

# The Church On-Guard

## Romans 16:17-20

**17 Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them.**

**18 For 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.**

**19 For 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.**

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

Sandwiched between Paul's greetings to the Christians at Rome and greetings from the brothers in Corinth to the Romans, the apostle takes the pen to write one of the strongest warnings in his letter. Almost every Bible commentator remarks on the surprise of this sudden warning. If you were reading Romans for the first time, there would be nothing to prepare you for what Paul says in these verses.

William Barclay calls this passage a "last, loving appeal." Paul had seen with his own eyes the danger of false doctrine and troublemakers in the church. So before he finishes his letter to the Romans, he warns them to keep their eyes open for those who would destroy the unity of the church.

For those of you who have read through the New Testament you will not be surprised at this word of warning. The Bible is full of warnings about false prophets and false teachers. Jesus warned (Matt. 7:15), "**Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.**" Throughout His ministry, Jesus boldly confronted the false teaching of the religious leaders of His day (cf. Matt. 16:11-12; 23:1-39). In Matthew 24 where Jesus teaches about the end times, He warned us (Matt. 24:4-5), "**Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many.**"

Almost the whole letter of 2 Peter is devoted to warning against false teachers. The letter of Jude has the same theme. John in his letters repeatedly warns of false teachers. In the book of Acts, Paul's final words to the Ephesian elders warned them (Acts 20:28-31),

**"Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. 29 For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. 30 Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. 31 Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears."**

In his final letters to Timothy and Titus Paul repeatedly emphasizes the need for sound doctrine. He told Titus (1:9) that an elder must be one who is **“holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict.”** He goes on to explain that there are many empty talkers and deceivers who are upsetting whole house-holds through their false teaching. In his final charge to Timothy, after telling him to preach the word, he explained (2 Tim. 4:3-4), **“For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.”**

So it should not surprise us that as Paul concludes his letter to the Romans, in the midst of giving and sending warm greetings to the saints, he breaks in with this warning to beware of false teachers.

In some ways, Paul’s words here are out of sync with our current culture that holds an unbiblical view of tolerance as the chief virtue. Some churches argue that we should set aside all doctrinal differences and come together in the areas where we agree. They say, “Jesus didn’t say that the world will know we are Christians by our correct doctrine, but by our love.”

But Biblical love, Christian love always has its foundation in the truth. 1 Corinthians 13:6 says that love **“does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth.”** 1 John 3:18 urges us saying, **“My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.”** In 2 Thessalonians 2:10 Paul warns that those who will be deceived by Satan **“perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved.”**

So how do we stand for the truth in love? Paul gives us four ways:

### **1. The Warning: Be on-guard against false teachers (Rom. 16:17-18)**

Paul uses a word in the Greek from which we get the English word ‘scope.’ To “note,” is to scope out, to mark out, to distinguish in order to clearly recognize. So on verse 17 he writes, **“Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them.”**

We are to note, be on-guard against, to watch out for those who cause divisions and offenses. How will we spot them? Paul gives us four characteristics of these false teachers to watch for:

#### **(1) Their motivation: to promote themselves by causing divisions and offenses.**

Divisions and offenses attack the unity of the church. The word that Paul uses here translated “divisions” he also uses in Galatians 5:20 where he describes the works of the flesh. There it is translated as “dissensions.” The word “offenses” was used of a trap or a snare. It is put there to trip-up people and cause them to fall.

This division and stems from self-centered, self-exalting motives. False teachers attempt to build a following because they love promoting themselves and being the center of attention. They don't seek to exalt Christ and Him crucified.

The New Testament epistles give plenty of evidence that divisions and offenses were common even in the 1st century church. In Galatians Paul blasted the Judaizers who craftily slipped in to teach that Christ is not enough for righteousness before God. Colossians and 1 John refute the Gnostics who twisted scripture to deny that Jesus had a real body or that He experienced a real death for our sin. In 1 Corinthians Paul confronted the libertines who flaunted the grace of God and liberty in Christ by advocating immoral behavior as legitimate. He corrected false teaching that said there is no resurrection. Other writings addressed ascetics who forbade marriage and called for abstinence from certain foods as the means to a holy life rather than dependence upon the cross of Christ. All of these false teachings and more assaulted the church's unity, deceived believers into sin, and threatened to destroy local communities of believers.

But at the root of it, these false teachers were motivated by promoting themselves, not Christ.

## **(2) Their message: to contradict sound biblical doctrine.**

Their message was “**contrary to the doctrine which you learned.**” Paul is mainly referring to the truth of the gospel which the Romans had believed and which Paul had set forth so clearly in this letter.

There are core doctrines where all true Christians must agree or you cease to be Christian in any biblical sense of the word. These have to do with the inspiration and authority of Holy Scripture, the nature of God revealed as one God in three persons; the nature of Jesus Christ as both God and man without mixture of natures; the saving work of Christ through His perfect obedience to the Father, His atoning and substitutionary death, His bodily resurrection from the dead, and His ascension as Lord; the sinfulness of man and our inability to save ourselves from the penalty of sin; the necessity of repentance and faith as a response to the good news of Christ; the certainty of eternal judgment and eternal life; and the Church as the redeemed of Christ. Though we can add to this list we cannot subtract from it and remain true to the Christian faith. These are essential doctrines by which we identify ourselves as followers of Jesus Christ.

All of the cults promote a different view of God and a way of salvation by works that detracts from God's glory through the cross of Christ. All false teachers undermine the person and work of Christ. If you abandon these core doctrines for the sake of unity, the unity you end up with is not Christian unity. So pay attention to the message.

Here's the point that we must take to heart: each member of this church holds the responsibility to understand sound doctrine in such a way that when it's not being taught or talked about or shared in a discussion he/she immediately recognizes it in order to stand for truth.

## **(3) Their master: their own appetites, not the Lord Christ.**

Paul explains (16:18), **“For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly.”** False teachers are in the ministry for their own profit or gain. They take people’s money so that they can live lavishly. They love power and being in the lime-light. Often false teachers take advantage of women in their congregation for their own sexual gratification. But they do not preach or live in submission to Christ as Lord.

#### **(4) Their method: to use smooth and flattering speech to deceive the hearts of the naïve.**

False teachers are usually nice, likeable, and winsome. They flatter you by telling you what you want to hear. They smile a lot as they tell you how great you are and how you can have your best life now.

Their method is to prey on those who are gullible and untrained in the faith and sound doctrine, and those who want to think the best of all people. Their speech is **“smooth”** or seemingly plausible, apparently offering what appears to be fair interpretations of Scripture. **“Flattering”** is from a word that actually means praise, so it implies speaking finely or using well-chosen words.

Listen to some of the smooth-talkers in our day who promote a prosperity gospel as a substitute to the gospel of the crucified Christ. They talk smoothly, flattering their hearers while seeming compassionate and interested in them. Yet run through the questions we just noted. See how they stack up. How can thousands, even millions of people, most professing to be Christians, follow some of the bogus preachers parading around their lavish stages? They are deceived by the smooth and flattering speech. How are they deceived? They have not anchored their lives in the sound doctrine common to disciples of Jesus Christ.

So the first warning Paul gives is to be on-guard against these false teachers, noting their motives, their message, their master, and their methods.

## **2. The Way to Respond: Avoid false teachers.**

Paul’s admonition is clear: **“Avoid them.”** Stay away from them. For Paul, doctrine is the basis of unity. Without the common doctrine they had been taught, the unity would not have been Christian unity.

He does not tell us to engage in dialogue with them or to invite them into our church to see if we can find some common ground as we discuss their ideas. No, he says, avoid them. Such is the way we are to deal with those of whom Paul speaks. We are to be alert to the dangers which they pose. We are always to be on the lookout for them. When we spot one, we are to keep our eyes on them and turn away from them. In this way, they will not be able to do us harm.

Should you invite cultists who knock on your door to come in and discuss their beliefs so that you might lead them to Christ? Maybe, but be very careful! The cults often do a better job of training their people than we do. They can take you to every verse that seems to support their errors. If you’re not knowledgeable, they will confuse you and draw you into their heresies.

I usually tell them that I have studied the Bible seriously for over 30 years now. If they’re seeking the truth of how to know God and go to heaven, I’d be glad to talk

with them. But if their aim is to convert me to their errors, they're wasting both their time and mine. Almost always, they say, "Thank you, have a good day," and walk away.

Watch out for false teachers and avoid them.

### **3. The Wisdom: Keep obeying the truth. (Rom. 16:19)**

Romans 16:19: **"For your obedience has become known to all. Therefore I am glad on your behalf."** Why does Paul begin this verse with **"for,"** which seems to be explaining the reason for the warning of verse 18? Because Paul rejoiced to hear about the obedience of the Roman believers to the gospel, but that obedience also made them a prime target for these false teachers. False teachers rarely make converts out of raw pagans. Rather, they go for unsuspecting Christians who lack discernment.

Paul also says, **"but I want you to be wise in what is good, and simple concerning evil."** J. B. Phillips paraphrases it, "I want to see you experts in good, and not even beginners in evil." Or, in Jesus words (Matt. 10:16, ESV), **"Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves."** In the context, "good" refers to sound doctrine in line with the gospel. "Evil" refers to the corrupt doctrine of the false teachers. While it's helpful to have a basic knowledge of what the cults and other false religions teach so that you can avoid their errors and witness to them, it's not edifying to study these errors in depth. Some who are targeting a particular false religious group may need to study their teachings more thoroughly. But our focus should be on being wise in the Scriptures. The best way to refute the errors of false teachers is to know the truth of scripture.

### **4. The Winner: God Himself will give the victory (Rom. 16:20)**

Ultimately, it's the God of peace and His grace that protects us from falling prey to false teachers (16:20). Romans 16:20: **"And the God of peace will crush Satan under your feet shortly. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen."**

He's given a warning, and he's given an exhortation wrapped up in encouragement, but here he gives an expectation of hope.

This is Paul's first mention of Satan in Romans. He is no doubt thinking of the first temptation in the garden, when the serpent deceived Eve. God promised that her seed (Christ) would crush the serpent's head (Gen. 3:15). The implication is that Satan is behind these false teachers who deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting, just as he deceived Eve.

Satan was defeated at the cross (Col. 2:15). But until Christ returns the battle rages as the enemy seeks to deceive and devour Christians. We win the battles against him as we put on the full armor of God and resist his evil schemes (Eph. 6:10-20; 2 Cor. 2:11; James 4:7; Rev. 12:11). He will be finally defeated when Christ throws him into the lake of fire (1 Cor. 15:25; Rev. 20:10). The Bible is clear that God will finally triumph and Satan will lose (1 John 4:4).

J. C. Ryle was a champion for the truth in the Church of England during the 19th century. He wrote about how difficult yet necessary controversy in the church is.

Then he added, "But there is one thing which is even worse than controversy, and that is false doctrine tolerated, allowed, and permitted without protest."

After acknowledging that many would view what he wrote as exceedingly distasteful, he states (p. 111), "Three things there are which men never ought to trifle with—a little poison, a little false doctrine, and a little sin." Amen!