Confessing faith, confronting sin

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In his letters to congregations, the apostle Paul frequently cites hymns, creeds, and confessions that seem to have been sung or recited in these communities.[1] When offering his pastoral counsel, Paul recalls these traditions to evoke memory of the gospel and to elicit conformity to the gospel. These articulations of the gospel for particular congregations have a communal faith-forming function. Each congregation has its own story and deals with particular concerns; the gospel speaks in specific ways to each group in its own circumstances. Paul actively persuades individuals to confess their faith, but beyond inviting individuals to make life-transforming initial decisions for Christ, Paul views corporate confessions of faith as significant for the formation of Christ-like character in the faith community.

Confessions of faith function in the epistle to Titus to form, reform, and transform a faith community in first-century Crete. Gospel summaries in this brief epistle and elsewhere serve both as critique of unfaithfulness and encouragement toward fidelity.

Whereas confessions of faith are relatively common in the Pauline corpus of letters, there are but few indications that Paul and his co-workers actively advocated a ritual practice of confessing sin or acknowledging sinfulness.[2] Instead of viewing sin primarily as individual acts of defiance or disobedience requiring repentance and divine forgiveness, Paul understands sin primarily as an oppressive power from which individuals and the faith community need divine rescue.[3] The gospel offers release from bondage; even the forgiveness of sin is interpreted as rescue from enslaving powers.[4]

My goal in this essay is to follow the pastoral argument in one of the letters within the Pauline corpus to illustrate how confessing faith relates to confronting sin. Specifically the focus is on the epistle to Titus, a short letter where the author cites several confessions of faith. We will examine how these confessions

function to form, reform, and transform a faith community in first-century Crete. Gospel summaries in this brief epistle and elsewhere serve both as critique of unfaithfulness and encouragement toward fidelity.[5]

Paul and the pastorals

Through an apocalypse of Jesus Christ, Paul came face to face with God's pre-emptive grace. He caught a vision of a glorious future, already realized, yet still unfolding. This vision drove Paul's evangelistic efforts and inspired his pastoral care for the congregations that emerged in the communities where he preached the gospel. Paul read the Scriptures with new eyes. The story of God's creating, calling, covenanting, correcting, and consummating activity took on new life and relevance in light of Jesus Christ. Paul also entered into the stories of varied congregations, from Thessalonica and Philippi in Macedonia to Corinth and Cenchreae in Achaia, from Galatia and Ephesus and Colossae in the east to Rome in the west. In his pastoral letters to these churches, Paul drew on Scriptures and revelation in ways that intersected with their local stories, and he employed metaphors and images from their worlds.

When we read the epistle to Titus, we get in touch with a later generation in the church, with an older Paul, and with co-workers carrying his missionary and theological enterprise into the next generation. Many scholars consider the epistles addressed to Titus and Timothy to have come not from Paul but from others writing on Paul's behalf during his lifetime or in Paul's name following his death.[6] We call the author "Paul" in recognition that, whether or not he actually wrote these pastoral writings, they speak solidly from within the trajectory of Paul's apostolic tradition.

Some scholars suggest that Paul's earlier dramatic vision for the future has become blurred, or that his successors have domesticated the prophetic message of the apostle. According to these interpretations of the pastoral Epistles, worship has shifted away from dynamic doxology to a concern to articulate static propositions and to root out heresies. Relationships have evolved from egalitarian understandings to the hierarchical patterns reflected in guidelines for life in the household, which call for the strict subordination of women and slaves. And the sense of the

church's urgent mission has dissipated into a quest for respectability. In a word, the church has moved from subverting the status quo to accommodating to it. According to this reconstruction of the setting within which the pastoral Epistles need to be interpreted, by the beginning of the second century a bourgeois ethic has taken over within that movement rooted in the ministry of Jesus, who identified with the poor and the marginalized.[7]

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An examination of the gospel confessions in Titus sharply raises the question whether they move the church to conform to the dominant culture or to confront that culture. Has the foundation been laid for the emerging "church catholic" seeking accommodation with the empire? Or does the restless vision of God's still unfolding peace- and justice-creating reign continue to inspire and empower communities of faith situated within the empire?

The story in Crete

An imaginative narrative of life among people being addressed by this letter might provide insight into that culture. We imagine a person named Jason, a member of one of the Jewish communities in Crete who has recently become a believer in Christ. The following "story" is loosely based on texts in the epistle to Titus (especially 1:5, 10–16; 2:1–10; 3:1–3, 9) and on Acts 27:1–12.

Travelers making their way along the coast of the island are treated to breathtaking views of the Great Sea. To the north lies the Aegean, whose waters bear cargo and passenger ships from distant harbors like Cenchreae in Achaia or Ephesus in Asia. Jason recalls that one of these ships delivered the Jewish missionary Paul to Crete. Paul had also made an earlier stopover on the island as a prisoner on his way to Rome. Jason speculates that something about that rest stop at Fair Havens might have sparked Paul's desire to return. On his release from prison some time later, Paul chose to revisit Crete on a preaching mission. Paul's testimony concerning Christ had moved Jason to join other Jews as well as native Cretans in confessing Jesus Christ as Lord.

By the time Paul departed, there was a congregation in Crete, and Paul's co-worker Titus was left behind to take care of things. It won't be easy for Titus, Jason muses. Cretans have a reputation as an independent and stubborn bunch. They quote a memorable line from Epimenides, one of their own poets of a bygone era: "Cretans are always liars, vicious brutes, lazy gluttons." Such characterization would smart if spoken by an outsider, but the people of Crete seem to get a cynical pleasure from perpetuating this self-deprecating caricature among themselves. Jason wonders whether isolation, especially during the winter when travel is risky at best, has led to their rough-and-tumble attitude toward life. Cretans are notorious for raucous oratory, too much wine, and the pursuit of sexual pleasure.

Some of these Cretan qualities even seem to have rubbed off on people in the Jewish colonies. Having traveled on occasion to Jewish communities elsewhere, Jason senses a distinctive level of contentiousness among his own people in Crete, especially in arguments about some of their founding myths and the interpretation of their traditional laws. And now with the emergence of a few messianic groups of Jews and Gentiles acknowledging Jesus as the Messiah, the arguments and debate have intensified. Jason wonders how long it will be until the Roman authorities on the island take note and begin to investigate and take action against the Christians. What will Titus need to do to bring stability among these converts who have accepted Paul's gospel on the wild island province of Crete?

The gospel, the culture, and the church's mission

What vision sustains a faith community when the founder leaves the scene? We have visited a young Christian community in Crete. Now we imagine Titus as he hears encouragement and instructions from the apostle Paul about how to lead the church.

Even the salutation of the epistle to Titus seems to bear in mind the trademark incivility of the people of Crete among whom the church struggles for a clear sense of its identity in Christ. Paul cites as the goal of this apostolic letter not only the faith of God's elect (Titus 1:1) and the hope of eternal life (1:2) but also the knowledge of the truth that is in accordance with godliness (1:1). The gospel is truth lived out by people of faith within godly

relationships sustained by reassurances of their everlasting hope. Such godliness derives from the nature and the redemptive activity of God: God our Savior (1:3) who is made known through Christ Jesus our Savior (1:4). The promises of God as one who never lies (1:2) are trustworthy and sure.

The letter outlines the desired character qualities of elders and overseers (1:5–9), warns about the corrupting influence of deceptive speech (1:10–16), and exhorts members of the households about appropriate behavior and relationships (2:1–10). The Cretans' rough-and-tumble moral ethos apparently necessitates firm directives and even harsh correctives. In the history of the church these texts have regrettably been used to justify slavery and the suppression of women. However, we should note the redemptive and missional intention of these directives.

The overseers need to be rooted in the trustworthy word, so they preach in accord with truth and also correct those who contradict the truth of the gospel (1:9). Deceivers need to be rebuked sharply, so they may become sound in the faith (1:13). Older women are to model reverent behavior and teach young women to show love to their husbands and children, so the word of God may not be discredited (2:5). The urgency for young men to exercise self-control calls for Titus to show himself to be a model of good works and integrity of speech; "then any opponent will be put to shame, having nothing evil to say of us" (2:8). Even the submission and fidelity of slaves to their masters (2:9–10) is advocated "so that in everything they may be an ornament to the doctrine of God our Savior" (2:10). In a situation beset by chaos, the witness of the church must include attention to orderly relationships, a commitment to the basic values of hard work and love within the family, and an eagerness to do good. The life style of believers in their relationship to each other and the world confronts the culture and gives witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In 2:11–14 and 3:4–7, Paul supplies the narrative framework that informs and motivates the living of the gospel for the sake of the mission of the church. The gospel's implications for the church coming of age within the disarray of first-century Crete may not be the same as in other situations. But the big story, the gospel of Jesus Christ, remains dynamically the same.

As a pastor drawing on the living gospel tradition in order to address these local circumstances, Paul recounts the story of salvation. This telling of the story features the imagery of epiphany. In fact, the gospel's narrative plot involves two manifestations of divine mystery, one past, the other still future. During the period between these two revelatory moments the church is summoned to live within its current social and political reality both in light of what has already been unveiled and in the hope of its future consummation. The following table depicts how 2:11–14 portrays these past and future epiphanies and the life and witness of the community that finds itself in between.

The past epiphany	Life and witness in the interim	The future epiphany
The grace of God has appeared bringing salvation to all	*training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly*	*while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.*
He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity	*and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.*	

This confession lifts up both the formational and educational functions of God's gracious salvation, which is potentially available to all people through Christ's self-sacrificing redemptive love. Given the prevailing ethos in the surrounding culture, it is noteworthy that Paul fixes first on the corrective training required among people who need to renounce impiety and worldly passions (2:12a). Such training also entails the formation of virtuous character in individuals who live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly (2:12b). Character formation also has a communal dimension. God's salvation liberates the faith community from lawlessness ("from all iniquity") and cleanses a people as God's own possession (an echo of Exodus 19:5), a people who express their covenant faithfulness through their zeal for doing good ("zealous for good deeds") (2:14).

The rhetoric of epiphany would likely have been familiar to the hearers of this letter, because this language was used by the imperial cult in its veneration of the emperor. In Titus the language of epiphany is applied to the redeemer God who has appeared in Jesus Christ. God's people anticipate the glorious future manifestation not of Caesar as liberator and benefactor but of "our great God and Savior Jesus Christ" (3:13). This confession of God in Jesus Christ as the Savior flies in the face of claims about the emperor as savior.[8]

When Paul echoes a confession that pre-empts imperial claims, the question about the relationship between the church's confession of the gospel and its life within the empire is posed sharply. What obligations do the people of God have toward the imperial authorities? A group of people who confess God as the Savior through Jesus Christ might have seemed subversive to Roman officials. Strikingly, however, Paul continues his instructions to Titus by counseling submission and obedience toward ruling authorities: "Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show courtesy to everyone" (3:1–2). How should these instructions be understood? Once again, we need to follow the grand story whose plot helps the reader make sense of this pastoral counsel.

Again Paul develops the narrative framework that undergirds faithfulness. He does so first with a graphic sketch of their former life (3:3), followed by another poetic litany of what God has done (3:4–6), climaxed by reference to their future hope (3:7).

Former life (3:3)	What God has done (3:4–6)	The future (3:7)
For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another.	*But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior*	*so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.*

Here is another marvelous version of the big story within which the church is invited to view its existence. The depiction of their past in 3:3 appears in a generic sense rather than specifically with reference to the situation in Crete. Paul includes himself representatively in this chronicle concerning sinful humanity. Attention is drawn to the experience of enslavement through having been led astray by deceitful powers. The emphasis in 3:4–6 lies on the saving and renewing power of "God our Savior," whose philanthropy has become manifest in divine rescue, not because anyone deserves it or has earned it but because of God's mercy. Again the language of the ruler-cult has been co-opted, not only in the vocabulary of epiphany but in the reference to God's loving kindness (Gk.: *philanthropy*). Reference to the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit surely alludes to the ritual of water baptism, which symbolizes the believers' conversion and inner renewal. In 3:7, Paul notes the future orientation of God's justifying grace. Members of the family remember their future "as heirs according to the hope of eternal life."

How then does this telling of the gospel story inform the ethical counsel about submission and obedience to the authorities? To those who have experienced rebirth, renewal, and incorporation as heirs into God's family, it goes without saying that their ultimate allegiance belongs to God. Their primary loyalty to God is conveyed in their confession of God our Savior (3:4) and Jesus Christ our Savior (3:6). God's heirs will therefore not submit to rulers in ways that violate their primary loyalty. Through exemplary character and behavior, including the kind of submission that makes clear that rulers too are accountable to God, the members of God's household give testimony to God. As with the household instructions in 2:1–10, so here with reference to their relationships to the state, their compliance with these guidelines has a missional goal: "I desire that you insist on these things, so that those who have come to believe in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works; these things are excellent and profitable to everyone" (3:8).

Attention to good works does not however imply conformity with the status quo in ways that contravene their Christian confession. A congregation formed through God's redeeming initiative in Jesus Christ lives within its culture in ways that

conform to values that are in harmony with the gospel. However, actions and attitudes that do not echo the way made known in Jesus Christ need to be confronted, first of all within the church: "Avoid stupid controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless" (3:9). As a people of God's own, a people eager to reflect God's loving kindness within their culture (cf. 2:14; 3:4), the church therefore needs both to discipline sinners (3:10–11) and to demonstrate a commitment to mutual aid (3:14). A missional stance toward the surrounding culture invites the church both to confess faith and to maintain a life style that confronts sin.[9]

Confessing faith: Conforming and confronting

The gospel narrated in the hymns and other recitals of faith chronicles the formation of the people whom God calls and rescues through Jesus Christ. This community is summoned to appropriate God's grace for living in harmony with the gospel. This life style may conform to some of the values of the surrounding culture, and may confront that culture at other points. The impulse toward stability can lead the church to over-emphasize its conformity to the dominant culture, in a quest for respectability; the household instructions and the counsel to slaves seem to later readers an unfortunate endorsement of an oppressive hierarchy. On the other hand, a zealous impulse for change can upset relationships to the dominant culture, leading to an unhealthy disconnect between the church and its context. The congregation's confession of the formative and transforming dynamic of God's grace manifest in Jesus Christ elicits a communal character somewhere between a compromising conformity and a destabilizing confrontation. The invasive power of sin from which God in Christ has brought redemption needs to be confronted within the redeemed community, so that God's saving intent through Jesus Christ can be made known to all.

Notes

[1] The phenomenon of hymns in Paul's letters is analyzed by Stephen E. Fowl, *The Story of Christ in the Ethics of Paul: An Analysis of the Function of the Hymnic Material in the Pauline Corpus* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Pr., 1990). Fowl focuses specifically on hymns and deals primarily with three hymns to Christ: Phil. 2:6–11; Col. 1:15–20; 1 Tim. 3:16b. A broader study which deals with Paul's appropriation and

expansion of the early church's faith confessions is Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

[2] An article entitled "Sin, Guilt" in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Pr., 1993), 877–81, illustrates a tendency to read Paul's letters through a "guilt/forgiveness" grid rather than "shame/honor" or "bondage/release" scenarios. Author Leon Morris admits that Paul "makes very little use of the 'guilt' terminology in the psychological sense, but it may fairly be said that many of the things he says about sin include the thought that sinners are guilty people" (877).

[3] The differences between these two assessments of the nature of sin are outlined succinctly in Martinus C. de Boer, "Paul and Jewish Apocalyptic Eschatology," in *Apocalyptic and the New Testament,* ed. Joel Marcus and Marion L. Soards (Sheffield, England: JSOT Pr., 1989), 169–90.

[4] Colossians 1:13–14 is the only place in the Pauline corpus where the words *forgiveness* and *sin* occur together. Even here, forgiveness of sin is connected with redemption, being rescued from the power of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of his beloved Son.

[5] This article draws on part of a larger manuscript, still in process, tentatively entitled "Remember the Future," which takes a narrative approach to Paul's pastoral theology.

[6] Recent commentaries reflect a widely held consensus that the pastoral Epistles are pseudonymous: Jerome D. Quinn, *The Letter to Titus,* The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1990). There are exceptions, e.g., Luke Timothy Johnson, *Letters to Paul's Delegates: 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus* (Valley Forge: Trinity Pr. International, 1996).

[7] The present study has interacted significantly with Philip H. Towner, *The Goal of Our Instruction: The Structure of Theology and Ethics in the Pastoral Epistles* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Pr., 1989). See his introduction (9–18) for a survey and analysis of how scholars have interpreted the theology and ethics of the pastoral Epistles.

[8] The nature of the Roman imperial cult during the first century is portrayed in Richard A. Horsley, ed., *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg: Trinity Pr. International, 1997). See especially S. R. F. Price, "Rituals and Power" (47–71), for some of the proclamations regarding Caesar Augustus as "savior who put an end to war" (53). See also Towner, *The Goal of Our Instruction,* 66–71.

[9] For reflections on the theology and communal ethic as reflected in the epistle to Titus, see James D. G. Dunn, "The First and Second Letters to Timothy and the Letter to Titus," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 11 (Nashville: Abingdon Pr., 2000), 873–4.

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