

Christmas Dawn – Epistle

The Loving Kindness Of God

Titus 3:4-7

Christmas Dawn

Analysis by Carolyn Schneider

4But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, 5he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. 6This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

DIAGNOSIS: Contempt

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Having Contempt for Others*

The letter to Titus is very concerned with how the Christian community in Crete appears to its surrounding society. It doesn't look good. To the eyes of the average non-Christian Cretan, the church is awash with contempt, too busy being critical of its neighbors to be helpful toward them or to work for the well being of Crete. Furthermore, the church is a community that seems to be engaged in endless bickering among its own members. The author of this letter warns that Christians are "discrediting" the "the word of God" (2:5). It would not be illogical for the Cretans to conclude, "If this is what Christ brings, then we really ought to stamp out those who call themselves Christians because they are no good for the world."

At this time, such persecution of the church had happened elsewhere and was allowable under imperial law.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Listening to Teachers of Contempt*

Titus's correspondent traces the problem back to certain teachers who are attracting members of the church to their classes for a fee. They teach people that there is a spiritual elite who distinguish themselves by studying genealogies and adhering to a regulated lifestyle. Those who do not undertake such practices thereby give evidence that they don't have what it takes. In the end, the elite say, only those who are truly spiritual will be saved. The letter to Titus draws attention to the fact that these teachings are pulling Christians away from their earthly responsibilities. They are consumed with quarreling over who the righteous really are. The only thing they seem to be certain about is that no one who lives an ordinary life will be saved.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *Becoming Contemptible*

If you measure your righteousness according to works, you will get what you deserve. Focusing always on your own behavior as the means of your salvation, you will always be found contemptible. In fact, the author calls Titus' community to look at their past behavior, and to include him in the picture: "For we ourselves were once foolish, ... passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another" (3:3). Things haven't changed for the Cretan Christians, he notes, as if God had never saved them and had never sent the Holy Spirit to renew their lives. His conclusion is: If you won't have God's salvation, then you are stuck with your own, which will leave you in continual doubt, prey to many false hopes.

PROGNOSIS: Kindness

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *Receiving God's Kindness*

But the fact is that together they already have a Savior, a God who “saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy” (3:5). The author reminds them that this God has given them God's own Spirit, “poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior” (3:6), thus making them truly spiritual people out of sheer kindness. It is as if by their baptisms they were brought into the manger with Jesus, receiving a new birth and a new life as children of God.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Remembering God's Kindness Together*

The letter to Titus suggests that the Christians in Crete change the subject of their conversation from their own “spiritual” achievements to God's loving kindness. Then their life together will in fact be different than it is when they are arguing all the time about their own behavior. The letter urges them to go about their normal work and to fulfill their obligations to society rather than try to become more pious than God. After all, who recognized the child of God in the feeding trough the first time around except for some shepherds and an unwed mother, those who were in equally less-than-heavenly situations?

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *Showing God's Kindness*

No doubt, the author would have considered shepherding and mothering among those “good works” that are “excellent and profitable to everyone” (3:8), as opposed to the activities that the other teachers have inspired, which are turning out to be “unprofitable and worthless” (3:9) to all. Then perhaps the Cretans will begin to say of the church that they are a “Holy People, The Redeemed of the Lord” (Isaiah 62:12). If word gets

out about God's salvation, the Cretan society may even begin to say of itself, that it is "Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken" (Isaiah 62:12). By crediting God for salvation (and "crediting," of course, can mean both believing and speaking about), maybe the whole earth will come to rejoice and "the many coastlands be glad" (Psalm 97:1)! Maybe "all the peoples [will] behold his glory" (Psalm 97:6) and "all gods bow down before him" (Psalm 97:7), because God will have made all things righteous and given all "the hope of eternal life" (Titus 3:7), "having been justified by his grace..." (Titus 3:7).