

Romans 16:17,18 and Its Application to Individual Fellowship

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[This essay, requested by the Wisillowa Conference of the Western Wisconsin District, was assigned by the Seminary faculty to Professor Gawrisch and was read to the conference assembled at Platteville, Wisconsin, on April 21, 1980.]

In September 1945 a “Statement” was issued by 44 pastors and professors of the Missouri Synod that proved to be of historic significance. Among the signers were five professors of Concordia Seminary at St. Louis and at least a dozen other prominent and influential leaders in the synod. The “Statement” was significant because it marked a radical departure from traditional Missouri and Synodical Conference theology.

Of particular interest to us at the moment is paragraph five. It reads:

We affirm our conviction that sound exegetical procedure is the basis for sound Lutheran theology.

- We therefore deplore the fact that Romans 16:17,18 has been applied to all Christians who differ from us in certain points of doctrine. It is our conviction, based on sound exegetical and hermeneutical principles, that this text does not apply to the present situation in the Lutheran Church of America.
- We furthermore deplore the misuse of First Thessalonians 5:22 in the translation “avoid every appearance of evil.” This text should be used only in its true meaning, “avoid evil in every form.”¹

This was an open assault on the “Brief Statement” adopted by the Missouri Synod in 1932. Paragraph 28 of the “Brief Statement” is entitled “Church-Fellowship.” Twice this short paragraph cites Romans 16:17. It states:

Since God ordained that His Word *only*, without the admixture of human doctrine, be taught and believed in the Christian Church, 1 Pet. 4:11; John 8:31,32; 1 Tim. 6:3,4, all Christians are required by God to discriminate between orthodox and heterodox church-bodies, and, in case they have strayed into heterodox church-bodies, to leave them, Rom. 16:17. We repudiate *unionism*, that is, church-fellowship with the adherents of false doctrine, as disobedience to God’s command, as causing divisions in the Church, Rom. 16:17; 2 John 9,10, and as involving the constant danger of losing the Word of God entirely, 2 Tim. 2:17–21.²

To demonstrate how diametrically opposed the fellowship doctrine espoused by the “Statement of the Forty-Four” is to that of the “Brief Statement” we quote several additional paragraphs from the “Statement of the Forty-Four”:

Six

We affirm the historic Lutheran position concerning the central importance of the *una sancta* and the local congregation. We believe that there should be a re-emphasis of the privileges and responsibilities of the local congregation also in the matter of determining questions of fellowship.

¹ *American Lutheran*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 11 (November 1945), p 4.

² *Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod* (St. Louis: Concordia, no date), p 13.

- We therefore deplore the new and improper emphasis on the synodical organization as basic in our consideration of the problems of the Church. We believe that no organizational loyalty can take the place of loyalty to Christ and His Church.

Eight

We affirm our convictions that any two or more Christians may pray together to the Triune God in the name of Jesus Christ if the purpose for which they meet and pray is right according to the Word of God. This obviously includes meetings of groups called for the purpose of discussing doctrinal differences.

- We therefore deplore the tendency to decide the question of prayer fellowship on any other basis beyond the clear words of Scripture.

Nine

We believe that the term “unionism” should be applied only to acts in which a clear and unmistakable denial of Scriptural truth or approval of error is involved.

- We therefore deplore the tendency to apply this non-Biblical term to any and every contact between Christians of different denominations.

Eleven

We affirm our conviction that in keeping with the historic Lutheran tradition and in harmony with the Synodical resolution adopted in 1938 regarding Church Fellowship, such fellowship is possible without complete agreement in details of doctrine and practice which have never been considered divisive in the Lutheran Church.³

Several points are rather obvious as one reads these paragraphs. The emphasis on the importance of the *una sancta*, the Communion of Saints, was intended to open the door to fellowship across confessional lines. The stress on the privileges and responsibilities of the local congregation in determining questions of fellowship was intended to shield those who did not conform to synodical fellowship policies and practices from synodical discipline. The thrust of the entire document was the contention that complete agreement in doctrine and practice is not necessary for church fellowship, and certainly not for prayer fellowship.

The appearance of the “Statement of the Forty-Four” came as a shock because of the openness with which it repudiated and attacked the doctrine of fellowship previously taught in the Missouri Synod and the Synodical Conference. Until then such ideas had been held or expressed in certain circles more or less privately.

When Missouri in 1938 took its first halting steps toward establishing fellowship with the American Lutheran Church, it still maintained that full agreement in doctrine and practice was a prerequisite for church fellowship. And even in 1944 when the Missouri Synod adopted a resolution that tried to distinguish between prayer fellowship and joint prayer, the reason for trying to make such a distinction was the assumption that prayer fellowship could be practiced only between those who were fully agreed. Joint prayer, on the other hand, was supposedly possible between those working toward such agreement.

Through the years Missouri’s official position on the doctrine of fellowship progressively deteriorated, and it was disagreement on this doctrine that led our Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod to suspend relations with Missouri in 1961 and to withdraw from the Synodical Conference two years later.

We mention these historical developments because it is impossible to divorce the subject of the fellowship of individuals from the broader topic of the fellowship of church bodies. If I were to practice fellowship with members of other church bodies without taking into account my relationship to my brothers and sisters in my own church body, I would be guilty of a gross violation of brotherly love and of good order (1 Cor 16:14; 14:40). I owe it to my fellow Christians in my synod to practice fellowship in conformity with the principles we as a synod have recognized as scriptural, or to convince them that our fellowship principles are unscriptural. If I fail to convince them, honesty requires that I withdraw from the synod. If, on the other hand, I

³ *Op. cit.*

do not withdraw, and if the synod fails to convince me that my position is unscriptural, then the synod ought to suspend me from fellowship.

In our day a correct understanding of the scriptural doctrine of fellowship is a rarity. Apart from the church bodies with which our Synod is in fellowship, I cannot think of a single Christian church that teaches and practices according to Scripture on this point. The Church of Rome, which was formerly adamant about not practicing pulpit or altar or prayer fellowship with anyone who did not subscribe to its doctrines, has since Vatican II opened the floodgates to joint worship and work with those whom Pope John XXIII called “separated brethren.” In Protestant denominations, including the majority of Lutheran bodies in the world, the winds of ecumenism have swept away all conception of what sound, scriptural fellowship practice is.

Even in those fundamentalistic groups that hold to a so-called “high view” of Scripture, that is, who uphold and defend the verbal inspiration, inerrancy, and authority of the Scriptures, one finds no clear understanding of what the Bible teaches about fellowship. And so, by their willingness to extend the hand of fellowship to those who disagree with them on what they consider non-fundamental doctrines, they are in reality calling into question the clarity and authority of the Scriptures. This illustrates the point that the doctrine of Scripture and the doctrine of fellowship are interrelated. Uncertainty in the one doctrine inevitably undermines the other doctrine.

Definition of Terms

At this point it will be well for us to define our terms. What do we mean when we speak about church fellowship? The expression is used in two ways. We say that our Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod is in fellowship with the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS). This means that we recognize one another as brothers in the faith. We recognize that we are in confessional agreement, and we are ready to give expression to this unity of faith by worshiping together and working together in the kingdom of God. When used in this sense, church fellowship refers to the relationship that exists between our two church bodies.

We may give expression to this unity of faith in various ways. We may mutually acknowledge one another as fellow Christians. In Galatians 2:9 Paul writes: “James, Peter, and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me.”⁴ The apostles in Jerusalem recognized Paul and Barnabas as brothers in the faith.

We may invite pastors of the ELS to preach in our pulpits. Then we are practicing pulpit fellowship. We may invite members of the ELS to commune at our altars. Then we are engaging in altar fellowship. We may join with them in prayer. We speak of this as prayer fellowship. We may hold joint Reformation services together with them, invite congregations of the ELS to join our area Lutheran high school associations, ask them to cooperate with us in training our pastors in the Bethany Program, jointly carry on work in missions or charity. A comprehensive term which includes all the various ways we have of demonstrating and expressing our oneness in faith is “church fellowship.”

The Role of Confession in the Practice of Fellowship

If one were to ask: How do we know that the ELS is one with us in faith?—the answer is obviously: On the basis of their confession. We cannot look into their hearts, and they cannot look into ours. We can judge one another only by what we say and do. In Romans 10:10 Paul writes: “It is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.” Jesus warns us against false prophets and tells us: “By their fruit you will recognize them” (Mt 7:16), that is, by what they teach. In his First Epistle the Apostle John bids us: “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (4:1). We are to test them by what they say. We are to judge them by their confession.

⁴ Quotations from the Bible are throughout from the NIV unless otherwise indicated.

This does not mean, of course, that only those whose confession is one hundred per cent in agreement with ours are Christians. We know that the gospel is a means of grace. It is “the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Rom 1:16). Wherever it is preached, it brings sinners to faith in Christ Jesus; and all who believe in him as their Savior from sin are God’s children and members of his family. Galatians 3:26,27 tells us: “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ.” Faith in Christ Jesus unites us with our heavenly Father and with every other believer in a close, spiritual fellowship. This is the fellowship John is speaking about when he writes: “We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ” (1 Jn 1:3). A few verses further on John adds: “If we walk in the light, as he (Christ) is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from every sin” (1 Jn 1:7).

This spiritual fellowship of all believers in Christ in the *una sancta*, the Communion of Saints, is a reality. Differences in race, in language, in sex, in age, in social position, or in other physical or earthly characteristics do not disrupt it. In Galatians 3:28 Paul writes: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Regardless of outward differences, all who believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior are members of his spiritual body (1 Cor 12). They recognize him as their head. They are living stones in the spiritual temple of his church, which is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone,” and which is “a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (Eph 2:20,22). They have “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Eph 4:5). What a glorious, blessed, and precious unity this is!

Nevertheless, even though this unity of all believers in the body of Christ is a wonderful reality, it is not visible to human eyes. Faith is a matter of the heart. Man can judge only on the basis of outward appearances. God alone can look into the heart (1 Sm 16:7). Only “the Lord knows those who are his” (2 Tm 2:19). If a person tells us he believes in Jesus and puts his trust in him for his salvation, love requires that we take him at his word, unless his manner of life contradicts what he says. Actions speak louder than words. If a man claims to be a Christian but lives in open sin, it is obvious that his claim is false. “A good tree cannot bear bad fruit” (Mt 7:18). On the other hand, the Bible also tells us that there will be hypocrites in the church. Their confession and life mask the unbelief that is in their heart. We do not know who they are, and so we are not to concern ourselves about them unless their unbelief becomes manifest. The Lord will be their judge.

A wicked life is evidence of unbelief. False doctrine may also be evidence that a person is not a Christian. No one can deny that Jesus is the Son of God and be saved. It is possible, however, that a person who trusts in Jesus for his salvation either does not know or because of a lack of understanding denies a non-fundamental doctrine such as the Bible teaching that the pope is the Antichrist. His error may even involve a secondary fundamental article such as the saving power of baptism. Such ignorance or weakness does not necessarily destroy saving faith. There are many children of God in false-teaching churches, but they do not realize that theirs is a false-teaching church.

While saving faith may coexist with erroneous views regarding certain teachings of the Bible, false doctrine is like poison. It may be fatal to saving faith. For that reason Jesus earnestly warns: “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves” (Mt 7:15). Jesus gives us this warning for our own good. We are to steer clear of false teachers just as we would keep our hand out of the cage of a snarling, vicious wolf. Failure to heed Jesus’ warning can lead to spiritual death.

Equally earnest are John’s words: “Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully. Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work” (2 Jn 7–11).

John is not talking, of course, about social courtesy. He is not urging us to be uncivil or rude. John is speaking about religious fellowship. In no way are we to give the impression that we approve of the teaching of

a person who “does not continue in the teaching of Christ.” In no way are we to support, encourage, or assist him in spreading his errors. If a pair of Mormon missionaries comes to our town, we will not invite them to make our home their headquarters. We will not offer them room and board while they canvass the town. To give them aid and comfort is to become an accessory to their sin.

An Exegesis of Romans 16:17,18

It is not necessary for our understanding of this passage to review the entire epistle in detail. Suffice it to say that Paul presents the theme of the epistle in chapter 1:16,17: “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The just shall live by faith.’”

This theme gives Paul the opportunity to enter into the most detailed and most profound explanation of the way to salvation that we have in the Scriptures. He shows first of all that all, both Jew and Gentile, “have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (3:23). But the same all “are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (3:24). The way to salvation then is not by observing the law, but, Paul insists, “we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law” (3:28).

Luther correctly recognized that the chief topic of the Epistle to the Romans is “the righteousness of God.” In his comments on the very first verse Luther says: “The whole purpose and intention of the apostle in this epistle is to break down all righteousness and wisdom of our own...and thus to show that...Christ and his righteousness are needed for us.”⁵ He points out that Paul does this up to chapter 12, and that from there to the end Paul teaches how we ought to live once this righteousness of Christ has been received. The first part of the letter is therefore doctrinal, the second part evangelical admonition.

In his deservedly famous Preface to the Epistle Luther calls it “the chief part of the New Testament” and “the purest gospel.”⁶ He says that “it is worthy not only that every Christian should know it word for word, by heart, but also that he should occupy himself with it every day, as the daily bread of the soul.”⁷ Luther considers this Epistle so important because, as he says, “it appears that he (Paul) wanted in this one epistle to sum up briefly the whole Christian and evangelical doctrine.”⁸

We mention this because in the passage we are considering Paul refers to the doctrine the Romans have learned. It is significant that in his Preface Luther also takes note of the warning in Romans 16:17. He writes: “The last chapter is a chapter of greetings. But he [Paul] mingles with them a noble warning against the doctrines of men, which break in alongside the teaching of the gospel and cause offense. It is as if he had certainly foreseen that out of Rome and through the Romans would come the seductive and offensive canons and decretals and the whole squirming mass of human laws and commandments, which have now drowned the whole world and wiped out this epistle and all the Holy Scriptures, along with the Spirit and faith itself; so that nothing remains anymore except the idol, Belly, whose servants St. Paul here rebukes. God save us from them. Amen.”⁹

It has been argued that Paul’s admonition to avoid false teachers is a kind of afterthought, an unexpected and abrupt interjection into the close of the epistle without any logical connection with what precedes or follows. A glance at the chapter as it is printed in the NIV will quickly dispel this misconception. The warning against fellowship with errorists fits very logically into a context in which Paul glories in the joys and blessings of fellowship with like-minded brothers and sisters in Christ.

The first 16 verses of the chapter consist of personal greetings. Paul begins by commending to the Christians in Rome Phoebe, a deaconess of the church in Cenchrea. Then he greets 24 individuals by name,

⁵ *Luther’s Works* (St. Louis, Philadelphia: Concordia, Fortress, 1955-), 25:3.

⁶ LW 35:365.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ LW 35:380.

⁹ *Ibid.*

both men and women. He also sends greetings to two unnamed women who are identified by their relationship to individuals named, as well as to five groups of Christians who lived in Rome. All these were fellow believers. Some were personal friends and some possibly even relatives of Paul. Some had labored and suffered with him, but all were highly esteemed and dear to the apostle.

Most earnestly, therefore, Paul warns: “I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them” (v. 17).

Note that Paul addresses them as brothers. He does this to underscore once again the thought of unity, fellowship, and brotherhood that runs through this chapter. It is Paul’s earnest concern for their souls that prompts him to warn and plead with them as he does.

The verb παρακαλῶ, which means, literally, to call to one’s side, has various shades of meaning, depending on the context. Very often it means to encourage or comfort. We remember that Jesus calls the Holy Spirit ὁ παράκλητος, the Comforter or Counselor (e.g., Jn 14:16). John describes Jesus himself as our παράκλητος in 1 John 2:1. Frequently the verb means appeal to, urge, exhort, entreat, beg or implore. That is the sense in our passage. There is a note of urgency and of loving concern in Paul’s words as he seeks to impress on the hearts and minds of the Romans the seriousness of what he is about to say.

The particle δέ is a simple connective. It does not suggest a strong contrast to what Paul has just said as the word ἀλλά would. We might translate it with “now,” as the KJV and Phillips do. The English word “now,” like the Greek δέ, often serves simply to tie thoughts together without any connotation of present time. It is a linking word that keeps our speech from having a broken, staccato effect.

The present infinitive σκοπεῖν is dependent on the main verb παρακαλῶ. The KJV translation “mark” has led to the widespread misconception that σκοπέω means to brand, label or designate, and the conclusion has been drawn that the moment someone has been stamped an errorist, he is to be avoided. Actually, the word σκοπεῖν comes from a familiar Greek root σκε/οπ that has to do with seeing. The noun σκοπός means a watchman, sentry, guard. So the verb σκοπεῖν means “to be on the lookout for.” It suggests the picture of a sentinel standing guard on a city wall, shielding his eyes and carefully scanning the horizon for any sign of approaching danger. Paul is urging the Roman Christians to keep a sharp lookout for enemies, for anyone posing a threat to their faith.

Who these enemies are Paul spells out in a participial phrase that is a typical Greek construction. Between the article τοῦς and the participle ποιοῦντας are two objects of the participial verb modified by a prepositional phrase. A relative clause modifies the object of the preposition. Eleven words separate the article τοῦς from the participle it substantivizes! The participle is in the present tense, indicating that the action is ongoing. The Romans are to be on the lookout for those who are continually engaged in making, causing, or creating divisions and offenses. Such activity is characteristic of these adversaries.

The fellowship thrust of this section of the epistle is evident from the encouragement in verse 16: “Greet one another with a holy kiss.” The giving and receiving of a fellowship kiss was a well-known practice in the apostolic church. It is mentioned in four other passages in the epistles (1 Cor 16:20; 2 Cor 13:12; 1 Th 5:26; 1Pe 5:14). It is “holy” because it was in no way erotic or sensual. Bestowing a kiss on the forehead or cheek was an expression of friendship, affection, honor and esteem just as it still is today. What hypocrisy it was, therefore, when Judas betrayed Jesus with a kiss! In the apostolic church each person turned to his neighbor in the assembly and gave him a kiss as a token of spiritual unity and fraternal fellowship. The custom continued in the church for several centuries.

Paul wants the Christians in Rome to know that they do not stand alone. As a further encouragement he adds: “All the churches of Christ send greetings” (v. 16). The congregations in the East joined Paul in greeting their fellow Christians in Rome via this letter, written probably from Corinth at the close of Paul’s third missionary journey in the spring of 58 A.D.

The fellowship and unity of the believers over which Paul rejoices is a work of the Holy Ghost. He “calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in

the one true faith.”¹⁰ The Holy Spirit creates this unity by means of the life-giving word of the gospel. That word brought all these people in widely scattered parts of the Roman Empire to faith in Jesus Christ, nourished and strengthened them in that faith, and united them despite their divergent backgrounds and characteristics into one body with one faith, one hope, one goal. In each of their lives the gospel had proved itself to be the power of God unto salvation. What could be more natural than that Paul should caution them against those who might disrupt and destroy that beautiful unity and fellowship by teaching a different gospel!

Passing over the warning itself for the moment, we see that Paul again picks up the thought of unity and fellowship in the gospel in verse 19: “Everyone has heard about your obedience, so I am full of joy over you.” The wholehearted submission of the Roman Christians to the Word of truth, the gospel of their salvation (Eph 1:13), was well known throughout the Christian church. Paul had heard about their living faith and rejoiced over the Holy Spirit’s work in their hearts and lives, and the believers in Jerusalem and Judea, in Samaria and Galilee and Syria, in Galatia and all Asia, in Macedonia and Achaia, and elsewhere shared his joy. It is Paul’s fervent hope and prayer that the Romans will not permit anyone to divide them and to disturb their unity and peace.

Paul was painfully aware of what had happened in Galatia when the Judaizers appeared and persuaded the congregations Paul had established to follow “a different gospel,” which was really no gospel at all. Paul was writing from Corinth, where the congregation had gone through the unpleasant experience of division and factionalism and where doctrinal aberrations of various kinds had reared their ugly head. Let the Romans be on their guard against trouble makers of one kind or another who might appear and seek to mislead them into error of this kind or that. It was the very purpose of Paul’s letter to strengthen them and to build them up in their faith so that they might be equipped to resist and repulse the inroads of error. What tragic consequences ensued for the churches and for individual souls wherever error succeeded in establishing a beachhead!

The word διχοστασίας means dissensions or divisions. The picture is that of people “standing apart,” some taking one side of an issue, some another. Paul uses the same word in Galatians 5:20 in a three-member set of related works of the flesh: ἐριθείαι, διχοστασίαι, and αἰρέσεις, “selfish ambition, dissensions, factions.”

Divisions are the very opposite of unity, the God-pleasing oneness of heart and mind Paul prayed for in chapter 15:5,6: “May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Divisions are the opposite of the unity Paul appealed to the Corinthians to strive for: “I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions [here Paul uses the Greek word σχίσματα] among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought” (1 Cor 1:10). The errors taught by the troublemakers have the potential of causing a split and finally a schism, an irreparable break, in the congregation.

Paul mentions a second result of the false teaching of the errorists. They cause σκάνδαλα, offenses. A σκάνδαλον is, literally, the trigger on a trap. I remember that as a boy I used to trap rabbits with a box trap. My friends and I would place a rather large box upside down on the ground and elevate one side with a stick attached to a long cord. On rare occasions when a rabbit ventured under the box to sample the fresh carrots that served as bait, we would quickly pull the cord, bringing the heavy box down on the hapless hare. The Greeks called that stick a σκάνδαλον. And so the word came to mean a death-trap. It is a rather common word in the New Testament and always has the connotation of being fatal. In the KJV it is generally translated “offense” or “stumbling block.” In Matthew 18:7 Jesus says: “Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come!” In 1 Corinthians 1:23 Paul calls the preaching of Christ crucified “a stumbling block to the Jews.” They regard it as something that leads to death. Paul uses the word in three other passages in the Epistle to the Romans: 9:33; 11:9; 14:13. Jesus speaks of the serious nature of the sin of setting spiritual death-traps for his little ones in Matthew 18:6: “If anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.” The NIV, as quoted above, translates the word in our passage “obstacles in your way.” Anything that causes Christians to fall from faith or hinders them in their faith or is an

¹⁰ Luther’s explanation of the Third Article.

obstacle that prevents sinners from coming to faith is such a death-trap. False teaching has such dire consequences. It is harmful, and sometimes even fatal, to faith.

The articles *τάς* and *τά* are generic, that is, they refer not to individual, specific divisions and offenses, but to the whole class of such things. Generic articles are usually not translated into English.

There has been considerable debate whether the phrase “contrary to the doctrine which you have learned” is adjectival, modifying “offenses,” or adverbial, modifying the participle “making.” In the first instance Paul would be saying that the death-traps are contrary to the doctrine the Romans have learned. In the second, what the troublemakers do in causing divisions and offenses is described as an activity contrary to the doctrine they have learned. In the latter case the thought could be made clear by translating: “Be on the lookout for those who, contrary to the doctrine you have learned, cause divisions and offenses.” The doctrine referred to would then be the one forbidding the sin of fomenting divisions and putting obstacles in the way of people’s faith.

In our judgment it is preferable to take the phrase as an adjectival modifier of *σκάνδαλα* and to translate as the NIV does: “Watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned.” The argument that then Paul would have had to repeat the article *τά* before *παρὰ τὴν διδασχὴν* is not persuasive. Although he might have repeated the article, usage did not demand it. To cite but one example: in this same epistle Paul writes in chapter 5:15, *πολλῶ μᾶλλον ἢ χάρις τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ ἡ δωρεὰ ἐν χάριτι τῇ τοῦ ἐνὸς ἀνθρώπου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ εἰς τοὺς πολλοὺς ἐπερίσσευσεν*, “How much more did God’s grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!” The prepositional phrase *ἐν χάριτι* modifies the noun *δωρεά* just as the genitive *τοῦ θεοῦ* modifies *ἡ χάρις*, but the *ἡ* is not repeated.

The point in our passage is that the *σκάνδαλα* are contrary to the doctrine the Romans had learned. Error by its very nature is a death-trap and damaging to faith. The preposition *παρὰ* with the accusative means opposed to, against, contrary to. The noun *διδασχὴ* means teaching. It has a passive sense: that which is taught. It is modified here by the restrictive relative clause, *ἣν ὑμεῖς ἐμάθετε*, “which you on your part learned.” How the Romans learned the gospel originally we do not know. Perhaps some of those from Rome who were present in Jerusalem on the first Pentecost had returned home and established the congregation there. In this very epistle, however, Paul has given the Romans a comprehensive summary of that doctrine. Any and all who deviate from it are guilty of creating divisions and setting death-traps for believers. Paul does not restrict his warning to a particular kind of errorist. He is warning the Romans to be on guard against any and every kind of false teaching.

Two paragraphs from Lenski’s Interpretation of Romans bear repeating:

Paul’s application is weakened in its application to us today by use of the historical principle of interpretation. Who were “those causing divisions,” etc.? In the first place, the well-known Judaizers who mixed law with gospel; then, as First Corinthians shows, a number of others, some by means of philosophical, some through false moral teaching. And it is stated that Paul’s words can be applied only to these errors, and that we cannot today apply Paul’s admonition unless we are able to point to exact duplicates of these errors. The case is generally narrowed down to the Judaizers of Paul’s day who demanded circumcision and observance of Jewish ceremonialism. And these are regarded as men who rejected the entire gospel. But look at those Judaizers mentioned in Acts 15:5: “certain of the sect of the Pharisees *which believed*,” former Pharisees, now believers, yet errorists. In Jerusalem they dropped their error, in Galatia some appeared as separatists to divide the churches and to draw them into their separatism.

Paul’s injunction is not to keep away only from total rejecters of the gospel—what Christians ever needed such a warning? His injunction is to keep away from believers who are errorists and teach falsely. Not only the exact duplicates of the errorists of Paul’s day are to be shunned, as though no new ones could arise, as though new ones do not divide, tear, and set traps, as though all errorists new and old, great and small, are not related, all in the same class; but, according to

Paul himself (15:4), “whatever things were written before, for our instruction were they written,” his admonition is to be fully applied and not weakened or evaded.¹¹

False doctrine originates with the devil, the father of lies. In Genesis 3 we are told how he deceived Eve with his lie, “You will not surely die” (Gn 3:4). With this lie he succeeded in separating man from God and causing his death. It cost the life of God’s own Son to rescue man from death and to reconcile the world to God. But through his agents Satan still tries to induce man to doubt God’s Word. “Did God really say?” is still the insidious question with which false teachers begin their attack on God’s saving Word.

Because of the danger such false teachers present Paul admonishes: ἐκκλίνατε ἀπ’ αὐτῶν, keep away from them! Avoid them! Steer clear of them! The prefix ἐκ in the verb is intensive. Shun them definitely, turn away from them completely and finally. Do not toy with their errors.

In the case of weak brethren Paul urges that they be dealt with patiently. In the 14th chapter of this epistle he writes: “Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters” (14:1), and in the 15th chapter he says: “We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak” (15:1). Such situations call for love and patience.

On the other hand, if those whose understanding is confused refuse correction and persist in their error, they are no longer weak brethren. In Titus 3:10 Paul admonishes: “Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him.” His repeated refusal to accept correction from God’s Word shows that he is a persistent errorist. Separation from him is necessary for the welfare of the church, for the sake of the truth of the gospel, and for his own spiritual welfare. The separation is to impress on him the danger to his salvation in the course on which he has embarked.

As was pointed out earlier in our discussion of 2 John 7–11, the separation Paul enjoins is in the area of religious life. When Scripture bids us to avoid false teachers and persistent errorists, it is not speaking in absolute terms. It may be that the errorist is a member of our immediate family. A Christian husband is not commanded to put his wife out of the house if she becomes a Jehovah’s Witness. We are not commanded to restrict our shopping to stores owned by members of our church. In certain parts of the country we might find it difficult or impossible to find a doctor or dentist of our faith. That Paul is not referring to non-religious associations and relationships is clear from 1 Corinthians 5:9,10, where he writes: “I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world.” It is also true, of course, that when Christians find it necessary to separate from a persistent errorist or to excommunicate an impenitent member of the congregation, they will not buddy-buddy him. That would take the edge off the admonition. For that reason Paul continues: “But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat” (1 Cor 5:11).

Even prior to taking the final step of terminating fellowship with an errorist, Christians will reinforce their admonition by refraining from close personal association with him. In 2 Thessalonians 3:14,15 Paul speaks of such a situation: “If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.”

We continue now with verse 18 of Romans 16. The NIV translation reads: “For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people.”

The connective γάρ is causal. It is important to note this. Paul is not explaining how such troublemakers can be recognized. The fact that they teach contrary to the doctrine of Scripture identifies them as false prophets. But Paul is emphasizing why it is so important to keep away from them.

¹¹ R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans* (Columbus: Wartburg, 1945), p 917f.

Failure to recognize this vital point has led to much confusion. The claim has been made that the warning in verse 17 must be directed against grossly immoral cultists like the infamous Jim Jones. The KJV translation has undoubtedly contributed to this misconception. It reads: “For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ but their own belly.” It is said, Paul must have had heathen prophets in mind. Surely one would not want to say that the eminent president of the Missouri Synod or the ALC is a bellyserver! Surely no one would want to accuse a certain famous and obviously sincere Baptist evangelist of serving his own belly! At the beginning of this essay we quoted the claim in the “Statement of the Forty-Four”: “This text does not apply to the present situation in the Lutheran Church of America.”

The fact is that it is not our evaluation but God’s that false teachers are not serving the Lord Jesus Christ but themselves. The pronoun οἱ τοιοῦτοι is a correlative demonstrative. It generalizes: such people, people like that. It refers back to the division makers and death-trap setters. They are slaves (δουλεύουσιν), but not of Christ. Paul glories in being a δοῦλος of the Lord Jesus Christ. He considered it a privilege and an honor. In fact, being a slave of Jesus Christ is to have true freedom. In chapter 6 of this epistle Paul reminds the Romans: “Now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life” (6:22).

The word κοιλία means the body cavity, the belly. It often refers to the womb. In John 7:38 it is a synonym for the heart, the seat of a believer’s soul life. Paul is using figurative language. False teachers are serving their own interests, not the cause of Christ. Falsehood proceeds, not from the new man, but from the flesh, the old Adam, man’s sinful nature. In so far as people lend themselves to the spreading of error, they are following the dictates of their flesh, the friend and tool of the father of lies.

This does not mean that the new man has necessarily died or never existed in such false teachers. The Christian is a dual personality as long as he lives. But a Christian who permits himself to become a purveyor of false doctrine is in that respect not serving Christ. Paul’s words are very general. The errorist may be a total unbeliever. On the other hand, he may be a Christian whose old Adam has led him into unbelief regarding this or that point of scriptural doctrine. In God’s eyes that is self-service.

Paul continues by warning against the sly and treacherous methods employed by false teachers: “By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people.” Χρηστολογία is speech that sounds useful, good, pleasing. Error is made to appear not only harmless, but helpful and good. Think of how the devil sugar-coated his poison when he deceived Eve: “You will be like God, knowing good and evil!” (Gn 3:5). The falsehood may even seem like a blessing, εὐλογία. But it is sheer hypocrisy. Εὐλογία is, literally, fine speaking. It sounds good, but it is completely untrue. It is a pious fraud.

Using such an approach, false teachers deceive their victims. Ἐξαπατῶσιν, like ἐκκλίνετε in the preceding verse, has the intensive prefix ἐκ: they thoroughly deceive the unwary. They pull the wool over their eyes as Satan did to Eve. They aim the arrows of their error at the heart (καρδία) of Christians who are not on their guard.

Faith lives in the heart. “It is with your heart that you believe and are justified” (Rm 10:10). The heart is the power plant that controls a person’s soul life. If the heart is unbelieving, sins of every kind will manifest themselves in a person’s life (Mt 15:19). But when God through his Holy Spirit by means of the gospel gives the sinner a new heart (Eze 36:26), he walks in God’s ways. Jesus said: “Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit” (Mt 12:33). By means of false teaching Satan aims to make the heart bad. His object is to separate the believer from his Lord.

Those who are naïve (ἄκακος) are susceptible to the smooth talk of false teachers. They are unsuspecting. Intending no evil toward others, they do not suspect others of intending evil toward them. Innocent themselves, they are trustful souls. But Christians cannot afford to let down their guard, “for our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph 6:12). Christians need to heed Paul’s warning to be on the lookout for false teachers.

False teachers had not as yet made inroads into the congregation at Rome. Paul rejoices in the Romans’ obedience to the gospel (v.19), and adds: “I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is

evil.” Paul brings this section on unity and fellowship to a close with the assurance: “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet” (v. 20), an obvious allusion to the Protevangel, and the benediction, “The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.” Greetings sent by others to the Christians in Rome and a doxology conclude the chapter and the epistle.

The Application of the Passage

It is important that we instruct the members of our congregations regarding the danger of false prophets so that they do not become victims. On every side they are bombarded by the propaganda of ecumenism. Unless we conscientiously and carefully instruct them in the scriptural principles of fellowship, they are apt to accept the popular notion that there is no such thing as absolute truth and that various religions are merely different roads to heaven. Even those who recognize the difference between Christian and non-Christian religions or between Protestants and Catholics may not see much difference among Protestant denominations. This is apparent in the military chaplaincy, where the basic division is Jewish, Catholic and Protestant. Only those who have been instructed will recognize that there are vital differences among Lutherans. The task is not made easier by the fact that at least two-thirds of the Lutherans in the USA do not consider the doctrinal differences among Lutherans as divisive.

When members of our congregations move, we will need to warn them not to follow the path of least resistance and join the nearest Lutheran church regardless of its synodical affiliation. It is encouraging to note that there are many who are aware of the dangers of false teaching and who make great sacrifices to travel a long distance to worship in an orthodox Lutheran congregation. Others gather together with fellow believers to conduct services in a private home using the tapes that are available from our Synod’s Board for Home Missions.

All of our members will be faced with situations in their life where they will need to make decisions regarding their fellowship practice. A relative who is of another faith gets married or dies, and they attend the service. Is it necessary that they make a point under those circumstances of emphasizing that they are not participating in the worship? If they have made it clear in other ways that they do not consider the doctrinal differences unimportant, they need not have a bad conscience about attending such a service.

The story of Naaman in 2 Kings 5:17–19 is instructive. Naaman, the Syrian general, had been healed of leprosy by washing seven times in the Jordan River on the instructions of the Lord’s prophet, Elisha. Naaman confessed his faith in the true God and took back with him to his home in Damascus as much earth from Israel as two mules could carry to use in building a place of worship to the Lord. For he said: “Your servant will never again make burnt offering and sacrifices to any other god but the Lord.” But Naaman was concerned about the fact that his official duties required him to accompany his king to the temple of the idol Rimmon. When the king bowed down to Rimmon, he leaned on Naaman’s arm, and Naaman was obliged to bow also. “When I bow down in the temple of Rimmon, may the Lord forgive your servant for this,” Naaman said to Elisha. “Go in peace,” the prophet answered. Naaman’s public confession was clear. Every one realized that he was not going to the temple of Rimmon to worship Rimmon.

There will be times when we have guests in our homes who are not of our faith. What should we do at the table? Should we pray as we customarily do? Of course. It is our home, and we are the ones who are praying or having our devotions. We do not exclude people of other faiths from our public services, and neither would we exclude them when we worship privately in our homes.

But what if the situation is reversed, and we are guests in the home of members of another church? Certainly we will not be rude. We will not make a point of showing that we are not joining them in their prayers by talking or standing or leaving the room. Assuming that we have made our confession clear in other ways, we will quietly listen until they have finished. Remember Naaman.

There will be many circumstances in which we will have to exercise our Christian judgment, and sometimes Christian brethren may differ in their judgment. The Bible is not like *Robert’s Rules of Order*. God does not provide us with rules to cover every possible case of casuistry. He deals with us as his mature sons and

daughters. He has set forth the principles of his holy will that are to govern our fellowship practice, and now he trusts us to apply them in the spirit of the gospel. In the Old Testament he dealt differently with the Children of Israel. He treated them as minors. The Sinaitic Covenant regulated their daily life in countless details. As God's New Testament people we are no longer under the law, but under grace. God deals with us as sons who have come of age.

From time to time it happens in our congregations that it becomes necessary to discipline a member because of false doctrine. There are, of course, many among our lay people and some perhaps also among our pastors and teachers who do not have a clear understanding on this or that point of doctrine. As long as they are willing to be instructed from the Holy Scriptures, we will bear with their weakness. We will vigorously practice fellowship with them in order to help them overcome their weakness and to clear up their confusion. Remember how patiently Paul instructed the weak brethren in Galatia, Corinth, Colossae, Thessalonica and elsewhere!

If, however, such erring people refuse to accept correction and persist in their error, perhaps even trying to persuade others to follow them, God instructs us to terminate fellowship with them. Exactly when theirs is no longer a case of weakness but of persistence may or may not be easy to determine. It would certainly be legalistic practice to remove members from the congregation or pastors or teachers from the synod who are not convinced that their views are unscriptural after one admonition. Neither is the injunction in Titus 3:10 concerning two admonitions to be applied mechanically. It would not be in the spirit of the Good Shepherd who risked his life to rescue the straying sheep to take the approach: We've talked to you twice, so you're out! Just as in the application of Matthew 18 each of the three steps may involve more than one consultation with the sinner, so also in the matter of terminating fellowship it may be necessary to talk with the one who has fallen into error a number of times before it becomes clear that he is persisting in his error. Our purpose must always be to win the brother, not to cut him off as soon as possible. On the other hand, once it is clear that he is clinging to his error—and this becomes evident through his repeated rejection of the admonition as the Titus passage indicates—then we are to act promptly. To delay after that is to endanger the rest of the flock and ourselves as well.

As we suggested earlier in this essay, terminating fellowship with persistent errorists, whether an individual or an entire church body, is not the same as excommunication. When we find it necessary to excommunicate an impenitent sinner, we are telling him: "You are on the road to hell! Your attitude shows that you are not a Christian. We cannot consider you as anything but a heathen and a publican. As long as you remain impenitent, your sin is not forgiven."

This may also be true of a person who holds to an error. A person who denies the doctrine of the Trinity, for example, does not have the true God. He is not a Christian. In such a case the termination of fellowship will take the form of excommunication.

On the other hand, when our Synod suspended fellowship with the Missouri Synod in 1961, we were not passing judgment on the faith of the individual members of the Missouri Synod. We did not excommunicate them. So also, when it has been necessary on occasion to suspend a pastor because of some false doctrine that did not in itself make saving faith impossible, we have not thereby passed judgment on his Christian faith. That rests with the Lord, who searches men's hearts.

One of the consequences of sin is that man's reason is clouded. It does not always function logically. A false teacher does not always recognize the implications of his error. He does not see clearly, and he is not always consistent.

Luther was quite charitable in his judgment of the heretic Nestorius. He wrote:

Although speaking logically it must follow from Nestorius' opinion that Christ is a mere man and two persons, this was not actually his opinion. This crude, unlearned man did not see that he was asserting the impossible when simultaneously he seriously took Christ to be God and man in one person and yet declined to ascribe the *idiomata* of the natures to the same person of Christ.

He wants to hold to the truth of the first, but what follows from the first should not be true—he thereby indicates that he himself does not understand what he is denying.¹²

Our theologians call this a “happy inconsistency.”

Neither is it true that a false teacher is necessarily insincere. He may well have deceived himself. Paul, or rather Saul, was convinced that he was serving God by attempting to root out Christianity. But he was blinded by his error. He had a zeal, but it was not based on knowledge.

We have not tried to be exhaustive in discussing the application of Romans 16:17,18 to the life of the individual Christian. That is obviously impossible. But we hope that the examples we have given are somewhat typical and will serve to illustrate how the fellowship principles Scripture enunciates are to be applied. If we are motivated by love, love first of all for Christ and his precious Word, but then also for souls, for the souls of our fellow believers whose salvation is endangered by error, as well as for the souls of our fellow men who are entangled in the pernicious web of error (Php 3:18), our fellowship practice will be evangelical. It may not always be understood, but it will please the Lord. And that is what counts.

¹² LW 41:102f.