

## God Cannot Lie

### Titus 1:1-4

What in the world is going on? Crowds of young people, camped out in a public park in New York City, are protesting the national financial system. But what exactly the protesters want remains unclear.

Similar protests are spreading around the world. Many European governments are finding themselves unable to pay their debts and are in danger of defaulting on their loans. When these governments try to reduce spending, strident protests have ensued. Meanwhile, the US Congress remains deadlocked on how to solve our own significant and growing fiscal problems. How will our government fulfill all those promises it has made to retirees without sufficient younger workers to pay the bills? No one seems to know.

And of course the Presbyterian Church is awash in a sea of uncertainty. We have an entirely new Form of Government for the first time since our denomination was created in 1983, and it won't be until next summer's General Assembly that we know for sure what it all means. And then there's our new flexibility in ordination standards. Presbyteries can now decide for themselves what beliefs and behaviors they consider essential for their members, and these essentials are radically different across the breadth of the denomination. Who's right? Who's wrong? Who knows? And how can any of us hope to figure it out?

Titus was facing a similar situation in his own ministry. He had gotten his start by accompanying Paul on several of those missionary journeys we've read about in the book of Acts. We know that Paul faced many problems and encountered many conflicts along those journeys, and Titus would doubtless have shared in those difficulties. But for Titus, those hardships had to have been at least somewhat bearable, because he knew that Paul there to encourage him and to give him guidance.

In a similar fashion, Titus had been sent on some difficult missions on Paul's behalf. He had hand-delivered some of Paul's correspondence to Corinth, and had thus had a hand in settling some of the conflicts within that congregation. But again, it wasn't like Titus had to figure out what to do about the difficulties the Corinthians faced. He had Paul's letter as an undisputed source of authority.

But at the time Titus received this letter, he found himself in a much more challenging situation. Although Paul had taken the initiative to preach the gospel to the people on the island of Crete, Titus had been left as what we would call the organizing pastor of the new church

development projects going on there. And according to verse 5, there seem to have been groups of believers on the island in different cities. That means Titus would probably have had a lot of travelling to do in order to visit and teach all these new Christians.

To make matters worse, given Paul's subsequent instructions about the qualifications of elders it seems that Titus hadn't yet completed the process of identifying and training those ruling elders who could help him with all of his pastoral tasks. And now, as verses 10 and following indicate, serious theological disputes had arisen among the new believers under his care. How in the world was he supposed to know how to proceed? In such a situation, no doubt Paul's letter was a tremendous relief.

In our current situation, wouldn't we also welcome some practical advice? I'd love to be able to ask Dr. Freundt about the new Form of Government. Wouldn't it be great to talk with Mr. CY or Mr. Lindsay about our new ordination standards? What would they suggest that we do?

Well, we may not be able to get a personal letter the way that Titus did, but we can certainly take advantage of the same advice that he received. For ultimately, the same authority on which Titus could rely is still available for us today. The good news is that we can rely on the authority of the apostles, just as Titus did.

Take a look at verse 1, where Paul calls himself an apostle of Jesus Christ. Likewise, in verse 3, Paul states that God's word was committed to Paul according to the commandment of God. The fact is that God has sent messengers to tell us things about Him – the prophets in the Old Testament and the apostles in the New Testament. And it is our responsibility to listen to those whom God has sent.

This is what it means to be part of the apostolic church. We are not supposed to trust in our own experience or in our own reason to figure out what to do in confusing situations. We should not dare to dream up what we believe about God for ourselves. No, as verse 1 says, we are to acknowledge that there is truth, and that God has entrusted this truth to those whom He has sent. We are to base our thoughts and our actions on the Scriptures that His apostles and prophets have given us, Scriptures that include this letter. There is a sense, therefore, in which this letter wasn't just written for Titus, the circuit-riding church planter in Ancient Crete. No, this apostolic letter has authority for modern American Christians today.

And that is in no small part because the authority of the apostles comes from God Himself, the ultimate authority to which we must always appeal. You note that in verse 1, Paul doesn't begin by calling himself an apostle. The first title he uses for himself is a servant of God. Of

course, in the Greek this title is an even more humble one – perhaps even a bit shocking. Paul is actually calling himself a slave of God.

Now, think about that. It would have been easy for Paul to be proud. Paul was the one who had taken all those risks on his extensive missionary journeys. Paul was the great evangelist, who had suffered so much opposition and abuse in order that the Gentiles might hear the gospel. Paul was the one who was giving the wise advice to Titus, the one Paul called his son in the faith.

But instead of giving in to the pride which is all too common among those of us in the ministry, Paul instead insists that, just as we stand under the authority of God's apostles, those apostles stood completely under the authority of God. Paul considered himself to be nothing more than a slave, someone whose every action is directed by his master. If Paul therefore tells us something in this letter, it is only because God first told Paul to say that.

And that is, in fact, what Paul is claiming in this letter. Look at verse 3. Paul says that God has revealed His word through preaching, specifically the preaching that was committed to Paul. The opinions of all too many modern theologians to the contrary, there can therefore be no daylight between the words of God and the words of the Scriptures. God in His sovereign power has chosen to reveal things about Himself through the proclamation of His apostles. What business do we have in rejecting or questioning their words?

But the most important reason that we believe God's word as transmitted to us by His prophets and apostles is found in verse 2: God cannot lie. Now, think about that for a moment. It would be one thing for Paul to tell us that God does not lie, that God is completely trustworthy. That idea alone would be most welcome in our modern era, torn as it is by so many conflicting opinions. Just to know that God's Word in Scripture is always reliable would be of great comfort indeed.

But Paul goes so far as to say that God cannot lie. And this just agrees with what Jesus said about Himself in our responsive reading this morning: I am the Truth. Jesus didn't just say that He would tell us the truth. Jesus said He is the truth.

What does that mean? Of course it means that there is only one standard, only one rule against which all other truth claims must be measured. But that is because God Himself in His own being defines what is true. That which is true is that which is in agreement with God. That which is false is that which doesn't line up with Who God is and what God says. God cannot lie because God is truth.

And that, in turn, means that God is the only One Who determines what is proper for us to believe and to do. God is the only One Who can say what is right and what is wrong. As verse 1 says, truth is in accord with godliness – that means that godly behavior is determined only by God's truth.

Now, make no mistake. This letter will go on to challenge many of our modern assumptions about what is proper and what is improper, about what is right and what is wrong within the Church. In fact, wherever we look in the Bible, we find all sorts of truth claims that fly in the face of what makes sense to us. Turn the other cheek? Love your enemies? We may not like everything Paul and the rest of the prophets and the apostles have to say. We may not want to agree with everything Jesus says.

But if God is truth, and if God always tells the truth and if God has chosen to reveal His truth through His prophets and apostles, what other choice do we have but to accept the Word of God, not on our terms, but on its terms? If God's word says it, and if God cannot lie, where else could truth possibly be found?

But the good news is that what God tells us in His infallible Word is the best news we could possibly hear. For not only does God give us an inerrant standard by which to make sense out of all the chaos in the world around us. God also tells us the most wonderful news of all – the news about Jesus.

The amazing truth, the essence of the gospel, is what Paul tells us in verse 4: Jesus of Nazareth, a man who lived some 2000 years ago in a place we now call Israel, was the Christ, the Messiah, the promised anointed Son of David whom God's prophets had predicted would rule and reign over the whole world. But this man Jesus is also the Lord. He is God, the second person of the divine Trinity, perfect in all His words and all His ways. As we sang this morning, Jesus is Son of God and Son of Man.

And it is precisely because Jesus is a man, one of us, that He can stand in our place. At the same time it is because of His perfection and because of His infinite worth that when Jesus died on the cross, He was able to pay the penalty that all the sins of all His people throughout all time have deserved. Paul simply puts it this way: Jesus is our Savior.

But the good news is that Jesus also rose from the dead on the third day. That's how He can send messengers like Paul to tell us the good news – Jesus is even now ruling and reigning over all the world. That's how He can keep that beautiful promise He made in our responsive reading that He will someday take us to live with Him forever. The risen Christ has promised to

share the eternal life He now enjoys with all those who trust in Him as verse 2 says. Because Jesus lives, all His people will live with Him forever.

Yes, that's the glorious good news: that God has extended salvation by His grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. But the only reason we know this good news, the only way we can learn about the salvation offered in the Person and Work of Jesus Christ, the only way we can share in the common faith of Paul and Titus is to listen to and to believe what the slaves of God, the messengers of God, the apostles of God have told us about Jesus. Unless we stand on the firm foundation of God's Word alone, we can have no confidence in the good news about Jesus.

So in the midst of our confusing world, in the midst of our conflicted denomination, take heart. God has saved His people. God has spoken to His people. And God cannot lie.