

192 Adorning the doctrine of God our Saviour

The three "pastoral Epistles" of the New Testament, I and II Timothy and Titus, contain such a wealth of down-to-earth instruction for daily Christian conduct. In recent weeks we have been told of our need to keep our consciences clean and pure, and to put things right in that department when there is need; to "guard the Deposit" of Christian doctrine in the face of falsehood and error; to stand firm in resistance on the spiritual battlefield in which we all find ourselves; and, from Ephesians 6, to understand and apply the various pieces of the "whole armour" which the Lord has supplied for our use and protection.

This week we shall reach a simple little phrase in the letter to Titus. Paul is giving instruction to Titus, who, like Timothy, is younger than Paul both physically and spiritually, and needs guidance over how to conduct his ministry in Crete. As always in the canon of Scripture, we thank God that these words, written in this case through the human agent of Paul, are first and foremost Holy Spirit-words, addressed not only to Titus, but to us all.

For Titus, we come across a similar scene to that being experienced by Timothy in his work in Ephesus - the reality of much opposition in various forms, and the need for Titus to stand firm and strong in "the Deposit" of Christian truth. Titus is urged, "But you, speak things which are fitting to sound doctrine" (Titus 2.1, Literal), and this is followed by how Titus is to help the older men and women, and the younger women and men, in that order, for whom he is spiritually responsible (2.2-6). The order of coverage of each of these four groups has some significance, emphasising on this occasion the responsibility that the older women have towards their younger counterparts. Here is a timely reminder for those of us, both men and women of course, who are older in years and spiritual understanding, of the responsibilities we have, especially towards those of our own gender, who are following on after us.

Perhaps the widespread social and spiritual chaos we see today is due in part to this old, obvious lesson being neglected by the older generation. There may be times when we clearly need to speak up, but refrain from doing so so as to "keep the peace". But if that timely word from us was never uttered, and things go terribly wrong later on in a younger life for whom we have some responsibility, nothing has been gained and so much has been lost.

Then Titus is urged to hold himself forth as "a pattern of good works in all things", including both his teaching of doctrine and his putting this doctrine into practice in his own life (2.7-8). Quite apart from the intrinsic rightness of such behaviour, it would mean that opponents of the Christian Faith and its adherents "may be ashamed, having nothing bad to say about you" (2.8b).

The next folk mentioned whom Titus is to assist in their Christian living are servants, literally "slaves", many of whom as new Christians found themselves working for not-Christian masters. In most cases this "slavery" was a far cry from how we would understand such a term these days; it referred more to the particular legal relationship between the boss and the worker, with both sides benefitting from the arrangement. Nevertheless Christian slaves were not to take any liberties in this system, being taught here to - "be subject to their own masters, well-pleasing in everything, not speaking against them, not stealing, but showing all fidelity" - and why is such behaviour necessary? - "that they may adorn the doctrine of our Saviour God in everything" (2.9-10).

We are so used to the need for self-effacement in our Christian lives that the notion of us - you, me, any of us - "adorning" anything takes a bit of getting used to! But there it is, from the Holy Spirit Himself: lives built soundly on the great doctrinal truths of the Christian "Deposit", lives which thereby display straightforward goodness in all its forms, without affectation or "just-look-at-me!" motives, really are an "adornment". In modern parlance, they are a positive, living advertisement for the Christian Gospel with all that that entails.

Such lives are needed these days as much as they have ever been, and, by the sole gift of God's grace so freely given to us in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, we have the calling and the means to live them.

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