They must be silenced, because they are turning whole families away from the truth by their false teaching. And they do it only for money. <sup>12</sup> Even one of their own men, a prophet from Crete, has said about them, “The people of Crete are all liars, cruel animals, and lazy gluttons.” <sup>13</sup> This is true. So reprimand them sternly to make them strong in the faith. <sup>14</sup> They must stop listening to Jewish myths and the commands of people who have turned away from the truth. <sup>15</sup> Everything is pure to those whose hearts are pure. But nothing is pure to those who are corrupt and unbelieving, because their minds and consciences are corrupted. <sup>16</sup> Such people claim they know God, but they deny him by the way they live. They are detestable and disobedient, worthless for doing anything good.

So, how did Titus go about conquering the people of Crete for the sake of the Gospel? How did he, as Eugene Peterson would describe it, *develop leadership* that honors the gospel *in community*? And, even more importantly today, how do we conquer *the wild mid-west* God has placed us in? How do we build a foundation for the community that Jesus has in mind ... right here in the Dodge County area of Wisconsin? First...

THE UNFINISHED WORK NEEDS TO BE COMPLETED. Again, verse 5 tells us, “I left you on the island of Crete so you could complete our work there and appoint elders in each town as I instructed you.” So, what is the *unfinished work* that had to be completed—the first step toward building a Christian foundation on Crete? I’m glad you asked...

First, **establish correct/sound teaching...** The Apostle Paul appointed leaders in various churches during his missionary journeys. He knew that new churches needed strong spiritual leadership. The men he chose were to lead these new churches by:

- Teaching sound doctrine...
- Helping believers mature spiritually...
- Equipping them to live for Jesus Christ despite opposition...

Leadership development, for Paul, always began by having agreed-upon and well-articulated standards. And *high standards* were especially important for anyone laying a foundation for a *Christian* community. Establish correct or sound teaching ... and also...

**Establish strong leaders...** Leadership development and what that can do not only for now, but for years to come, can’t be stressed enough! In his book, *I Almost Missed the Sunset*, Bill Gaither writes this:

Gloria and I had been married a couple of years. We were teaching school in Alexandria, Indiana, where I had grown up, and we wanted a piece of land where we could build a house. I noticed the parcel south of town where cattle grazed, and I learned it belonged to a 92-year-old retired banker named ‘Mr. Yule.’ He owned a lot of

land in the area, and word was *he would sell none of it*. He gave the same speech to everyone who inquired: 'I promised the farmers they could use it for their cattle.'

Gloria and I visited him at the bank. Although he was retired, he spent a couple of hours each morning in his office. He looked at us over the top of his bifocals. I introduced myself and told him we were interested in a piece of his land. 'Not selling,' he said pleasantly. 'Promised it to a farmer for grazing.' 'I know, but we teach school here and thought maybe you'd be interested in selling it to someone planning to settle in the area.' He pursed his lips and stared at me. 'What'd you say your name was?' 'Gaither. Bill Gaither.' 'Hmmm. 'Any relation to Grover Gaither?' 'Yes, sir. He was my granddad.'

Mr. Yule put down his paper and removed his glasses. 'Interesting. Grover Gaither was the best worker I ever had on my farm. Full day's work for a day's pay. So honest. What'd you say you wanted?' I told him again. 'Let me do some thinking on it, then come back and see me.'

I came back within the week ... and Mr. Yule told me he had had the property appraised. I held my breath. 'How does \$3,800 sound? Would that be okay?' If that was per acre, I would have to come up with nearly \$60,000! '\$3,800?' I repeated. 'Yup. Fifteen acres for \$3,800.' I knew it had to be worth at least three times that. I readily accepted.

Nearly three decades later, my son and I strolled that beautiful, lush property that had once been pasture land. 'Benjy' I said, 'you've had this wonderful place to grow up through nothing that you've done, but because of the good name of a great-granddad you never met.' 'A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold.' (Prov. 22:1).

Folks, the 'unfinished work' that has yet to be done, as we lay a Christian foundation for community right here in Dodge County and beyond, is to establish correct/sound teaching ... and also to establish strong leadership, whose work will be remembered for generations to come! This was the work Titus was about on Crete ... and this is the work we will be about here as well—as we seek to build a foundation for Christian community right here in the 'wild mid-west' we live in!

So, this is the 'unfinished work' Titus was about ... and that we need to be about, too! But, Paul didn't end there. If a foundation for a Christian community was to be laid in Crete that would last for generations, Titus and other leadership there had to be aware of what might keep them from their task. Here's what Paul told them. Besides completing the *unfinished work*, they needed to...

...BEWARE OF *FALSE TEACHERS*! Verses 10-11 remind us, "For there are many rebellious people who engage in useless talk and deceive others. This is especially true of those who insist on circumcision for salvation. <sup>11</sup> They must be silenced, because they are turning whole families away from the truth by their false teaching...." Watch out for the 'false teachers!'

So, who are 'those who insist on circumcision for salvation?' Some versions call them the 'Judaizers!' They were those who insisted that people had to obey all of the Jewish laws ... before they could become a Christian! (There was a large population of Jews on

Crete at this time.) This *regulation* caused great confusion amongst new believers and caused problems in many churches that Paul had planted in the past. Titus needed to be well-aware of this possibility...

Folks, the truth is ... *God accepts anyone who comes to him in faith!* Yet, do we? I can witness to the fact that there are still 'Judaizers' in the Church today...

- How many expect others to be 'just like them' if they're going to come to *our* church?
- To dress ... like we think they should? To have a certain background or family name ... like we think they should? To have their hair cut a certain way ... like we think they should?

What Paul was saying was to beware of any who think like that! *God accepts anyone who comes to him in faith!* Contrary to the belief of many, that is *the only requirement* to become a part of a Christian community. And, Paul goes on to explain by telling us ... you can spot *false* teachers (It's not that hard to do!):

1. The attention is generally *on themselves*, instead of Christ!
2. They'll ask you to *compromise* your faith by doing something you know is contrary to the teachings of Christ!
3. They'll de-emphasize *the nature or teachings of Christ*—him being divine, the word of God being inspired, etc!
4. They'll urge *human* direction, instead of relying on prayer and biblical guidelines for life!

It's not hard to spot false teachers ... if we're listening to God's word and being sensitive to God's spirit. Titus had to learn this, if he was to build a Christian foundation for community there on Crete. I want to take just a moment to comment now on the final two verses for today; let me share them with you one more time:

"Everything is pure to those whose hearts are pure. But nothing is pure to those who are corrupt and unbelieving, because their minds and consciences are corrupted. <sup>16</sup> Such people claim they know God, but they deny him by the way they live. They are detestable and disobedient, worthless for doing anything good."

Have you ever noticed in life that some people seem to have a knack for seeing good all around them ... while others see nothing but what's wrong? There's a reason for that, which Paul is trying to bring out here for Titus (and for us). *Our souls, folks, become filters through which we perceive good or evil in our lives.* The pure in heart (those who have Christ in control of their lives) learn to see good ... even in the midst of an evil world. But those who have not yet allowed Christ to be in control of their lives ... seem to find evil in everything, because their hearts—in their current condition—color even what good they do see and hear. Folks, as we build a community for Christ together right here, let's turn our thoughts to God and his Word—that we might become known as a community who always sees Light ... even in a world full of darkness. Just as a moth is drawn to a flame, so people are drawn to those who know the Light—who

reflect the Light in their lives... A mind filled with goodness ... has very little room (or time) for what is evil... Let's be that kind of a community for this wild *mid-west* we live in...