

Text: Titus 3:8-11

This is a trustworthy statement; and concerning these things I want you to speak confidently, so that those who have believed God will be careful to engage in good deeds. These things are good and profitable for men. But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and strife and disputes about the Law, for they are unprofitable and worthless. Reject a factious man after a first and second warning, knowing that such a man is perverted and is sinning, being self-condemned.

There was a meeting at a church, one evening, to plan the annual Missions Conference. This was a big deal, for that congregation, it was one of the most important events on their calendar. After opening with prayer, the chairperson of the committee asked if anyone had ideas for the theme of this year's conference.

Brother Bob eagerly stood up and passed around some sketches he had drawn. "I was thinking our theme should be: *Shining the Light of Jesus*, and here are a couple of verses that we could use for our Scripture readings, here are some drawings of what bulletins could look like." Everyone was impressed.

"Thanks Brother Bob," The leader of the committee said. "Before we go on with the meeting, I should ask if anyone else has ideas they want to share?"

Sister Sue anxiously stood up and opened her notebook: "I was thinking our theme could be: *Sharing the Love of Christ*. Here are some verses that we could use for the Scripture readings. I've even picked out some songs that I think would fit well with the conference." Again, everyone was impressed, and wondered how they were going to choose between the two ideas.

"Wow! I want to thank both of you for your work, these are great ideas. Let's open the meeting up for discussion before we take a vote."

Brother Bob didn't wait for anyone else to speak. He bellowed, "I just want to remind the group that we used Sister Sue's ideas the last two years, and so it makes sense to go with my idea this time."

Sister Sue chimed in saying, "Well it's true, we have gone with my idea the last couple of years. But if my ideas are better, then why not use them again this year too?"

Immediately, the spirit of the meeting changed, from cooperation to confrontation. It went downhill, rather quickly, from there with different members taking sides, arguing back and forth. The chairperson tried to regain control of the discussion, but it was too late. People went home that evening upset, with hurt feelings, and the committee hadn't accomplished anything productive.

Two suggestions had been shared: *Shining the Light of Jesus*, and *Sharing the Love of Christ*. Ironically, the members of that church were not doing a very good job, at that particular moment of fulfilling either one.

There are few things that can hinder the ministry of a church, or damage its testimony in the world, like divisions. When a congregation is filled with contention and strife, it won't be very effective at impacting the world with the gospel or building the faith of God's people. When believers allow themselves to be divided, they won't be very effective in their desire to serve Christ or grow in their walk with the Lord.

That's why the apostle Paul constantly wrote to the churches, urging believers to preserve the unity of the Spirit, and the bond that we share in Christ. There were all sorts of issues that threatened to cause division in the different churches: sometimes it was false teaching, other times it was a personality conflict, sometimes it was disagreements over trivial things. But no matter what the source of contention might have been, it posed a serious threat.

Here in our passage, in the third chapter of Titus, the apostle expressed concern for the churches in Crete. He has already discussed the importance of preserving doctrinal integrity of the church, and the need to be on guard against false teachers who would lead God's people astray. Now he goes on to warn Titus of the dangers of contention and strife that may be the result of these disruptive influences.

If the ministry of a church is hindered when God's people are divided, we must do everything possible to preserve Christian unity.

1. That means, first of all, we must avoid foolish arguments. (v.9)

Look at verse 9. *“But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and strife and disputes about the Law, for they are unprofitable and worthless.”*

There are some things that are not worth arguing about, they are silly, unimportant, insignificant in the grand scheme of things. That doesn't mean that the church should be afraid of controversy. Paul certainly was not one to shy away from a debate when it was over something serious: like how a person is saved, or who Jesus is. He was fierce defender of the faith, and we ought to emulate that example. But he had learned to distinguish between the things that are worth arguing about and the things that are not worth the energy. Maybe it was from looking back on his days as a Pharisee. The Pharisees were really good at splitting theological hairs, and debating things like how many angels can dance on the head of pin. He had moved beyond that.

He mentions some of those insignificant issues, here, in the passage. These were some of things people were arguing about in the churches. A lot of these disputes had been instigated by false teachers who were promoting some strange ideas. They apparently spent a great deal of time examining passages, in the OT, where the descendants of Adam, or Abraham, or Jacob are listed. You know, verses like: “Seth begat Enosh, and Enosh begat Kenan, and Kenan begat Mahalalel, and Mahalalel begat Jared...” and so on. These are verses most of us try to skim through as quickly as possible. But some people, in Paul's day, were fascinated with these

genealogies, and would take an obscure name, mentioned nowhere else in the Bible, and create all kinds of legends about them. One commentator says, “They were fanciful Jewish tales... [where] lists of ancestors were amplified, [and names] were invented... [it was] full of a lot of silly stuff that was unworthy of serious attention and created nothing but fussing and fighting with true Christians and deceived those Christians who were not yet well grounded.” *Lenski, R. C. H. (1937). The interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon (pp. 940–941, 500). Columbus, OH: Lutheran Book Concern.*

In another passage, **1 Timothy 1:3-4**, Paul warns believers “...[not] to pay attention to myths and endless genealogies, which give rise to mere speculation rather than furthering the administration of God which is by faith.”

Don’t pay attention to these things! Don’t listen to their arguments! Don’t get sucked in to their debates! People who spend their time arguing about those kinds of things have their focus in the wrong place. They are majoring on the minors. They are so consumed with minute details, which are of little consequence, that they miss out on the things that truly matter.

So what if you can recite all of the legends created about the people in these genealogies. Do you know the person who is at the end of those genealogies: the son of David, the descendant of Abraham, and the second Adam... Jesus Christ? Because He is the one all of Scripture is about, and if we miss that, we miss everything. You can become so consumed with the details, that you completely miss the big picture. How sad that would be.

Titus could spend a lot of energy, wading into those debates, trying to correct these people, but chances are he would be wasting time. Instead, he needed to focus his efforts on proclaiming the gospel, and teaching the truth of God’s Word.

Obviously, there aren’t many churches today that are caught up in that specific debate, arguing over OT genealogies, but there are plenty of foolish controversies that can distract us, and would sidetrack our ministry, if we let them.

A Sunday School class could get into a heated debate over a relatively minor question like: “who wrote the book of Hebrews?” One person insists, “It was Paul,” another declares, “It was Barnabas,” and someone else says, “It was Apollos.” Those are all possibilities, but at the end of the day we have to acknowledge that we really don’t know, and it doesn’t matter, it wouldn’t change the meaning of the book one way or another. If God decided not to reveal that to us, in His Word, and if Christians have been asking that questions for centuries, chances are we’re probably not going to be the ones who solve the question.

A person might stand up, in a meeting, and declare, “I like contemporary worship songs, and I think they are the only ones we should sing.” Another person might stand up and say, “I like traditional songs, and I think we should only sing out of the hymnbook.” We could round and round on that debate, but the reality is, God’s Word doesn’t specify one style of song over another. If we were to go back in time, and participate in worship with the early church, I guarantee all of their songs would sound entirely different from what we are used to today. Why not use both styles? The Lord has gifted many people, throughout church history, to compose lots of different songs, and we can appreciate all of them. Any song that is biblically sound, and

brings glory to God, is appropriate. It's not the sound of our voice, but the attitude of our heart, that matters most to God.

There are a lot of questions, like this, that are simply not answered in Scripture, but believers continue to debate. But if the answer is not found in Scripture, I have to be careful not to be so dogmatic in my point of view.

I remember getting involved in a foolish debate, when I was a student in Bible College. I happened to overhear a couple of guys in the dorm talking about something they had studied in class (election and free will). That's not actually a silly argument, but what was silly is how I acted in that situation. I figured that I was an upperclassman, and had taken a few more theology courses than they had, so I was in a position to explain the matter to them more clearly. I acted like I had all the answers, but I didn't. And even though they were gracious with me, my pride almost turned their peaceful discussion into a full blown debate.

Sometimes we need to take a deep breath, step back, and regain perspective. Is this worth arguing about? Is this worth fighting over?

Again, I'm not suggesting that churches should try to steer away from all controversial subjects. Sadly, there are some churches that are afraid or unwilling to address certain subjects because they don't want to risk offending anyone. But we have to speak about these things, regardless of how we will be received. There are times when we have to draw lines in the sand, and say, "we can go along with this," or "we can't go along with that." If we don't, then we are compromising our message, and will have nothing to offer a world that is in desperate need of God's truth.

The key is learning to tell the difference between foolish arguments and serious debates. If we're not able to do that, we will either go to one extreme or the other. We will either affirm everything or we will be dogmatic about everything. We need to understand the difference between a major doctrine, a minor doctrine, and something that is merely a matter of tradition or personal preference.

Major doctrines are the fundamentals of the faith, if you mess with these things the foundation of our faith crumbles (things like the deity of Christ, the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, Christ's death on the cross for our sins, the physical resurrection of Jesus, salvation by grace through faith...)

Minor doctrines are things that good, Bible-believing Christians have different perspectives on those things. Someone may reach a different conclusion than me, but I recognize that they are still saved, still my brother or sister in Christ. It's not that this is unimportant, but in the grand scheme of things, it is not worth breaking fellowship over.

Personal preferences are when the Bible does not offer clear instruction on how we do things, but allows for a certain amount of freedom. (...the format of our worship – how many songs are going to sing, when are we going to do the offering...?, where will we meet – someone's home, an rented space, our own building? What should that building look like? What color should the sanctuary be painted?)

2. The passage shows us that if a church is going to remain united, we must also stay away from divisive people. (v.10-11)

Verses 10-11 read, *“Reject a factious man after a first and second warning, knowing that such a man is perverted and is sinning, being self-condemned.”*

There are some people who just like to argue. No matter what you say, they will insist that the opposite is true. “Isn’t it a beautiful day?” you ask. ---**“I certainly don’t think there’s anything good about it! It is too hot, or too cold, or too windy...”** Or, “Wasn’t that a beautiful song, during the worship service?” ---**“Oh, I didn’t care for it at all, it was too loud!”** Or, “Wasn’t the message, this morning, just what we needed to hear?” ---**“I didn’t need to hear him drone on and on, I was starting to wonder if we would be there all day!”**

It’s almost as if conflict has a way of following them around, wherever they go. They are convinced that they’re always right. And they seem to think that they’ve been put on this earth to bring enlightenment to everyone else. When they study the Bible, it isn’t so much for the purpose of learning about the Lord or to grow in their spiritual life. They’re taking notes so that they’ll be able to win an argument with the neighbor down the road who goes to a different church.

Titus is told to confront divisive men, not just once, but also a second time. Approach them in a very loving way. Try to get through to them. Try to help them understand their attitude is tearing down, rather than building up, the work of the Lord. But if they refuse to listen, then there is nothing more you can do, but to have nothing to do with them. It wasn’t that Paul and Titus didn’t love those people. They cared about everyone, including the troublemakers. They even wanted the people who opposed them to hear the gospel, and be saved. But they could not allow divisive individuals to hindering the work of the Lord.

Imagine that you’re going to build a house. You hire a contractor, who’s really good at what he does. He has the right plans, and gets to work. Most of the workers on his crew is pretty sharp, but there’s one guy seems to working against them. After they pour the concrete, this guy comes along and steps right in the wet cement. When they nail the frame together, he goes along behind them and starts pulling the nails back out of the boards. When they unroll the insulation, he follows behind them and rolls it back up. So you ask the contractor about him. “What’s the deal with this guy? How can you afford to have someone like that on your crew?” And the contractor says, “I know, I just don’t have the heart to talk to him about it, or let him go.” --That would be crazy. He’s not going to build many houses like that. And the passage tells us that it would be counterproductive to allow divisive people to continue to cause trouble, in the church.

In another letter, Paul dealt with a church that was filled with all kinds of dissention and disagreements. The Corinthians seemed to argue about everything, including their favorite preacher. The apostle wrote to them, and showed them how serious this was. In 1 Corinthians 1:10–13 he writes:

Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment. For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's people, that there are quarrels among you. Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, "I am of Paul," and "I of Apollos," and "I of Cephas," and "I of Christ." Has Christ been divided?

There were so many factions in Corinth, and they were arguing about so many things, that they forgot they were all supposed to be on the same team. They may have thought that it wasn't a very big deal, but it was. A church cannot survive, like that.

We have to be careful about spending time listening to divisive people, reading their books, watching their programs... their attitude can be contagious.

If the church is to remain united, believers must avoid foolish arguments, stay away from divisive people...

3. And we must focus on our mission. (v.8)

Look at verse 8. *"This is a trustworthy statement; and concerning these things I want you to speak confidently, so that those who have believed God will be careful to engage in good deeds. These things are good and profitable for men."*

What is the mission of the church? We're here to spread the good news in this world, sharing the message of Jesus Christ with those around us. That's our purpose. It's why we are here. If we're focused on that, and it is the most important priority in our lives, we're not going to have time to argue about silly things. The task is much too important. How can members of a church get hung up on little things, when there are people all around us who do not know Christ, who have not heard the gospel, and who are headed towards an eternity in hell?

Just picture a couple of firefighters, getting ready to head into a burning building to save lives. People are trapped inside, who need help. Time is limited. Every second counts. But before they plunge into harm's way, they stop to argue about which helmet belongs to which firefighter. "I think you have my helmet." "No, I'm pretty sure this one is mine." "No, remember, yours has a scratch across the top, from when the ceiling started to fall down on top of you, at the last fire. Remember, I had to rescue you." "You most certainly did not! I was the one who rescued you..." The chief just looks at them, and can't believe what he is hearing. "Seriously, guys, are you going to stand there arguing? Don't you see that every second matters, and that people are going to die if we don't get to work?"

I can just imagine that must be how the Lord feels, at times, when He listens to some of arguments, His people engage in. "Really, you're going to argue about hymnals at a time like this? Don't you see there is a world that is lost and dying without Jesus? Won't you set aside your differences for one moment to reach out to them?"

Philippians 1:27 *“Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel.”*

I love that phrase, striving together. It conjures up a picture of soldiers, in the midst of a battle, supporting each other, marching side-by-side. They have each other's back. They depend on each other. And they are stronger together than they would ever be apart.

Paul says that we are stand firm with one spirit. It's as if our hearts have been knit together, in the Lord. There is a love and affection that we have for each other, knowing that we are a part of something much bigger than ourselves. The Spirit of God who dwells in me, guiding and directing my path, is the same Spirit who lives in you. And if we seek His will, we will find ourselves walking along the same path.

And we are to have one mind. It's not that we will always see things exactly the same way. We won't. We're different. That's okay. But we ought to be able to agree on the things that matter most.

And when we work together, side by side, it will have the effect of drawing us closer in our relationships with one another.

If we feel ourselves drifting apart, we need to focus on the things that we share in common, as fellow Christians.

Scripture tells us, *“There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.”* (**Ephesians 4:4-6**)

Conclusion –

A survey was conducted, a few years back, about some of the issues that have caused divisions in the local church. Many of the responses were what we might expect, but there were many answers that were downright silly.

- There was a church business meeting that became heated when members discovered that the budget was off. They went round and round trying to determine who was responsible for spending too much, casting blame, resolving that it would never happen again. Guess how much they were off? Less than dollar.
- There was a dispute in another church when the person who prepared communion accidentally used cranberry-grape juice, instead of regular grape juice. People complained that something was a little off about that communion service. They couldn't quite figure it out until they looked in the fridge.

- There were hard feelings, in different congregation, when members couldn't agree on the brand of coffee to use. Someone had replaced the Folgers, with a stronger blend. People actually left the church over the issue.

These stories are funny, until we realize that they're true. They were all real conflicts, between real people, in real congregations. Is it really possible for such frivolous and insignificant things to cause divisions among God's people? Sadly, it is.

The ministry of the church will be hindered, if God's people are divided. **So we must avoid foolish arguments.** When you find yourself in the midst of divisive situation, pause for a moment, take a step back, and ask "is this worth fighting about? Is it worth breaking fellowship over?" Extend grace, offer mercy, practice humility. **We must stay away from divisive people.** That attitude can become contagious. Don't let them pull you in. **And we must focus on our mission.** Remember the lost and hurting people, in this world, who need the Lord. We can't show the world God's love, if we are consumed with hostility towards one another.