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Watch Out for Those Who Lead You Away from the Truth

Resource by [John Piper](#) Scripture: [Romans 16:17-20](#) Topic: [False Teaching](#)

I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. Such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive. For your obedience is known to all, so that I rejoice over you, but I want you to be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil. The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

I recall talking to a wise leader of a large missions organization about doctrinal faithfulness. He said something to this effect, "It's crucial. And so is unity. Some people emphasize one, and some the other. Our organization is made of two kinds of people: purity boys and unity boys." The unity boys naturally emphasize the preciousness of personal relationships and tend to neglect an emphasis on truth. The purity boys naturally emphasize the preciousness of truth and tend to neglect the nurture of personal relationships.

In fact, you could probably categorize people and churches and denominations and institutions and movements in the evangelical church today (or even in society in general) along these lines: There are those who emphasize doctrinal purity, and there are those that emphasize relational unity.

Loving People *and* Loving Truth

I hope you are feeling uncomfortable with that description. A good impulse inside of you would be saying right now: "Do we have to choose? Can't it be both? Can't you love truth and love people?" In fact, it would be an even more biblical impulse if you found yourself thinking, "I don't even think you can love people if you don't love truth. How can you do what is ultimately good for people if you don't have any strong convictions about what is ultimately good?"

And yet there is no escaping the reality that people and churches and denominations and schools and even whole periods in history lean one way or the other. I think the period of history we live in is not an easy time to be a lover of truth. The most common criticism, if you stand for an important truth and imply by that stand that others should believe it, is that you are arrogant, which is the opposite of being loving ([1 Corinthians 13:4](#)), and therefore you are undermining relationships.

For many thoughtful people today the only path to peaceful relationships in a pluralistic world is the path of no truth that deserves assent from everyone. It seems on the face of it to make sense. If no one claims that what he believes deserves assent from anyone else, then we can live together in peace. Right? So peaceful pluralism and diminished truth claims go hand in hand.

But it doesn't work like that. When there is no truth that deserves assent from everybody, the only arbiter in our competing desires is power. Where truth doesn't define what's right, might makes right. And where might makes right, weak people pay with their lives. When the universal claim of truth disappears, what you get is not peaceful pluralism or loving relationships; what you get is concentration camps and gulags.

Purity for the Sake of Unity

I want you to see from the Bible—and feel in your bones—the importance of being a purity boy *for the sake of* being a unity boy. I want you to see and feel how out of step this text is with today's Western culture. It pictures a way of thinking and living that most of our fellow Americans would consider offensive, unloving, fundamentalistic, and out of date. It's mainly a purity text—a text calling for vigilance in matters of truth and doctrine. But it's not only that. In a striking way, it is a unity text. The goal of the vigilance for right teaching is to avoid Christ-belittling, self-exalting dissension.

So my hope in preaching from verses 17 and 18 is that you will be freed from any blindness or bondage to this truth-diminishing period of time in which we live. And I pray that, because of this liberty, you would know what it is to love your adversaries and that you would have fresh power from the gospel to magnify Christ in showing that love.

Let's read again [Romans 16:17-18](#),

I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive.

Verse 17 gives two commands that seem contradictory, but they are joined by a phrase that shows why they are not contradictory. And verse 18 gives two reasons why these two commands are so crucial. Let's look first at the commands in verse 17.

Watch Out for Those Who Cause Divisions

The first command in verse 17 is to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles or stumbling blocks. "I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles." So it is clear from this command that Paul is concerned about unity. He wants to promote unity. Watch out for those *who cause divisions*. These are enemies of unity. Watch out for them. I don't want them to have that effect on you.

Avoid Them

The second command in verse 17 is to avoid these people. The last phrase in the verse: “*Avoid them.*” Stay away from them. Now the reason I said these two commands sound contradictory is that the first one is driven by a passion for unity: Watch out for those who cause divisions. And the second one is, in fact, a call for division. When you spot such a division-causing person, divide from him. Avoid him.

The Dividing Line of Doctrine

What is it then between these two commands that helps us see how they are not in fact contradictory? It's Paul's reference to *doctrine*. Verse 17: “I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles *contrary to the doctrine* that you have been taught.” The issue here is not the same as in chapter 14 where Paul is dealing with different convictions about non-essential things. There he said, in verse 5, “Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.” There was no talk in chapter 14 about avoiding people. The whole point was to help the strong and the weak Christians live *together* in mutual respect and understanding.

But now here in [Romans 16:17](#), the approach is dramatically different. Here Paul says: Avoid them. Divide from them. Why? Because they are promoting doctrine contrary to what they had been taught. Now Paul's response to this could have been: Well, nobody has all the truth, and everybody has a piece of it, and unity is more important than truth, and so don't divide. And we would say: That impulse would not be all bad, would it? Unity is a good thing. Paul cares about it. His first command is: “Watch out for those who cause divisions.”

Truth-Based Division for the Sake of Truth-Based Unity

But that is not the way he responded to this situation. Instead, for the sake of unity—that is, truth-based unity—Paul calls for truth-based division. Avoid them. I don't know how Paul could make any clearer how he relates doctrine and unity. For Paul, doctrine is the basis of unity. Without the common doctrine they had been taught, the unity would not have been Christian unity. So he is willing to call for truth-based disunity (“Avoid them.” “Divide from them.”) for the sake of truth-based unity.

In other words, when a person departs from the doctrine that the apostles had taught, Paul sees this as a greater threat to unity than the disunity caused by avoiding such people. If we say: How can that be? How can dividing from a false teacher who rises up in the church promote unity in the church? The answer is that the only unity that counts for unity in the church is rooted in a common apostolic teaching. Isolating false teachers—avoiding them—is Paul's strategy for preserving unity that is based on true teaching.

Joy in the Truth Is Dominant

Now let's pause here before looking at the reasons for these commands in verse 18. I want to make a clarifying comment about both of these commands and the doctrine that connects them.

First, with regard to the command to “watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught,” it is possible to go overboard on this. I hesitate even to say it, since I don't think this is the temptation of most churches or most Christians today. But it is possible, and there are churches and people that do go overboard.

What I mean is that they become so obsessed with spotting doctrinal error that they lose their ability to rejoice in doctrinal truth. They're like dogs that are trained so completely to sniff out drugs at the airport, that even when they're off duty they greet everybody that way. It doesn't make for a very welcoming atmosphere.

The book of Romans does not make this mistake. Periodically Paul warns against doctrinal or ethical error. But most of Romans is a glorious display of the work of Christ for us and in us. So let's ask the Lord to help us get the balance right here. We must do this: “Watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught.” But this is not the main thing we do. Vigilance over error is necessary, but joy in the truth is dominant.

There Is a Defined Body of Doctrine

Second, with regard to the doctrine, don't miss the obvious: There is such a thing—a body of doctrine that someone can go against. Verse 17: “Watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles *contrary to the doctrine* that you have been taught.” There is a doctrinal standard. There is something you can depart from. Paul refers to it in several ways. In [Romans 6:17](#), he calls it *the standard of teaching*: “[You] have become obedient from the heart to *the standard of teaching* to which you were committed.” In [2 Timothy 1:13-14](#), he calls it *the pattern of sound words* and *the good deposit*. “Follow *the pattern of the sound words* that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard *the good deposit* entrusted to you.” In [Acts 20:27](#), he calls it *the whole counsel of God*. “I did not shrink from declaring to you *the whole counsel of God*.”

So there is a body or standard or pattern of sound doctrine. The caution here, of course, is that we must not put every minor opinion about hundreds of Bible verses in this category so that there is no room for any disagreement at all (cf. [Philippians 3:15](#)). The pattern of sound doctrine would be a faithful summary of biblical essentials determined by how crucial they are in expressing and preserving the history of redemption, the nature and condition of man, the nature and work of Christ, the nature and work of the Holy Spirit, and the nature and work of God the Father. One of the greatest challenges in the quest for unity is deciding what belongs in this body of doctrine when Paul says, if someone departs from it, avoid him. That's part of what the elders were working on last year in the baptism question. And which we are still working on.

Leave Room for Enemy Love

Third, with regard to the second command at the end of verse 17 (*avoid them*), we need to be sure we leave room for obedience to the teaching in Romans 12 that says we should “Bless those who curse you” (v. 14), and, “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (v. 18), and so on.

Avoiding someone does not mean: Stop caring about him, or stop praying for him, or even stop talking to them. When Peter acted contrary to the gospel in Galatians 2, Paul did not first avoid him. He first confronted him with a view to winning him back. That kind of contact is not forbidden. What Paul commands with the words *avoid them*, is not no contact at all, but rather avoid the kind of contact that communicates life can go on as usual between us. It can't. If you, as a professing Christian, persist in departing from the doctrine the apostles taught, we can't simply hang out together like we used to.

False Teachers Seem Nice

That brings us finally to verse 18 and the two reasons Paul gives for why doctrinal vigilance is so important. Verse 18: “For such persons [that is, the persons who depart from the doctrine] do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive.”

Let's take the second one first. Verse 18b: “By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive.” The word for *flattery* is simply *blessing*. And *smooth talk* doesn't necessarily mean *manifestly slippery*. It just means pleasant and plausible. So the reason we must be so vigilant over biblical doctrine is that those who depart from it take simple people with them by pleasant, plausible speech that presents itself as a blessing. False teachers don't get a following by being rough and harsh. They get a following by being nice.

Just take two examples from history: Arius (d. 336) and Socinus (d. 1604)—both of whom denied the deity of Christ. Parker Williamson describes Arius like this:

Here was a bright, energetic, attractive fellow, the kind of citizen whom any Rotary Club would welcome. Singing sea chanties in dockside pubs and teaching Bible stories to the Wednesday night faithful, this was an immensely popular man. His story reminds us that heresy does not bludgeon us into belief. We are seduced. (Parker T. Williamson, *Standing Firm: Reclaiming the Chastain Faith in Times of Controversy* [Lenoir, North Carolina: PLC Publications, 1996], p. 31.)

And another writer describes Socinus like this:

He was a gentleman. His morals were above reproach and he distinguished himself by his unflinching courtesy. Unflinching courtesy was remarkable in an age when even the great Protestant leaders, Luther and Calvin would use vile street language when arguing with their opponents.

This means that it will seldom be popular to resist false teachers in the church because they are almost always perceived as bringing a blessing and speaking with winsome words. They are gentlemen. And Paul says the innocent are carried away. Hence he says, “Watch out for them. And avoid them.”

False Teachers Serve Their Own Appetites

The other reason why doctrinal vigilance is so crucial, Paul says, is (verse 18a) because “such persons [the false teachers] do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites”—literally their own belly. In other words, the issue in false teaching is not a simple intellectual mistake. Behind the plausible speech and the smooth gentlemanly demeanor is idolatry, and the idol is the belly—the appetite for food or sex or human approval. Behind serious false teaching, we almost always find not merely intellectual mistakes, but worldly passions enslaving the mind.

Watch Out

So I close with a pointed call to vigilance: Watch out for smooth talkers who pastor large churches, write many books, lead wide ministries, and do not manifestly prize above their earthly good the whole counsel of God.