

GUIDELINES

BIBLE STUDY FOR TODAY'S
MINISTRY AND MISSION

MAY–AUG 2018

INCLUDED IN THIS ISSUE

The Spirit in Acts

Jeremy Duff

Genesis 1 — 11

Brian Howell

Deliverance in the Bible

Graham Dow

Mark 4:1 — 6:29

Steve Motyer

**2 Timothy, Titus
and Philemon**

Ian Paul

Leviticus

Henry Wansbrough OSB

Zephaniah and Habakkuk

Brian Howell

The fruit of the Spirit

Ian Macnair

GUIDELINES

VOL 34 / PART 2
May–August 2018

Edited by **David Spriggs**

- | | | |
|------------|--|------------------------------|
| 7 | The Spirit in Acts
Jeremy Duff | <i>7–20 May</i> |
| 22 | Genesis 1–11
Brian Howell | <i>21 May–3 June</i> |
| 38 | Deliverance in the Bible
Graham Dow | <i>4–10 June</i> |
| 46 | Mark 4:1–6:29
Steve Motyer | <i>11 June–1 July</i> |
| 68 | 2 Timothy, Titus and Philemon
Ian Paul | <i>2–15 July</i> |
| 83 | Leviticus
Henry Wansbrough OSB | <i>16–29 July</i> |
| 98 | Zephaniah and Habakkuk
Brian Howell | <i>30 July–12 August</i> |
| 114 | The fruit of the Spirit
Ian Macnair | <i>13 August–2 September</i> |

The Bible Reading Fellowship

15 The Chambers, Vineyard

Abingdon OX14 3FE

brf.org.uk

The Bible Reading Fellowship (BRF) is a Registered Charity (233280)

ISBN 978 0 85746 603 7

All rights reserved

This edition © The Bible Reading Fellowship 2018

Cover image © Thinkstock

Distributed in Australia by:

MediaCom Education Inc, PO Box 610, Unley, SA 5061

Tel: 1 800 811 311 | admin@mediacom.org.au

Distributed in New Zealand by:

Scripture Union Wholesale, PO Box 760, Wellington

Tel: 04 385 0421 | suwholesale@clear.net.nz

Acknowledgements

Scripture quotations taken from the New American Standard Bible®, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. (www.Lockman.org)

Scripture quotations taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version (Anglicised edition) copyright © 1979, 1984, 2011 by Biblica. Used by permission of Hodder & Stoughton Publishers, a Hachette UK company. All rights reserved. 'NIV' is a registered trademark of Biblica. UK trademark number 1448790.

Scripture quotations from The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, Anglicised edition, copyright © 1989, 1995 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations taken from the Holy Bible, English Standard Version, published by HarperCollins Publishers, © 2001 Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations taken from the New English Bible, copyright © Cambridge University Press and Oxford University Press 1961, 1970. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations taken from the Jerusalem Bible © 1966, 1967, 1968 by Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd and Doubleday & Company, Inc.

Printed by Gutenberg Press, Tarxien, Malta

Suggestions for using *Guidelines*

Set aside a regular time and place, if possible, when you can read and pray undisturbed. Before you begin, take time to be still and, if you find it helpful, use the BRF Prayer on page 6.

In *Guidelines*, the introductory section provides context for the passages or themes to be studied, while the units of comment can be used daily, weekly, or whatever best fits your timetable. You will need a Bible (more than one if you want to compare different translations) as Bible passages are not included. At the end of each week is a 'Guidelines' section, offering further thoughts about or practical application of what you have been studying.

Occasionally, you may read something in *Guidelines* that you find particularly challenging, even uncomfortable. This is inevitable in a series of notes which draws on a wide spectrum of contributors, and doesn't believe in ducking difficult issues. Indeed, we believe that *Guidelines* readers much prefer thought-provoking material to a bland diet that only confirms what they already think.

If you do disagree with a contributor, you may find it helpful to go through these three steps. First, think about why you feel uncomfortable. Perhaps this is an idea that is new to you, or you are not happy at the way something has been expressed. Or there may be something more substantial – you may feel that the writer is guilty of sweeping generalisation, factual error, theological or ethical misjudgement. Second, pray that God would use this disagreement to teach you more about his word and about yourself. Third, think about what you will do as a result of the disagreement. You might resolve to find out more about the issue, or write to the contributor or the editors of *Guidelines*.

To send feedback, please email enquiries@brf.org.uk, phone +44 (0)1865 319700 or write to the address shown opposite.

Writers in this issue

Jeremy Duff is Principal of St Padarn's Institute, a new centre for ministry training in Wales. His book *The Elements of New Testament Greek* (2005) is Cambridge University Press's bestselling religion title. He has also written *Peter's Preaching* for BRF (2015).

Brian Howell is visiting lecturer in Old Testament at London School of Theology. Previously he served as the Dean of Studies for Bible Society. He has published on interpreting divine metaphors, and currently researches the *Imago Dei* when not playing saxophone.

Graham Dow retired in 2009 after being Bishop of Carlisle for eight years, Bishop of Willesden (London) and Vicar of Holy Trinity Church, Coventry for eleven years. He loves expounding the Bible, supporting Holy Spirit renewal, praying for healing, the liberation of lay ministry and God's purpose in daily work.

Steve Motyer loves the quest for understanding – and the Bible is central to this quest. His life as a carer helps with this, as does 30 years of teaching New Testament and Counselling at London School of Theology.

Ian Paul is Associate Minister at St Nic's Nottingham, and Honorary Assistant Professor at the University of Nottingham, as well as Managing Editor at Grove Books in Cambridge. He blogs at www.psephizo.com.

Henry Wansbrough OSB is a monk at Ampleforth Abbey in Yorkshire. He is a member of the Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission, and lectures frequently across the globe. He has recently completed a new translation of the Bible, the *Revised New Jerusalem Bible*.

Ian Macnair worked in church pastoral ministry, Bible College lecturing and administration before his retirement. His writings include *Teach Yourself New Testament Greek* (Nelson, 1995).

David Spriggs writes...

At the heart of this issue we are celebrating the life-giving festival of Pentecost. Jeremy Duff, on the Spirit in Acts, explores with us how the unfolding story of the life of the early church is in reality the story of the Holy Spirit guiding, empowering and blessing the obedience of those first Christians. It is a remarkable account and holds many clues and prompts for us as Christians today as we seek to live faithfully in a complex and ever-changing culture.

But at the heart of our witness for Christ is the character which the Holy Spirit produces within. Ian Macnair brings his biblical scholarship and pastoral experience to the well-known list of characteristics we call the fruit of the Spirit. He makes two fundamental points: first that this 'menu' is not a pick-and-mix one – we are called to allow God to grow them all in us; and secondly that while God's Spirit produces them, we still need to pursue them!

Steve Motyer provides us with the narrative picture of Jesus to enrich our understanding of who we are called to be as he continues his journey in Mark's Gospel. We can glimpse a great deal about the heart of Jesus as we see him conquering the storm, demonic forces and biting criticism – all situations which require the fruit of the Spirit to handle as Jesus did.

Bishop Graham Dow shows us how the Bible can help us understand and respond to the demonic forces around us and how we can contribute to God's mission in this context as he explores 'deliverance'.

Ian Paul's exposition of 2 Timothy, Titus and Philemon, amongst other things, shows how the fruit of the Spirit was no abstract moral list but was exemplified in the life of Paul and needed in the ongoing life of the churches.

Brian Howell's insights on the book of Genesis remind us that the development of the early church and its mission has an antecedent in the way God starts to form his people, the nation of Israel as his 'mission partner' to bring to fruition his purposes to redeem his broken creation. Hence we are constantly reminded of the larger cultural context and the global vision of God.

Two other Old Testament contributions are Leviticus in the capable hands of Henry Wansbrough, and the prophets Zephaniah and Habakkuk, which are intriguing if less well-known. Zephaniah seems to be a catalogue of the judgement of God on Israel and the nations, yet it also contains the amazing promise that he will remedy their rebellion, take away the judgement against them and renew them in his love. Habakkuk brings his own challenges to us: 'He shows us a way to grow in our faith by boldly putting the tough questions of life back to the God who raised them.'

May God equip us for every good work as we respond to his word.

2 Timothy, Titus and Philemon

Ian Paul

These three letters, gathered at the end of Paul's writings in our Bibles, are often neglected but offer us some profound insights into Paul's thinking and practice. Alongside Paul's letters to seven churches, it means that (if we include Hebrews as Pauline, which is probably mistaken but was a common assumption in the past), we have in total 14 letters.

2 Timothy and Titus, along with 1 Timothy, are usually labelled the 'pastoral epistles' because they are addressed to pastors who have oversight of some of the early Christian congregations in their area. There has been significant debate about whether they really were written by Paul, in part because some distinct vocabulary is different from Paul's earlier letters, and in part because of what appears to be a different focus on questions of church order, reflected in Paul's concern for the appointment of 'elders'. But, as we shall see, there are many things in these letters which correlate not only with Paul's earlier concerns but also with those of Jesus and other New Testament writers. Compared with the literature that we know from the second century, these letters look thoroughly Pauline.

Philemon is rather different. A personal letter addressed to a friend and fellow leader, it is one of the 'prison epistles' along with Colossians and Ephesians, written by Paul when under house arrest, and never seriously questioned as authentic. Although these three letters are dealing with quite different concerns from his other letters, the portrait of Paul is consistent. In all three, but particularly in 2 Timothy – his last, written knowing that he was near the end of his life – we are offered fascinating insights into his character and thought. Paul, the great theological thinker of the first generation of followers of Jesus and the fearless pioneering missionary and church planter, is revealed as a person of great warmth and tenderness, someone deeply dependent on personal relationships and profoundly hurt by personal betrayal. Together, the letters give us a Pauline combination of passion and wisdom, of victory and suffering, and of both personal and doctrinal insight.

Quotations are from the New International Version (Anglicised).

1 The confidence of faith

2 Timothy 1:1–14

Paul's opening greetings blend together the transformation in his thinking that has come about as a result of his experience of what God has done in Christ, and his tender affection towards Timothy, his 'dear son' in the Lord. And in these opening verses, he holds together important themes in Christian thinking that are often set against one another.

The first pair of themes is the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of human response. Paul is an apostle of Jesus 'by the will of God' (v. 1) and not of his own choosing. In fact, the whole project of our salvation and sanctification is 'because of [God's] own purpose and grace' (v. 9), arising out of God's intention and initiative before time began. Although Jesus' 'appearing' (v. 10) here refers to his incarnation and public ministry, Paul's personal experience on the Damascus road reinforces his sense that God's revelation of himself in Jesus was of his own doing. And yet, for Paul, this elicits not a sense of passivity but of vigorous human response, both for himself and for Timothy. Just as Paul energetically pursued the ministry of being a 'herald', 'apostle' and 'teacher' of the faith (v. 11), so he now encourages Timothy to take action, to 'fan into flame' (v. 6) the gift of God – probably the commission to be a minister of the gospel – to respond with energy to what God has called him to. The Spirit does not take control of us, but leads us into 'self-discipline' (v. 7), to the fullness of human maturity and responsibility. We need to bend our will to 'guard the good deposit' of faith we have been given (v. 14).

This means attending to both the inner life and the outer – to personal discipline and holiness as well as the 'testimony about our Lord or me' (v. 8), meaning either the testimony they offer or the testimony about them. It means experiencing both 'joy' (v. 4) in seeing what God has done in our lives and the lives of others and in the blessing of our new family in the Lord, and 'suffering' (vv. 8, 12) pressure and opposition just as Jesus did. It means looking back with pride ('my ancestors', v. 3) and looking forward in confident hope ('promise of life', v. 1). Paul can put up with public shame because he knows he is honoured by the one whose opinion is all that ultimately matters.

2 Building a people of power

2 Timothy 1:15—2:10

Paul is often characterised as exemplifying ‘muscular Christianity’, not least because of his tireless activity in preaching and teaching, and his travels around the eastern Mediterranean – he probably walked around 10,000 miles in his ten most active years of ministry. The metaphors at the centre of this passage reinforce this impression. A follower of Jesus is a ‘soldier’ (2:3, despite the early Christians being uniformly pacifist), engaged in spiritual warfare, not against human forces but against the ‘powers of this dark world’ (Ephesians 6:12), language that finds its way into many baptism liturgies. Discipleship involves the training regime of an ‘athlete’ (2:5, though many Jews and Christians saw the Roman games as immoral because of the nudity involved), a metaphor Paul applied to himself as well as others (1 Corinthians 9:27) because he knew that even he had not yet attained maturity (Philippians 3:12–14). And though it is God who sows the seed (Mark 4:3) and who gives the growth (1 Corinthians 3:6), nurturing faith in ourselves and others requires the hard work of a ‘farmer’ (2:6). These are images that we must return to and reflect on again and again (2:7).

Yet Paul was no individualist. His gratitude to Onesiphorus, who went out of his way to support and encourage Paul (1:16–18), is typical of someone who was keenly aware of his dependence on others – those ahead of him in faith, those from whom he had learnt much and those whose support, ministry and partnership he treasured (Romans 16:1–16). If his words about those who have ‘deserted’ him (1:15) sound harsh, this reflects the pain of betrayal felt by someone who was a consistent team player. So he urges Timothy to be the same – to build a team of ‘reliable’ people, whom Timothy can trust and who will share his teaching ministry (2:2). Timothy, like Paul, needs the company of other faithful ‘witnesses’ who will share his testimony.

This twin focus is rooted in Paul’s gospel (2:8), even though the summary here sounds more than succinct. Jesus was fully human, ‘descended from David’, the anointed king who would fulfil the hopes and longings of his people for freedom and deliverance. And he did this through defeating death as only God could do – through being ‘raised from the dead’ and ascended to the Father’s right hand, sharing his glory and power. This combination of human discipline and divine power come together to forge a renewed ‘elect’ (2:10), the people of God, both for this age and the age to come.

3 The foundation of faith

2 Timothy 2:11–21

The trustworthy word or saying might be something already known which Paul is quoting, or might be a saying of Paul's. The fourfold assertions, all in the form 'if... then...' align with both Paul's earlier teaching and the teaching of Jesus, and continue the theme of divine and human responsibility.

Firstly, Paul has explained that we 'die with him' as we enter the waters of baptism, and then emerge to new life in anticipation of our final resurrection as we emerge from those same waters (Romans 6:4). This symbolises the reality that, when we are in Christ, 'the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here' (2 Corinthians 5:17). Secondly, patient endurance is the hallmark of Christian faith, since we cannot enter the kingdom without going through 'many hardships' (Acts 14:22). But those whom Jesus has purchased and who walk his path of suffering will reign with him (Revelation 5:10). The third assertion echoes Jesus' own teaching in Mark 8:38 (and Luke 9:26) that 'If any is ashamed of me... [I] will be ashamed of them' on the last day. God's gracious offer of new life is free, but it is not cheap, and accepting it requires costly commitment. And yet (fourthly) God always remains faithful, even when we are not, and his offer of forgiveness is always available for those who turn to him.

These are precious truths which God's people need to keep hold of if they are to live this new life in all its fullness. Paul has no time for worthless quarrelling about mere words (vv. 14, 16), whether that is in theological point-scoring or idle gossip. But Paul knows that words matter, and longs that Timothy should handle the words of scripture and of the good news about Jesus like a skilled craftsman who can make a straight cut in a piece of wood (v. 15). This includes the truth about our relationship with God (v. 19) as well as sound teaching or doctrine (v. 18); the two belong together. (The idea of a secret resurrection is not unlike modern teaching about a secret rapture, and is just as misleading.) There is no sense here of spiritual elitism; anyone who commits themselves to live in this truth can be used by God (v. 21).

4 Spiritual leadership

2 Timothy 2:22—3:9

Martin Luther once defined sin as *cor curvum se* – the heart turned in on itself. Here, Paul encourages Timothy to live a disciplined life in order to fulfil his responsibilities as a Christian leader – but it is a life turned, in a disciplined way, not in on itself but outwards towards others. Christian leadership involves being ‘kind to everyone’, avoiding unnecessary conflict, firmly focusing on good teaching and being winsome to opponents. The point of teaching the truth is not to win arguments, but to win people, so that those who are in error might themselves ‘come to their senses’ (2:26) and also come to live in the truth. For Paul, it seems, there is always hope, even for those who are ‘opponents’ of the gospel; even they have the possibility of repentance held out if they ‘come to their senses’, the phrase Jesus uses of the prodigal son at his turning point in Luke 15:17.

This is a spiritual and not simply a practical or pastoral task – the winning over of others means engaging in spiritual conflict and rescuing them from ‘the trap of the devil’ (2:26). So ‘fleeing the evil desires of youth’ (2:22) probably does simply refer to sexual temptation (as is often thought) but includes having the maturity to avoid snap judgements, scoring points over others or getting carried away with power. Timothy needs a wise and steady head on his young shoulders.

This is all the more pertinent because of the character of ‘the last days’ (3:1). Although there are hints at some intensification of evil towards the end, the ‘last days’ actually began with Pentecost (Acts 2:17). Paul lists 18 vices in no obvious order, though with some overlap with the list in Romans 1:29–31 – but in striking contrast to the fruit of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5:22–23. The power of true godliness is in the transformation that leads to holy living. This distinctive life is like the difference between Israel and Egypt at the Exodus; ‘Jannes’ and ‘Jambres’ are the legendary names of the magicians opposed to Moses and Aaron (Exodus 7:10–12). Just as God’s deliverance then became clear, so the difference between true and false godliness will become ‘clear to everyone’.

5 Apostolic confidence

2 Timothy 3:10–4:5

This supremely pastoral letter here reaches its climax, as Paul makes his final charge to Timothy before his very personal signing off, setting out three features of apostolic ministry.

The first is that of relationship and fellowship, of shared ministry with others who live that distinctive life and whose teaching he can trust. It is entirely consistent with Paul's ministry throughout the New Testament that he can appeal to Timothy by highlighting the qualities in his own life that have been fashioned after the example of Jesus, just as he did with the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 11:1). But Paul is not unique in this; Timothy also knows the way of life of 'those from whom you have learned' (3:14) the faith, including his family.

The second is that of suffering. Paul still recalls the hard time he had on his first missionary journey in Iconium and Lystra (Acts 14), and repeats here what he said there: 'we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God' (Acts 14:22). His language here echoes Jesus' teaching in the sermon on the mount ('Blessed are you when people insult you', Matthew 5:11) and the theme of suffering forms the centrepiece of Paul's defence of his apostolic ministry in 2 Corinthians 11:21–29.

The third feature is faithfulness to the teaching of the scriptures. Paul treats his scriptures (the Old Testament) as a reliable testimony to the acts of God in and among his people, and he constantly refers to them in communicating the truth about Jesus, the climax and fulfilment of God's action in the world. These now include the New Testament, since the Gospel writers saw themselves as continuing this reliable testimony (Luke 1:1–4; John 20:31–31), and because others soon saw this in Paul's writings too (2 Peter 3:16). These scriptures, breathed out by the Spirit of God, are able to teach what is right and correct what is wrong in understanding, and train right action whilst rebuking wrong action (3:16), just as is the apostolic message which aligns with it (4:2). So Paul urges Timothy to be unstinting in proclaiming the word of God, not just because of the presence of God and Jesus in which they both live, but because of the hope of his appearing (this time referring to his return) at which he will 'judge the living and the dead' (4:1), a phrase now incorporated in the creeds, and when the kingdom at last will be fully present.

6 A life poured out for others

2 Timothy 4:6–22

In this extraordinary ending to his final letter, Paul touches on many of the themes he has already explored, but does so against a brimming sense of confident personal hope. As he has poured himself out for others and for the sake of the gospel in life, so he is now being poured out in death – ‘till death Thy endless mercies seal, and make my sacrifice complete’ (Charles Wesley, 1707–88). For Paul, death is not the end or a loss, but a ‘releasing’ into God’s future, the literal meaning of the word translated ‘departure’ (v. 6). He is confident, not just because he has indeed remained faithful to his life’s end (compare 2:13) but supremely because of the faithfulness of God who will bring his work to completion in Paul (compare Philippians 1:6).

Once again, Paul is acutely aware of the impact of relationships. There are those who have failed to stay the course and have deserted both Paul and the gospel – Demas (v. 10) and Alexander (v. 14). But just as he has taught others to do (Romans 12:19–20), he does not seek revenge but trusts to God as judge of all. And Paul continues to the end to value those who have worked alongside him, particularly Luke, whose friendship explains the close relationship between Paul’s theology in his letters and Luke’s in his writings. Perhaps the most poignant mention is that of Mark – the same Mark who bailed out of ministry at an important moment (Acts 13:13), and whose involvement became a serious point of contention between Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:36–40). Paul not only taught about the ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:16–21); he lived it out in his own life.

Paul’s concern for reading the scriptures endures to the end – the probable meaning of his request for Timothy to bring ‘scrolls and parchments’, though this could also include some of his own writings. He ends on a note of continued trust; he knows God has delivered him in the past, and is confident that God will deliver him again – not necessarily from suffering and death at the hands of his enemies, but into the kingdom of God’s perfect, heavenly reign. For Timothy, his final wish is for the presence of God to guide him; the grace of God to surround him; and for the glory to be to God in all things. It is a fitting end to a life well lived.

Guidelines

This fascinating final letter contains many striking and challenging ideas. Perhaps one of its most notable features is the way it holds together different aspects of Christian living and thinking which are often either separated or traded off against each other. It is going too far to call Paul's thinking 'dialectic', but the ideas which he holds in tension or relation to one another are things which, on their own and stripped of their counterbalancing partner, easily become heretical.

The first pair is the idea of God's sovereignty and human response. Paul is clear that salvation is not only God's gift, but it is God's initiative from the very beginning. However, this leads him neither to a determinism about who is saved nor complacency about human action. God's initiative calls for – demands, even – human response, not just as an initial reaction but as an ongoing focus. This interaction between the human and the divine finds expression in the person of Jesus, who holds together in himself divine action and human response.

The second pair is the importance of both the personal as well as the corporate. Paul is clear that each person needs to make a personal response to God's invitation, but is equally clear that this then leads to a new corporate identity within the body of Christ. It is presented here in Paul's encouragement of Timothy to personal discipline on the one hand, and Paul's own focus on the importance of relationships with others, something he also wants to see in Timothy. This is a reflection of the way Paul holds together the subjective and the objective; the gospel is about personal experience but it is also about truth; it is about feelings but also about facts. We never find Paul arguing that one of these has priority and the other then tags along.

Lastly, we note Paul's twin focus on understanding and action. He wants people to fully understand what God has done for them in Jesus – but then wants to see their lives changed by this, so that the difference is evident to all.

1 Establishing God's people

Titus 1:1–14

Although Paul follows the usual format of letter-writing here, this one has an unusual introduction, similar only to Romans in its focus. He identifies himself as a 'servant' of God (or Christ) and an apostle or 'special messenger' of Jesus (v. 1); the purpose of servants and of messengers is not to draw attention to themselves, but to serve and point to the one who sent them. But here, Paul expands on his purpose in relation to those to whom he has been sent – to build up God's people in their faith, knowledge of the truth and their hope, and that in turn is to shape godly living. As elsewhere, Paul emphasises that this is not of his choosing, but by the 'command' (v. 3) of God.

This focus is not surprising, given the reason for Paul's writing. Titus is not mentioned in Acts, but is referred to by Paul in his early (Galatians 2:1, 3) and later (2 Corinthians 2:13) writings. He was probably one of Paul's converts ('my true son', v. 4) from a Gentile background, and is not only a trusted partner in gospel ministry (2 Corinthians 8:23) but also someone who can tackle difficult pastoral issues (taking Paul's 'harsh letter' to Corinth, 2 Corinthians 7:12–15) and trustworthy with the collection for the Macedonians (2 Corinthians 8:5–7). It appears that, after Paul's release from the imprisonment at the end of Acts, he and Titus went to Crete and planted churches there, and Paul has left Titus to appoint local leaders. Paul is here not seeking to control what is happening, but to enable the delegation of shared ministry – not correcting problems, as in 1 Timothy, but putting leadership in place to avoid them.

Although Paul only mentions men as elders ('faithful to his wife', v. 6), we know from Romans 16 that he worked with women who shared his apostolic ministry (Romans 16:7). He recognises the importance of living an integrated life – a leader's good standing among believers should reflect his competence as a leader in his own household. 'Hospitality', literally 'the love of strangers', was a notable characteristic of the early Christian community and a concern of all (Romans 12:13; Hebrews 13:2; 1 Peter 4:9). In asking leaders to be 'blameless', Paul is not asking for perfection, but that leaders should be mature in the faith, living distinctive lives in good standing with all, just like the first believers in Jerusalem (Acts 2:47).

2 A healthy distinctiveness

Titus 1:10–2:5

Although Paul is not trying to correct errors that have already crept into churches in Crete, he is aware of the possibilities of danger. Chief amongst these threats are those ‘of the circumcision group’ (1:10). These seem to be the ones who were arguing that to be a follower of (the Jewish saviour) Jesus, you needed to be circumcised as well – something Paul believed undermined the sufficiency of Jesus’ death and resurrection for us, and compromised the offer of salvation to all, both Jew and Gentile. It was a major debate for the early church (Acts 15) and touched on a key part of Paul’s understanding of the gospel (Romans 1:16).

Titus had already encountered this debate, since he was in Jerusalem with Paul, and his lack of circumcision was part of Paul’s own case (Galatians 2:3). For Paul, Jesus (and he alone) was the ‘yes’ to all God’s promises (2 Corinthians 1:20–22), and nothing needed to be added to the message about him – Paul wanted to ensure that those whom Titus appointed would hold to the same good news. Paul’s opposition to ‘Jewish myths’ (1:14) is not opposition to Jewish faith, or the Jewish roots of Christian faith; he consistently assumes that the Jewish scriptures (the Old Testament) have become the scriptures of all followers of Jesus, Jew and Gentile alike.

Though it sounds harsh, Paul agrees with the Cretan philosopher Epimenides about the failings of his fellow countrymen (1:12) – but that could not describe all the island’s inhabitants, else Titus would find no one to appoint to leadership! Paul’s concern is rather that Christian leaders are shaped more by the fruit of the Spirit than by their surrounding culture, and that they lead distinctive lives that others should follow. This is quite the opposite to a narrow-minded legalism; the discipline and self-control that comes with mature faith actually allows people to enjoy the freedom that is theirs in Christ (‘To the pure, all things are pure’, 1:15). Paul here uses a medical metaphor of ‘healthy’ teaching – translated in most English versions with the rather duller ‘sound’ (2:1) – a word he uses frequently in the pastorals and not in his other letters, but one which makes a connection with Jesus’ own claims to be the one who brings spiritual health (Luke 5:31). Healthy churches need healthy teaching from healthy leaders.

3 Winsome living

Titus 2:6—3:2

It is easy to feel frustrated that some of the ethical instructions in the New Testament don't sound a bit more radical. The apparent acceptance of slavery and the submission to what was in reality a violent autocratic system of government seem too meek and mild and highly conformist – not just in comparison with contemporary Christian ethics, but also compared with the radical ethics of Jesus. It is easy to misread Paul's concerns in two directions – either rejecting them as a failed compromise, or accepting them as a universal agenda for social conformity.

But all letters in the New Testament are 'occasional' – written to people in a particular time and place. The early Christian movement at this stage comprises perhaps 10,000 people in an empire of 14 million, so challenging the structures of the status quo was not an option. And this new way of life was a revelation – but it mustn't look too much like a revolution. Any movement which was seen to be threatening the social order would quickly be put down by the Roman authorities. The message of the gospel was indeed radical, but not in ways we might realise. It offers a radical involvement of all; groups (slaves, women and children) who might be expected simply to do as they are told are appealed to as active moral agents. It offers a radical blessing of all; the ethics here are full of concern for others and kindness to them. And it offers a radical hope – that we will see the full glory of God at the coming of Jesus our saviour (the best way of understanding 2:13). He is the one who not only loves us and accepts us, but effects the radical transformation of holiness in each of our lives.

Paul's consistent concern is that this hope should be made available to all – hence the repeated refrain that opponents should 'have nothing bad to say about us' (2:8) and that 'the teaching about God our saviour [will be] attractive' (v. 10). There were plenty of issues in which the early Christians were distinctive, not least their refusal to worship anyone other than Jesus, and Paul did not want to add any unnecessary barriers. And it worked! Over the next 200 years, this tiny band grew faster than any religious movement in history until it took the empire captive.

4 Oh, what a gift!

Titus 3:3–15

The sharp contrast that Paul has drawn between the moral position of believers and those in wider society could easily give the believers a sense of superiority so that they looked down on others – were it not for two things which Paul now explores.

The first is that he is very clear that believers are, by their own efforts and in their natural state, no different from those around them. It is striking that Paul includes himself, a Jew, in the description of what ‘at one time, we too were’ (v. 3). The list of seven faults are not just a matter of moral failure, but of being spiritually ‘enslaved’; we needed not just teaching but rescuing from bondage. And that rescue has been effected by the one who ‘saved’ us. The ‘washing’ alludes to water baptism which acts as a sign of the inner washing by the Holy Spirit. The language of ‘rebirth’ reminds us of Jesus’ teaching in John 3, that we must be ‘born again’, but the particular term Paul uses hints at the new creation, the new world that God’s anointed one brings into being. When we are born anew of water and the Spirit, we begin to live the life of the age to come – the meaning of ‘eternal life’ (v. 7).

But the second thing Paul emphasises is that the change we have experienced is all God’s doing – it is his ‘mercy’ and not our merit by which we have received this gift. In Paul’s day, gift-giving was governed by strict protocols; you gave a gift to a person who merited it by their worth, and the greater their worth, the greater the gift you gave. But God turned that system upside-down in Jesus; the greatest gift of all has been given to those of no worth at all, but by the sheer kindness and generosity of the giver.

Having received this gift, however, is only the beginning. In the light of God’s generosity to us, we now seek to be generous to others by ‘doing what is good’ (v. 8). There is no point in Titus engaging in ‘foolish controversies’ (v. 9) that will not change anything; focusing on responding to God and sharing good news in word and deed will avoid the pitfall of living ‘unproductive lives’ (v. 14).

5 Transforming relationships

Philemon 1–11

It is perhaps surprising to find one of Paul's personal letters in the canon of the New Testament, especially as it does not appear to be concerned with obvious issues of ministry, leadership or doctrine. But it is significant in giving us an insight into how Paul handled a difficult situation.

The first part of this short letter is dominated by Paul's establishing of his strong relationship with Philemon before he turns to make his personal request. Luther called this letter 'holy flattery', and some have suspected Paul of being manipulative and underhand – but in fact the kinds of things he focuses on here are present in his other letters. He deploys the language of friendship and family (Apphia 'our sister' in verse 2 might well have been Philemon's wife) which he uses frequently elsewhere; having been born of the same heavenly Father, all those who believe are now members of one family which transcends natural family ties. He also emphasises shared commitment and ministry; Philemon is a 'fellow worker' (v. 1), a term Paul uses for those who shared his apostolic ministry, who seems to be the leader of the Christian community ('church' is too institutional a term for *ekklesia*) meeting in his home. Another member of his family (perhaps his son?) is addressed as a 'fellow soldier'; the imagery of fighting as a soldier is one that Paul and others use elsewhere (1 Corinthians 9:7; 2 Corinthians 10:3; Ephesians 6:10–13; 2 Timothy 2:3; 1 Peter 2:11).

But the theological basis of their relationship is matched by one of personal experience. Paul prays for Philemon, his family and his fellow believers, and 'always' (v. 4) gives thanks for them, as he does for many others (1 Thessalonians 1:2; Philippians 1:3; 1 Corinthians 1:4). It is typical that Paul's concern in verse 5 is both upward ('faith in the Lord Jesus') and outward ('love for all his people'), and that he sees discipleship not simply as having a decisive beginning but as also involving a continuing journey of 'deepening understanding' (v. 6). And, also typically, Paul is reluctant to demand anything even when he would be entitled to do so; instead, he prefers to 'appeal to you on the basis of love' (v. 9). The quality of relationships within the body of Christ are no mere abstraction for Paul, but make a practical difference in the way that he relates to his brothers and sisters.

6 The practice of reconciliation

Philemon 12–25

In past debates among Christians about slavery, both sides have appealed to this letter. On the one hand, Paul appears to take the institution of slavery for granted, and offers no obvious objection to it. After all, up to one third of the population of the empire were enslaved, and an ending of the institution would have brought the social and economic structure crashing down. And yet the language Paul uses here challenges the very assumptions that make slavery possible.

It appears as though Philemon's slave Onesimus (whose name means 'useful') has run away ('separated from you', v. 15), possibly because he stole some money ('if he... owes you anything' v. 18). He has met Paul, either by seeking him out or in his imprisonment, and has become a Christian through him ('my son', v. 10). Paul's affection for Onesimus ('my very heart', v. 12) outstrips even the warmth of his greeting to Philemon – but instead of seeking the freedom of the slave, or allowing him to go his own way, he seeks reconciliation between the two which will transform their relationship. The language of verse 16 ('no longer as a slave') is rather ambiguous; Paul does not appear to be suggesting that Philemon should grant Onesimus manumission – setting him free – but does assume that the fraternal relationship between fellow believers will both transcend and transform the social relationship that already exists.

This reconciliation involves at least three things for Paul. Firstly, it means Paul making costly decisions to prioritise the reconciled relationship over his own needs and preferences. He would rather have kept Onesimus with him, as a support in his confined situation, than send him away. But his commitment to Philemon means doing what is right by him. Secondly, it means Paul 'standing in the gap' and being ready to bear the cost of whatever it will take to restore the relationship and right what has gone wrong. Thirdly, Paul is committed to maintaining his relationship with both parties as they come together with one another. Not only does he emphasise his continuing partnership with Philemon (v. 17), he also commits to coming to him again in person (v. 22). For Paul, the reconciliation effected between us and God through the death and resurrection of Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:18–19) was not simply an useful idea or a handy metaphor – it was something that shaped his own life and relationships.

Guidelines

These two letters of Paul, with their attention to two very different issues, have less of a sense of urgency about them, and less personal disclosure than many of his other letters. However, they are marked by Paul's continued concern for truth in teaching and truth in relationships.

Having entrusted to Titus the task of leadership among believers in Crete, he hopes that Titus will in turn find people he can trust and who are trusted already. It is no surprise, then, that his focus is on character rather than gifting, and on people for whom the transformative impact of the good news is evident. But Paul is also concerned about the truth of the doctrine that they receive, so that they can pass on to others what Paul himself received and passed on, first to Titus and (through him) to these others. The distinctive nature of Christian belief, and the way that it sets apart its followers from their surrounding culture, means that it is all the more important to have no stumbling blocks to faith; leaders must present no unnecessary obstacle that would distract from holding out the offer of life which they themselves have received. The renewing life of the age to come must be lived out persuasively among those still living in this age which is passing away.

Christian truth will only be persuasive when it is lived out in practice. Paul's exposition elsewhere of the reconciling power of the good news is expressed in his own concern for reconciliation between Philemon and Onesimus, when both might have good reason to choose another path. Paul is committed to rebuilding relationships, even at cost to himself – and the preservation of his personal letter is most likely testimony to the fact that what he longed for did in fact happen. Paul's concerns here have continued relevance to us. How can we make sure we (and those around us) are rooted in healthy teaching, and how can that be expressed in healthy and health-giving relationships? How can we communicate God's offer of reconciliation – and how can we live it out in an ever-divided world?

FURTHER READING

John Barclay, *Paul and the Subversive Power of Grace* (Grove Books Ltd, 2016).

Gordon Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* (New International Biblical Commentary) (Hendrickson, 1984).

Ben Witherington, *The Letters to Philemon, the Colossians and the Ephesians* (Eerdmans, 2007).

Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The pastoral letters* (SPCK, 2003).



Transforming lives and communities

Christian growth and understanding of the Bible

Resourcing individuals, groups and leaders in churches for their own spiritual journey and for their ministry

Church outreach in the local community

Offering three programmes that churches are embracing to great effect as they seek to engage with their local communities and transform lives



Teaching Christianity in primary schools

Working with children and teachers to explore Christianity creatively and confidently

Children's and family ministry

Working with churches and families to explore Christianity creatively and bring the Bible alive

Visit brf.org.uk for more information on BRF's work

brf.org.uk

The Bible Reading Fellowship (BRF) is a Registered Charity (No. 233280)

Guidelines is a unique Bible reading resource that offers four months of in-depth study, drawing on the insights of current scholarship. Its intention is to enable all its readers to interpret and apply the biblical text with confidence in today's world, while helping to equip church leaders as they meet the challenges of mission and disciple-building.

Instead of the usual dated daily readings, **Guidelines** provides weekly units, broken into six sections, plus an introduction giving context for the passage, and a final section of points for thought and prayer. On any day you can read as many or as few sections as you wish. As well as a copy of **Guidelines**, you will need a Bible.



Guidelines is edited by David Spriggs, previously Dean of Studies at Bible Society.

BRF Bible reading notes are published three times a year, in January, May and September.



brf.org.uk