



Dealing with Toxic Cretans

Titus 1:10-16

Spiritually healthy churches attract spiritually toxic people

Titus' mission on Crete was to bolster the leadership in city house churches throughout the island so that those leaders (elders) would then confront the false teaching that was going on. It was an unpleasant task: Titus, an expert trouble shooter, was challenged to select and train leaders who would then take care of spurious doctrine. It meant showing up in the homes of others; lovingly, gracefully, yet boldly identifying and engaging the problems that were being brought on by those who wanted to make money off other believers. As wrong as this is, Paul's primary goal is not expulsion but correction. *"Therefore, rebuke them sharply so that they will be sound in the faith."* (v.13)

It's a good reminder that local church life is not all rose-colored. Occasionally, the church will attract the toxic; people who are not safe; people without boundaries; people who try to worm their way in and cozy up to others in the attempt to manipulate them for self-centered reasons. Some of these toxic folks are so clueless that they don't see the damage they're doing to the church family at large. Or, they know exactly what they're doing but could care less. Paul says that they are "detestable, disobedient, and unfit for doing anything good." Toxic people won't go away. They have to be dealt with.

The worst thing church leaders can do to toxic Cretans is . . . nothing. Yet so often, because church people desire peace, their response is, "Well, we're Christians; we need to love everyone; we shouldn't judge . . . etc." And they let one dysfunctional individual hold the rest of the church hostage because the rest of the church can't figure out what Jesus would do. See if this quote is true where you lead:

Almost every *struggling* church (read: organization) has at least one dysfunctional bully who goes out of the way to be a big fish in a small pond. Often, that is the primary reason the church is struggling. This person gets a sense of self-worth by keeping the church so intimidated, either by actions or money, that very little can happen without the person's approval. The sad thing is that most of the leaders know this person presents a stumbling block to the church's future, but they will not do anything about it. The church leaders ignore the bully thinking that is the Christian thing to do. In doing so they assist in the congregation's stunted growth or decline.¹

Big mistake.

¹ Bill Easum, *On Not Being Nice for the Sake of the Gospel* (Net Results, April 1997).

How to deal with spiritually toxic people: Identify and Take Initiative

Identifying what's toxic

Can you identify toxic teaching and their teachers? John Stott is of help:

What does good teaching like? Is the origin human or divine? Revelation or tradition? Is its essence inward or outward? Spiritual or ritual? Is the result a transformed life or a formalized creed? What does a good teacher look like? Check the quality or character of the teacher's life. A tree is known by its fruit! What one believes and how one lives are inseparable. And the gospel will always lead to godliness.

Ben Witherington wrote that the issue on Crete is about two competing visions cast by competing visionaries:

Elder

House manager
Blameless
Not pursuing dishonest gain
Not quick-tempered or intemperate
Holding fast to sound doctrine
Truthful and refuting error

False Teacher

House wrecker
Defiled conscience and work
Unscrupulous teaching for gain
Acting like a wild beast
Pursuing myths and human commands
Liar, deceiver, embracing error

The stakes are high because the church will become whatever competing vision wins! This is why vv. 5-9 insist that godly pastor-teachers are needed on Crete.

Taking initiative to correct it

The way to fight bad teaching is with good teaching. It won't go away. It won't get better on its own. House churches will be ravaged and ruined if some godly elders don't step up and say something. *Paul wants the good teachers to rebuke the bad teachers so that the bad teachers will become good teachers by means of good teaching!* Sound doctrine is gospel-centered, grounded in the Cross.

Many sermons tell people to say no to immorality. Often the reasons are "it is against the Bible" or "it will hurt your self-esteem" or "it's against our Christian principles," or "your sins will find you out." Those things are true, but they are inadequate and secondary motives. Only the grace of God, Titus says, "teaches" us to say no. It argues with us: "You are not living as though you are loved! As his child! As heirs having the hope of eternal life! We are to be holy and godly and pure—not because Jesus will abandon us but rather because at enormous price He has said He won't ever abandon you! How can you live in the very sin that Jesus was ripped to pieces to deliver you from? (Tim Keller)

It takes good teaching to reform bad teachers. And what if after rebuking, the bad teachers remain unfazed? We'll get to that in Titus 3:10-11. But that's for later.

Two very important questions for now

- What toxic behavior must I confront on my island of Crete?
- What toxic behavior must I confront in my life?