

Faith Pulpit

Are Separatists Divisive?

Are separatists divisive? The answer is “yes” when they are disobedient with reference to character. The answer is “no” with reference to content. What does this mean? Romans 16:17 explains this seeming contradiction. “Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them.”

As Paul concludes the letter he wrote to the church at Rome, he grabs our attention by a dramatic change of mood. For 14 verses (Romans 16:3–16), Paul has been greeting and commending faithful believers. Abruptly he becomes negative, switching from a list of examples to follow to an exposure of those who are to be avoided. Paul’s ministry experience would not allow him to conclude a doctrinal treatise without a warning concerning those who undermined the truth. Hence, the Spirit of God led him to describe the believer’s responsibility in dealing with theological perversion and truth trimming.

Context of Romans 16:17

Note the context of Romans 16:17. Since the verse introduces a new subject, one must survey the following verses to grasp the context. The verses reveal first of all that the people to be avoided are serving themselves. Their motive is identified as “serving . . . their own belly” (v. 18). The reference to appetite does not limit this idea to gluttony. C. E. B. Canfield captures the concept well: “Perhaps the most likely explanation is that ‘serve one’s own belly’ is here used to denote serving oneself, being the willing slave of one’s egotism, that walking according to the flesh and having one’s life determined by the flesh, to which 8. 4 and 5 refer.”¹ Not only are they serving themselves, but second, their method is deception; “by good words and fair speeches [they] deceive the hearts of the simple”(v. 18).

Those who spread error are in sharp contrast to the readers whose “obedience [had] come abroad to all men” (v. 19). Paul’s desire for his readers is that they concentrate on that which is good and keep their

distance from that which is evil. Obviously, Paul's priority for them is consistent exposure to truth. He concludes the context by referring to the source of evil and error-Satan (v. 20). It is ludicrous to give credence to error, since error is contrary to "the God of peace [Who] shall bruise Satan under your feet." In the context, Paul exposes the undesirable nature of error by revealing its repulsive nature on the human level (v. 18) and its ultimate anti-God source (v. 20).

Overview of Romans 16:17

Romans 16:17 introduces two aspects of error. The first aspect deals with character. A divisive spirit is described by the phrase "them which cause divisions and offenses." The other aspect refers to content, identified by the phrase "contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned." Hence, this article began with a yes/no answer. If separatists manifest a fleshly character (like that of the false teachers described in this verse), they will create division by driving people from the truth. However, if separatists separate or cause division to maintain doctrinal purity, they are not divisive. They are obedient. The one departing from the faith, in fact, causes the division.

Before these two aspects of error are discussed, it would be good to ask what Paul is seeking to accomplish by the verse. First, he is calling for discernment. Second, he is commending separation from doctrinal deviation. Paul commands his readers to mark those involved in error. The word mark literally means "to watch." The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament states, "The meaning is 'to look at' esp. 'to look at critically' as a judge does."² As James D. Dunn states, Paul "calls his readers to circumspect and responsible judgment."³ Paul wanted them to realize the necessity of discernment. Contrary to today's politically correct, tolerant evangelicalism, Paul demands that God's people refrain from believing "every spirit." Paul was concerned about theological accuracy and sought to inculcate the same concern in his readers. His desire needs to be intensified in the twenty-first century.

Divisions Caused by the Flesh

Paul had a heart for unity, but not at the expense of truth. His life promoted and protected truth. It must have been a great grief for him to witness those who were divisive in character. The subject became quite familiar to Paul. Eight of the seventeen words utilized to describe the "works of the flesh" in Galatians 5:19–21 refer to that which characterizes divisiveness. In fact, the Greek word for divisions in Romans 16:17 is the same word that is translated seditions in Galatians 5:20. Human nature loves conflict. It is the natural activity of an unsaved person but is entirely out of place for a believer. Thus, it should not be a part of the believer's daily life or attitude when he defends the faith.

When separatists are divisive in apologetics or polemics, people are driven from the truth. A divisive spirit is associated with offenses. The Greek word translated offences refers to that which harms. C. F. Hogg and W. E. Vine, in *The Epistle to the Galatians and the Epistles to the Thessalonians*, explain,

“In the N. T. skandalon is always used metaphorically, and ordinarily of anything that arouses prejudice, or becomes a hindrance to others, or causes them to fall by the way.”⁴ Hence, such an attitude must not be found in the lives of those who love the truth and want to eternally benefit others. Instead, separatists should “speak the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15) and “give an answer . . . with meekness and fear” (I Pet. 3:15) when defending the faith.

Divisions Caused by Obedience

When content, or doctrine, is at stake, believers must separate from the ones promoting “divisions contrary to the doctrine which [we] have learned” (Rom. 16:17). Bible truth is non-negotiable. It is not a buffet. Believers are not at liberty to pick and choose what to believe and teach. It is true that much truth is unpalatable to post-modern man, but the responsibility of God’s man is to give people what they need, not what they want. Many have succumbed to the temptation to trim truth in order to reach twenty-first century audiences. This practice is “contrary to the doctrine” that first-century believers had learned. The Lord Jesus commissioned Age of Grace preachers and churches to be “teaching [men] to observe all things” (Matt. 28:20). Paul said he was “pure from the blood of all men. For [he had] not shunned to declare unto [them] all the counsel of God [italics added].” Those who de-emphasize, question, neglect, or deny clear Bible teaching are the ones who cause divisions. Obedient Bible believers separate from these in obedience to Romans 16:17.

Lest separatist Baptists receive the impression that this view is unique to themselves, the following quotes reveal that those from other theological persuasions come to the same conclusions when they take this verse at face value. Alva J. McClain, of the Grace Brethren, comments:

“When you meet people who cause divisions and who become stumbling blocks (division has to do with arguments over doctrine; stumbling blocks consist of offenses to a Christian’s sensitivity), you are not to argue with them. You are to ‘mark them and avoid them,’ get as far away from them as possible.

“In these modern times we are told we must have unity above all else. The idea of being united has been exalted to the very skies, and very often at the price of truth and purity. In this verse, the apostle Paul does not talk about divisions and offences in the abstract sense, but they are “divisions contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned.” This is a very plain commandment that the Christian is never to surrender, even for the sake of unity, to any man or woman who brings some teaching contrary to the doctrine we have learned in this book. In other words, the truth is exalted above unity. If it is possible for us to have truth and unity, we will praise the Lord! But if it is impossible, hold to the truth!”⁵

Charles Hodge, a Presbyterian, states:

“It is the duty of Christians to be constantly watchful over the peace and purity of the church, and not to allow those who cause divisions and scandals, by departing from the true doctrines, to pursue their

course unnoticed. With all such we should break off every connection which either sanctions their opinions and conduct, or gives them facilities for effecting evil, ver. 17.”⁶

R. C. H. Lenski, the classic Lutheran commentator, admonishes:

“Note well that the apostolic doctrine never causes either inward or outward rents in the church, either division of mind or schism in communion and fellowship. How can it when it is ever one and the same? Being one, it unifies, holds in unity. When those who hold this doctrine firmly reject those who refuse to hold it or some part of it, they cause no division but prevent division by not giving room to those who do divide and disunite. They keep the unity in the Word intact against those who would invade and disrupt that unity . . . Paul’s injunction is not to keep away only from total rejectors of the gospel-what Christian ever needed such a warning? His injunction is to keep away from believers who are errorists and teach falsely.”⁷

No, separatists are not divisive when their separation is based on truth. They are following Paul’s directive to avoid the false teachers. Hodge states that “avoid them” means “to break off connection with them.”⁸ Cooperation with those who “cause divisions . . . contrary to the doctrine . . . learned” will confuse God’s people, produce a convictionless new generation of Christian leaders, and dishonor God and His Word.

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8. Hodge, 450.

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