

## Learning the Art of Refusal

### Remarkable Christianity, Part 5

*Titus 3:9*

I've heard it said before that buzzards and eagles are similar yet at the same time very different. They're both birds; they both soar on the wind . . . they both have powerful wings and sharp vision. What makes them different is in the way they view life below; what they focus on . . . what it is that attracts their attention.

To a very large degree, whatever a Christian is interested in, or not interested in, will determine their spiritual focus.

What they focus on or what they refuse to focus on will, by and large, determine the quality of their lives.

There's something we as believers need to cultivate; it's the spiritual art of refusal – cultivating what to go after, and what to ignore.

The Bible refers to it as *developing the ability to determine what's right from what's wrong (Hebrews 5:14)*.

I can remember as a kid every so often having the rare experience of going out to eat at a local cafeteria – back in the day when one price covered everything. And every time I went, I had the same problem – I wanted more than I could handle.

At the front of the line, the pasta salad looked good – so I'll have some of that, but then further down, that Jell-O salad looked really good, so I'll take that too; at least two different kinds of bread looked really fresh – banana bread and sour dough rolls; then further down the line the main courses appeared – the lasagna looked great – but, hey that fish looks good too and so do those cut potatoes soaking in butter – besides I needed a vegetable.

And then you finally arrive at the dessert section at the end of the line – how do you decide between

chocolate cake and banana pudding and butterscotch cookies. I'll have some of each.

It was a disaster waiting to end in a stomach ache and a tray with half the food uneaten.

My wife and I have been eating here at Wednesday night suppers with individuals and families going through the GreenHouse class – and I don't know if the kitchen staff prepared for people like me or not because they hand me a plate with everything already on it. It's already measured out.

I don't get to choose anything . . . and I would never choose all those green beans – double up on those potatoes. Truth is it's all delicious.

Listen, learning the art of refusal is critical, not only in a cafeteria line, but in the Christian life.

Just as an individual Christian learns to pick and choose his physical food, so he must learn to pick and choose his spiritual food – those spiritual influences in his life – if he ever hopes to be spiritually healthy.

Let me put it another way . . . there are just some things in life you really need to learn how to ignore.

They're just going to end up distracting you from the kind of spiritual growth you need to develop and the kind of life you need to live.

That's exactly what the Apostle Paul is effectively reinforcing in Titus chapter 3 where he tells Titus and the churches through Titus, you need to learn the spiritual art of refusal.

In fact, Paul is going to spell out four distractions in *Titus chapter 3 that you need to ignore*.

They might look interesting . . . they might seem appealing, but don't put them on your tray – you'll end up with a spiritual stomach ache, or worse.

## Four distractions to refuse.

Let's get a running start at *Titus chapter 3 and verse 8*. *This is a trustworthy statement; and concerning these things I want you to speak confidently; so that those who have believed God will be careful to engage in good deeds. These things are good and profitable for men* – or for mankind in general. **BUT** . . . here's that word again . . . Paul writes, *But avoid foolish controversies, and genealogies and strife and disputes about the Law, for they* – note the difference – *they are unprofitable and worthless.*

Notice, he doesn't say they are unpopular – oh, they were very popular, as we'll see in a moment – in fact, he doesn't want to end his letter to Titus without delivering this warning.

He doesn't say they are unpopular, he says they are unprofitable and worthless.

In other words, they're not good for you. Don't put them on your tray . . .

The first of these four distractions, Paul refers to here are:

### 1. Foolish controversies

He writes, *in verse 9, Avoid them*. That word translated avoid is a verb that means “to shun”; to turn oneself around and literally turn your face away.<sup>i</sup>

In other words, while everybody else is captivated; while everybody else is digging in, you turn your face and heart away. And the present tense for this verb means you're going to have to avoid this stuff over and over again.

*Avoid foolish controversies* – what's he talking about?

Well, the word he uses for *foolish* is the word *moros* (μωραός) which gives us the word *moron*. We get our word, *moronic*, from this adjective.<sup>ii</sup>

The word for *controversies* refers to searching or investigating out things that have no basis . . . they have no substantive meaning. They are merely speculations that occupy the mind without any ability to resolve them.

They are simply fascinating speculations that waste your time and cause you to get into heated debates and controversies.

Paul has already warned Titus about avoiding Jewish fables in chapter 1.

They are fruitless – they are unprofitable.

I was preaching this past summer in the beautiful Adirondack Mountains at the home of Word of Life in upper New York. And wouldn't you know they'd have a heat wave while we were there. I took them through the Book of Ruth and made several comments on Jewish culture.

One of the men came up to me and said, “Have you ever purchased a copy of Jewish Legends?” I said, “I didn't even know one existed.” He said, “Oh yes, they've into English a comprehensive copy of Rabbinical legends and interpretations related to different passages in the Bible that have been handed down from one generation to another.”

So I ordered a copy – it's an oversized volume with large pages – and still there are nearly 1,000 pages of rabbinical legends and interpretations.

When I came to this text in Titus that, for the second time, warned the church of legends, I pulled down this volume that would have contained many of them. I began to read of so many different interpretations and speculations that could have caused division and arguments that I finally had to stop.

Since we are studying Noah and the Flood, I wondered what they might have been speculating about and perhaps arguing over in relation to that event.

I ended up reading more legends and controversial interpretations than I have time to read to you.

But I'll summarize a few of them; one rabbi taught that Noah and his family barely survived an attempt by all the people on the outside trying to turn over the ark with them in it and God saved them by sending lions to surround the ark.

Another legend claims that even though it was dark in the ark, Noah had brought along a pearl which he hung from the roof and they had no need of the light of the sun because the pearl glowed so that Noah and his family could see.

Another rabbinical legend tells that when the rain began to fall and the flood waters rise, one large sea creature didn't want to perish, so Noah tied him to the ark and as he swam alongside the ark he plowed furrows in the water as wide as a sea.

Another Rabbi taught that as the floodwaters swelled, Og, the king of Bashan, sat on one of the rungs of the ark's ladders and promised Noah that he and his sons would be their slaves forever. So Noah punched a hole in the ark, and through it he handed out food to the King every day.

Another legend claims that every raindrop that fell on earth, God first brought it to a boil in the underworld before He carried it out and then dropped it on the human race.<sup>iii</sup>

This is great devotional reading isn't it?

One more rabbinical legend claims that when Noah sent out the dove, she flew to the gates of the Garden of Eden – and God opened the gates for her and she was able to bring back to Noah an olive leaf freshly picked from the Garden of Eden.<sup>iv</sup>

No wonder Paul would reinforce these predominantly Jewish congregations on the Island of Crete to put these things away; they were unprofitable debates and controversies.

In the same way, the church in every generation can get caught up in debatable interpretations about questionable things . . . the Bible isn't as clear as we'd like it to be, so we take sides and take shots.

Paul delivered the same warning to Timothy when he wrote, ***[Don't] pay attention to myths and endless genealogies, which give rise to mere speculation rather than furthering the administration of God which is by faith (1 Timothy 1:4).***

In other words, it doesn't accomplish the mission of the church by means of the gospel.

He wrote further to Timothy in ***2 Timothy 2:23, But refuse foolish and ignorant speculations, knowing that they produce quarrels.***

In other words, if the Bible isn't clear on it, don't argue over it.

The enemy will be more than happy in a church fight to stay neutral and provide both sides with ammunition.

Which is why Paul will also write, ***“Do everything in your power – be diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” (Ephesians 4:3)***

In our GreenHouse class – our class for incoming, potential new members – the need is never more apparent – and more exciting to see developing even in that class.

I typically begin by going around the class – this time right at 82 adults – and find out where they came from.

We have former Anglicans, Catholics, Presbyterians, Methodists, Evangelical Free Church, Bible Church, non-denominational, Independent Baptists, Freewill Baptists, Southern Baptists, Really confused Baptists.

Many of them coming to this church directly from their former church.

I go around the room and tell them to raise their hand when I get to their denomination from which they came . . . Missionary Alliance, Lutherans and United Methodists . . . raise your hand. I tell people from the Assemblies of God they can raise both hands if they want to – wave them around.

They come from all over!

Some come from small churches and some from churches that make ours look small.

Some are used to their pastor preaching on topics and issues of the day and others are used to their pastor preaching through a Book of the Bible for years at a time – they're my favorite students.

Some are from churches that sang mostly hymns with an organ and a piano and some from churches that sang mostly choruses with a band.

Some of them prefer more music while others really want longer sermons. Okay, I made that part up. But they would if I asked them.

Some people come from churches with a lot of liturgy and formality and others come from churches where you never knew what was going to happen.

We have people born and raised in the South – some moved here from the North; there are people from out west and people from up east.

We have Caucasians, Africans, Asians, Hispanics, and more and then again a mixture of several in between.

Some heard the gospel every time they showed up at their church while some are hearing the gospel for the very first time. Like one of the men in our class this session – a young police officer who was podcasting our sermons and listening while on duty – who a few months ago accepted Jesus Christ as his Savior – he and his family are now attending.

You got a roomful of older believers in the Lord and brand new believers in the Lord.

You got singles, married couples, widows and divorcees.

You got couples with children and couples without any children.

Some homeschool their kids; others send them to public school and still others send their kids to Christian school.

I usually tell them that my wife and I did all three – public school, homeschool and Christian school; and I can say with all authority that none of them work – perfectly.

This myriad of variety is represented in one new members class.

How do think we'll ever get along; and maybe you're thinking, we probably won't!

I mean, how are these believers on the Island of Crete going to get along. You've got descendants of Gentile pirates and then historic Jewish converts ever going to get along?

Some of them are poor – some are wealthy; some grew up without any education and one of them, Paul mentions at the end of this letter, is an attorney.

There are going to be people in these churches on Crete who had grown up under the influence of the Essenes – a sect that that pandered toward formality and ritual. They ate special meals together only after participating in special rituals of cleansing with water.

They're now standing in the pew next to Gentiles who barely bathe to begin with, much less experience some kind of ritual cleansing.

You have people coming in with religious traditions and pagan ritualistic memories.

Everybody came to the cross and their sins were washed away but opinions tend to stick.

Funny how that happens.

Paul effectively tells Titus – you'll need to remind them that these opinions – these legends – these superstitions – these dearly held convictions that are neither right nor wrong but definitely divisive – tell them to determine what to leave off the table.

And here's what you can do to determine what to keep to yourself and what to try and convince others to adopt. At the end of the verse he summarizes – these are unprofitable and worthless.

In other words, they will not bear spiritual fruit even if you win the argument.

Even without a clear text of scripture, the interpretation takes on the authority of whoever is dispensing it – like the Rabbi's of old who created volumes of opinions taught as doctrines and you end up with Noah being protected by lions and feeding a king out of compassion and the dove getting that olive leaf from the Garden of Eden.

I shared recently with my GreenHouse my growing opinion that we ought to wear white clothing. I mean we're told in Revelation that our future wardrobe will be the triumphant robes of white, indicative of victory in battle. And in light of that coming day, we ought to even now begin to wear white in anticipation of our final victory with

Christ as we eventually come, Revelation 19 records, riding on our white horses.

So let's start wearing white clothing.

And of course the class begins to smile . . . they know me well enough by now – and obviously I'm not wearing white clothes.

Could I be serious?

I then read a quote to them from one church leader who gathered a following in the second century – and he was serious as he preached and taught – and I quote – “Forsake colored clothing; remove everything in your wardrobe that is not white. No longer sleep on a soft pillow nor take warm baths; if you are sincere about following Christ, never shave your beard, for to shave is an attempt to improve on the work of Him who created us.”

How many of you, this morning before you came to church, attempted to improve on the work of your Creator.

Thank the Lord.

I can't help but laugh whenever I read that quote because, for one thing, I was raised at a time and in a circle of churches that believed if you didn't shave – if you had a beard – or moustache – you were sinning. This guy was preaching in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century that if you shaved you were sinning.

Listen, in any generation, there are plenty of controversies that are really unfruitful.

And I haven't even mentioned:

- whether or not global warming is make believe;
- if drilling off shore is a good idea;
- if gun control is a bad thing;
- if border control is a waste of money;
- if you should be eating only organic foods to prove you're taking care of God's vessel;
- if you're driving an electric car to show you're taking care of God's planet;
- if you're feeding your cats and dogs expensive food that contains vegetables, to prove you're a loving pet owner; because your dog needs to eat vegetables just like you. I thought of saying, your dog wants to eat that cat, but I changed my mind.

I haven't really brought up anything controversial yet.

We could really begin to hash out political views, parenting styles, worship styles, personal

convictions, an array of preferences and opinions and traditions and secondary issues that so easily elevate to the level of gospel truth.<sup>v</sup>

The Apostle Paul had been around the block several times . . . he knew that Titus faced this kind of threat to the effective and fruitful ministry among the churches on the island of Crete.

Although the non-saving, secondary, non-doctrinal controversies change their name over generations, has it ever occurred to you that the church is not so much defeated as she is distracted by pursuing non-essentials – creating foolish controversies that shrivel up our demonstration of the grace of God and with that, the potential of spiritual fruit shrivels up and disappears.

No wonder Paul would say to the Ephesians, ***“Be diligent to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” (Ephesians 4:3)***

No wonder he effectively reinforces to Titus here, “Listen, develop the art of refusal – you’re surrounded by a buffet of opinions and speculations – stick to the word – and not some strange interpretation of it either . . . protect the church from loading up on stuff that will do nothing more than make her unprofitable and worthless.

**2. Secondly, Paul goes on in verse 9 to refer not just to shunning foolish controversies but also, avoid genealogies.**

Again, this would have been particularly important to a Jewish audience.

The Jewish people meticulously investigated and documented their family lines since their inheritances and holdings of land were thus determined.<sup>vi</sup>

Genealogies determined status; ancestral dominance would lead to positions of authority.

And that could creep into the church as well if they weren’t careful.

This would be especially divisive between Gentiles and Jews. Jews would hold over the Gentiles the fact that they had connection to the Apostles – they had a connection to Jerusalem; they had a familial connection to the prophets – they had a special connection to the former covenants and certainly God would consider them especially favored in this new covenant.

Certainly the Gentiles would become second class Christians if genealogies became equal to the gospel.

The Jews could claim some kind of spiritual superiority –and that would be that.

Talk about a distraction in the church!

Imagine Titus carrying out his orders from Paul and appointing elders in the church as Paul had directed him (1:5) – imagine Titus appointing some unconnected, unimpressive, unimposing Gentile man as an elder and bypassing some distant relative from some noble Jewish clan descending from one of the more impressive Jewish tribes of Israel.

There are certainly a number of reasons Paul told Titus and through Titus the churches that their genealogies meant nothing in the dispensation of the church.

In fact, the only genealogies that mattered were those that revealed Jesus had in fact descended from David – as well as Joseph and Mary; and beyond that, the only genealogical record that will matter for eternity is whether or not you are related to Jesus Christ by faith – and in so believing, ***you have become a child of God (John 1:12). That you have been born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. (John 1:13)***

That’s the only family tree that really matters.

Paul effectively says, “Start living now, in light of the value of *that* family tree.”

**3. Thirdly, Paul mentions the distraction of strife, next in verse 9.**

The word strife simply stands as a categorical term for arguing and quarreling.

You get the idea that Paul is not only warning the churches of what not to do, the implication here is that the churches were already involved.

As we learned in an earlier text – Paul revels in the fact that we have been ambushed by the grace and kindness of God – and what did we learn from His example?

Well, we learned the part about ambushing each other . . . we just didn’t catch on as quickly that it was an ambush of grace.

Jim Cymbala who pastors The Brooklyn Tabernacle talked in an interview about how he challenges the new members who join that church to not speak critically or unkindly about any other member instead of talking to them directly. He made this comment; “To this day, every time we receive new members, I say much the same thing. That’s because I know what most easily destroys the church is not crack cocaine, government oppression,

or even a lack of funds; rather it is gossip and slander [this kind of strife] that grieves the Spirit of God.<sup>vii</sup>

Dwight Pentecost, a longtime professor of Bible Exposition, and a friend of this pastor, tells of one church split that was so serious each side filed a lawsuit to dispossess the others from the church. The judge threw it out of court and it eventually came to a church court, convened by denominational leaders. The court made its decision and awarded the church property to one of the two factions. The losers withdrew and formed another church in the area. What was interesting and tragic was that in the course of the proceedings the church leadership found that the conflict had begun at a church dinner when an older church member received a smaller slice of meat than the child seated next to him.” And it escalated from there.<sup>viii</sup>

Accusations were made . . . Sides were taken . . . and strife began.

Strife is an ever present distraction waiting to happen within any body of believers – and Paul knew it could uproot any advancement Titus had accomplished through the organization of the church.

Why? Because:

- strife reduces the gospel to personality conflicts;
- strife dissolves the unity of the church into cliques and circles
- strife refuses to listen to reason and rides on rumor and emotion
- strife invites the enemy of the church inside the church where he is more than delighted to stir up one of the very things singled out as something God hates recorded by Solomon in **Proverbs 6:19; we're told that God despises seven things and the seventh thing is the one who spreads strife among the brethren.**

Strife literally invites the devil to church. Why would the devil ever need to attack a church if he can join it?

4. **Paul adds the fourth and final word in his list of distractions here in verse 9 – But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and strife – now notice, and disputes about the Law.**

The church was embroiled for decades in how the Law of Moses might relate to the church.

A major division had been avoided at the Jerusalem council in Acts 15 – as Peter and Paul and James led the church toward a decision of grace that no longer required Gentiles to effectively become Jews to be welcomed in the faith.

There would be debates over Sabbath practices carrying a child.

But Titus was in the middle of it and needed to stand strong against those who wanted the church to become just another, newer outpost of Judaism.

And they were just as serious as Titus would have been.

In the Greek language the root word for disputes is the same root word for sword.<sup>ix</sup>

This word carried a nuance of violence – the word was used of physical combat and even for war.

Chuck Swindoll commenting on this verse wrote that he was aware of two seminary students who were disciplined after their quarrel over the doctrine of sanctification escalated into a fistfight.<sup>x</sup>

How ironic is that? Arguing over godly living to the point they started throwing punches.

If you don't think the church today has the same propensity to disputing as they did on the Island of Crete, just do an internet search on “church fights” . . . and then hold on to your hat.

How tragic.

*The bride of Christ can trip walking down the aisle;  
The bride of Christ can dirty her shoes  
The bride of Christ can soil and stain her dress  
The bride of Christ can embarrass her Groom  
The bride of Christ can act in such a way you would never imagine while waiting for Her Groomsman.*

I'd love to think that the churches in the First Century and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century were above any and all of this.

But Paul writes to them and us. Avoid – shun – turn your face away from – don't get involved in – don't put these things on your tray, even though they're in the buffet line and everybody else is getting a piece of the action – don't do it.

**Avoid, foolish controversies and genealogies and strife and disputes about the law.**

And here's the strategy for avoiding all of that . . . this last phrase in **verse 9. For they are unprofitable and worthless.**

Let me break that down into two positive statements.

**This is how you develop the art of refusal and avoid devastating distractions:**

**1. Be discerning – stay within biblical boundaries.**

In other words, if the Bible is clear and vocal . . . then speak up. If the Bible is for the most part quiet, we oughtta follow suit.

Listen, give your energy to good deeds – remember *verse 8 – these things are profitable* – *verse 9 – these things are not profitable*.

Whether the dove flew to the Garden of Eden or not – right or wrong on that one, it won't really add to the profitability of the gospel and the testimony of Christ.

**2. Secondly, be determined – keep your focus on the mission**

Paul uses a word here at the end of the verse that helps us evaluate what we've been arguing about

and dividing over. He effectively says, "These kinds of distractions are unprofitable and worthless."

The word for worthless Paul uses here is a word that means, powerless, fruitless, or useless.<sup>xi</sup>

Who have we discipled? Who have we won to the grace of Christ?

So here's the test: don't get overheated and all wrapped up to the point of distraction in discussions and opinions and debates that escalate into arguments and cliques and anger and division so that at the end of the day we have produced no real, tangible, lasting, eternal, spiritual fruit.

No wonder Paul would write, "*I implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*" (Ephesians 4:1-3)

So be determined – make sure you walk and think and act within Biblical boundaries.

And be discerning – stay focused on the mission that God has given you.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 10/14/2012 by Stephen Davey.

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i John MacArthur, Titus (Moody Bible Institute, 1996), p. 161

ii John A. Kitchen, The Pastoral Epistles for Pastors (Kress Christian Publications, 2009), p. 560

iii The Book of Legends: Legends from the Talmud and Midrash, Edited by Hayim Bialik & Yehoshua Ravnitzky (Schocken Books, 1992), p. 27

iv Ibid, p. 28

v Knute Larson, Holman New Testament Commentary: 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon (Holman, 2000), p. 385

vi Knute Larson, p. 385

vii Jim Cymbala, Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire (Zondervan, 1997); Men of Integrity (Jan/Feb, 2001), posted on Christianity Today/PreachingToday.com

viii R. Kent Hughes, Ephesians (Crossway Books, 1990), p. 123

ix Robert Black & Ronald McClung, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon (Wesleyan Publishing House, 2004), p. 259

x Charles R. Swindoll, Insights on 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus (Zondervan, 2010), p. 312

xi Kitchen, p. 561