

(16:17) - “NOW I BESEECH YOU, BRETHREN, MARK THEM WHICH CAUSE DIVISIONS AND OFFENCES CONTRARY TO THE DOCTRINE WHICH YE HAVE LEARNED; AND AVOID THEM.” -

One of the greatest dangers for the Church in this world is false preachers and false professors seeking to divide and destroy the fellowship of brethren. We know the true Church CANNOT be destroyed and true believers cannot be separated from Christ because Christ has redeemed us unto Himself, and He preserves and protects us unto final glory (**Matt. 16:18**). All who are truly saved by grace will bear the fruit of faith, repentance, and perseverance unto glory (**Matt. 13:23; John 6:37-45; 15:1-16**). But all who claim to have faith in Christ will be tested both individually and collectively (**1 Pet. 4:12-13**). These trials will reveal and strengthen true faith, and many times they will expose false professors (**Matt. 13:20-22; 1 Cor. 11:19; 1 John 2:18-19**). As believers, therefore, we are commanded to be ready and prepared for them, and to act accordingly in truth when they come - **“Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood”** (**Acts 20:28**). Paul is warning the saints in Rome to do the same when false teachers seek to divide believers by introducing doctrines that are contrary to **“the doctrine which ye have learned.”**

“Now I beseech you, brethren” - This is a serious matter for all believers and cannot be tolerated or ignored. Paul begs them to listen to him on this matter. **“Mark them which cause divisions and offences”** - To **“mark them”** means to **“keep your eye on them.”** This is not some kind of self-righteous or self-serving witch hunt simply trying to find fault with others. It is simply following the commandment of our Lord (**Matt. 7:15-20; 1 John 4:1-5; 2 John 9-11**). It is being a noble Berean (**Acts 17:10-11**). The Bible tells us that one of the objects of the Lord’s hatred are those who **“soweth discord among brethren”** (**Prov. 6:17-18**). This is a serious matter, and believers are to be aware of who these false preachers are. This is not a pleasant task but a necessary one. Some of these could be friends or family members. Some could be men of renown, but that does not relieve us as **“brethren”** of our responsibility. **“Which cause divisions and offences”** - These false teachers seek to divide brethren and cause them to stumble over issues that are **“contrary”** (opposed) to the basic Gospel truths that God the Holy Spirit teaches every one of God’s children. God’s true ministers will seek to edify (build up, unify, encourage, strengthen, and teach) brethren in the truth (**Eph. 4:1-16**).

“Contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned” - The issue here is right doctrine that is consistent with the true Gospel of God’s free and sovereign grace based on the glorious Person and finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ for the complete salvation of God’s people. Paul had laid these doctrines out clearly and systematically in this letter to the church at Rome. It is the doctrine of grace which reveals the holiness and justice of God, the sinfulness and depravity of man, the glory and righteousness of God in Christ for salvation, and the work of the Holy Spirit in regenerating and preserving God’s people unto glory. This the **“doctrine”** of the simplicity that is in Christ Jesus (**2 Cor. 11:3**) and which the Holy Spirit teaches ALL believers concerning the great salvation God freely gives us in Christ and based on His blood and righteousness alone (**Jer. 31:34; John 6:45; Rom. 6:17-18**). This is neither new doctrine nor deep doctrine only revealed and understood by an elite group of preachers and people who claim to have this special knowledge from God. Any teachings **“contrary to”**

the simple teachings of the Gospel of Christ are to be exposed and avoided. Any teaching that confuses or challenges the doctrine of Christ is to be exposed and avoided.

“And avoid them” - We are not to follow or support *any* teacher who promotes **“divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which (we) have learned”** (cf., **2 Thess. 3:6,14**). This does not mean that they are to be treated harshly. It also does not mean that we should not pray for them and seek their recovery. It means we are to turn away from them in their teaching and their division. They are to be avoided in all their instructions contrary to the simple Gospel doctrines of which every true believer is taught and convinced. John Gill wrote this means to “shun their ministry, drop attendance on it, depart far from them, have no private conversation with them, receive them not into their houses, nor bid them God speed; with such do not eat, have no communion with them at the Lord’s table, withdraw from them as disorderly persons, who act contrary to the doctrine and order of the Gospel, and after proper admonition reject them from all fellowship with you.”

(16:18) - “FOR THEY THAT ARE SUCH SERVE NOT OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST, BUT THEIR OWN BELLY” - False teachers do not serve Christ. They serve themselves. The **“belly”** here refers to their natural, fleshly appetites. They may have an appetite for self-righteousness, self-promotion (to make a name for themselves), money, power, position, the approval of men, to gain a following among men, etc. They have their fleshly motives, but it is not for the glory of God in Christ, the salvation of sinners, and the edification of the Church. Those who seek to divide the Church in the name of Christ and truth do not serve Christ no matter what they say or do (**1 Cor. 1:11-13**).

“AND BY GOOD WORDS AND FAIR SPEECHES DECEIVE THE HEARTS OF THE SIMPLE” - Many false prophets have an appearance of great sincerity and love for the truth and the people of God. They creep in **“unawares”** (**Jude 4**) as wolves in sheep’s clothing (**Matt. 7:15**) and disguised as messengers of light, apostles of Christ, and ministers of righteousness (**2 Cor. 11:13-15**). They do not openly deny Christ and His Gospel. They speak much truth but introduce new teachings hard to understand and explain, **“strange”** (foreign) doctrines that upset, confuse, and divide the children of God instead of establishing our hearts with grace and promoting growth and unity in the body (**Heb. 13:9**).

“Simple” here does not mean ignorant or unintelligent. It describes those who are innocent, unwary, and unsuspecting, not on their guard. They insist on believing the best in spite of clear evidence to the contrary - **“The simple believeth every word: but the prudent man looketh well to his going”** (**Prov. 14:15**). They refuse to test preachers (**1 John 4:1-3**) and to judge the reality of good and evil by God’s Word (**Heb. 5:13-14**). They trust their own hearts, and this is deadly (**Jer. 17:5-10**). All judgment of good and evil in doctrine and in practice must be based on God’s revealed Word in the Holy Scriptures - **“To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them”** (**Isa. 8:20**). So, the **“simple”** describes those who follow false teachers in their error and division. We do not want to become suspicious of everyone, but we also do not want to be **“simple”** (gullible) and be deceived. Remember, **“The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul: the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple.”** (**Psa. 19:7**). **“O ye simple, understand wisdom: and, ye fools, be ye of an understanding heart”** (**Prov. 8:5**). **“A prudent man foreseeth the evil, and hideth himself: but the simple pass on, and are punished.”** (**Prov. 22:3**).