

"PAUL'S WARNINGS" (Romans 16:17-20)

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Paul begins his exhortation with the same words which he has used to introduce an earlier one: *I urge you brothers* (17, cf. 12:1). He issues a threefold appeal - to vigilance, to separation and to discernment.

First, Paul pleads for vigilance; *watch out for those who caused divisions and put obstacles in your way*, hindering your progress, that are (both of them) *contrary to the teachings you have learned* (17). Of course some divisions are inevitable, like those caused by loyalty to Christ (see Mt. 10:34ff.), and so are some obstacles, especially the stumbling-block of the cross (Rom. 9:32, 1 Cor. 1:23). Paul urges the Romans to look out for those who cause them because they contradict the teaching of the apostles. He takes it for granted, even this early in the church's history, that, there is a doctrinal and ethical norm which the Romans must follow, not contradict; it is preserved for us in the New Testament.

Secondly, Paul calls for separation from those who deliberately depart from the apostolic faith. *Keep away from them*, he writes. There's no question of approaching them with a holy kiss, but rather a standing aloof, and even turning away. Why is this? What is the essence of their deviation? Paul tells us. *For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites* (18a), literally "*their own belly*" (AV). This is very unlikely to be an allusion to the controversy over the Jewish food laws. It is rather a graphic metaphor of self indulgence (as in Phil. 3:19, "*their god is their stomach*"). The expression is used in the sense of serving oneself, of being the willing slave of one's egotism. These false teachers have no love for Christ, and no wish to be his willing slaves. Instead, they are "*utterly self-centered*" (JBP), and also have a baneful affect on the gullible. By smooth talking flattery they deceive the minds of naïve people (18b). Better, "*they seduce the minds of simple people with smooth and spacious words*" (REB).

Thirdly, Paul urges the Romans to grow in discernment. On the whole he is very pleased with them. Everyone has heard about your obedience he says, "*so I am full of joy over you*" (19a). Nevertheless, there are two kinds of obedience, blind and discerning, and he longs for them to develop the latter: *but I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil* (19b). To be wise in regard to good is to recognize it, love it and follow it. With regard to evil, however, he wants them to be unsophisticated, even guileless, so completely should they shy away from any experience of it. J. B. Phillips captures the contrast well: "*I want to see you experts in good and not even beginners in evil.*"

Here then are three "valuable tests to



apply to different systems of doctrine and ethics—biblical, Christological and moral tests. We could put them in the form of questions about any kind of teaching we come across. Does it agree with Scripture? Does it glorify the Lord Christ? Does it promote goodness?

In verse 20 Paul adds an assurance to his warning. He has written about good and evil; he wants the Roman Christians to know that there is no doubt about the ultimate outcome, the triumph of good over evil. He detects the strategy of Satan behind the activity of the false teachers, and he is confident that the devil is going to be overthrown. *The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet* (20a). That is, God "will throw him under your feet, that you may trample upon him". He has already been decisively defeated; but he has not yet considered his defeat.

It may seem strange that in this context Paul refers to the God of peace (as in 15:33), since enjoying peace and crushing Satan do not sound all together compatible with each other. But God's peace allows no appeasement of the devil. It is only through the destruction of evil the true peace can be attained.

Probably there is an allusion to Genesis 3:15, where God promised that the seed of the woman (namely the Christ) would crush the serpents head. But there is surely a further reference to the man, male and female, and God created and to whom he gave dominion. As the Psalms put it, God has "*put everything under his feet*" (Ps. 8:6). So far this has been fulfilled only in Christ, since God has put all things under his feet (Eph. 1:22; cf. Heb. 2:8ff.). Yet still his explanation is incomplete, for, while he reigns, he also waits for his enemies to be made his footstool (Ps. 110:1 and its many New Testament applications to Christ). That this will happen "soon" is not necessarily a time reference, but space between the ascension and the *parousia*. The *parousia* is the next event on his calendar. Meanwhile, the Romans should expect regular interim victories over Satan, partial crushings of him under their feet.

Such victories would be impossible, however, apart from grace. So Paul adds: "The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you" (20b).