

Physician Horace Smith warns that in the church "we must guard against 'spiritual autoimmune disease,' in which "spiritual white cells" see normal cells within the body as enemies and try to destroy them" Dr. Smith adds:

*Is it possible for a human body to 'bite and devour' healthy cells, destroying life? Absolutely. Sometimes white blood cells mistakenly attack healthy cells in the blood, causing disastrous results. The immune system fails to recognize components of the body as normal. It then creates autoantibodies that attack its own cells, tissues, or organs. This causes inflammation and damage, and it leads to autoimmune disorders. For example, autoimmune hemolytic anemia is a group of disorders that attack red blood cells as if they were substances foreign to the body. Like other cases of anemia, the person may experience shortness of breath, tiredness, and jaundice. When the destruction of healthy red cells persists for a long period of time, the spleen may enlarge, resulting in a sense of abdominal fullness and pain*

*God intends for his body to be healthy, nourish each other, protect each other, and carry harmful waste away.*

In the last few passages of our study in Romans... the Apostle Paul has been commending the church at Rome. We actually get the idea that it is a pretty healthy body of believers. (And I believe that it was... at the time of Paul's writing.)

Last week we came to the final chapter of Romans... where Paul is saying his goodbyes... greeting several church members by name. He had a lot of good things to say about these people. ... But suddenly... in the middle of what appears to be Paul's final comments in his letter to the believers in Rome... he breaks-in with a completely unexpected warning about people who might "*cause divisions and put obstacles in your way.*" ... Paul urged the believers there to look for early signs of division and false teaching.

This brief warning about false doctrines and unbelieving teachers reminds us that no church is immune from danger. Paul did not address this until the very end of his letter... probably because the church in Rome was remarkably strong and healthy. But Paul loved the Roman church and was concerned that something harmful might enter into it... to spoil the church and its witness. ... So He urged them to watch out for small... early... signs of divisiveness and/or heresy. These can be hard to detect and are so often tolerated because they begin in small and insignificant ways.

These verses are especially beneficial to churches (and individual Christians) who are united and healthy. The dangers of division or false teaching are great because they are so subtle. We need to be suspicious of little signs of a divisive party spirit... (the spirit of “*us-verses-them*.”) (LISTEN!) All Christians... no matter how strong they suppose themselves to be... must be very aware of deceitful people – because all of us can be so easily enticed.

Divisiveness is always stealthy. It is like melting snow underneath the ice that presses against a wood shingled roof in the winter. The water probes for a weak spot through which it can enter... in a trickle at first but later like a flood. ... [ P A U S E ] ...

Here is what we know from other passages of Scripture... such as Philippians chapter one: Paul’s fears were not groundless. Two years later when Paul arrived in Rome... he found exactly what he had warned them against... because they chose not to heed his warning. ... (Oh! That we would be more careful!)

Not everyone was working with Paul for the spreading of the Gospel. There were some... who (for selfish reasons) were dividing the church.

We have the same problem today... (in nearly every church) and Christians must beware of them. They come to you trying to convince you that they have a proper "concern"... that not many people know about. They make you feel so honored... that they have come to YOU with this matter of confidentiality. But you have (merely) been victimized by flattery. ... (You were given a sense of specialness to be brought into this inner circle.)

In our passage today Paul gives two instructions: watch out for them (identify them)... and avoid them. ... (You see... Folks!) The issue is not making or keeping these friends who flatter you... It is far more important to please the Lord... not the flatterer. ... (Please hear me now)... It is NOT Godly love that tolerates divisive behavior. So keep a watchful eye on them... and avoid them.

The phrase that we will see in verse 17: "watch out for them" (*skopeo*)... means to keep one's eye on... to observe... to contemplate... to scrutinize. You will hear this important word ("skopeo") several times throughout this sermon.

It is the word from which we get our English terms: "microscope" and "telescope." ... We use these instruments to observe details. Paul is going to tell the whole congregation (not just its leaders) to scope for people who create two very deadly dangers: "divisions" and "obstacles." ... "Skopeo" (observe) them – see if they are obeying the Lord in their behavior.

### **Romans 16:17**

Paul warns against two specific things. 1. **Those who cause divisions** and 2. **Those who put obstacles in other persons' ways.** Let's take a brief look at both.

1. **Those who cause divisions.** What Paul has in mind when he speaks of "those who cause divisions" is not so much people who introduce heresies into the church - though this also sometimes happens - but those who divide churches into factions... to make people be loyal to themselves.

These people are knowledgeable. They usually have noteworthy abilities... or resources. ... They are leaders in the sense that they have enthusiasm and get people to follow them easily. ... Somehow they get others to believe that they are spiritual – even though they engage in UNspiritual acts... like gossip... grumbling... and complaining. Church people wont “skopeo” them (spiritually observe them closely... to see that they are NOT obeying Scripture... which is what Paul says we are to do.)

Eventually they begin to push a particular point of doctrine... AND / OR they become very critical of fellow church members (disguised as their personal concerns... or a matter for you to pray with them about.) ... But every believer is to be on his/her guard against factious people in the church.

2. **Those who put obstacles in other persons' ways that are contrary to the teaching you have learned.**” The word Paul uses here is *skandalon*, from which we get our word “scandal.” He is not thinking of scandalous behavior (though that is also often a problem)... but rather of adding things to the gospel that get in the way of those who are merely trying to obey the Bible and follow Jesus Christ.

In the Greek text of this verse... Paul uses the words “*para*” which means along side of... and *didachê*... which means teaching. ... So what he is thinking of is those who put some other teaching alongside of what is taught in Scripture. ... People like this do not deny the essentials of the Christian faith... but they bring in other things that are not in the Bible... and insist on conformity in these areas. These would be matters that are not specified in Scripture... and are not necessarily wrong for a Christian to practice them.

An example might be how we worship God on Sundays. It is acceptable for a Christian to adopt particular ways of observing the Lord’s Day... or to have certain standards of dress that he/she believes will best honor the Lord. ... But it is not acceptable to impose these standards on other believers... and then cause division in the church... because some Christians will not conform to them. - That is putting obstacles in the way.

### **Romans 16:18**

Having identified the telltale signs that a divisive person has entered the church... verse 18 (here) exposes his or her true nature. ... Such people do not serve Christ... because they are slaves to their own appetites (literally “bellies,” *koilia*). ... Their teaching — along with every other activity — benefits them personally. The payoff may be: power... prestige... control... sympathy... (and when it is a pastor) it may be money. It can be anything that depravity craves. ... And to conceal their true intentions... they project a remarkably admirable image. ... They have mastered church vocabulary — that dialect we call “Christianese” — and they have perfected the mannerisms of a mature believer.

Divisive people keep their people skills polished to a high gloss. They instinctively find trusting people in positions of influence and then play to their weaknesses. If it's pride - they **flatter**.... if it's fear - they reinforce their **sense of control**... if it's insecurity - they make them feel **important**... if it's despair - they **promise the impossible**. ... .. And so the unguarded are led away. ... By the time the lies are finally exposed... the loss is immense.

No wonder Paul has some rather harsh things to say about people who divide the church! ... His harsh judgments concern both the motivation behind their actions and their basic methodology.

1. Their motivation. ... When people such as the ones Paul is describing first enter into a Christian congregation... they come as angels of light. That is... they present themselves as teachers who want to instruct and help other believers and move the church forward. They “care” for them. They “want” everyone to experience the fullness of God's blessing.

But this is not what they achieve... nor is it what they are really after. Paul says they really want to serve "their own appetites," not Jesus Christ. They are not committed to His honor and glory and mission... but to themselves — to getting and doing what they want.

No matter how seemingly sincere and caring factious people in the church may appear to be... they are never genuinely concerned for the cause of Christ... or for His church. They are often driven by self-interest and self-gratification — sometimes for fame... and frequently simply for power over their followers.

(And let's face it)... These are sometimes pastors who dominate their congregations... or evangelists who make a great deal of money and live lavishly on the many sacrificial gifts of their followers.

2. **Their methodology.** The second thing Paul says about teachers like this concerns their methodology. They operate by deception... deliberately setting out to deceive the unwary: "*By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people*"

I have been speaking (already) about flattery... but there is (also) this matter of "smooth talk." ... "Smooth talk" is the Greek word *chrêstologia*... This is a compound Greek word... based on the noun *logos*... meaning word or talk... preceded by the adjective *chrêstos*. ... *Chrêstos* means kind... loving... merciful... or easy to bear. ... In other words... the term refers to talk that **appears** to be kind and loving.

They put on the appearance of great sincerity... piety... and humility. They exhibit such smooth... plausible pretenses... like a great love for truth that they seem to have. ... Their speech is filled with enough Bible references and familiar Christian expressions that they have the potential to deceive even "strong" believers.

They deceive the hearts of the naïve... (anyone who does not skopeo them.) It never seems to dawn on the naïve believers to observe the spiritual obedience of a divisive church member... because **THEY** (themselves) are without any disposition to deceive other church members. Therefore their minds are unsuspecting... (they are naïve.)

**Romans 16:19**

*“I rejoice over you – BUT...” ... (Paul says) “I rejoice in your mild... obedient disposition to extend Christ’s grace... and to love and accept everyone. (In this you are obedient) ... BUT... *I don’t want you to be naïve. ... You (also) need to be discerning!*”*

Paul was urging the Roman believers to exercise skillful discernment of the deceptiveness of those who do not have Godly motivation. ... Jesus sent out His disciples to serve with these instructions:

**Matthew 10:16 (ESV)**

<sup>16</sup> *“Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.*

Take note of Paul’s specific advice (here at the end of Romans). They were to be *“wise in what is good.”* Why...? Because someone who is wise in what is good will recognize the factious behavior of someone who is trying to divide. They will know **THAT** is **NOT** good.

If we are wise in what is good... skopeo comes naturally. We will recognize and observe contentious people in the church... and avoid participating in it with them. We will not be naïve. ... We will see that they are not obeying what Scripture says they should do with the information they have just given to us. ... Did they go to the person they are spreading a bad report about...? Are they gossiping – even if they say *they want you to pray about it...*? (So much gossip happens under the guise of a “prayer matter...”) “Be wise in what is good! – and evaluate the character and behavior of the smooth- talking person who spreads divisive information.

Grumbling about another person is (also) destructive... and is being just as disobedient to Scripture.



### **Philippians 2:14-15 (ESV)**

*<sup>14</sup> Do all things without grumbling or disputing, <sup>15</sup> that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world,*

Additionally... Paul wrote that the congregation was to be “*innocent in what is evil.*” ... The Greek word for “*innocent*” (akeraios) can also describe city walls that had survived a siege. ... “*Intact*” or “*unscathed*” would be accurate synonyms.

(LISTEN!) ... Evil will certainly attack... and its assault will be intense. However... each of us must make certain that the walls of the congregation’s integrity will hold. Let this be your concern when someone wants to let you in on a matter that can cause division.

Don’t be surprised to discover a divisive person in our midst. This doesn’t necessarily reflect poorly on our congregation. They are in every church. What matters is how the membership responds. ... Will they continue to be naïve...? Or will they equip themselves to recognize the telltale signs of a divider... and do what Scripture (here) is telling us to do...?

Here are four questions every member of a church should be trained to ask. Think of them as “truth filters.” ... Everything we hear should easily pass through all four.

- “Does what I am hearing agree with Scripture?”
- “Does what I am hearing honor my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ?”
- “Does what I am hearing help me become more godly?”
- “Does what I am hearing cause me to think more highly of my fellow believers?”

Imagine how ineffective a divider or deceiver would become if everyone he or she encountered subjected everything they heard to those four tests. If every congregation were this wise in what is good... they would never devour God's vineyard.

### **Romans 16:20**

Satan... ("the father of lies") lurks behind all the systems of deception that enters a local church. ... He is the weaver of all the various deceptions with which fallen men and women in every church fall.

That God permits Satan to have a measure of freedom to pursue his evil designs against those who are in the church... seems like such a puzzle to me at times. ... But we can be quite sure (however) that God has Satan on a tight leash. Satan may be the instigator of strife and division... but God is "the God of peace," and as Paul says, "*the God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly*". ... This bruising will actually be an utter and complete crushing of the serpent.

Romans 16:20 is a reference to Genesis 3:15... after Satan got Adam and Eve to sin. God told Satan...

#### **Genesis 3:15 (ESV)**

*<sup>15</sup> I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."*

In His mercy... God did not crush Adam and Eve... but rather promised that Satan would one day be crushed. ... The reference that Paul makes to this passage... reveals Paul's confidence that we will gain the victory... and

overcome all the divisive arts... of those who sow seeds of discord and contention in the church.

But hold on just a minute! ... Genesis 3:15 says that “**HE** shall bruise your head...” referring to the Messiah (Jesus)... when He comes. ... But Paul claims that Satan will be crushed under **OUR** feet. ... So which is it...? Messiah’s feet... or ours...? ... [ P A U S E ] ...

In Revelation 12:11... the apostle John writes of the victory of the saints over Satan... saying:

**Revelation 12:11 (ESV)**

*<sup>11</sup> And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony...*

There are two parts to this victory over Satan by God’s people. ... First is the victory achieved by Jesus through his death on the cross... and the second is the victory won by our testimony to the truth of God. ... But honestly... the victory that involves us... is still God’s victory... because it is God working in us. ... But it is our victory too... since it is achieved by our life’s testimony. ... So Paul is not being incorrect by saying “*the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.*” ... [ P A U S E ] ...

Whenever we tolerate divisive behavior... we often do it because the person who tries to engage us it is our friend... Maybe they have done nice things for us... made us feel important or significant. ... Or perhaps we tolerate it because we don’t want to cause trouble. ... But we actually cause more trouble than we think we avoid. ... Wherever it is tolerated... churches (REPEATEDLY) are devastated. (LISTEN!)... Part of our life’s testimony is to obey God... which crushes the head of the serpent (Satan) !

Rather than tolerate it... we must **confront** it. I'm not calling for a totalitarian approach to church-life... No one wants to live under the spirit of constant suspicion and paranoia... like what happened during the Salem Witch Trials. (All of this would be counterproductive.) But we can be **wise in what is good**... so that we will not be so gullible to a divisive person whispering in the shadows of congregation. ... And we must lovingly confront it... whenever we experience it.

**Titus 3:10-11 (ESV)**

*<sup>10</sup> As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, <sup>11</sup> knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.*

The first and second warnings do not need to be harsh... even though it is confrontation. ... "*Confrontation*" has become an unpleasant term in our vocabulary... perhaps because it is rarely done **well**. ... Confrontation is nothing more than bringing the truth of a situation **out of the shadows** and into the light... by choosing to discuss it openly. ... This **can** be done tactfully (without the threat of losing a friendship)... by avoiding accusations... choosing to ask the person some honest questions in its place. *"Have you spoken of this directly with the people who are involved...? Don't you think we should bring this matter to the elders...? "Hey... why don't we go to them now...?"*

Thankfully... such questioning is often enough. Divisive people **thrive** on secrecy. ... So once their cover is blown... they usually back off. ... On occasion... they move on. ... **[ P A U S E ]** ...

This no-nonsense instruction from our passage today... is teaching about how to **love the church**... and love one another. (You see) a God-like love

is protective. ... When you really love people as much as Paul loved the Romans... you protect them. This is a great example for all of us. We need to put it all on the line... to be less loving of ourselves... and be more protective of Christ's body (the Church.) ... [ P A U S E ] ...

Last week I covered the next several verses that come up in Romans chapter 16... so I won't go over those again. In them we continue to see Paul's great love for the Roman believers. But what I want to briefly touch on... is Paul's closing of this letter... that we have spent the last several months (here) on Sunday mornings studying.

### **Romans 16:25-27**

*"Now to Him who is able to strengthen... (or establish) you" ... This identifies God as the sole source of stability and strength for the believer... as well as the church. ... There is no fear He cannot relieve... no danger from which He cannot deliver us... no anxiety He cannot quiet... ... even when it involves His call for us to confront the sin of divisiveness. ... This is good news! ... Everything is of God... and He establishes us. Believe it! ... God is able to make us stand. ... [ P A U S E ] ...*

Paul then praises God for the mystery he has been writing about all through his letter. It is the truth (finally revealed in full) that Gentiles are included with the Jews... as God's people.

None of us would ever be able to think up a gospel like this. This gospel is divine in origin... and it displays the supreme wisdom of God in all its parts... and on every page of His written revelation. We are therefore right

to say with Paul, "*To the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.*"

But (real quick...) what about the "*Amen*" (this final word of Paul's letter)...? We say "*amen*" whenever we agree with God's declaration. We set our seal of approval to what we heard is true and that God is faithful.

That is what Paul is doing with his "*amen*" that he writes here. He is setting his seal of belief on God's truth. Can you do that...? Can you add your "*amen*" to what Paul has written – even to Paul's straight-forward instruction for how we should handle divisive behavior on the church...?

For my part... that is what I am determined to do. There is much in the Word of God that I do not understand. ... But what I **do** understand... I believe... and to God's declaration of all these eternal truths (here in the Book of Romans)... I say a hearty - "*Amen!*"