

Zealous for Good Works

1. A People Incapable

Titus 1:15-16

Session 1 of the Covenant Baptist Church Camp, Rossmoyne, Perth

November 2009

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A People Incapable

Background

This is the first of three sermons delivered at the 2009 church camp of Covenant Baptist Church, Rossmoyne, Perth.

Preliminary

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Reading before the sermon

Titus 1:1-16.

Introduction

Over the next three sessions we'll be working through Paul's letter to Titus. It's a short letter: about 1½ A4 pages when printed.

Paul had one major concern about the Christians in Crete. Their behaviour was bad; it wasn't matching their profession. There was an ugly gap between what they said they were, and how they were behaving. Paul wrote to address this problem. Christianity was in Crete, but Christians weren't bearing the proper fruit. The churches that had been planted were going in bad directions.

Look around you, and look inside you. The problem that plagued Crete is always present. It's in me, it's in you, and it's in our churches. It can grow rapidly into a major problem in a very short time. We need to listen to what Paul said. Doesn't the state of your own spirituality worry you sometimes? When you look at the marvellous, life transforming truths of the gospel, and then when you consider the impact they have in your own daily life, it can be worrying. And if our churches are the expression of the Kingdom of God here on earth, why are they in the state that they are in? Paul's letter is vitally relevant to our day.

As you read the letter to Titus, you frequently come across the phrase *good works*. It resounds through the letter. The theme for our camp is *Zealous for good works*. This is what will occupy us in our three sessions.

Of course, Paul says many things to Titus. We cannot look at everything. So I have selected three passages in Titus that contain vital, strategic information. These passages promote healthy Christian life, both our congregational lives and our individual lives. The strategic information brings out the best in Christians and in churches. It is only as we understand this material that we can function properly as Christians. Paul gave this information to Titus to solve the problem of unholy and unfruitful behaviour in Crete.

The information in these three passages will help us to make sure of some critical issues. We must ensure that unsaved people cannot bumble along, believing that they are Christians. We must ensure that saved people cannot bumble along without ever really properly glorifying God in their behaviours and witness.

So we'll be looking at strategic information, and I hope that it assists all of us. And you'll see how Paul's information throughout the letter aligns with these strategic passages. And each of our strategic texts contains the phrase *good works*.

We read the whole of Chapter 1 earlier. Now let's read our first passage: Tit 1:15-16:

¹⁵To the pure all things are pure, but to those who are defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure; but even their mind and conscience are defiled. ¹⁶They profess to know God, but in works they deny Him, being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work.

Here is the first vital, strategic piece of information about good works: there is a group of people who simply cannot do good works. Now of course we know that the church exists in a society that is hostile to God, and therefore hostile to us His people. Of course we know that there is a group of people who are incapable of good works. After all, Crete was a pagan society. But take a closer look at the people Paul is describing here. These aren't people who couldn't care less about God, and who worshiped idols. Paul says that they profess to know God.

Look at what else Paul says about them. They are unbelieving; their minds and their consciences are defiled. Although they profess to know God, their works show that they deny Him. They are abominable, disobedient, and

disqualified for every good work. These aren't your typical pagans. This is a tricky group to deal with, don't you agree? And it was this group that played a large role in the problem of unfruitfulness and unholiness in the churches in Crete. We are going to consider this group now. This is our first bit of strategic information. The title of this sermon is *A People Incapable*.

Try to picture in your mind a group of people who believe they are something, but are totally mistaken. Try to image people who say they are successful at something, but are actually utter failures. Have you ever heard of the Cargo Cults?

During the Second World War in the Pacific Theatre, groups of island people saw aeroplanes landing with cargo for the troops. They saw food and equipment being unpacked and distributed. This looked marvellous to a primitive people. It had a touch of the supernatural about it too: provisions arriving from the sky. A religion grew around this. The tribal people also wanted food from the sky; so they tried to make it happen for themselves. They duplicated the externals as much as they could. They built things that looked like runways and lit fires alongside. They put someone in a wooden hut with two blocks of wood on the side of his head for headphones, with rods of bamboo sticking up like radio antennas – he was supposed to be the flight controller. And they waited for the aeroplanes to come with the precious cargo. But of course, none ever arrived.¹

This group of people in Crete was similar. They were energetic. They had busy schedules. They used the Old Testament Scriptures. They insisted that they knew God. Yet they were men who spread Jewish fables and who turned from the truth (Tit 1:14). From a distance they looked like the sort of people you wished would join your church. They already owned Bibles! They could talk about the Old Testament and about God. And yet Paul says that for all their Scriptural decorations, they were total failures. Like the Cargo Cult people who were utterly incapable of bringing in aeroplanes, this group of people on Crete were utterly incapable of doing good works.

We have to be very clear about this. We have to get this fixed firmly in our minds, because it affects how we view the types of people around churches, and how we allow them to influence our churches. It affects the kind of settings we create and allow in our churches. We are going to start here and get this clear in our minds.

So let's look the situation when good works are impossible.

When good works are impossible

Now it seems amazing that these people use Scripture. When we hear that people are incapable of good works, we expect to find them in trouble with the law, or being treated for addictions, or something along those lines. But here we see the condition at its very worst; even though they have the Scriptures, they are incapable of good works. So let's start off by asking what these people do with Scripture.

What do they do with Scripture?

It's not enough that people merely use Scripture. All sorts of people use Scripture. Even the devil used Scripture when he tempted the Lord Jesus Christ in the wilderness. Let me give you some examples of the sort of things these people might have been doing with Scripture. And remember, because the New Testament Scriptures were still being written, they were using the Old Testament. So here are the issues that were likely to be present in Crete, because they were problems in Judaism at that time.

The first definite problem was that they added information to the Old Testament Scriptures. We see this directly from the first chapter of Titus, where we read that Jewish fables were involved (Tit 1:14). So, for example, one commentary by the rabbis provided the following unexpected information:²

- The time from Creation until the entrance into Canaan is divided into periods based on the number seven, and that the incidents in the lives of the Biblical figures coincided rhythmically with this timescale.
- The Sabbath was observed by arch-angels.
- The angels were circumcised.

¹ Related by Richard Feynman, Nobel Prize winning physicist, from Hutchings's *Surely You're Joking Mr Feynman!* Norton and Co., 1997, quoted in McConnell's *Professional Software Development*, Addison-Wesley, 2004. Additional material from Saliba's *Cargo Cults*. Microsoft® Encarta® 2007 [DVD]. Redmond, WA: Microsoft Corporation, 2006.

² Hendriksen's New Testament Commentary Series, *I & II Timothy and Titus*, Banner, 1991, p59.

The second problem was their attitude. Sometimes these people were proud and presumptuous. There are even teachings that God and the angels participated in the discussions of the rabbis. In one extreme case, they said that God's judgement on an issue was in doubt until He gained the support of an authoritative rabbi who had just died and entered heaven.³

The third problem was a terrible feature of the Jewish handling of the Old Testament. It lowered the standard of holiness required by the Scriptures. Here is just one example. Look for a minute at Ps 66:18: *If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear.* It seems pretty clear, doesn't it, that this means that if I am entertaining hidden sin in my heart, it will make my prayer unacceptable to God. But wait till you see what the rabbis did with it. Matthew Henry explains:

*The Jewish writers, some of them that have the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy, put a very corrupt gloss upon these words: If I regard iniquity in my heart, that is (say they), If I allow myself only in heart-sins, and iniquity does not break out in my words and actions, God will not hear me, that is, he will not be offended with me, will take no notice of it, so as to lay it to my charge; as if heart-sins were no sins in God's account.*⁴

And you'll remember of course, that the Lord Jesus Christ strongly opposed this thread of Jewish teaching. The Sermon on the Mount directly confronts this. He condemned the way that the Pharisees used verbal gymnastics to escape the obvious requirements of God's law. He showed how they made oaths while really promising nothing, how they murdered in their hearts, and how they divorced whenever they felt like it. In contrast to this, the Lord Jesus Christ showed that the Law of God has to be obeyed with all your heart, and not merely in outward appearance. And when He said this, He was showing us what His own obedience of the Law was like.

There was another severe problem with the Jewish use of Scripture. They believed that you could study the law of God, and go away, and keep the law as a do-it-yourself project, and then come back and present God with this righteousness that you had achieved on your own (Phil 3:9 speaks about a righteousness of the law). They couldn't do it, of course; but they believed that it could be done, and they taught that it could be done. And some of them thought they were succeeding. And of course, it was easier for them to be misled because they had twisted the law to silence its demands of deep-hearted obedience.

In addition, there was an obsession with genealogies, which focussed on the ancestry of Bible characters, and perhaps of some of the Jewish community on Crete (Tit 3:9).

Just to summaries, the Jewish method of Bible teaching was likely to have these ingredients:

- Speculations about numbers and angels.
- Idolisation of human teachers, even suggesting that God depended on them.
- Tricks of interpretation for evading the heart-requirements of God's law.
- Belief that you could use God's law to become righteous in His sight.
- Pedigrees and family trees.

And as your look at that summary, note that much of this involved imposing the earthly on the heavenly, and the carnal on the spiritual.

Remember that Paul was concerned about the shortfall in behaviour of the churches in Crete. He was concerned about the absence of good works. Now, how helpful do you think this traditional Jewish teaching was? At best, it would waste time and puff people up with useless knowledge. At worst it would encourage them to behave lawlessly by lowering the standard of God's law, and would confuse them about what makes them right before God. And this confusion about righteousness was an infection that was hard to purge from the churches – the idea that if you had to keep the ceremonial Old Testament law to be saved. It caused terrible confusion. Paul had to mount a desperate fight against this issue his Galatian letter.

And to make matters worse, this traditional Jewish influence was specially attractive to the average Cretan. You get special problems when one bad influence reinforces another. A Cretan from long ago had described typical Cretan

³ Edersheim's *Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Hendriksen, 1993, 74.

⁴ *Matthew Henry's Complete Commentary on the Bible*, Hendriksen, 1991, p836-837.

behaviour:⁵ *One of them, a prophet of their own, said, ‘Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons (Tit 1:12).’* Paul agreed with him (Tit 1:13). You could earn an easy living by teaching these things in Crete: they were teaching what they ought not, for the sake of dishonest gain (Tit 1:11). For good measure, this teaching was in Biblical wrapping.

So this was the situation. There was this group of people on Crete, professing to know God, versed in Jewish fables, promoting the commandments of men who had turned away from the truth, and totally incapable of good works. And Paul says to Titus that their influence in the churches must be stopped (Tit 1:10-11).

Let’s consider now the influence they had in the churches.

What was their influence in the churches?

As you read Paul’s concerns in Tit 1:10-14, you find it hard to work out whether he is always speaking about the false teachers outside the church. You wonder whether he sometimes means those inside the church who are influenced by them. Let’s read it again, and you’ll see what I mean:

¹⁰For there are many insubordinate, both idle talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision, ¹¹whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole households, teaching things which they ought not, for the sake of dishonest gain. ¹²One of them, a prophet of their own, said, “Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.” ¹³This testimony is true. Therefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith, ¹⁴not giving heed to Jewish fables and commandments of men who turn from the truth.

Let’s start with verses 13 and 14. These are definitely people inside the church. They must be rebuked so that they are sound in the faith and do not heed commandments of men who turn from the truth. Paul views them as believers who are inconsistent, and who must be corrected. He wants them to be sound in the faith, and not to be influenced by the group we looked at – the group who are disqualified for every good work.

Verse 12 tells us why Cretans are prone to this influence. They are a nation with particular vices. The church will always face these problems in discipling converts: that the behaviour they were steeped in before conversion must constantly be countered with sound teaching. You know this from your own heart too. If you were prone to a bad temper before you were converted, you have to keep a constant watch on yourself and constantly pray for the opposite graces. The same is true of laziness, or whatever else may have characterised you. And entire nations can have characteristics, and that was the case in Crete.

Now, verse 11 tells us that whole households were being subverted. They must have been people in the church too. This was why people had to be rebuked to be sound in the faith, and not to give heed to these things.

And now we come to verse 10. There were people whose mouths had to be stopped. They were causing the damage in the churches by promoting the doctrines, even as others were causing the damage by accepting the doctrines. Now these people in verse 10, who are mainly of the Circumcision: are these the false teachers outside the church, or are they people inside the church who are under the influence of the false teachers? It’s hard to determine this from the passage.

Let me attempt an answer. If you have been around churches for a while, you come to realise that like disease, false doctrine has a course that it follows. First you get the pioneers, who formulate the doctrine outside the church. They are submerged in heresy, or pagan belief, or scientific scepticism, or secular philosophy.

Then people on the fringe with some theological training decide that the church would benefit from this particular belief. They think that if the church could only adopt it, then the church would become relevant to the world, and the world would stop laughing at us, and so on. So these fringe people do the best possible job they can of trying to dress the teaching in Scripture. They trawl through the Bible for verses that appear to support it. They sift church history to find statements by people that appear to encourage it.

The pioneers have now done their work. The new idea – usually it’s an old one that has been recycled – now parades in semi-Biblical garb. Then the next phase takes over. People within the church become promoters. They may be genuine believers who are unqualified to discern what they are promoting. They tend to be trusting of the

⁵ This was Epimenedes. Hendriksen’s New Testament Commentary Series, *I & II Timothy and Titus*, Banner, 1991, p353.

pioneers. They get hold of this new thing and start to promote it because they think it will solve the problem that they think is in their church, or may even genuinely be in their church.

Not everything that looks useful is useful. Have you heard of ant-bait? It's ant poison made to be appealing to ants. You put it down in the path of the ants, and they find compelling and take it back into their nest. And they wipe out the whole colony. The humans who formulated the ant-bait are the pioneers; the ants that find it are the promoters. The ants think they are solving a problem for the colony – food supply; but they cannot discern what they are promoting. And so they destroy the colony.

You have probably heard of Herbert W. Armstrong, who promoted the idea of the British Israelites: the idea that the British and their English-speaking descendants are the lost Ten Tribes of Israel. Even today, in Reformed Baptist Churches, among people who have been members for years, it can happen that someone finds this material and is fascinated, and thinks it explains a great deal about the world today, and feels that it should be brought to the attention of the church. Somehow, for all the years they have been in these churches, they have missed the point that the important thing is not the first natural birth but the second spiritual birth. They still don't understand that what matters is not who your earthly fathers are, but whether you have a heavenly Father.

They think they are helping the church, and they become promoters of this newly discovered doctrine. After all, it will involve a lot of discussion about the Old Testament, and a lot of revisiting of the accounts of the Assyrian exile. And it will lead to an inquiry into history and archaeology from a Biblical perspective. So they try to persuade the Elders to have a teaching session on this, for the benefit of the church. But they are unqualified to discern its impact.

Now remember verse 10. We are trying to decide whether the people mentioned are inside or outside the church. They are promoting the doctrines that are causing the damage. Are they influencing others, or are they themselves influenced? And the answer may well be, both. If you look at Tit 3:9-11, Paul even had instructions about people who were active promoters, to determine whether they could be reclaimed or whether they were really incapable of good works:

⁹But avoid foolish disputes, genealogies, contentions, and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and useless. ¹⁰Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition, ¹¹knowing that such a person is warped and sinning, being self-condemned.

When a church is influenced by false doctrine from the outside, it has a very confused state on the inside. It becomes like a hostage crisis: you have to choose your targets with the utmost care. Enemies are mixed with friends who have been taken captive. You are unsure of who is who.

But one thing is for certain: the church in that condition, even though it has genuine believers, will be very deficient in godly behaviour. Those false teachers, those pioneers, those people disqualified for good works, will be dragging down the life of the church as surely as Paul was trying to restore it by his letter.

Perhaps you think we are safer today, after so much church history behind us. I wish that were true. In May 1981 a group of 45 Evangelical leaders signed a letter expressing their concern about a doctrinal direction at a famous Protestant seminary in the USA. The seminary itself had just expressed support for the teaching of one of their professors. To show the seriousness of the issues, this group of 45 put their names to a covering letter. Some of the names you might recognise are Iain Murray, Albert Martin, Robert Reymond, O. Palmer Robertson, and Meredith Kline. The institution was Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. The doctrine at stake was justification by faith.⁶ It sounds hard to believe, doesn't it? Westminster Theological Seminary had been formed by Gresham Machen in 1929 because of liberalism at Princeton Theological Seminary.⁷

Yet in 1979, when respected evangelical leaders were asked to comment, here are some of the responses. Martyn Lloyd-Jones said:

[Mr Shepherd's] teaching is a subtle form of legalism, and eventually is "another gospel."⁸

William Hendriksen, the famous commentator, said this:

⁶ Robertson's *Current Justification Controversy*, Trinity Foundation, 2003, p61-62.

⁷ See Stonehouse's *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir*, Banner of Truth, 1987.

⁸ Robertson's *Current Justification Controversy*, Trinity Foundation, 2003, p48.

*As I see it, we must choose between Shepherd's view and that of Paul.*⁹

Philip Hughes was a visiting professor of the New Testament at the time.¹⁰ He expressed his amazement in a letter of dissent:

*A situation in which I find myself in disagreement with a statement of the Faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary, of all places, on of all themes, the theme of justification I would have considered unimaginable.*¹¹

This is the problem we face: error exists. And we never know what is brewing in the background, out of sight. We never know who the next unexpected supporter of error will be.

So this is the first piece of strategic information that Paul gives to Titus. There is a group of people on Crete who are incapable of good works, who are using Scripture, and who are exerting a strong influence on the life in the churches.

And of course Paul's strategic information comes with instructions for correcting the situation, which brings us to our next point: what should we do about these people who are disqualified for good works and who are exerting an influence in the church?

What do we do about them?

Paul is concerned about protecting the life of the church. So Paul tells Titus what to do. And the answer is surprisingly simple: Titus must draw the lines clearly. He must make it plain what kind of teaching is allowed, and what kind of teaching is outlawed. He must ensure that apostolic doctrine controls what is taught in the church. He must rebuke those who depart from it, and stop the mouths of those who undermine the church with false doctrine.

The health of the church depends on having apostolic doctrine regulating its life. Titus wouldn't always be there to make sure of this. So apostolic doctrine had to be woven into the ongoing life of the church by the perpetual appointment of elders who would ensure that it remained central.

That's it. This is Paul's remedy for the influence of the false teachers. Promote apostolic doctrine. Silence those who oppose it. And make this part of the ongoing life of the church by entrenching it as a ruling function of the Eldership. Look at one of the requirements for an elder in Tit 1:9:

⁹holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict.

And by now we know the situation Paul was speaking about in verse 10 onwards. This is what Titus had to cope with, and what the Eldership would have to cope with after Titus had left. It's what the Eldership in every age has to cope with.

Remember that Paul's concern is good works. Paul insists on this atmosphere in the church because he wants to promote the good works that are in keeping with being a Christian, and because he wants to shut down the influences that hinder Christians from being what we ought to be. The influence of false teachers who use the Scriptures and who are disqualified for good works must be eliminated from the churches. So the directives that Paul gives are very plain. But unfortunately it's far from easy to implement them.

Let me ask you a question. How popular do you think Titus was going to be, as he set about shutting down the influence of these false teachers, and silencing those who were promoting them inside the churches? How happy do you think these people would be, if they faced losing the prominence they enjoyed?

Let's just think about the opposition Titus might get. If today is anything to go by, people might be saying something like this to him: 'Don't you realise that we are surrounded by pagans on this island, who are opposed to Scripture? Now you want to attack these people who use and who love Scripture. Are you out of your mind? This is not the battle we need to be fighting right now. There is a watching world out there, and you are going to damage the cause of Scripture. Our enemies will love this. You will do a great deal of damage. You had better mend your ways, my young friend!'

⁹ Robertson's *Current Justification Controversy*, Trinity Foundation, 2003, p49.

¹⁰ Robertson's *Current Justification Controversy*, Trinity Foundation, 2003, p27.

¹¹ Robbin's *Companion to the Current Justification Controversy*, Trinity Foundation, 2003, p105.

Or how about this one? ‘Titus, don’t you realise you are missing out on a *huge opportunity*? If we keep our relationships with these traditional Jewish teachers, *we can influence them*. Our motto, Titus, must be *in them to win them*. They are halfway there: they love Scripture. We will influence them and bring them around without them even realising it. But if we meet them head on, if we criticise them in public in our churches, we will alienate them. They’ll view us as the enemy, as dogmatic and inflexible. If they say they love Scripture, and if they profess to know God, it’s our duty to be involved with them.’

They would be saying other things too, probably behind Titus’s back. Titus was a gentile. What did he know? He was opposing teaching that was supported by Jewish people, who were of the circumcision. Of course he wouldn’t be able to understand these things. And he was young and single, which explained why he had enough time to stick his nose into things that didn’t concern him. It’s not that he was a bad sort of a chap; he could be quite useful if he assisted with errands and diaconal tasks, because there was always plenty of work to be done around churches. But he was pedantic. And he was in the minority: how could he think that he was right and that all these others, people much older and wiser than he was, were wrong? He was obviously a bit arrogant, dismissive of age and wisdom, opinionated, and overestimated his own abilities. He was unloving; he was willing to hurt people by suggesting that they were wrong. He was doing the devil’s work by attacking the peace and unity in the church.

Unfortunately, this was probably the sort of response Titus received. Against this, he had to maintain the apostolic cause. He had to ensure that apostolic standards were woven into the permanent church structures. Titus had to ensure that it was impossible for anyone in the church to mistakenly think that these false doctrines enjoyed apostolic approval.

The churches in Crete had to be transformed from hotbeds of false doctrine which pandered to the natural vices of the Cretans, into communities with grace rippling through them (to borrow a term from Hughes and Chapell).¹²

And was Titus going to be popular in all quarters? Certainly not! That’s one of the reasons that Paul wrote this epistle. John Calvin picks up on this in his commentary,¹³ as does Matthew Henry.¹⁴ It wasn’t only that Titus needed instruction in what Paul wanted in the churches; Titus was certainly well acquainted with apostolic standards. The additional benefit of Paul’s letter was that it would prove to everyone that Titus was doing what Paul wanted. Anyone reading the letter would find Titus amply defended. He wasn’t being pedantic; he was being apostolic. He wasn’t destroying the unity of the Spirit, he was protecting it. He wasn’t attacking the Biblical bond of peace, he was rejecting a ceasefire with false doctrine. He wasn’t being unloving; he was promoting the only way that Christians can demonstrate their love for Christ, by obeying His commandments (John 14:15; John 14:21).

And John Calvin’s statement reminds us that we should look to the Scriptures to decide whether people in our churches who are promoting things are being constructive or destructive. Titus was also promoting something in the churches. Just as those under the influence of Jewish false doctrine were promoting error, so Titus was promoting apostolic truth. Sometimes promotion is good: if so, it is called reformation. (By the way, may I take a moment to commend John Calvin’s commentaries to you? Next year is the 500th anniversary of Calvin’s birth. 500 years! And his commentaries are still some of the best you can read.)

And there is a permanent institution in churches that must continue the work of Titus. That institution is called the Eldership. This is the way to promote church standards from generation to generation to promote holy living and good works.

Now let me remove any possible misunderstanding. It is not that we should be unconcerned for these people who are lost. We should want them to be saved. We’ll consider this in our next study. We want these people to be rescued from what they are, and to live to God’s glory. Paul himself was rescued from precisely this kind of setting. Would we like them to be saved? Yes. Will we bring the gospel to them if we can? Yes. Paul is highly concerned for his kindred, the Jews. He says in Rom 9:1-3 that he could wish himself accursed if they could be saved.

Of course we are concerned about them. But what we must not allow them to dictate the doctrine in our churches or to set the standard of holiness in our churches. That’s why there is an Eldership: for when people like this want to influence things.

¹² Hughes’s and Chapell’s *1 & 2 Timothy and Titus*, Crossway, 2000, p328.

¹³ Calvin’s *Commentary on Titus*, Baker, 2009, p277-278.

¹⁴ *Matthew Henry’s Complete Commentary on the Bible*, Hendriksen, 1991, p2367.

Conclusion

This was our first piece of strategic information from Paul to Titus. There was a group of people, within the orbit of the church, who professed to know God but were incapable of good works. Titus had to understand that they were incapable of good works. The church has many enemies, of course, but these particular ones use the Bible. And we thought about the Cargo Cult people, who put wooden blocks on their heads and sit in huts, but no aeroplanes ever arrive: they are a people incapable.

And as we considered what Paul says about these people who are incapable, it made us think about when good works are impossible.

We were a bit surprised to hear that these people used Scripture. So we looked at how they used Scripture. We saw that their interpretations undermined godly living. When they weren't wasting time with things that no one could prove or disprove, they had many ways of evading the Biblical demands for holy behaviour. They spent a lot of time on family trees. And on top of all that, they thought they could study the demands of the law and construct a righteousness of their own and bring it back and present it to God.

Then we looked at the devastating effect that they have in churches. We saw that these people were pioneers of bad doctrine, but that some of the promoters of that doctrine were people inside the churches, who had to be rebuked to be sound in the faith and not to pay attention to these dangerous pioneers. Others in the churches were victims. We saw that these doctrines made the gap in godliness on Crete worse rather than better.

And then we looked at what should be done about them. The answer is simple: suitable men, whose qualifications are given in Paul's letter, should be appointed as Elders. And they must protect the life of the church by not allowing these people to set the tone of the meetings and of the holiness. They must not be allowed to dictate doctrine and influence the domestic life of the Christians. Elders must prevent this by rebuking those inside the church who were promoting these doctrines. Titus had to do this in the meantime, and he had to leave behind him an established institution which would make this part of the ongoing life of the church.

Let me just say a few things about this. First, pray for Elders. They are essential for the life and health of the church. They are the ones who have control, for good or for ill. Pray that the right men get into office, and pray that they will continue to fulfil this task.

Second, realise that everyone starts off as a person incapable of good works. Our next two sessions will focus on the solution, as we work through two more pieces of strategic information given by Paul to Titus. If you have never repented of your sins, and have never come to the Lord Jesus Christ for forgiveness, if you have never been born again, then you are incapable of producing good works. You need to come to Him for salvation and forgiveness. It doesn't matter what you think you believe about God, and how much you know of the Scriptures, and how successful you think you are at keeping them. Remember, the God who gave the law is the God who gave the Saviour. More of this in our next sessions.

What we have been hearing about in this hour is the story of Adam. It is the battle between what God wants the church to be, and what the world wants to turn it into. And it is a particular difficulty when the world gets hold of the Scriptures, and comes up with a lethal concoction, crafted to the particular weaknesses of a group. These people are like the Cargo Cult we heard about earlier. They have Scripture strapped on, and from a distance they look like the real thing: but they are incapable of good works.

There will always be some in the church who are misled by this concoction, and try to drag it back triumphantly into the ant-nest. That's why there is an Eldership to maintain apostolic standards, so that we aren't at the mercy of everyone who latches onto some new idea without having the discernment to assess its impact. If we don't get this right in our churches, we will always have confusion and an ugly shortfall in the holiness and fruitfulness of our people.