

Fierce Devotion to the Health of the Church
Romans 16:17-20

We live in a day in which it's very fashionable to critique the church. Some suggest that the church as an institution has outlived its usefulness. You can find books with titles like, *They Like Jesus but Not the Church* and *Quitting Church* and *Life After Church* and *So You Don't Want to go to Church Anymore*. Churches are accused of being boring, irrelevant, bloated, power-hungry, racist, oppressive to [almost everybody], materialistic, overly-political, not political enough, etc., etc., etc. My guess is that each of these books contain a kernel of truth. All churches are flawed, and some are so flawed, the book of Revelation tells us, that Jesus "removes their lampstand": He withdraws His presence from those churches because they have essentially abandoned Him and His ways.

There are so many churches in the U.S. that many, many people have a church horror-story. If we set up a mic and let you come forward to tell about the disappoint and pain you've experienced in the church, we would be here all day. I regularly hear painful, tragic stories about experiences in the church. I could tell a few myself (not about Faith, of course!).

You know somebody who could really tell some church horror stories? The apostle Paul. He could tell stories about churches he had planted turned on him and accused him of being motivated by greed and fame (see 2 Corinthians 12:11-21). He could tell stories about church splits and immorality of all sorts. And **yet** he didn't write books like *Quitting Church*; he wrote books like Galatians and Ephesians and 1 & 2 Corinthians. Instead of giving up on the church, **he advocated a fierce devotion to the health of the church** - not only the Church (capital C), but also specific churches in specific towns. Paul advocated this fierce devotion to the health of the church because individual churches are the local expression of the body of Christ. If you don't have healthy churches the gospel never takes root in a place.

In Romans Paul has already mentioned numerous things that are essential for the health of the church - things like using our spiritual gifts (12:3-8), putting aside arrogance toward others in the church (11:20, 12:16), loving one another (13:8-10), accepting one another (15:7). Today's passage gives two more things that are essential for the health of the church. The first involves our doctrinal integrity; the second involves our personal integrity.

Today we finish up our study of the book of Romans. In light of everything we've seen, I invite you to receive this final challenge to be fiercely devoted to the health of the church.

Doctrinal Integrity: Keep your distance from false teachers. (Romans 16:17-18)

17 Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them.

Here the warning is against false teachers: those who advocate something “contrary to the teaching you have learned.” Since this is the first mention of false teachers in the book of Romans, Paul is probably warning them to watch for false teachers who might infiltrate the church at Rome in the future, not that they are already in their midst.

Paul told the church at Rome to “keep your eye on” them (NIV - “watch out for” them). Specifically they were to look for two things. First, they “cause dissensions.” Instead of being peacemakers, they were trouble makers. Instead of promoting unity, they caused the church to break into factions. They had no commitment to “preserving the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4); they mainly cared about gaining a following.

Second, they caused “hindrances” or “stumbling blocks” (*skandalon*) contrary to the teaching which the Romans had learned. In other words, they taught things contrary to the gospel. We aren’t told the specific things they taught. Perhaps they were Judaizers who taught that you had to keep the Law if you really wanted to be right with God. Perhaps they were gnostics who taught that what you do with your body doesn’t matter; all that matters is what happens in your mind. Whatever the case, by definition false teachers advocated something different than they had learned. What they had learned was that the gospel was “the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes.”

Paul’s simple directive is “turn away from them.” Don’t associate with them; don’t invite them into the church to debate with them; keep your distance from them. Once it becomes obvious that someone is only wanting to cause a faction, the only course of action is to disassociate yourself from that person. In the church we always seek reconciliation when there are divisions. But when a false teacher arises, there’s no common commitment that can bring reconciliation.

Notice in verse 18 how Paul characterizes such false teachers. This description is exactly the ***opposite*** of how genuine believers should live their lives.

18 For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting.

You may remember how Paul described himself in the first verse of the book of Romans: “Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus. . .” As a slave of Christ Jesus, there was nothing Paul wouldn’t do for Jesus. Because of his devotion to Jesus, he willingly accepted any assignment Jesus gave him. By contrast, “such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites.” Whether they realized it or not, they were enslaved to their own appetites; they were essentially self-absorbed and self-centered instead of Christ-centered. There was a great contrast between the motivation of Paul and the other apostles and “such men.”

There was also a great contrast in their methods. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 2:4-5, “my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.” By contrast, Paul says of the false teachers, “and by

their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting.” Instead of speaking plainly, they disguised their teaching with “smooth and flattering speech.” The result was the “the hearts of the unsuspecting/naive” were deceived. This is why Paul urged the Romans to keep their eyes open and to keep their distance from false teachers.

Again, we don’t have any indication that Paul knew of specific false teachers in Rome. Rather, he seemed to operate under the premise that sooner or later false teachers will appear in every church. In Acts 20 Paul gave this warning to the elders at Ephesus:

28 “Be on guard for yourselves and for 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 “I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; 30 and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.”

Of course this doesn’t mean that we should become paranoid and controlling or dogmatic on every detail of doctrine. But it does mean that every church in every culture in every generation needs to watch out for false teachers. Here at Faith we have at least a couple of doctrinal safeguards. First, our elders pay attention to doctrinal issues that arise. Second, as part of the Evangelical Free Church of America, we have a ten-point doctrinal statement that expresses what we understand the Bible to teach about core doctrines: God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, salvation through faith in Christ, the importance of obedience, the reality of heaven and hell.

We have these doctrinal safeguards, but like every church in every generation, we need to remain watchful for those who teach a different gospel and distance ourselves from them.

Personal Integrity: Be wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil. (Romans 16:19-21) As we’ll see, this is a way of describing obedience, a life that is compatible with the gospel we believe.

In verse 19 Paul first affirms the Romans, mentioning that they had a reputation in the body of Christ for being an obedient church.

19 For the report of your obedience has reached to all; therefore I am rejoicing over you, but I want you to be wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil.

Three times in Romans Paul mentions that his mission was to bring about “the obedience of faith among the Gentiles” (Romans 1:5, 15:18, 16:26). Remember that the commission Jesus gave the church included teaching disciples from every nation “to obey all that [He] commanded.” Not surprisingly Paul had great joy when he heard the report of the Romans’ obedience. He wrote, “therefore I am rejoicing over you.”

Then he quickly adds, “but I want you to be wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil.” Paul is talking about experiential knowledge when he talks about wisdom and

innocence here. When it comes to “what is good,” he wants them to be wise; he wants them to have practical, experiential knowledge about what is good. [Back in Romans 15:14 Paul wrote that he was convinced that they were already “full of goodness.”] Goodness is a general term that denotes “kindness and generosity toward others” (Moo, p. 888). If they were “wise in what is good,” they would be skillful in being kind and generous toward others by their thoughts, words, and actions.

They would have the capacity to dwell on what is good, to speak good words, and to do good works for the well-being of others. And if they were experts in what is good, they would notice and help correct what is bad in the body of Christ.

By contrast, Paul wanted them to “be innocent in what is evil.” When it came to their experiential knowledge of evil, he wanted them to be innocent. We should have knowledge of the types of thinking and behavior that are “evil.” Numerous passages in the Bible explain evil/ungodliness. Galatians 5, for example, gives a list of the “deeds of the flesh,” which are basically ways of behaving that are opposite of what God wants. We should be clear about what is good and what is evil. But when it comes to our experience as believers, we are to be innocent (as opposed to guilty).

Spiritually speaking, there is no advantage to having vast experience with all different types of knowledge. Think about Jesus. The fact that He was perfectly innocent in what is evil was no liability. His innocence allowed Him to be pure in heart and singleminded about His Father’s will. There is no advantage to having experiential knowledge of evil.

Occasionally I’ve heard people lament that they had such a “boring testimony”: they grew up in a believing family, came to faith in Christ early in life, and have basically been walking with God ever since. Sometimes such people are a bit jealous of those whose story is more like the prodigal son who lived a wild life and finally came to his senses, coming home to God. It’s true that those of you whose testimony involves coming back to God from a dark place have compelling stories to tell of God’s grace and mercy. Our of your firsthand experience you can assure people that nobody is too far gone; nobody is beyond God’s grace. But you would also tell them that your experience with evil has its downside. You might be plagued with regrets or with temptations from your old way of life. Even though God uses our past, there is no advantage to being experienced when it comes to evil.

This is especially true **after** we come to Christ. When we are “innocent in what is evil” we are “pure in heart” - our hearts aren’t polluted by things that distract us and distort our view of God. Jesus said, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” Consequently, we grow in the knowledge of God and we become “godly” and “Christ-like.”

Some of us would say that “being innocent in what is evil” isn’t a live option; the innocence train left the station a long time ago. We’ve thought too many sinful thoughts, we’ve said and done too many sinful things. Our innocence is long-gone. I would say with great confidence that a person with a guilty past (or present) can have an innocent future in Christ. In an interview, the major league pitcher Oral Hershiser said that his

goal going into every game was to pitch a perfect game (no hits, no walks,. The interviewer asked, "What happens when someone gets their first hit against you?" He said, "Then my goal is to pitch a one-hitter. History is history, but the future is perfect." This could be called "living in the future perfect tense."

In Christ we can have this same confidence/hope. We have the Spirit of God living in us: the same Spirit who hovered over the surface of the deep, the same Spirit who empowered the prophets of old, the same Spirit who descended upon Jesus at His baptism, the same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead, the same Spirit who empowered the early church to represent Jesus in Jerusalem and across the Roman Empire in the first century. That same Spirit indwells all who believe. By God's grace we can keep in step with the Spirit and learn to be innocent in what is evil.

When I do weddings, I often say that "the best thing you can do for your marriage is to walk with Christ." That's because genuinely walking with Christ, keeping in step with the Spirit, will progressively make you the type of person who can thrive in a relationship as intense as a marriage. I would say something very similar when it comes to the church: the best thing you can do for the unity and health of this church is to walk with Jesus.

I love how Paul concludes this paragraph in verse 20. After warning against false teachers and after challenging the church at Rome to be "wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil," he writes this:

20 The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.

Paul refers to God as "the God of peace" because His character and His actions in history exude a commitment to peace. The triune God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - have existed in perfect peace from eternity past; instead of strife and animosity, there has always been wholeness and integrity within the godhead. God sent Jesus (the "Prince of Peace" - Isaiah 8:6) to bring this same peace on earth. Through faith in Jesus we now have peace with God and peace with each other.

Here Paul lets the Romans know that God's commitment to peace will manifest itself by "soon" crushing Satan under their feet.

This is the confidence that a healthy, unified, gospel-believing, Christ-centered church has in this world. Paul alludes to Genesis 3:15 where God told the serpent that an offspring of the woman would "crush his head." This victory over Satan will ultimately happen at the very end of the age when all of God's enemies are finally defeated. But Paul seems to be saying that as they distance themselves from false teachers, become wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil, that they would experience freedom from the enemy of their souls in their day.