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## Romans 16:17-19a “Beware of False Teachers!”

Intro. Have you ever experienced a division or split in your church, or your family, or some other group to which you belong? Most adults probably have at some point in our lives. That can be a very difficult experience. At times you can even be caught in the middle, each side demanding that you choose between one group or another.

Paul did not want that to happen to the church in Rome, or any other church. He seems to have been aware of some disagreements in the church, not so much over doctrine, but over moral decisions. That is one reason he wrote back in Romans 12:16, “Be of the same mind toward one another.” He made another appeal for unity in 15:5-6, “Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus, that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” In addition to disagreements over moral issues, there was also the danger of resurrecting old divisions between Jews & Gentiles, rich & poor. Now, as he reaches the end of his letter, he gives a stern warning regarding an even more serious possible cause of division, and that is false teachers. We need not suppose that these agitators and false teachers had actually invaded the Roman church. Probably they had not.<sup>1</sup> Paul is only warning the Roman Church against a danger which he had seen in other places. And Paul’s urgency is felt as he begins the warning with the words, “Now I urge you, brethren....”

This same warning applies to us today. Will you give heed to the warning, or ignore the warning? As you approach a railroad crossing, suppose you see flashing red lights. Will you heed the warning of an oncoming train, or will you ignore the warning? You pick up a bottle with a skull & crossbones, warning that the bottle contains poison. Will you heed the warning, or will you ignore the warning & consume the poison? Failing to heed a warning can lead to disaster. Let us not make that mistake in regard to Paul’s warning in this text of Scripture.

I am not preaching this text of Scripture to address a particular problem *we* are currently having in our church. I can assure you that it has nothing to do with Senior Adult Sunday! I am simply preaching through a book of the Bible to give you a balanced diet of spiritual truth. I believe in doing what Paul did and preach “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). I am preaching these verses of Scripture to help prevent problems in our church.

Right after this warning, Paul makes reference to Satan in v.20. Satan would love to cause divisions and splits in churches, families, and other communities. He has come to destroy, and Jesus said, “Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation, and every city or house divided against itself will not stand” (Mt. 12:25). Our nation is being divided between the so-called “secular progressives,” and those of us who hold to the traditional values that have made our nation great. What is happening to our nation must not happen to our church. We must never allow Satan to destroy our church through division and disunity.

We would like to believe that everyone only has our best interest at heart, from the politician to the preacher. But it would be naïve to believe that is the case. Some religious leaders

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<sup>1</sup> If they had we would expect direct encounter with them in the body of the epistle, as for example, in the epistles to the Galatians, Colossians (2:16-23), & 1 Timothy (4:1-8).

are either working for Satan, or they are working for themselves. And we need to be warned about them.

So let's examine the warning that Paul gives us here in this text. Jesus Himself warned of "wolves in sheep's clothing." How can we tell the difference between a God-called, Spirit-anointed leader, and one who is not? First of all:

## I. RECOGNIZE THEM BY THEIR CONDUCT

We see in this text 3 examples of ungodly conduct that marks many false teachers. One mark of a false teacher is this:

A. They Cause Divisions and Offenses – Paul says in v.17, "Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses...." The words "divisions" and "offenses" have the definite article, indicating that both were well known to the early church. Back in Acts 15:1-2 we read of a well-known division that was taking place in the early church over the issue of Gentile admission into the church. Must they first become Jews by accepting circumcision & submit to Jewish law? This disagreement caused various factions to form in the early church.

Other issues came up in the early church over the years. There were some in the Roman church who believed that Christians should not buy or eat meat from the public market, because some of it came from an idol's temple. That is why Paul also spoke of those who cause "offenses" among the people of God. That word (*skandalon*) literally refers to someone who causes someone to stumble (cf. 14:13). While some would argue against the practice of eating such meat, others would flaunt their liberty. Either way, some would stumble over the way even Christian can argue and fuss, and others might stumble by following someone's expression of liberty, even in cases where many Christians disagree.<sup>2</sup> Paul would mainly have in mind anyone who would lead a split in the church over such issues.

Down through church history we can find many examples of those who caused divisions in the church, often on rather minor points of doctrine. The Protestant Reformation has splintered into literally hundreds of denominations. Much worse than that are the many cults which have formed from those who used to be in the Christian church. They use Scriptural terms, but come away with doctrines that are heretical.

On the other hand, Paul may have added the term "offenses" in the sense of causing someone to stumble through temptation. This is a common meaning of the term (Mt. 13:41; 18:7; Rev. 2:14). Indeed, false doctrine causes people to stumble into sin.

In Paul's day one group of false teachers was the liberal antinomian teachers. The word "antinomian" literally means "anti-law." They were the libertarians of their day who wanted to live as they pleased without the limitations of religious law. They would somehow come up with ways to excuse such things as gluttony, drunkenness, and sexual immorality. As v.18 says, they served "their own belly." There will always be teachers out there who will help you feel comfortable engaging in sin. That's not true in *this* church. You will probably either repent & get saved, or you will quit.

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<sup>2</sup> Some commentators disagree. They say it does not appear that Paul has the same situation in mind. We have here false teachers and propagandists. These are not envisaged in Chapter 14. These, Denney says, "refer more naturally to conduct which would create a moral prejudice against the gospel, and so prevent men from accepting it". (cf. 2 Pet. 2:1-2).

So one mark of false teachers is they cause divisions in the church, and often lead a group out of the true church to establish a cult or new denomination that is doctrinally or morally flawed. Now we have to be careful here. There have been times in church history when true believers have been led to leave a church or denomination that has become doctrinally or morally flawed. That was true of the leaders of the Reformation, and that has been true of our Baptist forefathers. Martin Luther once warned: “It is better to be divided by truth than to be united by error.” So this test cannot be used alone. It must be used with the other marks of false teachers given here. So notice the second one Paul gives:

B. They Promote Themselves, Not Christ – In v.18 Paul says, “For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly....” Paul wrote something similar in Phil. 3:19, where he said of false teachers, “whose God is their belly.” There were some who were dividing the churches for selfish reasons. The reference to the belly could be interpreted literally. If so, Paul has in mind those who cause divisions & offense with the result that they gratify their bellies with gluttony, or with food that a number of Christian would take offense over. Jude 19 warns of “sensual persons, who cause divisions.” However, this characterization need not refer to preoccupation with sensuous appetite. It may express the notion of self-service in contrast with the service of the Lord Christ. It could be a contemptuous way of describing a self-seeking spirit. It is not our Lord Christ whom they serve; on the contrary, it is their own base interests.

We have some in the church today who have split away from Southern Baptists, and have formed their own group of churches. One reason seems to be that they want to be able to promote the consumption of alcohol, so-called “Christian pornography” for married couples, course language, and so forth. Perhaps they, and certainly others, have split off into independent churches & ministries, where they have no accountability to the denomination or even the congregation, and they have worked the process so that the church or ministry exists to benefit them. *Some* preachers have become quite wealthy through their ministry, at least until they got caught!

We have to be careful about judging motives, but if you see clear evidence that a ministry leader seems to be consumed with their own self-interest, they are a false teacher. In Jude 12 he warned of such people. He said, “These are spots in your love feasts, while they feast with you without fear, serving only themselves.” Literally, instead of feeding the sheep, they shepherd or feed themselves.

Another mark of a false teacher is this:

C. They Use Smooth & Flattering Speech - These teachers were skilled in the artful device of “smooth and fair speech.” In the last of v.18 Paul says that “by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple.” “Smooth words” (*chrestologia*) refers to “mild, pleasant, or smooth words.” Does that remind you of any preachers on TV? “Fair speech” is *eulogia* (*eu*, “good”, and *logos*, “word”) in Greek. Our word “eulogy” is derived from it. It can refer to “praise,” and thus flattery. Have you ever gone to a funeral & heard a eulogy about the departed that doesn’t sound like the person you knew? Well, there are preachers who give eulogies to sinners, talking as if they are just fine living in sin because they never rebuke sin, warn of judgment, and call on them to repent. On the other hand, it can refer to “fine discourse, polished language.” It is language artfully adapted to captivate the hearer. This type of preacher will smile, and only say things that are positive, that make you feel good. He will not talk about sin. He will not warn of God’s judgment upon sin. Just because a person is a good speaker, and says pleasant words, that does not mean that they are called & anointed of God. Beware of the man with suave and smooth speech,

especially if he backs up his talk with nothing more than a few proof texts without taking the whole of the Word of God (Col.2:4; 2 Cor. 2:17). Just because someone is a gifted orator does not mean they have been called & sent of God. Paul warned of such in 2 Tim. 3:5-7, “having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away! For of this sort are those who creep into households and make captives of gullible women loaded down with sins, led away by various lusts, always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth..”

So I am calling upon you to use some discernment, and before you follow some religious leader, put them to the test of conduct given here. What they believe on the inside will inevitably be manifest in their conduct.

So we should recognize false teachers by their conduct. The second main thing we are to do is this:

## II. APPLY THE TEST OF SCRIPTURE<sup>3</sup>

In one sense this is the first & primary test that Paul gives here in this text. In v.17 we are instructed to see if their teaching and their work is “contrary to the doctrine which you learned.” In fact, the word “contrary to” in Greek (*para*) literally means “alongside,” and is used of making comparisons. If you have me a counterfeit \$20 bill, I would probably be hard pressed to tell if it was a counterfeit. But if I pulled out a genuine \$20 bills and set it along side the counterfeit, I would probably be able to see the difference. Even so, compare their beliefs and practices along side of the teachings of Christ & His apostles. The first question is this, “What do they teach about Christ? It should go without saying that any denial of the person and work of Christ should be recognized immediately as positive heresy of the highest degree. Anyone, who would attempt to rob Jesus Christ of His essential deity, or to claim that His death was not a ransom for our sin, cannot be counted as a member of the Body of Christ. If you determine that their teaching or lifestyle is “contrary to” the Word of God, then you have just identified someone that you should not follow. You can also use the 2 primary tests that John gives in 1 John. Do they practice love and righteousness?

This means of course that we all must learn for ourselves the Word of God so that we can know if a person is teaching contrary to the doctrines of the Word of God. Also, we must listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit within. Jesus said, “The sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers” (John 10:4b-5). Christ Himself says that it should be impossible for one of His own sheep to be led away by a false shepherd. If someone has made a profession of faith and then leaves Christ, it is certain beyond question that the person was not saved in the first place (1 John 2:19). So we need to exercise some discernment when it comes to those who would lead us astray.

In addition to the antinomian false teachers, there were two other types of false teachers in the early church that certainly failed the test of Scripture:

1. The Ultra Conservative Judaizers –If we can interpret v.18a in a non-literal sense, then the false teachers could well be Judaizing Zealots. This is the group of people I was referring to back in Acts 15. These were the apostle’s opponents in many instances and they fit the description, “causing the divisions and occasions of stumbling, contrary to the doctrine which he learned” (see Phil. 3:17-21). They would correspond to those today who teach about Christ, but insist that you must follow their legalistic rules in order to be saved or acceptable to God. They are wrong on their doctrine of salvation, and they are wrong on their doctrine of the Christian life.

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<sup>3</sup> I could make this point I instead.

2. The Intellectual Gnostics - It could be teachers of incipient Gnosticism against whom Paul later wrote in Colossians. There were two groups of Gnostics. One (Docetics) said that Christ did not have a real material body but only seemed to have. Due to the influence of Greek philosophy, they felt it was impossible for God, who was spirit and good, to become flesh, which was matter and evil, in the person of Jesus Christ. The other (Cerinthians) said that "Christ" was neither born nor did he die; deity came upon Jesus at his baptism and left him before his death on the cross (cf. 2 John 1:7). The former denied Christ's humanity; the latter denied Christ's deity.

False teachers today, and the cults or splinter groups they lead, have different names and structures from those of the first century. Yet there are certain similarities. Most false teachers try to modify the Christian faith to be acceptable to the prevailing opinions or practices of unbelievers.

We have the same problem today, and Christians must beware of false teachers. They come to your front door with magazines, books, and tapes, trying to convince you that they are teaching the truth. They are on TV, radio, online, etc. We can have a serious problem with division in the church when some members are influenced by these outside false teachers, and then try to bring their teaching into the church.

### III. RESPOND TO SUCH PEOPLE APPROPRIATELY

Paul gives two explicit instructions:

A. Take Note of Them – Paul says in v.17, "Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses...." "Note" is *skopeo*, "to look at, observe, contemplate, to fix one's eyes upon, direct one's attention to, scrutinize." It is a present tense and might well be translated "continually keep your eye on those who create dissensions." It was a situation that needed constant watching, as it does in every generation of the church's history.

Unfortunately, we live in a spiritual jungle. There are dangers on every hand. If you were walking through a jungle, you would constantly be vigilant to look out for snakes, and any other predator that could endanger your life, and the lives of those who are with you. Even so, the apostle Peter said in 1 Peter 5:8, "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour." But usually he does not come as a roaring lion, but as an "angel of light" (2 Cor. 11:14).

But remember that we are always to have the spirit of Christ. While we are to keep our eyes open to note those who cause divisions, we are not to go round as self-appointed theological watch dogs, sniffing at all the saints, and barking in disappointment every time we find that they deviate in the slightest degree from our own beliefs and practices. True love will never act in this way. Nevertheless, if you feel that someone is leading a faction away from the doctrines & practices of the New Testament, you should take the matter to the leaders of the church for further examination & action as outlined here in our text.

The last thing we are to do, according to the last of v.17, is:

B. Avoid Them – Literally, we are to turn away from them (*ekklino*). The same Greek word is used in 1 Peter 3:11, "Let him turn away from evil...." We are to break off any connection to false teachers or those who cause divisions among God's people. You should not follow after them, or go to their so-called "Bible study." You should not listen to them on TV, or read their books, and you certainly should not support them! Paul said something similar in 2 Tim. 3:5, "having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!" 2 John 1:10 says, "If anyone

comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him.” The issue is not making or keeping friends, but pleasing the Lord and maintaining a consistent testimony.

We have to determine what kind of person Paul has in mind here. In the case of an apostate, the break should be complete and final, unless we find out that the apostate has repented. The purpose of turning away from them is to keep them from having an influence on us. But in the case of a believer who has gone astray, the purpose of the avoidance is different, and then our spirit toward them must be different. They are to be admonished and admonished again. If they do not respond, then they are to be avoided (Tit. 3:10; 1 Tim. 6:3-5). Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, “If any one refuses to obey what we say in this letter, note that man, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not look on him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother” (2 Thess. 3:14, 15). Sometimes this kind of church discipline is necessary in order to correct a wayward brother or sister in Christ.

However, this is not to be practiced in regard to questionable issues. Back in Romans 14:1 Paul said, “Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things.” Then in 15:7 he concluded that section by saying, “Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God.” While we are to withdraw contact with heretics or a professed believer who refuses to repent of what is clearly sinful or doctrinally wrong, we are not to withdraw fellowship over disagreements over minor points of doctrine or practice.

Conclusion: Will you follow these admonitions of the apostle Paul? Will you exercise discernment and compare what a teacher or preacher says or practices along side the Word of God? And when you see that their doctrine or practice is contrary to God’s Word will you note them, and turn away from them? Paul felt the Roman Christians would do just that. He says in v.19, “For your obedience has become known to all.” Paul is expressing his confidence in them that they will follow his directive regarding those who cause divisions. Now its your turn to demonstrate that your Christian faith is real by your obedience to this text of Scripture.

Sources: Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Expositions of Bible Doctrines Taking the Epistle to the Romans as a Point of Departure*, vol. 4, “God’s Discipline” (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964); F.F. Bruce, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963); Bruce Corley & Curtis Vaughan, *Romans: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976); Hershel Hobbs, *Romans: A Verse by Verse Study* (Waco: Word Books, 1977); Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950 reprint); John Murray, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible [CD-ROM]* (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Right: Romans* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1977); Kenneth S. Wuest’s *Word Studies From the Greek New Testament*, Vol. 1, Romans (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1955). No material in Maclaren. Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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