

Introduction

I have been asked to speak about challenges to evangelical theology today. Evangelical theology I understand to be the theology that, revealed in Scripture, was taught by the church fathers at their best and rediscovered at the Reformation in the 16th century and then renewed and revived in subsequent generations. It is living, orthodox Protestant Christianity as essentially expressed in the great confessional statements. Today there are many challenges to this theology that demand serious attention. There are theological challenges such as open theism, the new perspective on Paul's theology in relation to justification, the questioning of penal substitution, pluralism, the revising of traditional evangelical teaching on homosexuality and so on. From outside there are the challenges of issues arising from our encounter with Roman Catholicism, other religions, secularism, globalisation and post-modern culture. The subject is vast and daunting. I have chosen to address an issue that touches on many that I have mentioned, but is to my mind one that is urgent. That is the challenge of recovering a vision of godliness. When evangelical theology loses sight of this vision it loses its way, but when it keeps it in sight it stays on the right path and fulfils its purpose.

My approach in dealing with this subject is straight-forward. After defining what I mean by godliness and offering a few general comments, I intend to reflect on the subject in the light of Paul's Letter to Titus. The third and shortest of Paul's

pastoral letters, Titus is concerned with the nurturing of godliness among God's people. While not dealing with godliness in a comprehensive way, the letter nevertheless focuses on four key areas in which godliness needs to be nurtured – ministry, leadership, lifestyle and citizenship. These are areas that especially demand theological reflection in the light of the vision of godliness.

The word 'godliness' or *eusebeia* is used most frequently in the New Testament by Paul in his pastoral letters. Broadly it means reverence or piety or religion, but as usual with Paul he fills a word in general use with Christian meaning. In his commentary on the pastoral letters Robert Mounce quotes several definitions of godliness, beginning with Spicq's that godliness is about being 'totally consecrated to God, to his worship, and to the fulfilment of his will' with an emphasis on 'the outward appearances of worship and piety in honour of God' and 'an extreme devotion to accomplish the divine will'. Particularly important is the emphasis on the ethical outworking of faith as expressed in Foerster's definition of godliness as 'a lifestyle that stems from faith'. Stressing this horizontal dimension Towner defines godliness as 'a fully reverential attitude and behaviour stemming from a true knowledge of God'. As such, godliness is the goal of every believer as Paul makes clear (1 Tim. 2:2; 6:11; 2 Tim. 3:12; Tit. 2:12) and in which he must train himself both for the benefit it brings for this life and even more for the life to come (1 Tim. 4:7-8). The opposite of godliness is of course ungodliness which characterised the false teachers

and their adherents that Paul and his associates opposed.²

My own definition of godliness is *devotion to God actively expressed in a good life motivated by the gospel*. The godly life is one that is centred on the Triune God revealed in Scripture and as such is a Godward life in its orientation. It is a devotion characterised by fearing, trusting and loving God. Such devotion is actively and not merely passively expressed in the kind of good life described in all its life-affirming richness in the Bible. The good life may or may not be attended with material prosperity, but it will be a life in which our relationships with God, others and ourselves are being restored from the consequences of the fall. But this good life must be motivated by the gospel. Only a person redeemed by Christ and indwelt by the Holy Spirit can live the good life that pleases God. Godliness is not man-centred piety but God-centred devotion. What Paul describes as godliness in the pastorals is described elsewhere in the Bible by him and others in terms of discipleship or holy living or loving God with our whole being and our neighbour as ourselves.

My contention is that this godliness must be recovered as the vision of evangelical theology. Sadly this has not been and is not always the case. To read much theology one would think that the vision of theology was itself. One of the reasons theology is something of a dirty word among Christians is because of its seeming disconnection with the life of the church and the believer. However this

disconnection is largely the result of the enlightenment and the rise of rationalistic philosophy. 'Before then,' as Stephen Chen points out, 'theologians conceived their task as a profoundly spiritual exercise....A merely academic theology would have been quite alien to them, since theology is simply the rational and precise expression of the believer's reflection on God'.³

This is what we find by even a cursory survey of the classical theologians. Summing up the teaching of Athanasius Ellen Charry says that for him theology was about how 'God saves us from ourselves by renewing us in his image, reforming our minds, and shaping our actions to their proper ends'. For Basil of Caesarea it was about 'drinking in the majesty and grace of God'. Fundamental to Augustine of Hippo's theology was the distinction between *scientia* or knowledge and *sapientia* or wisdom. Both are necessary in theology, but sadly much modern theology has emphasised the former at the expense of the latter. Augustine didn't do this. According to Charry, 'A central goal of Augustine's treatise [on the Trinity] is to persuade the reader that revelation and doctrine work together to reshape our minds and affections and thereby our identity'. For him 'the goal of life is knowing and enjoying God'.⁴

We discover this same emphasis in the Protestant Reformers. One of the most influential books in the history of theology has been John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Contrary to the common image of Calvin it would be mistaken to think that the purpose of this work was to discuss rarefied

aspects of theology. In his prefatory address to King Francis I of France in the 1536 edition he wrote: 'My sole purpose was solely to transmit certain rudiments by which those who are touched with any zeal for religion might be shaped to true godliness'.⁵ Later in the 1559 edition he wrote that he had 'no other purpose than to benefit the maintaining of the pure doctrine of godliness' and to 'spread [God's] kingdom and to further the public good'.⁶ As John Leith has said, 'Calvin wrote his theology to persuade, to transform human life.'⁷ No one can read the *Institutes* without being impressed with how Calvin was concerned to help Christians understand their salvation and live it out in the real world. In his commentaries Calvin was not content only to explain the text of Scripture but also to apply its message to the Christian, the church and the world. The goal that Calvin set for himself was taken up by his theological and spiritual heirs among the Puritans. Puritanism was in many ways a movement concerned with godly living. Perhaps sometimes they could be overly scrupulous and too introspective and sowed some seeds of moralism, but in their theology they aimed to help people live holy and godly lives. For William Ames, in his widely used *Marrow of Theology*, theology 'is the doctrine of living to God'.⁸ Or as David Clarkson said at the funeral of his late colleague John Owen, the greatest of all Puritan divines: 'It was his great Design to promote Holiness in the Life and Exercise of it among you'.⁹ I could cite many more examples such as Cotton Mather's emphasis on doing good and Jonathan Edwards' on experiential knowledge of

God. Suffice it for me to mention Lewis Bayly's *The Practice of Piety*, one of the most popular and influential Puritan devotional manuals that simply sought to help Christians live godly lives. First published around 1611, there were 71 editions by 1792 by which time it had also been published in Dutch, French, German, Polish, Italian and Hungarian as well as in some Indian languages in New England. What is striking about the book is how doctrine is applied to everyday Christian living and experience in an accessible and warm-hearted way.

Theology has not always been done this way, but happily there has been in recent years a renewed interest in godliness as the purpose of theology. I have mentioned Ellen Charry's book *By the Renewing of Your Minds* with its significant subtitle, *The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine*. Her argument is that theology is not an end in itself, but to promote moral excellence as it nurtures Christian virtue. She writes: 'Theology is a form of proclamation that aims particularly at interpreting God's word to assist Christians in godly living.'¹⁰ David Wells has written of the inability of much of evangelicalism to nurture moral virtue because of its loosening grip on biblical theology.¹¹ Among indicators of a turn in the theological tide are two recent books. The first is *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* where the author, Richard B Hays, states: 'The goal of this entire project is to encourage the church in its efforts to become a Scripture-based community, to allow its life to be more fitly conformed to the stories narrated in the New

Testament'.¹² That's a fresh breeze from an 'academic' book of theology. A sustained and successful attempt to make godliness the goal of theological prolegomena is David K. Clark's *To Know and Love God*. Clark sees *sapientia* or wisdom as the goal of theology. Several quotes: "The point of gaining knowledge of Christian truth is to be found by the knowledge of the Father, to be conformed to Christ, and to experience the power and presence of the Spirit"; 'godly wisdom is knowledge directed to salvation and Christian living'; 'a major purpose of theology as *sapientia* is to shape and guide the faith, experience and character of Christians'; 'I claim that theology is *sapientia* - that it serves the purposes of godly living'; 'I say that the transformation of lives and communities - *sapientia* - is the ultimate function of theology'; 'A goal of theology as *sapientia* is that persons grow in godliness and in their relationship with God and others'.¹³ Theology that is biblically faithful and done for such a purpose cannot but be of benefit to the churches.

I would like to turn now to Titus in order to map out how having godliness as a goal in theology can help churches and Christians. Paul wrote this letter to his younger colleague Titus, who, as we're told, had been left on the island of Crete to 'put what remained into order' (1:5). What exactly Titus's circumstances were we cannot be sure. It seems that the churches were only being formed, but already they were being harassed by false teachers of the 'circumcision party' who were probably teaching some 'faith plus' doctrine of salvation. Whatever the case, from what Paul writes of his own ministry

(1:1) and later of what Titus was to teach, Titus was to nurture godliness among the Christians on Crete. From what we know Crete was not a congenial place to do that. Quoting one of their own poets, Epimenides, Paul reminds Titus that 'Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons' (1:12). This morally corrupt social environment had infected the false teachers, but it was also the environment out of which the new Christians had been converted. Titus was to help these believers in this context to become godly.

I believe that there is much that we can learn from what Paul wrote to Titus. We live in a culture in Europe that is increasingly morally and intellectually uncongenial to godly living. Nevertheless this is where we live and this is where we are to become godly. In our culture we are to be devoted to God and to actively express that devotion in good lives motivated by the gospel. In this, evangelical theology should help us. From Paul's letter to Titus I suggest that it can do so in four ways.

1. Evangelical theology must help to nurture godly *ministry* (1:1-4)

Paul's greetings in his letters are always significant in relation to the rest of what he writes in them. Here in writing to Titus Paul expands on the apostolic nature of his ministry not only to affirm his authority, but also, I suggest, to remind Titus of the apostolic foundation of his own ministry as well as that of the churches for which he was responsible. Like Titus and the Cretan churches we too are

engaged in ministry that is built on the foundation of the apostles and one of the roles of evangelical theology is to nurture such ministry or service for the Lord in its various forms.

The purpose of ministry is, like Paul's, to nurture godliness (1:1) or devotion to God that is actively expressed in good lives motivated by the gospel. Fulfilling this purpose involves preaching the gospel so that God's elect come to faith and those who believe know the truth that enables them to become godly. In other words the purpose of gospel ministry is twofold: evangelism (seeking to bring the elect to faith) and edification (helping believers to become godly by knowing the truth). This is the purpose of every minister of the gospel and of every gospel church. As with Paul, preaching is the way the purpose is fulfilled. Ministers of the gospel and churches do many good things, but preaching is the focus of their ministries. In God's sovereign purposes preaching the gospel is the way that his promise of eternal life is manifested to human beings so that they can be saved (1:3). We must never forget the place of preaching in God's redemptive purposes. It is always an awesome thing to preach the word, whether to a congregation or in a personal conversation. Such ministry is not in vain because it is based on the truthful character of God himself (1:2). It is impossible for God to lie and therefore it is impossible for his promise of eternal life to fail.

One of the purposes of evangelical theology is to nurture this kind of ministry. Too often this has been forgotten. On the one hand for some academic

achievement or respectability has been the purpose. On the other hand for others practical things such as church growth, psychological wellbeing or political or cultural relevance have been the purposes. But the great purpose of evangelical theology is to nurture godliness and as such the ministry that will bring it about. Those of us engaged in ministry as well as theological institutions, missionary agencies, para-church organisations and churches need to regularly assess themselves in this light. Is this ministry being nurtured by evangelical theology?

2. Evangelical theology must help to nurture godly *leadership* (1:5-16)

From the placing of what Paul says about elders in the churches at the beginning of the letter it would seem that leadership in the churches was a priority if godliness was to be nurtured on Crete. The leadership of the churches was a deep concern for Paul as the Pastorals in particular bear witness. Leadership in churches remains a priority. Our prayer must be that the Head of the church gives the churches the leadership they need and without which godliness will decay and at best retain the form without the power (2 Tim. 3:5) and at worst die out altogether.

What kind of leaders or elders is needed in the churches? First, they need to be godly men. Here as in 1 Timothy 3 Paul emphasises the importance of godly character in regard to behaviour, attitudes and relationships. While gifting is obviously important character is more important. Better a leader who is a godly but modestly gifted man than one who is brilliantly gifted but ungodly in some ways. The

former can do much good for a church while the latter can do untold damage. Secondly, a leader must be sound in the faith or as Paul puts it: 'He must hold firm to the trustworthy message as taught' (1:9). Theological understanding and soundness is vital if a man is to be a godly leader. Sincerely and without reservation he must believe in the apostolic faith. Thirdly, a leader must positively 'be able to give instruction in sound doctrine' and negatively 'to rebuke those who contradict it'. A godly leader needs to be able to teach the believers, both publicly and privately. Some elders will have a more public ministry of the word and may be remunerated for it (1 Tim. 5:17), but all elders need some ability to teach. Sadly that is not all they need to do. Sometimes they must also rebuke those who oppose the truth.

Evangelical theology must help to nurture this kind of leadership. However leaders are trained they must be thoroughly grounded in the faith by means of the different theological disciplines. Positively they need to understand the evangelical faith but negatively they also must understand the false teachings they will have to oppose. It is interesting that Paul gives considerable space to exposing the ungodly character of the false teachers. This training is a ministry-long process. Theological education cannot be left once a course of training is over; the godly leader is always learning. Our theological institutions must keep the nurturing of such leadership in view. They don't exist only as academic institutions (although such institutions are needed), but also as institutions preparing men for gospel leadership in the churches.

The curriculum needs to be developed with the training of godly leaders in mind. Within churches we need to be constantly looking out for and nurturing men for leadership. This is where mentoring and apprenticeships play a key role.

3. Evangelical theology must help to nurture godly *lifestyle* (2:1-15)

As I have defined it godliness is about devotion to God actively expressed in a good life motivated by the gospel. It is to such a good life that Paul turns in chapter two. Titus is to 'teach what accords with sound doctrine' (2:1). What that involves is unfolded in the following verses. In other words, doctrine must be practical and practice must be doctrinal. Doctrine must be practical in that it must never simply be abstract, but rather truth that transforms our lives. The danger for many who love theology is to forget its purpose to nurture godly living. But equally practice must be doctrinal. Some pragmatic types grow impatient with theological discussion and sometimes rightly so. However they are in danger of slipping the theological moorings that are necessary if Christians and churches are not to drift away on the currents of ungodly culture. Our practice as churches and Christians needs to be constantly tested and shaped by Scripture.

In verses two to ten Paul sketches the godly lifestyle that Titus was to nurture in the believers on Crete. No doubt what he writes relates in some degree to the context of Crete. Considering the moral environment in which these Christians lived that is probably why he emphasises the virtue of

'self-control' several times (2:2,5,6,12). My purpose here is not to go into detail about the different aspects of a godly lifestyle, but simply to mention that every Christian was expected to live in a godly way whatever their gender, age, or social status. Titus was to set an example to the others as Paul himself did (2:7). Work life as well as home life is included. What Paul wrote for the slaves in the Cretan churches is applicable to every believer in every age and culture. In the way we live we are to 'adorn the doctrine of our God and Saviour' (2:10). A godly lifestyle should be something compellingly attractive to unbelievers. I am reminded here of someone like William Wilberforce whose winsomeness commended the faith to all who had anything to do with him.

What we are dealing with here is something that is very culturally subversive. Evangelical Christianity is a revolutionary movement, but its strategy and tactics are not like those of the revolutionary movements that in the end have done so much harm in the world. On the contrary Christians aim to change the culture not by force of arms or even legitimate political action or cultural domination, but subversively by means of a godly lifestyle. Listen to how Thomas Oden puts it in his commentary on verses 1-6:

Sound teaching is to be brought situationally to bear upon each and every class, gender, race, lifestyle, viewpoint. No lowly position should bar one's capacity to bear this good news.... Some would argue that it would do little good to begin in Crete, of all places, with the

tinest bits of behaviour and try to shape the world towards godliness from the ground up. It might seem at first that the pastoral effort was too microscopic, inordinately micro-managed, and that systemic, institutional, or political evils might better have been first addressed. Yet this is just the point misunderstood by 'systemic' reformers who have not adequately grasped the apostle's way of transformation: only by descending to reshape social existence beginning with the smallest, least conspicuous matters of daily social conduct is the society changed. This has longer, surer consequences than legislative and ideological posturing.¹⁴

I find this very encouraging. As evangelicals we seek to nurture godly lifestyle. That is where the real action is in the world. That time spent with a young person or visit to an older member of the church or conversation about the pressures of work with a middle aged Christian has significance far beyond what we can imagine. Evangelical theology should help Christians develop a culturally subversive godly lifestyle. This will mean addressing issues such as work, marriage, singleness, sexuality, parenting, spending, health, leisure and so on. The Puritans were very good at this and there is much we could do to become like them today in our very different cultural context. Evangelical theology embraces the whole of life.

But the danger here is moralism. In our reaction against the antinomianism of our culture it is all too easy for us as evangelicals to become moralistic. That's why we need to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest what Paul writes in verses 11-14.

Here Paul magnificently summarises the gospel that is to motivate the godly lifestyle described in verses 2-10. In Jesus Christ God's grace has appeared in human flesh to teach us to say 'no' to ungodliness and 'yes' to godliness. Indeed the reason Jesus gave himself up to death on the cross was 'to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for himself who are zealous for good works' (2:14). Godliness is the goal of our redemption. As God's grace in Christ grips our lives through the transforming presence and power of the Holy Spirit within us we become the godly people he intends. The gospel is the motivation for godly living. It is the work of evangelical theology to unfold the riches of God's grace in the gospel so that believers, in Calvin's words, 'might be shaped to true godliness'.

4. Evangelical theology must help to nurture godly *citizenship* (3:1-15)

In chapter three Paul turns his thoughts outward and considers how Christians are to live as citizens or members of the *politeia*. In verse 1-2 he outlines the nature of Christian citizenship. Christians are to submit to the governing authorities as ordained by God as his servants (compare Romans 13:1-7) and they are to obey the law, do good to everyone and be civil in their relationships with other citizens. I want to highlight Paul's exhortation that the Christians on Crete 'be ready for every good work' (verse 1). Seven times in this letter Paul had reminded Titus of the importance of Christians doing good (1:8; 2:3,7,14; 3:1,8,14). Doing good was not only to be done within the family and

church, but also within the wider community. Three times in chapter three Paul makes this point. In verse 1 Christians are to be 'ready for every good work'; in verse 8 Christians are to 'be careful to devote themselves to good works'; and in verse 14 Christians are to 'learn to devote themselves to good works'. What are these good works? The term is almost a technical expression for public benefactions.¹⁵ As citizens, Christians are to be public benefactors in the good they do to others outside as well as inside the church (Gal. 6:10). Such good works would include individual acts of kindness, helping people in need and service to the community or government. Examples from the Bible of the last kind are Joseph, Daniel and Erastus, 'the city treasurer' mentioned by Paul in Romans 16:23. As citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem and exiles in the cities of this world Christians are to do good to others.

Here, as with the nurturing of a godly lifestyle, it is essential that our public engagement is rooted in the gospel. In verses 3-7 Paul again summarises the gospel. Christians are not naturally better people than others. Like everyone we are sinners. But because of his 'goodness and loving kindness' God has mercifully saved us in Christ by regenerating and renewing us, pouring out his Holy Spirit on us when we believed and justifying us by his grace so that we have become the heirs of eternal life. The emphasis here is on the application of redemption to the believer. The point is that it is the gospel that makes Christians godly citizens or people eager to do good to others in their city.

One of the functions of evangelical theology is to nurture public godliness. Christians need to be equipped theologically to live as active citizens in the world. We have a rich theological tradition to draw upon. The Reformers actively sought to transform their societies as did the Puritans. In the 19th century, evangelicals were very active in social reform and political movements. The examples of Thomas Chalmers in Scotland and Abraham Kuyper in the Netherlands are especially instructive.¹⁶ It is no coincidence that it is when the gospel has been rediscovered that Christians have been publicly active in doing good. Of course it is recognised that sometimes Christians have made mistakes in this area and not least in too closely identifying their society with Christ's kingdom. The appropriate paradigm for the relationship of God's people today to the world is that of the exile of the Jewish people. Such a paradigm allows Christians today to live distinctively as God's people while participating in public affairs with people of other religions or none. We don't seek to establish Christ's reign through politics or impose our convictions on others, but rather to display Christ's reign in our lives and churches and commend the teaching of God's word to others for their good.

One of the greatest challenges to evangelical theology today is to nurture this kind of public godliness in those areas of the world where

Christianity is growing fastest. There is at present a shift taking place of the centre of gravity of evangelical Christianity to Africa, Asia and Latin America.¹⁷ Christians from these areas need an evangelical theology that will help them live as godly citizens who will influence their nations for good. Evangelical theology must deal with issues such as political power, corruption, bioethics, economics, the environment, human rights and so on and do so not by baptising conventional political thinking, but by reflecting deeply on Scripture and drawing on the wisdom of the Christian tradition. That is a task needed as much in Europe as in other parts of the world. While deeply personal, being a Christian is not a private matter. Like the Cretan Christians we are called to be godly citizens today.

Conclusion

Here then are four areas – ministry, leadership, lifestyle and citizenship – where evangelical theology must help to nurture godliness today. Paul mentions these areas in his letter to Titus whose work it was to nurture godliness in the morally uncongenial environment of Crete. Our environment is just as uncongenial and our task is just the same. In our lives, families, churches, agencies, schools and communities we must pray and work to see godliness nurtured among God's people here in Europe and across the world.

References

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15. See Bruce Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City, Christians as Benefactors and Citizens* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press 1994). The whole book is worth reading for a fresh insight into the engagement with society of first century Christians, but especially note pp. 19ff, 179-198 (on Erastus), 200-210.
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