

"THE IMPORTANCE OF ORTHODOXY"

(Romans 16:17-20)

(Frank Theilman)

The first part of the passage (16:17-20) focuses on remaining unified around the body of teaching that all Christians have learned. It begins with a warning against a form of false teaching that creates division and hinders progress in the faith by insisting that some new form of the faith is better than the ancient form (v. 17). When Paul speaks of "the teaching that you learned," he implies that both he and the Roman Christians, many of whom he had never met, agreed on what the gospel was and that the teaching they had received and believed was the teaching that all Christians follow.

This teaching had made its way across the Mediterranean Sea to Rome, and not only had the Roman Christians become famous for embracing it (1:8; 6:17; cf. 16:19), but Paul was confident that they could encourage one another (15:14), and himself also (1:12), to remain committed to this faith. Clearly Paul thought that the gospel he had just outlined at length in the letter, and the ethical principles he had articulated on the basis of it, were not merely his ideas about the gospel and its implications but a widely accepted understanding of what all Christians should believe. They were a summary of the Christian faith.

Articulating the content of the gospel in the way he had just done did not divide Christians from one another but brought them together. As Paul would say a few years later, in a letter written from Rome, "Christ himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility" (Eph 2:14). The gospel, with its message of God's reconciling grace, pulls people together instead of dividing them from one another.

In contrast, the false teachers that Paul warns against in 16:17 divided Christians from one another. The divisive tendency of their false teaching stemmed from their advocacy of some new form of the faith that hindered a Christian community's progress in the commonly held, traditional form of Christian belief. They were not outsiders expressing an interest in the Christian faith and asking sincere questions, nor were they fringe members of the traditional group who were expressing real doubts and occasionally registering dissenting opinions. Paul's welcoming approach to outsiders and the weak in faith is clearly visible elsewhere in his correspondence (Rom 14:1; 1 Cor 14:16-17, 23-25). Rather, these false teachers were disingenuous people with sophisticated rhetorical and analytical skills, who were using those abilities to serve their own greedy impulses—"their own belly"—as Paul memorably puts it (16:18). They must have been people with talent and experience in leading social groups. They were people who had enough power and influence to lure large numbers of Christians away from the gospel. In short, the false teachers of 16:17-20 were divisive, novel, self-serving, and persuasive.

Warnings against false teachers in the church with these four traits are not uncommon in the New Testament. The apostle John wrote three letters to Christian assemblies within his own sphere of responsibility in the wake of the kind of disruption that Paul was trying to avoid at Rome. A heretical group had broken fellowship with the main, orthodox group (1 John 2:19) because they were advocating some new "progressive" form of the gospel that had abandoned the apostolic witness to Jesus's life and teaching (2 John 9; cf. 1 John 1:1-5). They had apparently also left behind certain Christian ethical principles (1 John



3:4-10), including such basics as offering practical assistance to the poor (3:17), and they were making headway in their efforts to convince the larger group they had left, and to whom John was writing, that their knowledge of the truth was defective (2:20-21). The same pattern reappears in Jude and 2 Peter where apostles warn against rhetorically persuasive and immoral false teachers who have left "the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3-4, 16; cf. 2 Pet 1:16; 2:1-3).

The church needs to heed this apostolic warning. People who fit secular notions of leadership ability and possess impressive rhetorical skill should not be quickly ushered into leadership positions in the church simply because they seem to be effective in attracting a following and getting things done. Rather than smoothing the way for such people, the church should examine them even more carefully than others before giving them responsibilities in the church. If they have a history of fomenting division, especially if their divisiveness is fueled by novel teaching and talking more about themselves and their ideas than practicing humble service to Christ, then they clearly fall within the boundaries of Paul's warning in this passage no matter how much their language is tinged with "fine speech and blessing."

It was probably not Paul's intention to set up a contrast when he followed his warning against false teachers with a paragraph of greetings from his associates. The eight people that appear in the letters next paragraph (16:21-23), however, provide helpful examples of good church leaders. Paul's "coworker" Timothy was indispensable to the apostle because, as Paul describes him to believers in Philippi, he was genuinely concerned with the welfare of other believers and served with Paul as a "kindred spirit" (ἰσόψυχον) in the cause of the gospel (Phil 2:19-22 NASB). Little is known about Paul's fellow Jews Lucius, Jason, and Sosipater, but here too, if they were delegates from Paul's mainly gentile churches traveling with Paul on the risky famine relief mission to Jerusalem, they were certainly people more interested in service than in self-aggrandizement. Tertius worked hard with Paul because of his commitment to "the Lord" when he took down this long letter at the apostles dictation. Gaius had shown Paul and other believers hospitality. We can say nothing specific about the work of Erastus and Quartus, but it is unlikely that their names would be found in the same paragraph with Timothy, Tertius, and Gaius if they had not helped Paul to advance the gospel in some practical way.

This group of eight coworkers and friends of the apostle illustrates the humble way believers should work together as "one body in Christ ... each one members of one another" (12:5). In Ephesians, Paul explains that when the church works together in this way, with each part of the body playing its God-given role, the church grows in maturity and is not fooled by the kind of trickery that false teachers use on spiritually immature and gullible followers, "tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine" (Eph. 4:11-14). Instead, "speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love" (Eph 4:15-16). A helpful antidote to the kind of false teaching that Paul describes in 16:17-20, therefore, is the kind of teamwork that Paul and the eight people in 16:21-23 seem to have demonstrated in Corinth.

Romans 16:17-23, then, provides both a warning and a positive example that will help those involved in selecting leaders for the church do so with discernment. John Stott usefully summarizes 16:17-20 as implying three tests, biblical, Christological and moral, "for any system of doctrine or ethics, and we can apply the same tests to people who seek to help lead the church. Does this person affirm the apostolic witness to the Christian faith found in the Scriptures? Is this person interested in serving Christ more than self? Does this person promote what is good? Based on what Paul says about divisiveness in 16:17, we can also add a fourth question: Does this person seek the unity and peace of the church?"