



Citizens and Neighbors

Brownsburg Church of Christ

by Edwin Crozier

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Introduction:

According to **Titus 1:5**, Paul left Titus on Crete. Can you imagine for a moment what life in the 60s on Crete must have been like for a Christian? Talk about a struggle to maintain faith. First, they were living in the Roman Empire, which went through periodic bouts of unfriendliness toward Christianity. Nero was emperor then. He is credited with leading some of the first purposeful persecutions against Christians across the empire. His cruelty to Christians is almost unparalleled. He killed his own mother, step-brother, and two wives. He committed multiple immoralities, including a homosexual marriage. He was recklessly cruel to the rich and the great and, perhaps, overly generous with the poor and the common. Emperor worship was the favorite form of religion in Rome and Nero was eventually declared divine. Of course, the entire empire was rampant with the idolatry of the Roman pantheon and the imperial taxes all went to pay for this sin.

Crete stepped things up a notch. They viewed themselves as the birthplace of Zeus. So they were quite religious, but fully idolatrous. Further, because of a high mortality rate, their ancient religion placed a high value on fertility, which led to all kinds of sexual and fetishist worship practices. In ancient times, according to uncovered artwork and sculptures, both men and women walked in public bare-breasted. If by the time of Titus they had adopted a more modest sense of dress, the artwork of such nakedness remained, much like our billboards today.

The Cretans had a general reputation for being horrific people. Paul quotes an ancient testimony of the Cretans in **Titus 1:12** saying, “Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.” This reputation was so strong that one of the Greek words for lying and dishonesty was “Cretanize.” To call someone a Cretan was to accuse them of malicious deception. The statement that they were evil beasts was a kind of inside joke against the inhabitants of the island. It was said that there were no actual wild beasts on the island but that the people made up for that lack. Even today, the term “Cretan” is used to speak of someone who lacks decorum and social graces, a bull in a china closet if you will. Cretans had a reputation for covetousness and materialism. It was said of them that no means of financial gain was considered dishonorable, neither stealing, nor lying, nor cheating. And thus they were lazy gluttons.

Beyond that, they were a cruel, factious, warring, and argumentative bunch. Ancient historian Polybius says they were constantly “involved in insurrections, murders and internecine wars.” (“Internecine” means “involving conflict within a group” and “of or relating to slaughter or carnage.”¹)ⁱⁱ And you thought your neighbors were bad.

Amazingly enough, the gospel had impacted some of these. In **Acts 2:11**, some of the Jews in Jerusalem on that critical Pentecost after Jesus’ resurrection were from Crete. It is likely that some of those were among the converts and perhaps eventually traveled back to the island to establish churches. Or perhaps, after Paul’s first imprisonment at the end of **Acts**, he went to Crete himself and established churches in its several cities. As shocking as it may be to us, some of those from such a horrific background wanted freedom from their sins and turned to Jesus. Paul could apparently say the same thing about these brethren that he said about the Corinthians in **I Corinthians 6:9-11**.

I hope I have established the cultural backdrop for the letter to Titus. In this letter, Paul says he left Titus behind to put things in order (**1:5**). In **Titus 1**, that dealt with establishing proper congregational organization and leadership by appointing elders in each town. This was needed because insubordinate false teachers, who were the epitome of the Cretan reputation, were leading whole households astray (**Titus 1:10-14**). In **Titus 2**, that dealt with household matters. Titus was to teach the Christians how to live as men and women in their homes, both for the older and the younger. This even included instruction on how to conduct one’s self if the Christian was a slave. This was necessary so Christ’s opponents would have nothing evil to say about the Christians (**Titus 2:8**) and that the doctrine of Christ might be adorned or demonstrated as proper to the Cretan society (**Titus 2:10**). Further, this was to be taught because God’s grace had brought salvation teaching them to be different from the world and follow the true God and Savior, not the emperor, but Jesus Christ (**Titus 2:11-14**).

But then **Titus 3:1-2** takes an interesting turn. As Titus was setting things in order, he had to deal with how to live as a citizen not only of heaven, but of the world. These Christians were citizens of that wicked empire and sinful society. They were neighbors with the people we have described above. How were they to live? What might you expect Paul to say? Were they to take up arms against the evil and immoral government? Were they to petition lawyers to redress wrongs the civil government made against Christians? Were they to rebel against the pagan culture politically? Maybe they were to slip away into communes of Christian freedom trying to be completely separate from all these evil influences? Were they to berate and belittle their non-Christian neighbors, arguing at every turn with the worldliness that was around them? If you were to base your practice on what modern Christians do with our modern culture and society, you might think that

any and all of these are the appropriate stances for Christians in a sinful culture. If you were to take modern Christian e-mails, Facebook posts, and political rants as the guide, you might think this is exactly what Paul said to do. But you would be wrong. Brothers and sisters, I fear that many in the Lord's church today are allowing modern American Evangelicalism and Right-wing politics to be their standard for living out their Christianity in these days rather than the words of the apostle Paul. In fact, I fear that many will hear these words of our beloved and inspired brother and consider them unpatriotic and worse, heresy. But I encourage you to look at **Titus 3** and recognize that perhaps some things need to be put in order not just in the Cretan churches, but in American churches as well. We are Christians. We may not be of the world, but we are in this world. We are citizens and we are neighbors. How are we to live?

Discussion:

I. Christians Citizens (**Titus 3:1**)

A. "Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities":

1. What? Submit and be subject to an immoral man like Nero? Yes. Absolutely. And this is not some aberrant idea found only in this letter. Paul made the same point in **Romans 13:1-2**, as did Peter in **I Peter 2:13-14**. This idea of subjection is "a voluntary attitude of giving in, cooperating, assuming responsibility, and carrying a burden."ⁱⁱⁱ The very grammar of this phrase was a demonstration that the submission was voluntary and not forced on the Christians by the Empire.
2. The same word for "submissive" in **Titus 3:1** is used in **Ephesians 5:24** speaking of wives being submissive to their husbands. Notice in that context, the submission is not merely an outward action but also includes an attitude of honor and respect (cf. **Ephesians 5:33**). Notice that when Peter expresses this injunction he adds "Honor the emperor" (**I Peter 2:17**). This mirrors and provides specific application for Paul's more generic teaching in **Romans 13:7**, "Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed" (ESV).
3. Brothers and sisters, I think we need to take these words to heart in our modern society, especially in an election year. Many Christians seem to think that the First Amendment promise of free speech overrides Biblical teaching. We seem to think that in an election year we can say what we want about our governing authorities in whatever way we want to. This passage does not say that you have to agree with any person's politics. Nor does it mean that you cannot have a reasoned debate and discourse about political issues. And I praise God that we live in a country that allows that sort of thing, which was not allowed under Nero's reign. But as we carry out these discourses we must ever show respect and honor to those who are our civic leaders even when they are ungodly and lead our nation in ungodly ways. I daresay we have not had a president or even a candidate for president who matched the immorality of Nero. But Paul and Peter were talking about Nero.

B. "To be obedient":

1. As if being submissive was not enough, Paul drove his point home. These Cretan Christians were to be obedient. They were to do what they were told by these governing powers at every level. The use of the phrase "authorities and powers" in this context refers to governing authorities at every level from the emperor to the local magistrate. In our modern vernacular, we would include the president, the senate, the Supreme Court, the governor, the mayor, the local police. I suggest it would even include your teachers in the local high school.
2. In the biblical context, there is only one exception to this rule. It is found in **Acts 5:29**. If the governing authority commands us to violate God's will, we must obey God rather than men. But that is the only exception. It is not we must obey men unless we don't like it. It is we must obey these governments unless they command us to violate God's will. And even then we are not to take up arms against that government but rather quietly obey God instead, praying that God will grant us favor in the eyes of the governing authorities so we may lead peaceful and quiet lives, godly and dignified in every way (**I Timothy 2:1-2**).

C. "To be ready for every good work":

1. If Paul had merely given the first two charges, we might think we only have to go so far as to do what we are told by the government. This principle says we are to go beyond waiting to be told to do things, but we must be ready to pursue good works. Governing authorities are supposed to promote what is good (**Romans 13:3-4**). We are not to wait for them to tell us to do good works, but in contrast with worldly Cretans who Paul said were unfit for any good work (**Titus 1:16**), we are to be ready, that is prepared. We are to look for and pursue opportunities to do good works.
2. Brothers and sisters, I want to encourage you to look at this in the context of this chapter. Because of debates about biblical authority and the work of the church, we have a tendency to hear this phrase "good works" and think of things like taking the Lord's Supper every Sunday and only on Sunday. We think of things like singing praise without instruments. We think of avoiding institutionalism, refusing fellowship halls, and avoiding the denominational pastor system. While these are good works, that is not what Paul is talking about here. He is talking about civic duties. He is talking about helping our neighbors and other citizens in this society. Look

in **Titus 3:14** to see Paul's explanation of good works. "And let our people learn to devote themselves to good works, so as to help cases of urgent need, and not be unfruitful" (ESV). Certainly, speaking with honesty, living in purity, worshipping in righteousness are all good works. But Paul explains that the good works he is really talking about here are about helping people in need. And in **Titus 3:1**, it is specifically talking about the good works we would do along with our government and with our neighbors, even if they are Cretans.

3. Beloved, I fear for myself when I read this. How many times have I allowed my political views to talk me out of being involved in good works? How many times have I allowed my judgment and condescension of those whose sins have left them in need cause me to excuse myself from exercising good works among them? But Paul told Titus to teach the Cretan Christians to be ready for every good work even within that despicable Roman government and among their ungodly Cretan neighbors.
4. To be honest I share the politically conservative view that government is not helping people when it simply puts them on the government dole. Like many of you, I fear a welfare state and what it means for our nation's future. But this verse means I have to ask what good work am I doing among my fellow Americans to help those in urgent need? Further, I also am convicted of the biblically conservative view that the local church and its treasury is not the proper agent for performing these kinds of good works. But have I forgotten that the actual point behind that doctrinal position is that passages like **Galatians 6:10** and **Titus 3:1** are commands to individuals? Have I been allowing a doctrinal position about the local church to be an excuse not to obey God's clear command to me as an individual Christian?

II. Christian Neighbors (**Titus 3:2**)

A. "To speak evil of no one":

1. In this verse, Paul expands on being ready to perform every good work, demonstrating that being a good citizen means being a good neighbor. We aren't just talking about how we relate to people who have an official position in the governing body. We are also talking about how we behave toward all the other citizens as well.
2. Remember that Paul is not saying don't speak evil of our brethren here. He is saying don't speak evil of any of the "Cretans" surrounding us. The word is "blaspheme." In this context, it means we are not to slander or malign others, even though that is exactly what they will do to us (cf. **I Peter 4:4**).
3. Certainly, this doesn't mean that we naively ignore the sin around us. Nor does it mean that we never correctly evaluate or rebuke the evil that folks around us commit. After all, that is exactly what Paul did in **Titus 1:10-16**. But this speaks against improper motivation. It also speaks against the natural inclination to retaliate tit for tat with those who speak against us. Rather than curse those who curse us, we are to offer a blessing and to pray for them (**Luke 6:28; Romans 12:14, 17**). While we may reasonably and critically evaluate the sins others commit in order to show them their need for the gospel, we must not devolve into personally malicious attacks. This would include bearing false witness or even passing on accusations for which we have no basis or proof.
4. Once again, I can't help but make application to our present political climate. It is all too easy to hit "forward" on some juicy e-mail to make our political opponents look bad. Paul is telling us that is wrong. Before you engage in political slandering ask yourself your motivation. Is it a reasoned look at and comparison of varying political positions or is it an assassination of character in order to manipulate people to simply adopt your political opinions. Are you speaking respectfully and honorably of all involved? Don't let our modern political climate govern your behavior. Let God's instruction govern it.

B. "To avoid quarreling":

1. According to **I Timothy 3:3**, a shepherd among God's people is one who has grown in this trait. They are not quarrelsome. Further, according to **II Timothy 2:24**, evangelists must not be quarrelsome. Sadly, it has been my experience that evangelists are some of the most quarrelsome people I know. Even sadder, I know I have been all up in the middle of it myself.
2. No this isn't saying that we avoid defending the faith. After all, **Titus 1:9** demonstrates that shepherds (and really all Christians) need to know how to defend the faith and rebuke those who contradict God's Word. But some Christians move from defending the faith to seeking a fight. They look for every opportunity to get in the face of a "Cretan" and engage in intellectual battle. Their motivation is not to defend the faith or win souls, but devolves into defending themselves and defeating their opponents in a verbal spar. They look for opportunities to withstand Cretans to the face about their every immoral decision as if getting into an argument about any and every potential doctrinal issue with a non-believer might be the thing that gets them to be one of us instead of just causing them to think that we are hateful, cranky, malcontents who just want to control everyone else's every waking thought and movement.
3. **Titus 3:9** also speaks to this. Some Christians will turn everything into an argument. They act as if every decision they make is on par with deciding whether Jesus is the Savior or not. I've seen Christians argue over

decisions like homeschooling vs. public schooling, nursing vs. bottle-feeding, cloth diapers vs. disposable, co-sleeping vs. independent sleeping. Really? Do we remotely think that Jesus died in order for us to micromanage every decision someone else makes? There is a time to defend the faith. But let's make sure we are defending the faith once for all delivered and not just our personal preference. And again, let me bring this home to our election year. It is perfectly fine for you to have your political opinions and persuasions. I encourage you to vote your conscience. I believe the Lord would even support you discussing your differences with others. But if we think that picking political fights with our neighbors and co-workers is glorifying God and furthering His cause, we are sadly mistaken. Jesus didn't die to make sure your political candidate makes it into office. He didn't even die to make sure that America passes laws that correspond with the Bible. Jesus died so we might be saved from our sins and that we might live free from sin no matter what our society and government does. He didn't die to make America a Christian nation. He died so that Americans (along with citizens from all nations) might become Christians. And trying to convince someone to vote for your political party is not the same as carrying the saving message of Jesus Christ to them and do not ever think that it is.

C. "To be gentle":

1. We are not only to avoid fighting and quarreling, but as if that is not enough, we are to take the positive quality of gentleness. That is be peaceable, equitable, fair, mild. Rather than pursuing fights, we are to be peace-makers (cf. **Matthew 5:9; Romans 12:18**). We try to get along with our neighbors. We don't look for opportunities to dispute with them. We look for opportunities to conciliate with them.
2. Certainly, there will be opportunities to share with them the nature of sin and judgment. But we do not pursue that with sadistic glee as if we are somehow better than them. We speak to them with kindness, fairness, and equity. It means treating them in their sinfulness the way we want to be treated in ours (cf. **Matthew 7:12**).
3. I certainly believe we need to stand firm on the principles of God's Word. But I think we make a mistake if we think standing firm on the principles of God's Word means yelling epithets of judgment and condemnation against people who are doing wrong. May I step on our toes for a minute and challenge us to consider how we address some of the moral and political hot button issues today? Since we are to be ready for every good work, wouldn't it be better and more fitting to volunteer some time at a crisis pregnancy center striving to counsel and influence those who are considering an abortion rather than yelling accusations at pro-abortionists as we line off in battle stance? By the way, there have certainly been some peaceful and gentle protests and I don't want to speak ill of those or any who have been involved in them. But sometimes these devolve into shouting matches that are anything but gentle.

D. "To show perfect courtesy toward all people":

1. The term translated "courtesy" in the ESV of **Titus 3:2** is the word most commonly translated gentleness or meekness. The word for "perfect" in this verse is the same as the one for "all" in reference to people. In other words, we are to show all courtesy, meekness, gentleness for all people. We are to show this even when we have to correct and restore those who are caught in transgressions (**Galatians 6:1**).
2. **II Timothy 2:25-26** explains that the evangelist is supposed to correct even his opponents with gentleness. This passage reminds us that the Cretans we live among are not the enemy. Rather they are prisoners of the enemy, and our dealings with them are to help them escape his snares and traps, not vilify them for becoming ensnared. Yes, we must always be ready to defend the hope we have. But we are to do so with gentleness (**I Peter 3:15-16**). The very reason for that is so our opponents may be put to shame when they want to vilify us for how we treat them. We must behave in such a way that they have no ground for accusing us of inappropriate behavior.
3. We have studied this word "meekness" and "gentleness" in other contexts. We know that it does not mean weakness. It is not a mild treatment because we fear those around us. It is not a submissive attitude forced upon us because we are weak and overcome by the Cretans around us. It is the same word that was used to describe a tamed animal such as a horse. A wild stallion filled with strength is broken and tamed but he doesn't become any less powerful as a race horse or show horse. Rather, that power and strength are there but held in check to accomplish a greater purpose.
4. The ESV translates this "perfect courtesy." This does not simply mean following the rules and forms of courteous exchanges. This doesn't simply mean checking off the verbal requirements of Robert's Rules of Order. Many of us have seen or experienced those debates where the opponents speak honoring words that suggest courtesy but follow them up with brutal wit and sarcasm that demonstrate anything but courtesy and gentleness. "My esteemed and worthy opponent once again demonstrates his amazing ability to say less in more time than anyone I know." "Perfect courtesy" means sincere, complete courtesy, not just satisfying some technical forms of courtesy.

III. But why? (**Titus 3:3-7**)

- A. If you are like me, these two verses are utterly shocking. They seem to fly in the face of all we would expect. Why aren't we supposed to get up in the faces of all these Cretans, hurling back the abuse they hurl at us? Why on earth are we supposed to submit to, honor, and obey such heathen rulers? Why should we treat with courtesy those who refuse to be courteous to us? Paul explains that in **Titus 3:3-8**. We learn that every practice we have is actually anchored in theology. These are not arbitrary rules that God has established to see how well we can follow them. He hasn't said these things simply to try to frustrate us and thwart our natural urges. What we believe about God and our salvation naturally leads to this behavior when we grasp what God has done for us. Paul provides two major reasons why we are to act like this even with Cretans.
- B. *We used to be just like them* (**Titus 3:3**).
1. I can hear the protests now. "But Paul, these Cretans are foolish, disobedient, led astray. They are unreasonable and malicious. They hate us." In fact, I have no doubt that some of my brethren who hear me make application of these passages to how we handle our politics want to respond, "But that other party is foolish and led astray. Their policies are ridiculous and ungodly."
 2. Paul faces that anticipated objection head on. That is no reason to be unsubmissive citizens or harsh neighbors. Why? Because we used to be just like them. As **Ephesians 2:1-3** explains, "we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind" (ESV), like the Cretans. We may try to claim we didn't go as far as they did, and maybe we haven't. We may try to compare ourselves to them and claim that we were more righteous than they are. But our eternal standing is not based on how our sinfulness compares to that of other sinners; it is based on how it compares to God (**Romans 3:23**). And the potential differences between us and the Cretans is miniscule compared to how far short we fall from God's holiness.
 3. We need to put ourselves in their shoes. It shouldn't be hard. We were once in their shoes. As **Matthew 7:12** said, we should treat them the way we want to be treated. If you were still in your sins, if you were still a worldly Cretan, how would you want someone to show you the way to God? How would you want to be treated? Would you want someone to malign you and pick fights with you? Or would you want someone to be gentle and courteous with you, treating you with respect. "But they don't deserve it," we cry. Think of it this way. How do we want God to treat us? The way we deserve? Or do we want Him to treat us with mercy and grace?
 4. Paul says we should treat even Cretans like this because we were no different.
- C. *We are different now because of God's grace not our righteousness* (**Titus 3:4-7**).
1. "Perhaps we were once like them," the objector replies. "But not anymore. We've changed. We've left that behind. We've repented. We don't act like that anymore. If they want to be treated better, they need to change like we have." But Paul anticipates that objection as well.
 2. We have changed. We are different. But that isn't because of us. It is the goodness and kindness of God that saved us from ourselves. And His salvation did not come to us because of any righteousness on our part. It was by His grace and mercy. It is the Holy Spirit who has renewed us, not we ourselves. We have been justified by God's grace, not our works. If it were not for the grace of God we would still be just like the rest of those Cretans. **Ephesians 2:4-10** makes the exact same point. We were not saved because we were rich in good works. Rather, we were saved because God was rich in mercy. He has made us alive with Christ. He has lifted us by His grace. We have nothing of which we can boast. We have nothing of which we can claim to be better than our neighbors and fellow earthly citizens. We walk in good works now, but that is because God is recreating us in Jesus Christ, not because we were strong enough to remake ourselves. As **Romans 7:14-23** claims, when we work based on our own decision and commitment, we only go back into sin. It is only by Jesus Christ that we are delivered from our body of death (**Romans 7:24-25**).
 3. Paul says we should treat even Cretans like this because our present difference is from God, not us.

Conclusion:

Paul concludes in **Titus 3:8**, since we were once just like the worldly Cretans, and since we have only changed by the mercy of God, the renewal of the Holy Spirit, and the grace of Jesus Christ, we must devote ourselves to good works. We must not attack the worldly Cretans. Rather, we must act as good citizens and good neighbors no matter how they treat us. Paul told Titus to remind the Cretan Christians of this. I think we too need the reminder, especially this year.

ⁱ <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/internecine>

ⁱⁱ This description of Cretan culture and Roman life under Nero's rule comes from the following sources, as does much of the explanation of the seven directives for Christian citizens and neighbors:

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ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong=G5293&t=ESV>