

Homiletics Analysis: Titus 1

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

Titus 1 opens with one of Paul's most theologically dense salutations, grounding the entire letter in the eternal purpose of God, the certainty of His promise, and the apostolic commission entrusted to Paul for the sake of the elect (vv. 1–4). Paul then turns immediately to the practical task he has left Titus to complete: appointing elders in every town across Crete (vv. 5–9). The qualifications given are overwhelmingly character-based — blamelessness in household, freedom from the vices of self-will and anger, sobriety and self-control, hospitality, love of what is good — before arriving at the singular doctrinal requirement: holding firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that the elder can both exhort in sound doctrine and refute those who contradict it (v. 9). The chapter closes with a pointed description of the false teachers already active in Crete (vv. 10–16): they are insubordinate, empty talkers, deceivers, motivated by shameful gain, drawn from the circumcision party, teaching what they ought not to teach, and their character is exposed by the ancient Cretan reputation for falsehood and vice. Paul's verdict is unsparing — their minds and consciences are defiled, they profess to know God but deny Him by their deeds, and they are unfit for any good work.

This Text — Intent:

God is pressing through this chapter toward a single, urgent effect in the reader: the recognition that the church's health, the gospel's advancement, and the suppression of error are inseparably tied to the *character and doctrinal fidelity of its leaders*. The chapter does not merely describe what elders should look like — it is pressing the reader to understand *why* the qualifications exist, namely because the gospel travels through persons, and corrupted persons corrupt the message and unravel the community. Paul's intent through the opening salutation is to anchor the whole project in God's eternal, unbreakable purpose — so that the practical work of appointing leaders does not look like institutional maintenance but like the execution of a divine commission on behalf of the elect. The intent of the false-teacher section is to demonstrate by contrast what is at stake: this is not mere preference for qualified leadership, it is a matter of life and death for the congregations.

Subject Sentence: The church's health depends on leaders whose godly character and doctrinal fidelity guard the gospel against corruption.

Primary Claim: God is calling the church — through Paul’s charge to Titus — to take the qualification and appointment of its leaders with absolute seriousness, because the health of the gospel community and the suppression of error depend entirely on leaders whose character and convictions are sound.

Interpretive Evaluation

The relationship between character and doctrine in the elder qualifications (vv. 6–9):

A common misreading separates character and doctrine into two independent tracks — treating vv. 6–8 as personal virtue requirements and v. 9 as the theological addendum. This produces either a purely moralistic reading (the elder is essentially a good man) or an intellectualist reading (the elder is fundamentally a sound theologian). The text does not permit either reduction. The list moves organically from household character through personal virtues to the climactic doctrinal requirement, and the particle “as” in v. 9 (“holding firm to the trustworthy word *as taught*”) signals that the doctrinal commitment is not a separate category but the culmination of the entire profile. The Reformed reading presses both together: an elder who is doctrinally sound but whose household is disordered has disqualified himself from the trust required to shepherd; an elder who is personally virtuous but cannot refute false teaching has disqualified himself from the doctrinal task of oversight. Paul will not permit the two to be disaggregated.

The use of Epimenides’ quotation about Cretans (v. 12):

Some readers are troubled by Paul’s apparent endorsement of a pagan poet’s ethnic characterization and his ironic declaration “this testimony is true.” Two misreadings recur. First, some read Paul as engaging in ethnic stereotyping, which misses the rhetorical function: Paul is using a source *the Cretans themselves recognized* to establish the cultural backdrop for why the false teachers found fertile soil and why extraordinary vigilance was required. Second, some read Paul as affirming the Cretan reputation as an excuse for low expectations — the opposite of his actual point, which is that the gospel creates people who are *precisely not* what the surrounding culture produces. The Reformed reading takes the Epimenides quotation as a rhetorical device establishing cultural context and the urgency of sound leadership, not as an ethnic absolute. Paul’s use of an external source without embarrassment reflects the Reformed understanding of common grace — truth may be observed even by those outside the covenant.

The phrase “for the sake of shameful gain” and the circumcision party (vv. 10–11):

Some Dispensational readings interpret “those of the circumcision” as a reference to Jewish Christians legitimately preserving Torah observance, and read Paul’s critique as overly harsh or culturally conditioned. The text does not support this. The circumcision party here is not the circumcision-party of Acts 15 still wrestling in good faith — they are described as insubordinate, deceitful, and motivated by financial gain. The Reformed

reading recognizes that Paul is identifying a specific network of false teachers whose Jewish-background teaching was being weaponized to undermine the Gentile congregations' standing in Christ. The critique is not of Jewish heritage but of a works-righteousness framework being used to destabilize what grace had established.

“Unfit for every good work” (v. 16) and the relationship of profession to practice:

Arminian and Wesleyan readings sometimes use v. 16 to argue that observable moral failure constitutes apostasy — that the false teachers were once genuinely saved and have now forfeited that standing. The text neither requires nor supports this reading. Paul's verdict is on their present state, not a timeline of their spiritual history. The Reformed reading takes v. 16 as an instance of the broader biblical principle that genuine faith produces works congruent with it (James 2; Matthew 7:15–23), and that the absence of such works exposes the profession as empty — not that it reverses a prior genuine standing before God. The false teachers are “detestable, disobedient, unfit” — their works are the *evidence* of what they are, not the *cause* of a change in what they are.

Key Canonical Support

- **1 Timothy 3:1–7** — The parallel elder/overseer qualifications in Paul's letter to Timothy confirm that character-based leadership criteria are not situational to Crete but are the consistent apostolic standard for all churches. The overlap in language strengthens the case that Paul is transmitting a received pattern, not improvising.
- **Acts 20:28–31** — Paul's Miletus farewell to the Ephesian elders grounds the same concerns: elders are to shepherd the flock, and fierce wolves will come from outside *and from among yourselves*. The overlap with Titus 1:10–16 shows that false teaching arising from within leadership was an anticipated threat, not a surprise.
- **Matthew 7:15–23** — Jesus' warning about false prophets known by their fruits, culminating in “I never knew you,” provides the canonical root for Paul's logic in v. 16: the profession of knowing God is contradicted and exposed by the deeds that follow. The test of genuine leadership is fruit, not claim.
- **Ezekiel 34:1–10** — The devastating oracle against the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves rather than the flock provides the Old Testament grounding for the seriousness with which God views false or self-serving leadership over His people. Paul's unsparing critique of the false teachers stands in this long prophetic tradition.
- **2 Peter 2:1–3** — Peter's parallel description of false teachers — secretly introducing destructive heresies, motivated by greed, bringing the way of truth into disrepute — confirms the canonical consistency of this portrait and shows that the problem Paul addresses in Crete is not local or incidental but a recurring threat to the whole church.

Aim: To demonstrate that the appointment of qualified elders is not an administrative preference but a theological and missional necessity — and to press the reader to take both the qualifications and the stakes with the seriousness Paul does.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–4	Salutation: Paul identifies himself as servant of God and apostle of Jesus Christ, for the faith of the elect and their knowledge of the truth that accords with godliness, in hope of eternal life promised before the ages by God who never lies, and manifested in His time through preaching entrusted to Paul by command of God. Addresses Titus as his true child in a common faith.	One of Paul’s theologically densest salutations — establishes election, promise, revelation, and apostolic commission before any practical instruction begins. The foundation for everything that follows.
5	The assignment: Paul left Titus in Crete to put what remained in order and appoint elders in every town.	“Every town” signals systematic, church-wide concern — not selective appointment. The church’s order is incomplete without qualified leadership.
6	Elder qualifications — household: must be above reproach, husband of one wife, children who are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination.	Household integrity is the first filter. The elder’s home is the proving ground for his fitness to lead the household of God (cf. 1 Tim. 3:4–5).
7–8	Elder qualifications — personal character (as overseer): not arrogant, not quick-tempered, not a drunkard, not violent, not greedy; but hospitable, a	The negative list (what he must not be) precedes the positive list (what he must be). The vices listed are all forms of self-indulgence or self-assertion — the

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	lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, disciplined.	antithesis of shepherd-character.
9	Elder qualifications — doctrinal: holding firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may give instruction in sound doctrine and also rebuke those who contradict it.	The capstone of the entire qualification list. Two functions flow from doctrinal fidelity: exhortation (positive teaching) and refutation (negative defense). Both are required.
10–11	Description of false teachers: many insubordinate, empty talkers, deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party. They are upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach.	“Many” — the problem is not isolated. “Whole families” — the damage is not abstract. The false teachers have specific social networks and financial motivations.
12–13a	Paul invokes Epimenides: “Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.” Paul’s verdict: this testimony is true.	Rhetorical use of a recognized Cretan source to establish cultural context and the depth of the problem. The gospel creates a counter-culture; sound leadership is its instrument.
13b–14	Titus’ response: rebuke them sharply so that they may be sound in the faith, not devoting themselves to Jewish myths and the commands of people who turn away from the truth.	Rebuke is not punitive — it is restorative in intent (“so that they may be sound”). But the command is unambiguous: sharp rebuke, not accommodation.
15	“To the pure, all things are pure, but to the defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure; both their minds and their consciences are defiled.”	A general principle applied to the false teachers’ corrupted judgment. They apply their defilement to everything they teach, including their food and purity regulations. The

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16	Final verdict on the false teachers: “They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works. They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for every good work.”	problem is not external but internal — a corrupted conscience. Three-part verdict — character (detestable), relationship to authority (disobedient), capacity for good (unfit). The contrast with the elder qualifications is complete and deliberate.

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–4	The Eternal Foundation: Gospel, Promise, and Apostolic Commission
2	5–9	The Practical Task: Appointing Qualified Elders in Every Town
3	10–16	The Urgent Reason: False Teachers Already at Work, and the Verdict Against Them

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The church’s health depends on leaders whose godly character and doctrinal fidelity guard the gospel against corruption.

Primary Claim: God is calling the church — through Paul’s charge to Titus — to take the qualification and appointment of its leaders with absolute seriousness, because the health of the gospel community and the suppression of error depend entirely on leaders whose character and convictions are sound.

Applications (Five)

1. [Mind/Belief] The density of Paul’s salutation (vv. 1–4) is not ornamentation — it is load-bearing theology for everything that follows. Before Paul gives Titus a single practical

instruction, he anchors the entire mission in God's eternal election, His unbreakable promise made before time began, and the apostolic commission that flows from it. This means that the work of appointing church leaders is not institutional management — it is the execution of a divine purpose on behalf of the elect. Congregations and leaders who think of elder appointment as a procedural formality, a matter of finding capable volunteers, or a task that can be deferred indefinitely have misread the theological weight Paul places on it from the letter's first sentence. Reframe what you believe is actually happening when a church installs its leaders.

2. [Mind/Belief] Paul's qualification list is not a checklist for eliminating the worst candidates — it is a positive portrait of what the gospel produces in a man over time, now visible in his household, his temperament, his loves, and his doctrinal grip. A church that reduces elder qualification to "does he have his life together?" has missed that every item on the list is the fruit of grace, not merely the evidence of natural maturity. The elder qualifications are simultaneously a portrait of a gospel-formed man and a portrait of what the gospel can produce in everyone under his care. The congregation is meant to see in their leaders a picture of where Christ is taking them — and to trust those leaders to lead them there because the gospel is already visibly at work in the leader's own life.

3. [Affections/Worship] Paul's unsparing verdict on the false teachers — "they profess to know God, but deny Him by their works" (v. 16) — should produce in the reader not contempt for those teachers but a searching grief and a renewed urgency about integrity. The most dangerous spiritual condition is not ignorance but profession without reality: a relationship claimed in words that the shape of one's life denies. Paul is not offering a diagnosis for the Cretan false teachers alone. Every reader should ask whether there are areas where their own deeds are contradicting their confession — not to produce paralyzing self-doubt but to produce the honest self-examination that genuine faith sustains and proud profession cannot tolerate.

4. [Will/Behavior] The dual function Paul assigns to the doctrinally qualified elder — exhortation and refutation (v. 9) — is not two options but two inseparable obligations. A church that values teaching and resists correction, or that is willing to rebuke error but never builds up in sound doctrine, has produced only half an elder and only half a church. This has a direct behavioral implication for those in teaching or leadership roles: identify specifically whether you are neglecting exhortation (building people up in the truth) or neglecting refutation (naming and opposing what contradicts it). The omission of either is a failure of the office, not a stylistic preference.

5. [Will/Behavior] Paul instructs Titus to rebuke the false teachers "sharply, so that they may be sound in the faith" (v. 13). The purpose clause is critical: rebuke is not punitive rejection but a restorative instrument. This governs how a church handles those who have been drawn into error — not with expulsion as the first move, not with silence as the safe move, but with clear, sharp correction aimed at health. Churches and leaders who avoid all conflict in the name of graciousness have confused kindness with negligence. The

question is not whether to rebuke but whether the rebuke is aimed at the person's restoration to soundness.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Titus 1 teaches that God takes with the utmost seriousness the human instruments through whom the gospel travels and the church is built. The eternal purpose announced in the salutation — election, promise, revelation, commission — does not bypass ordinary human leadership but works precisely *through* it, which is why the integrity of those leaders carries such theological weight. The chapter teaches that character and doctrine are not independent tracks but a single integrated profile of gospel-formed leadership: a man whose household reflects the ordering power of grace, whose personal character reflects its transforming power, and whose doctrinal grip reflects its content-anchoring power. The false-teacher portrait completes the theology: what godless character and doctrinal corruption do to a church is not merely harmful but spiritually lethal — upsetting whole families, defiling consciences, and producing a profession of God that His own works deny.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Titus 1 is a cornerstone passage for Reformed ecclesiology, establishing the principle that the church's visible health is inseparable from the character and doctrinal fidelity of its ordained officers. The Reformed tradition's emphasis on the *regulative principle* of church order — that the church is governed by the Word, not by custom or pragmatism — is precisely what Paul is pressing upon Titus: the appointment of elders is not optional, not customizable, and not a matter of cultural adaptation. The chapter also provides one of the clearest biblical bases for the Reformed insistence that justification by grace alone through faith alone produces visible fruit in the justified — both in the elder who holds firm to the gospel and in the false teacher whose defilement of mind and conscience produces deeds that deny the God he claims to know. The salutation's grounding of the mission in God's pre-temporal election and unbreakable promise reflects the Reformed conviction that the church's work does not generate its own momentum but flows from and back to the sovereign purpose of God for His elect.

Main Takeaway

The health of the church does not self-generate — it flows from leaders whose character has been formed by the gospel and whose grip on sound doctrine is strong enough to both build people up and push error back. Paul gives Titus no option to cut corners on this: appoint qualified men in every town, because the false teachers are already in the

households, and what is at stake is not institutional tidiness but the souls of the people Christ died to gather. A church that is casual about who leads it is casual about everything the gospel entrusted to it.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Reducing the elder qualifications to a moral-character checklist.** The most common mishandling of vv. 6–9 is treating the list as a screening mechanism for personal virtue — essentially, “is he a good man?” — while missing that each qualification is simultaneously a portrait of gospel fruit, a requirement for the trust the role demands, and a counter-witness to the surrounding culture. Preach the *why* behind the list, not just the list.
- **Disconnecting character requirements from the doctrinal requirement.** Some expositions treat vv. 6–8 and v. 9 as two separate concerns — “the personal” and “the theological” — and in practice emphasize one at the expense of the other. The text demands both in a single integrated person. An elder who is personally exemplary but theologically soft cannot fulfill v. 9; an elder who is theologically sharp but whose household is disordered cannot be trusted with the household of God.
- **Preaching the salutation as throat-clearing.** Paul’s opening four verses are among the most compressed statements of election, promise, revelation, and apostolic commission in the New Testament. They are not boilerplate — they are the theological roof under which everything else in the letter stands. An exposition that begins with v. 5 has cut the foundation away from the practical instruction.
- **Treating the Epimenides quotation as an embarrassment or as ethnic prejudice.** Some teachers skip past v. 12 uncomfortably or over-explain it into insignificance. Paul’s rhetorical use of Cretan self-testimony is deliberate and effective — it establishes the cultural urgency for sound leadership without requiring Paul to make the argument himself. Teach the rhetorical function clearly, and use it to press the point that the gospel creates people who are precisely *not* what their surrounding culture produces.
- **Preaching the false-teacher portrait as an “out there” problem.** The false teachers in Titus 1 are inside the churches, inside the households, operating for financial gain, and causing real damage to real families. The passage does not permit the comfortable reading that error is always external and obvious. The application should press the congregation to ask what voices they are permitting access to their spiritual formation — not with paranoia but with the discriminating attentiveness that sound doctrine teaches.

- **Moralizing v. 16 into a behavior-reform call without its gospel root.** “They deny him by their works” is a devastating diagnosis, but it should not be preached as “therefore behave better.” The Reformed reading sees in v. 16 the principle that deeds reveal the root — and the corrective is not moral effort but the kind of deep-conscience renewal that only comes from a genuinely transformed relationship to God. Press v. 16 into the congregation as a diagnostic, not a demand.