

THE LETTER THAT CHANGED THE WORLD - The Biblical Theology of Romans - Part sixty-three - Sunday, November 22nd, 2020 - 6:30 p.m.
Pastor Don Horban - Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

WHY GENUINE SPIRITUAL UNITY MUST ALWAYS BE TRUTH-BASED

Romans 16:17-20 - "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."

There is a reason this passage of Scripture is so vital to a proper understanding of Paul's mind and heart. And if you didn't study the **whole** book of Romans - or if you left these four verses out - you would probably come to a wrong understanding of other extended portions of the letter.

I'm thinking especially of chapters 14 and 15. We spent a good number of weeks digging deeply in Paul's instructions to both the strong and the weak Christians at Rome. The weak were those who still carried their Jewish heritage and regulations under the law. The strong were those who, because they had never been **raised** in these strictures, didn't feel any obligation to keep them as followers of Christ Jesus.

Paul takes two chapters to help each group learn to relate properly to the other. The weak aren't to **judge** the strong on the basis of their own Jewish heritage. And the strong aren't to **despise** the weak, scoffing at their prudish legalism. And, perhaps above all, the strong are **never - not ever** - to do anything in **word** or **example** that might lead their weaker brothers and sisters to act against the edge of their conscience.

And now I return to what I said earlier. Without Paul's strong words in **Romans 16:17-20** one might easily conclude that Paul placed **unity** above **holiness**. A careless reader might think that Paul was telling these Christians at Rome that they should just **"live and let live"** in matters of lifestyle. After all, none of us knows **all** the truth. And who has a corner on absolutes, anyway?

So we see again the ever present danger of taking isolated texts and building a whole theology around them. When the whole picture of Romans is taken and sewn together we can see that what Paul means is there are **some** issues that are **non-essential** issues. The Bible doesn't place major emphasis on

them. And on non-essentials, unity and motive of heart are to rule the day. Because there were no vital **doctrinal issues** at stake in Romans 14 and 15, the **conscience** of the weaker brother is the primary concern.

And it's the primary concern, not because the issues are so huge, but because the strong in faith can **train the weak to act against conscience**. And if that training takes place in these non-essential matters, the weaker brother may actually **get used** to acting against his or her conscience and continue to do so in some **vital, holiness issue** later on. That's Paul's main concern in those two chapters.

In today's text we sense a very different tone from Paul. There is far more **edge** in his words: **"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"(16:17).**

And we notice immediately there is nothing at all of **"live and let live"** in those words. Those are **"watch out for trouble-makers"** words. In fact, those very words - **"watch out"** - are right in the text (17). Paul is saying, **"It's spiritually wrong to be indifferent about contrary doctrine. I'm commanding alertness. Don't let personal feelings and sentiment keep you from "watching out" for, and "avoiding," those who want to take you in a different doctrinal direction than you received from me!"**

Now to the issue. To increasing numbers of evangelicals those words, however Biblical, don't sound proper and polite anymore. Our tolerant, postmodern age has made even those Biblical injunctions sound out-to-lunch and somewhat bigoted. We're almost embarrassed by them, just a little bit. And because these words are so **counter-intuitive** to our whole cultural mind-set, I think we need to study them very carefully today:

1) **KNOW WHEN TRUTH IS BEING MOLESTED**

Romans 16:17a - "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...."

I suppose it's best to start with what is most obvious. Paul says there is such a thing as a knowable body of truth which people can go against. If people can say things **contrary** to the

doctrine, then Paul must assume everyone can **know** what that doctrine is. You can't ask people to spot things **contrary** to a doctrine they can't recognize anyway.

So there is a knowable, observable body of doctrinal truth. Paul actually refers to this fact quite a few times in his writings: **Romans 6:17** - "But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed...." So there is a **standard** of teaching or doctrine. By that he means there is a way of **measuring** the truthfulness of central doctrinal claims. That's what a standard is for.

Or, look at **2 Timothy 1:13-14** - "Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. [14] By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you." So there are words that are **sound**, as opposed to **unsound**. And this truth is recognizable enough that we can "**guard**" from error and distortion. We also see that doctrinal truth is **precious**, because Paul tells Timothy it's worth defending against error.

Or consider Paul's words in **Acts 20:26-30** - "....Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you, [27] for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. [28] Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. [29] I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; [30] and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them."

We see several of the same ideas repeated here. Paul declared truth so definable that he could **know** when he had declared it. Now, Paul certainly didn't know **everything** there was to know about God. No one does. But he knew the content of the **counsel of God** and could be certain when he had left nothing out. That's a knowable message.

Then, Paul tells the leadership of the church at Ephesus that people will come who will speak "**twisted things**"(30). Again, people can know the truth well enough that they can tell when it is being "**twisted.**" They can protect themselves **best** by knowing, not just **each other in love**, but

the ***counsel of God in truth.***

Don't miss the idea carried along in this text. You ***"guard the flock"*** by teaching the ***"whole counsel of God."*** That, says Paul, is the best way to ***protect people.*** In other words, a love for truth and a love for people aren't opposites. In fact, you ***don't*** love people unless you contend for sound doctrinal truth. That's going to be our next point.

For now, just remember the simple idea that there is a ***knowable body of truth.*** And the church must know it well enough to know when it's being tampered with.

2) **YOU NEVER CREATE UNITY IN CHRIST BY IGNORING TRUTH**

Romans 16:17-18 - ***"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 myth of doctrinal pluralism thrives under the false assumption that as long as there are no truths to which everyone must give assent, people will live in unity. If no one claims any truth as absolute, no one else ever has to feel compelled to believe the same thing. And, because no one ever feels the threat to change his or her beliefs, we can all live together in peace.

But it doesn't work like that in actual practice. Imagine a class room - say a grade eleven class room. Picture a teacher preening over her open-mindedness, saying to her class, "Don't ever be afraid to speak your views in this class. There are no wrong views. No one is claiming absolute knowledge. Your views are just as valid as anyone else's."

Now most people would admire her approach. Nothing grabs the heart-strings of the postmodern more than the relativizing of truth claims in the name of tolerance. But then imagine our scene as it continues:

Imagine a young student putting up her hand. She's troubled about something and it shows on her face. The teacher calls on her to speak and she surprises everyone in the room: ***"I see that you're anxious to have broad participation in the class. And I see you're trying to***

encourage it by saying no one has the absolute truth and everyone's views are equal. But if that's really the case, I think I'm going quit this class to play tennis. If we've already established that nobody has the absolute truth, then, while we all might want to share, why should I listen to anybody? If we already know no one's views carry absolute, knowable truth, truth that may correct my errors, why should anyone listen to anyone else?"

Now what I am desperate to have everybody see in our text today is the difference of the Biblical approach to truth and unity. Paul doesn't try to create unity by **denying** absolute, knowable truth. He seeks to build unity by **establishing** absolute, knowable truth.

And you can see the key role doctrinal truth plays in uniting Christians by the striking way he words his plea, especially in **verse 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."**

Notice how Paul seems to put two things together that don't belong together. He's pleading for the church to **guard unity**. We know that because he tells the church to look out for people who **"cause divisions"**(17). And then, quite shockingly, he tells the church what to do when they spot such people in their ranks. They're to **"avoid them"**(17). So what Paul tells them is they are to spot people who are **causing separation** in the church and they are to **separate** from them. They're to **stop** division by **dividing**.

And I can't think of a clearer way for Paul to tell us how important **doctrinal truth** is to **unity**. It's only because **doctrinal truth** is the basis for **unity** that Paul says truth actually **trumps** unity that isn't based on truth. In other words, when someone departs from the teaching of the Apostles, Paul sees that as a greater threat to genuine unity than separating from false teachers and teachings.

This is significant. Paul **could** have said that nobody has all the truth anyway. He could have said there are so many things we **don't** know. He could have said they were to love each other and just **embrace mystery** together. But he doesn't go anywhere **near** any of those options. For the sake of genuine, Christian, truth-based unity, separate from those who depart from Apostolic

teaching.

And now we need to wrap this up by examining why this plea for truth-based unity is so hard to follow:

3) **PLACING BIBLICAL TRUTH OVER OUTWARD UNITY IS NEVER A POPULAR CHOICE**

The reason for this is given in our text, though it's easy to overlook:

Romans 16:18-20 - "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."

At least initially, false teachers always lighten the load and broaden the borders. Paul says they use "***smooth talk***"(18) and "***flattery***"(18). And what that means is they gear their words to affect quick popularity. And what ***that*** means is it will never be popular to ***oppose*** them or their teaching. "***Naive***" people (18) will always be won over by the ***tolerance*** arguments and the ***unity*** arguments. False teachers win followers, not with clubs and knives, but by ***seduction***.

This is why Paul stressed that, especially in the last days, it would be open-season on truth in the church of Jesus Christ - **2 Timothy 4:1-4** - "I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: [2] preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. [3] For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, [4] and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths."

It's very easy to miss the actual message of those verses. Paul's point ***isn't*** that people won't want to hear teaching in their churches in the last days. It's that they won't want to hear ***myths challenged and exposed in the last days***. It's not that they won't want to hear ***anything***. It's

that they will think they have latched on to something **better**, more **contemporary**, surely more **relevant** than **“sound”** teaching (3). That’s why Paul has to encourage Timothy. He’s trying to **reinforce** him with the kind of courage and patience and strength he knows it’s going to take to do what Paul tells the Christians in Rome to do - **separate from false teaching**.

This is the reason for Paul’s comments about God crushing Satan in **verses 19-20** - **“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.”**

The battle with Satan. Where and when is it fought? When is it won? I’m sure there are many manifestations of this warfare in this age, but Paul is calling this church to awareness of one particular aspect of the struggle with Satan they might be prone to overlook. You fight the Devil when you stand for truth. God crushes Satan when you separate from false teachers and teaching.

Strangely, Paul emphasizes the coming of the **“God of peace”(20)** when they **divide from false doctrine**. Just when we might be tempted to think otherwise - that it might be more loving and peaceable to **ignore** all the differences and do a group hug - Paul actually says the church can cherish truth with such passion that it shames the Devil, purifies the church, and brings the God who is pleased with unity formed around truth to **“crush Satan” under their feet!**

And any church that’s in the business of helping crush Satan is one I want to belong to!