



HICKORY GROVE

BAPTIST CHURCH

The Bedrock of Unity

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Romans 16:17-20

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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; avoid them. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

(Pastor prays)

Unity in any organization is a necessary element if that organization is to succeed. Whether a football team, a Marine division, or a Fortune 500 company, if an organization is not clear on its vision and unified in its purpose, then it flounders and eventually fails. Now if that's true, on a lower, lesser level, then I would say it's also true on a higher holier level, especially when we talk about the church. A church that's unified and clear on its mission and purpose can be a formidable movement for the cause of Christ. Paul says so right here in the last paragraph of Romans.

Isn't it interesting that Paul's final push, the last thing he says to the church is a warning about division and a call for unity? I think that's important and should be one of our primary goals as we press toward church health and strength. But make sure you read what the warning is in verses 17-20. Sometimes it's politics that divides or attitudes that divide or even thoughts on race that divide, but Paul doesn't really address any of that. He warns about something much more subtle and seductive, something much more demonic and destructive. His final warning in

Romans is a call to expose false teachers who threaten the true Gospel. And how relevant I found this passage for the world we live in right now.

The spirit of this passage is a call for unity. Yes, a strong unified church around the essential truths of the Bible. And the warning here is not against those with bad attitudes or rough demeanors. The warning is against the nice smooth talkers that poison the water when we aren't looking. And, as Paul gives the warning, he also gives real steps we can take to make sure we are true to the faith once and for all delivered to the saints.

Real Christianity Has Boundaries and Those Boundaries Must Be Protected

I think Paul gives five ways we protect the doctrinal lines of Biblical Christianity.

I am going to copy the expositor, Warren Wiersbe's "Be" series.

Be vigilant about the faith

Let's read all of verse 17 and then come back and look at the commands. 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; avoid them.*

Do you see that phrase "watch out"? It is two English words that come from one Greek word, *skopeo*. It's where we get the word "scope." A hunter uses a scope to shoot long range. It brings the object closer. We use a telescope to see the moon, bring it close. A scientist uses a microscope to see things and study them. John Chrysostom, the Golden Mouth, said this word means that when false teachers come down, you need to be exceedingly careful. Make sure that you look at it hard, search it out thoroughly. We cannot adopt a casual attitude on false gospels. False gospels, like the "prosperity gospel." What scares me is what else is downstream from there that *feels* like the real Gospel. There is also the social gospel that puts a high priority on justice, which in fact is what all Christians should do. But it cannot replace the Gospel of the cross. Or your temptation might be a political gospel. And if you are not careful, politics starts to rotate up and knocks the cross out of the way when you don't mean for it to but then that becomes your gospel. And another one that scares me is the "almost" gospel. It's the one that teaches a love for the Bible and a belief in Jesus but doesn't actually ever get to the Gospel. The first command is – we must be vigilant about the faith.

The second thing is:

Be careful what you let in

Or you could say, be careful *who* you let in. And what I mean by that is what you let into your life or who you let in. Go with me and let's read verses 17-18. 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; avoid them.* ¹⁸*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.*

The second command is at the end of verse 17 and the why is in verse 18. *Avoid*. This is to keep away from, to give no opportunity for inroads into your life. Every false teacher covets an opportunity for a friendly discussion. Look how Paul describes them in verse 18. They do not serve our Lord Christ. They serve themselves. They are smooth talkers. This is the only time this is used in the New Testament. They manage to deceive people by their plausible ways of putting things. Smooth talk. They speak well but do evil. It's the language of a good man used by a bad man. He seems nice and uses flattery. *Eulogia*. It's not the blunt or brash or rude or loud or abrupt that are the worst in the church. It's the smooth talking, good sounding. Surely that's what Jesus meant in Matthew 7:15. *"Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.*

Look who Paul says are in danger. ¹⁸*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.* It's the unlearned, not disciplined. We have to avoid both gullibility and cynicism. We've got to be discerning. There is a series put out by the publisher Kregel that will be very helpful with this. One of the books is called "40 Questions about interpreting the Bible." Another good book would be "40 Questions about Biblical Theology."

Be vigilant about the faith. Be careful what you let in.

Be obedient to what you do know

Let me show you where I get that. It's the first part of verse 19. Something happens to the congregation when people take the Bible seriously and strive to live for Christ, asking God to change and empower them for His glory. It will be obvious. ¹⁹*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.*

We live in a world with such backward morals that it will be obvious soon enough if you actually take the lordship of Jesus Christ seriously. The church at Rome did and everybody knew it. Do the people you go to school with know it? Do the people you work with know it? Do the people you live with know it, your kids or your parents? It will be obvious.

It will be encouraging. Look what Paul says: your obedience is known to all so that I rejoice over you. Their obedience encouraged his heart. They simple strength that you can put into someone's heart by just being faithful, it's one of the big reasons we need to keep meeting. It's to strengthen each other. All of us who love Jesus have felt the bewildering pain of seeing someone we always thought was a solid believer walk away from the faith. The opposite is also true. To see believers grow strong in Christ through the hard work and discipline of discipleship. John said it in 3 John 1:4. *I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.* Be vigilant about the faith. Be careful what you let in. Be obedient to what you know.

Be wise about your choices

Let's read verse 19 again, this time with an emphasis on the end of the verse. ¹⁹ *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.* Be wise to what is good. That means you have a strong and smart handle on what is and isn't a godly lifestyle. In fact, the way Paul says it here is to be innocent to evil. You don't know it. You don't experience it. You don't flirt with it and you don't see how close to the line you can come! Instead, you have a growing depth of knowledge and experience in what is good, God-honoring and Christlike.

Paul says this a lot. In 1 Corinthians 14:20 Paul says, ²⁰ *Brothers and sisters, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults.* Jesus said in Matthew 10:16, *"I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves."* We are going to make choices this week, and as we do we might ask questions like: Is this Christlike, Biblical, mission-minded? If I make this choice, is it defensible to my Christian friends? Is it sacrificial? Will I be spiritually stretched to grow more like Jesus? Will this create Godly joy? If I chose to do this, will it adorn the Gospel? Will it make other people want to know the Gospel?

Be diligent about the faith. Be careful what you let in. Be obedient to what you know. Be wise about your choices.

Be confident in our God

Don't you love verse 20? *The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.* Let me suggest seven reasons you should be confident in our God.

He is the God of peace, wholeness, wellness, soul-healing peace. When you have peace with God at the cross, that's when you can reconcile with one another. You can have peace with who you are in Jesus. He is the God of peace and you can trust Him.

He is the God of Providence. You see that word **soon**. God will **soon** crush Satan under your feet. His timing is good and right and perfect and soon. 2 Peter 3:8 says, *But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.* And they are always filled with hope.

He is the God of promise. God will soon crush Satan. That is the echo of a promise made in Genesis 3:15 when God said that the seed of the woman—Jesus—would crush the head of the serpent. Jesus kept that promise at the cross. God keeps all of His promises in Christ. He is the Yes and Amen.

He is the God of sovereignty. God will soon crush Satan under your feet. Crush Satan. God and Satan are not two well-matched foes battling it out until one is finally defeated. If Satan is a poisonous cockroach, then God is a galactic steel-toed boot. He will obliterate Satan. God is sovereign over Satan. Next time you step on a bug, think of this.

He is the God of victory. The God of peace will soon crush Satan under our feet. Listen to the language. *He* does the crushing but it's under *our* feet. *He* wins the battle; *we* get the victory. *He* wins the war; *we* get the parade. *He* gets the stripes, *we* get the healing. *He* gets the cross, *we* get the forgiveness. *He* gets the worms, *we* get grace.

He is the God of grace. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Adam came and took us into sin. Jesus came all man And He is Christ; He is all-God. He came and took away our sin. He is Lord. The Bible says that one day every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

He is the God of the Gospel. This whole verse is the Gospel. Death and sin are defeated at the cross of Jesus. Come and see, taste and see that the Lord is good and He has shown us His goodness at the cross of Jesus.

Real Christianity has boundaries and those boundaries must be protected and are circled close to the cross. Be vigilant about the faith. Be careful who and what you let in. Be obedient to what you know. Be wise about your choices. Be confident in our God.

(Pastor prays)