

1

Why the truth matters!

Please read Titus 1:1-4

The most influential image of our modern world is that of a market-place. For many people this description pictures most clearly the way the world works and how its people interact, not just in matters of trade, but in all kinds of relationships.

Over the last quarter of the twentieth century much of our life as people and nations has been rearranged in conformity to this image. Many traditional ways of handling matters have gone. Everything from education to health is now seen in terms of products, consumers and prices. We speak of market forces, market research, market value. This is our culture.

Behind this image of the market-place there is a philosophy. At the centre of the market is the idea of the sanctity of individual choice. True freedom is for the individual to stroll through life's bazaar, stopping at the different stalls and making his or her own selection. The market is therefore an image

which promotes a subjective attitude to life. The philosophy behind the market-place is one which idolizes the freedom of individuals to choose whatever they think is best for them. The centre of the market is really the self and its perceived needs.

The driving force of the market-place is competition between the different traders. They must contend with one another in an ever-changing battle to grab attention and market-share. The market-place is a very temporal affair. Fashions change. The whims of the customers are in continual flux. It is very much rooted in the here and now. The trader who can somehow produce what the individual finds most instantly attractive at the most competitive price, while still making a profit, is king in the market-place. This is a view of the world which many people would see as most realistic.

But, as Christians, we need to be reminded that this is not the Bible's image of the way the world should ultimately be seen. According to Scripture, the world is not finally a market-place, but a kingdom belonging to God. As Christians living in a self-centred world we need to reflect seriously on this. The driving force of a kingdom is not that of the competition of rival merchants, but the power of an unrivalled kingly throne. The centre of a kingdom is ultimately not freedom of choice for the individual, but the will of the sovereign. A kingdom is described by a completely different set of words from a market. These words are not words like preferences, alternatives and options. They are words like authority, obligation, loyalty, submission and calling.

The Cretan Christians' fundamental trouble was that of a vast gap between what they said they believed and how they actually behaved. In today's Western society the church generally suffers from the very same gap, and one of the main reasons behind

that gap is that Christians have been subverted by the cult of self. The market mentality contributes to that cult.

There is the market and the kingdom. We find ourselves torn between these two very different ways of looking at the world and more than we realize we have been subverted by an outlook on life which, although superficially it seems to contain much realism, is actually self-centred and is not ultimately the biblical outlook.

The letter to Titus is a letter which tackles the problem of living as Christians in a self-centred culture. As Paul begins his letter it is very striking how his opening remarks profoundly reflect the absolute kingship of God, and by implication challenge the whole atmosphere of subjectivism which dominated the ethos of first-century Crete, and dominates our post-modern Western culture today: 'Paul, a servant of God, and an apostle of Jesus Christ for the faith of God's elect and the knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness—a faith and knowledge resting on the hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time, and at his appointed season he brought his word to light through the preaching entrusted to me by the command of God our Saviour, to Titus, my true son in our common faith: grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Saviour.'

In confronting the gap, do you see where Paul starts? He immediately lifts our eyes above this world, its temporary fads and values, and begins by directing our thoughts to the sovereign God and the objective reality of eternal life which God desires people to have. What he is ultimately doing is lifting our attention to see that there is a King in heaven, and there is a heavenly lifestyle (he calls it 'godliness', 1:1) here on earth which cuts across the prevalent cultures. It is a way of living which is never out of date. It is distinct from the ways of the world,

because it flows from God's throne and is the present expression of that eternal life which has about it all the beauty, gravity and joy of God himself.

Let us see how Paul brings these things out. The introductory verses can be subsumed under three headings. These are Paul's calling, Paul's responsibility and Paul's greeting.

Paul's calling (1:1)

'Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ for the faith of God's elect and the knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness.' Paul introduces himself uniquely here, in the first verse of Titus, as God's servant. To people who see the world as revolving around themselves, Paul's emphasis on God and his service should come as a thunderclap. He is not talking of one god among many from whom we may choose. He is talking of the reality of the one true God to whom we are all answerable. God is the great destroyer of the purely subjective outlook on life. There is someone in the universe far more important than you or I. There is someone who reigns, who created us and to whom we must give an account. There is someone whose very existence shatters totally the idea that truth and morality are merely relative values or personal choice. There is someone who overturns the stalls of the market-traders in our lives. There is a God before whom we must stand in submissive awe.

Flying in an aircraft is not something I particularly enjoy. I have on occasion travelled to the U.S. and to Africa in a jumbo jet. To sit by the window of the aircraft and look down and see New York harbour like a small map below you, and to realize the immense distance you are flying above the earth and what it would be like to fall out of the plane, is awesome. We are sobered, even terrified, by the thought. And height is just one of the metaphors the Bible uses to convey to us the awesomeness of God. 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways

higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts,' says God. He is, in his very being, 'the Most High', who says, 'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool.' If we are awed by mere vertical distance when we fly in a plane, how much more should we be awed by the spiritual and moral distance between ourselves and the sovereign God! The Christian message begins with the fact of God—God without comparison, or competitor, or rival, whom we dare not treat like so many goods in a market.

A servant of God

Paul is God's servant. The phrase has an Old Testament background in that the prophets were often designated 'servants of God'. Paul, too, in a special way is God's spokesman. But his servanthood reflects God's position. God is the King. Paul is a man whose own will is bowed before the will of God. He has laid down his choices at the King's feet. He is committed, not to pleasing himself, but to faithful service as a slave to a gracious Master. Paul's life revolves around the Lord.

The self-centred attitude of the market-place will ultimately fail us, for it is not founded in the reality of God. The market-place is about making our choices, getting what we want. But as I go through life more and more I meet people who say, 'When I get what I want I find it isn't what I want.' Having our own way produces only a transitory elation, but leaves us empty. 'What was the point?' we eventually ask ourselves. We satiate our desires to no purpose. Without God we are like ships without anchors. We are like travellers who never reach home. The truth is that we were made for God, and we can never find true satisfaction outside his loving service. 'Take my yoke upon you and learn from me,' said Jesus, '... and you will find rest for your souls' (Matthew 11:29). We can only find our roots in submission to the sovereign God.