

WHERE ARE THE CHURCHES FOR CHRIST?

Today's Text: Titus, Chaps. 1-3

Extracts:

- **To Titus [from Paul], a true son in our common faith: grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ our Saviour. For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should *set in order the things that are lacking*, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you [Titus 1: 4-5]**
- ***For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ [Titus 2: 11-13]***
- **This is a faithful saying, and these things I want you to affirm constantly, that those who have believed in God should be careful to maintain good works [Titus 3: 8]**

On Thursday, 23 February 2017, Pope Francis, the head of the Catholic Church with a membership of well over one billion, delivered the homily during morning Mass at Casa Santa Marta in Rome.¹ It was based, among the day's readings, on the Gospel of Mark where Jesus says that it is better to be drowned than to cause others to sin [Mk 9:42]. The Pope said, "If you're a Christian who exploits people, leads a double life or manages a 'dirty' business, perhaps it's better not to call yourself a believer." He added, "What is scandal? Scandal is saying one thing and doing another."

That is a timely wake-up call, especially coming from the head of the largest and oldest Christian denomination in the world. Every church I know has similar skeletons in its cupboard, but why is there such a deafening silence? Why are we keeping dirt under a carpet that is already too swollen and stinky? As we face end times, we need to see the churches that are standing up for and with Christ. Is your church one of them? Is it user-friendly or God-fearing? In today's Bible study verses, Paul takes up with Titus, the young pastor in the church at Crete, the need to build a congregation of true believers with God-fearing elders and members. There is so much that we can learn therefrom for today's congregations.

¹ Story is based on Daniel Burke, CNN Religion Editor, "Pope suggests it's better to be an atheist than a bad Christian," February 23, 2017; <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/02/23/world/pope-atheists-again/>.

1. Background: Challenging times call for more committed church leaders and members

The church has been defined as “the body of Christ” [Eph. 4: 12; Col. 1: 24], or “the house of God” [1 Pet. 4: 17] or the “bride of Christ” [Eph. 5: 22-26; Rev. 19: 6-8]. As the bride of Christ, it is clothed with fine linen, that is, “the righteous acts of the saints” [Rev. 19: 8]. A true marriage requires the voluntary consent of the bride [Gen. 24: 57-58]. Therefore, *we can define the church as a voluntary association of worshippers who have accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. In that sense, the church is the school that prepares true believers for life after life.* The Psalmist states, “God stands in the congregation of the mighty” [Ps. 82: 1]. The ungodly shall not stand in the judgment nor sinners “in the congregation of the righteous” [Ps. 1: 5]. So, if church membership is voluntary², why should anybody come there to want to pollute it?

The answer is simple: criminals counterfeit the highest denomination of any currency! For example, the hundred (US) dollar bill is more targeted by counterfeiters than the one-dollar bill. So, when the sons of God came to present themselves before God, Satan also came among them [Job 1: 6]. When Jesus came into the synagogue in Capernaum on the Sabbath, there was a man, presumably one of the worshippers, who had an unclean spirit that cried out, “Let us alone! ...I know who You are- the Holy One of God!” [Mk 1: 21-24]. Indeed, a virus lives where it can thrive best! So, *the church is a very attractive place for the good, the bad and the ugly.* That is why you need to pay serious attention to today’s discussion. *There are enemies who want to snatch the joy of salvation from you in your place of worship and they are from unexpected quarters!* For example, they could even be your ministers, elders, counsellors, family or friends. How can we see and avoid the booby traps set for us by Satan and his angels?

Paul’s letter to Titus, the young pastor in charge of the church at Crete, serves as a good study guide. As in his first letter to Timothy, Chapter 3, Paul concentrated on the building blocks of a church that can withstand the wiles of Satan and guide true worshippers to salvation by Christ Jesus. Since *the church is about its members, not the elegant building or padded pews*, Paul emphasized the qualities that worshippers of all categories should have in order to win. He wrote, “I left you [Titus] in Crete, that you should *set in order the things that are lacking*, and *appoint elders in every city as I commanded you*” [Titus 1: 5]. Here are the key points to note in Paul’s letter:

a) *Qualities of true church ministers*

Church ministers were required to be “*blameless*, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination.” More specifically, a bishop “must be blameless- as a steward of God, not

² A recent Supreme Court ruling in Nigeria has affirmed this principle:
<http://www.vanguardngr.com/2017/02/s-court-sacks-assemblies-god-leader-rev-emeka/>

self-willed, not quick-tempered, not given to wine, not violent, ***not greedy for money.***” Instead, bishops are expected to be hospitable, lovers of what is good, sober-minded, just, holy and self-controlled. They are to ***hold fast “the faithful word” as they have been taught so that they can “by sound doctrine... exhort and convict those who contradict” [vv. 6-9].***

Take your eyes off the “book” and what do you see around you in your place of worship? In some churches, priests are defiling altar boys and girls and the matter is rather hushed up than dealt with so as to preserve “our public image”! A pastor cannot be questioned on how church funds are being spent and there are no reliable records. Promotion to higher ranks is not based on spiritual standing but on political and other worldly considerations. It may not, therefore, be surprising that those looking for salvation will have to move from one congregation to another- often with frustrating results. Some people even give up worship altogether and become atheists.

b) *How about the other elders-male and female?*

Paul enjoined Titus to “speak the things which are proper for sound doctrine” to the elders, male and female, among others. The ***older men*** should be “sober, reverent, temperate, sound in faith, in love [and] in patience.” The ***older women*** should likewise be reverent in behaviour, not slanderers, not given to much wine, and be teachers of good things [**Titus 2: 1-3**].

Modern churches also face challenges here. For example, when the church is an opportunity for fashion parade, you can be sure that gossip and envy become popular distractions! ***Emphasis shifts from the evidence of spiritual fruits to inordinate pursuits/demonstrations of spiritual gifts***, especially speaking in tongues and prophecies. The church becomes a clearance house for political and business deals- with the tacit approval/benign neglect of the pastors and ministers! The words of Jesus to the scribes and Pharisees, quoting Prophet Isaiah, state: “These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honour Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” [**Matt. 15: 8-9**].

c) *What of the youths?*

Paul asked Titus to admonish the ***young women*** to love their husbands and their children, to be “discreet, chaste, homemakers, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be blasphemed.” Likewise, he should exhort the ***young men*** to be “sober-minded in all things, showing [themselves] to be a pattern of good works; in doctrine showing integrity, reverence, incorruptibility, sound speech that cannot be

condemned.” *Bondservants* should be obedient to their masters, “not pilfering, but showing all good fidelity, that they may adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things” [Titus 2: 4-10].

What are the youths learning from the adults that they look up to in today’s congregations? Impunity? Hypocrisy? Affluenza³? You name it! The word of God says, “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it” [Prov. 22: 6]. It can go either way!

From the forgoing, Paul is alerting Titus and us that there is so much work to do in our churches. *In our midst are leaders and followers who profess to know God but “in works they deny Him, being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work” [Titus 1: 16].* As Peter has warned us, “The time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God, and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God? [1 Pet. 4: 17]. *Therefore, we must sit up and find an answer to this question: Is your church for Christ? What can you do to make it the training ground that prepares believers for life after life?*

2. Lessons for the modern churches

Paul wrote: “The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age; looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ” [Titus 2: 11-13]. That is an excellent summary of what the church is and should be all about. What lessons can we learn from Paul’s letter to Titus that can help us to operate churches of today that can lead believers to Christ? Here are some good guides, among others:

a) *Build institutions*

In an era of human freedom where national laws are even being made to equate evil rights with civil rights⁴, there may be the need to build institutions that will make it easier to promote true worship. It is like putting the spiritual equivalent of physical and electronic gadgets that will “force” people to obey laws, not because they want to but they do not want to be caught and embarrassed- “be sure your sin will find you out” [Num. 32: 23]. For example, when the early post-Pentecostal church was spreading, some foreigners complained against the Hebrews, that their

³ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/affluenza> : the unhealthy and unwelcome psychological and social effects of affluence regarded especially as a widespread societal problem

⁴ “Is sin a civil or an evil right? *Weekly Bible Study Series*, Vol. 8 No.10, 1 April 2007; http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume_8/PDFs/Sinaciviloranevilright.pdf

widows were neglected in the daily distribution. The twelve apostles knew that they could not combine administrative chores with their spiritual work. So, they summoned the multitude of disciples and asked them to seek out from among themselves seven men “of **good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom**” whom they would appoint for administration. That was how Phillip and Stephen (among other five people) were selected and appointed. The result was that “**the word of God spread and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith**” [Acts 6: 1-7].

There are opportunities for members to be appointed and serve as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers “for the equipping of the saints, for the work of the ministry [and] for the edifying of the body of Christ” [Eph. 4: 11-12]. **Every member has a role to play and operating rules and procedures can be designed for coordination, delegation and accountability in a truly transparent manner.** People are motivated to contribute their best because they can see how important doing their work well means to the success of the total system. Leaders soon discover that NOBODY is indispensable and EVERY member has something to give.

b) *Enforce discipline*

Paul wrote: “Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition, knowing that such a person is warned and sinning, being self-condemned” [Titus 3: 10-11]. In other words, nobody should be above discipline. **The rules and regulations should apply equally to the clergy and the laity, to those on the pulpit as well as those in the pews.** For example, Paul wrote to the church at Corinth to put away from among them any member “named a brother who is sexually immoral, or covetous or an idolater or a reviler or a drunkard or an extortioner.” They should not even eat with such a person [1 Cor. 5: 9-13]. Once rules are applied firmly and uniformly, no matter who is affected, worshippers are likely to fall in line. That will in turn allow true worship to flourish.

Happily, Jesus has laid out the grievance procedure in a dispute between a member and another. First, go alone to the offending party to lay your grievance. If not settled at that level, the offended party can take one or two witnesses to hear and resolve the dispute. Where they still fail, the matter should be referred to the whole church. If the offender still refuses to heed the church, then s(he) should be treated as “a heathen and a tax collector”, that is, treated as an outsider, no longer as a member [Matt. 18: 15-17]. **We should stop looking at faces and focus on strict and impartial application of rules, policies and regulations.**

c) *Focus on salvation*

As the bride of Christ, the main mission of the church on earth is to serve as the sanctuary for believers on the way to salvation in heaven. Therefore, in everything that is done there, the emphasis must be on true worship and salvation. In the words of Jesus, “For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?” [Matt. 16: 26]. For example, even though Stephen and Philip were appointed administrators, they went on to make significant contributions to spreading the gospel of Christ. Stephen became the first martyr of the post-Pentecostal era [Acts 7: 54-60] while through Philip, the gospel first reached Africa by the hand of the Ethiopian eunuch [Acts 8: 26-40].

The church on earth is to be populated by “sojourners and pilgrims” [1 Pet. 2: 11]. Like ambassadors, pilgrims see themselves as tourists or visitors here but their home is elsewhere. Their loyalty should be much more to the home country “out there” than their present abode. Therefore, the church should play the role of preparing believers for their homes in heaven, with emphasis on salvation. It does that best by members of the congregation showing themselves to the world “as an epistle of Christ ... written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, that is, the heart” [2 Cor. 3: 2-3]. Only churches for Christ exhibit such qualities. Is yours one of them? That is the question Paul is asking all of us from today’s lesson.

3. Conclusion: With God all things are possible!

When Jesus once told His disciples how hard it is “for those who trust in riches to enter the Kingdom of God,” they were surprised. Then, Peter asked Him, “See, we have left everything to follow You.” What then was in there for them? Jesus replied, “With God, all things are possible.” Everyone who has given up family and material things for His sake and the gospel’s shall receive a hundredfold of material blessings now “and in the age to come eternal life” [Mk 10: 23-30]. That promise is not to denominations or specific places of worship but to the individuals in them who can keep themselves as the temples of the Holy Spirit [1 Cor. 6: 19] and of the living God [2 Cor. 6: 16].

No SINGLE church can pass Christ’s spiritual test of righteousness, as the seven churches in Asia Minor demonstrated [Rev. Chaps 2-3]. So, you may never find one that is totally for Christ. Therefore, you should worry more about yourself than your church. Once you are in Christ, your temple (body) is for Christ. Keep it that way until the day you are called home to eternity.

That may look hard but, with God, all things are possible!