

The Pastor's Powerful Warning

Romans 16:17-20

Introduction

In this final chapter of Romans Paul greets some specific friends that he has come to know and love (vv. 1-16). Now Paul will issue a rather powerful warning: mark those who cause divisions; be on the alert for troublemakers and those who threaten the peace of the church. Who are these people? Those who cause divisions (v.17a); those who teach false doctrine (v.17b); and those who upset people's faith (v.17c). Paul then proceeds to offer an explanation why the peacemaker or troublemaker promotes division; they are in it to satisfy themselves; to make themselves happy or to gain money or power for themselves (v.18). Paul then tempers the powerful warning with an even more powerful promise; one day God will crush Satan and the gospel and grace of Jesus will saturate the life of the believer and characterize the climate of the church.

Are you peacemaker or troublemaker?

Why would Paul even ask such a question? Because Paul is not naive. He knows we live in a broken and fallen world. Sometimes people in their problems or struggles become dissatisfied, disgruntled, unhappy, selfish—and then act out in sinful and harmful ways. The abrupt warning is not some afterthought—or parting cheap shot at Paul's critics. It is a final exhortation needed for every healthy church—for the strong church—if they are going to weather the storm of divisive people.

Colorado has experienced some fierce storms in the form of floods and fires. Years ago it was discovered that the Hayman fire was started by a fire-fighter! Gerald Cornelius talks about a similar incident in Texas:

“The Fort Worth Star-Telegram reported that firefighters in Genoa, Texas were accused of deliberately setting more than forty destructive fires. When caught, they stated, “We had nothing to do. We just wanted to get the red lights flashing and the bells a clanging.”

Are there circumstances where a fire fighter might have to start a fire in order to combat fire? Firefighters tell me there are special circumstances where that might be needed. But by a large firefighters are supposed to fight fires—not start fires! By and large the Christians job is to promote peace and resolve conflicts not generate divisions and create grief in the Body of Christ. The Pastor of a small southern church was on his way home when he met an acquaintance from town who was not a member of his church. After chatting a while the man asked how many members he had. The Pastor responded; “Fifty active members.” The friend said, “My, that certainly speaks well of you.” But the preacher responded, “Well, I wouldn't say that. All fifty are active—but twenty five are actively working for me and the other twenty-five are actively working against me!”

Alan Redpath wrote; “The secret of every discord in Christian homes and communities and churches is that we seek our own way and our own glory”.

Guard The Sheep: Mark Those Who Cause Divisions (vv.17-18)

Romans 16:17 (NKJV) 17 Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them.

The NLT translates this; “And now I make one more appeal, my dear brothers and sisters. Watch out for people who cause divisions and upset people's faith by teaching things that are contrary to what you have been taught. Stay away from them.”

Division is a very serious sin. Divisive people must be recognized and avoided.

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Paul told the Corinthians (1Cor. 1:10); “Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.”

18For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple.

There are several reasons why false teachers and divisive people must be marked out—identified and avoided. The most obvious reason is a divisive person causes division and offenses and lays a stumbling block for believers in their growth and maturation in Jesus Christ. The word ‘divisions’ is the Greek word *dichostasias*. It means to stand apart, to be separate, to cause cleavage. The word ‘offenses’ translates the word *scandala* which suggests an object that has been purposely left in such a place that it will cause someone to stumble or trip over.

Paul argues that such behavior is “contrary to the doctrine which you learned.” What doctrine is Paul talking about? All the content of the doctrines of the Gospel; of Jesus and salvation and justification and sanctification; of the total content of all that has been revealed by the Holy Spirit through the Apostles concerning Jesus. Paul believes doctrine is relevant and matters about what we believe and how we behave! Some argue that doctrine itself is divisive or worse—irrelevant, impractical, unspiritual or unknowable (see Robert Bowman Jr.; *Orthodoxy and Heresy p. 15*).

According to Jesus and the Bible doctrine matters. The entire book of Romans has been devoted to the large themes of doctrinal beliefs and practical behaviors. In broad categories Paul speaks of the need of salvation and the way of salvation and the life of salvation and the scope of salvation. The whole book began by declaring God’s holiness and the condemnation of sin; God’s grace in justifying sinners and the wonderful plan of God in saving sinners in Christ Jesus the Lord. Paul speaks of sin, salvation, sanctification, sovereignty and service!

Doctrine does not deal with insignificant matters irrelevant to the Christian. Doctrine does not deal with “disputes over doubtful things” (Rom. 14:1). Doctrine in its most basic and fundamental sense is the teaching of Scripture. The teaching of Scripture asks and answers the most fundamental and basic questions of life and the afterlife. Who is God? Who is Jesus? Why are we here? Where are we going? Why is there evil and suffering in the world? How can a person have a right relationship with God? The gospel of salvation is doctrine. What is the gospel? How is a person saved? How is salvation received? Certainly some doctrines are more important than other doctrines; but doctrine is practical, unified, spiritual and knowable.

This is why Paul told Timothy (2 Tim. 3:16); “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” and Galatians 3:22; “But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to all who believe.”

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Jesus told the religious leaders (Mark 12:10) “Have you not even read this Scripture: “The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone”.

We read the Bible and study the Bible. Some things are more difficult to understand. Bible reading requires effort and discipline but we must commit ourselves to the task.

“Mark them” the word is skopeite—keep your eye on them—observe them—it means to focus, to contemplate to scrutinize.

What are we to do with the divisive person? Avoid them. People who engage in crusades of legalism or license, people who erode the truth into speculations, people who engage in wild prophetic speculations.

Heretics are to be avoided. Sometimes we want to hunt them down and put a stake through their theological heart! We know they hate crosses and the strong pungent odor of grace!

Paul says; avoid them—not simply avoid their false doctrine or their sin—avoid them!

Avoid them because of the terrible devastation they can bring on the church.

The word ‘avoid’ translates the strong Greek word *ekklinatē*—to shun, to turn away from, to keep away from—to remove oneself.

Guide The Sheep: Mark What Is Good (vv.19-20)

19For your obedience has become known to all. Therefore I am glad on your behalf; but I want you to be wise in what is good, and simple concerning evil.

20And the God of peace will crush Satan under your feet shortly. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen.

Conclusion

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