

“Sowers of Discord”
Romans 16:17-19
(Preached at Trinity, March 11, 2012)

I'm supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord's Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I'll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. In this final section of Romans, so full of greetings and unity and best wishes, Paul suddenly turns to the subject of dealing with those who cause disunity.
It isn't nearly as fragmented as it may seem. Paul begins with the connecting conjunctive δέ which is usually translated but or as we find here, “now.”
After speaking of these many brothers and sisters who have labored so hard and who have been such a blessing to the church they must not ignore the presence of those who would interfere with this unity.
Romans 16:17 NAU - "Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them."
2. Greg Nichols writes in his book on Covenant Theology – “The church on earth is a visible society of Christ’s spiritual posterity. It should, by right, *de jure*, receive and retain only genuine believers. Yet in fact, *de facto*, it receives professing Christians with a credible testimony. Thus it may potentially receive hypocrites and apostates. Even the most conscientious churchmen can only discern a credible confession of faith. Only God infallibly sees a circumcised heart.”
3. This means even the best of churches can have hypocrites sown among them. Even Judas sat and partook of the last supper with the disciples.
Jesus knows every one of them and warns us to be diligent and watchful. When we discover them it is our duty to remove them.
4. Paul warned often of the danger of these false brethren.
2 Corinthians 11:26 NAS - "*I have been* on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from *my* countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren;"
Acts 20:29-30 NAU - "I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them."
5. In this admonition Paul commands two things:
 - I. First, he commands the church to mark them or define them
 - II. Second, he commands the church to turn away from them
6. This morning I want us to examine these two charges. It is essential for every church to give regard to these things. There are basically four reasons a church will be forced to exclude a member from their membership:

1. Conduct unbecoming a Christian which is not forsaken or repented of
 2. Heretical doctrine that is not abandoned
 3. Sowers of discord among the congregation – an ongoing action
 4. Apostasy – those who turn from the faith
7. Paul is dealing here with those who disrupt the harmony of the church
- I. First, Paul commands the church to mark them or define them
- Romans 16:17 NAU** - "Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned"
- The word implies fixing our attention upon them, setting them apart
- A. Paul says these are people who cause dissension and division
 1. There are countless ways that this can happen
 - a. It almost always involves someone desiring to put forth their own opinions and ideas.
 - b. Sometimes it is over a point of doctrine. Sometimes a doctrine that isn't sound doctrine but sometimes it may be a point of sound doctrine that they want to stress over all others.
 - c. Sometimes it involves a person that continually opposes the work of the church—continually calling into question the direction the church is moving and continually sowing seeds of discord.
 - d. Sometimes it involves a person that strongly pushes his personal agenda – perhaps change the church isn't ready for. And they begin to sow seeds of discord.
 - e. It might be a person that manifests strong leadership and easily gathers people around them.
 2. James Montgomery Boice describes the pattern: "Often these are people who show up in a congregation suddenly, usually from another church where they have also caused trouble, though they give no indication of that when they come. They are knowledgeable. They usually have considerable abilities. They are leaders in the sense that they have enthusiasm and get people to follow them easily. Generally they are used to teaching, and they want to fill this role in their new church. Unfortunately, although the Bible warns us to make full proof of those who want to be teachers, people like this are usually warmly welcomed and quickly put to work, because most churches need able people who actually want to serve."
 3. Paul says here, be cautious, be watchful. How do we protect ourselves? We must share the Gospel profusely. We must pray for the conversions of souls—lots of them. We want to receive new members into our church—lots of them. But we must zealously guard our church.
 - Properly examine prospective new members
 - Don't make people teachers quickly
 - Maintain strong leadership in the church. You don't want leadership that is quickly moved by the latest book they read or by everything they read on the internet.
 - Don't make changes in the ministry of our church quickly
 - Be on guard against those who have a pattern of sowing discord.

B. Paul describes them in detail

1. They are sowers of discord
 - a. They disrupt the harmony of the church
 - b. Harmony, love, and unity are essential to the health of a local church. The community of the local church mirrors our unity in Christ. In this unity we conduct the work of the Gospel. When the unity is disrupted we begin to turn inward focusing only on our own interests.
 - c. These disrupters of the peace cause the church to focus on the narrow scope of personal interests
2. They set out stumbling blocks before God's people.
 NASB – "hindrances" KJV – "offenses" ESV – "obstacles"
 $\sigma\kappa\acute{a}\nu\delta\alpha\lambda\omega\nu$ – we get our word "scandal" from it. In the NT it refers to something that leads to sin or something that causes one to turn away.
 - a. It could be an issue of sin that begins to infect the whole.
 Unchecked sin always acts like a cancer in the church.
 - b. Or it could be adding some teaching that doesn't find its basis in Scripture or developing a doctrine through the misapplication of Scripture.
 Paul says: "contrary to the teaching which you learned"
 They don't deny the essentials of the faith but they bring in other things and stress conformity to them thus causing division in the church.
 - c. Or it could be the constant bickering, murmuring, and disorder that discord brings. It is particularly damaging to young or immature believers.
 - d. Jesus warned sternly over such things:
Luke 17:1-2 NAS - "And He said to His disciples, "It is inevitable that stumbling blocks should come, but woe to him through whom they come! ² "It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea, than that he should cause one of these little ones to stumble."
3. Paul describes their character
 - a. They are slaves, not to Christ but to their fleshly sin. They are not motivated by a love for the congregation and a desire to bring them nearer to Christ. They are only motivated by self interests.
 - b. Their character and heart exposes their corruption. They are not believers.

- c. They are often cunning with their words and can lead the weak astray.

Verse 18 - "by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting."

Their actions cause division and left unchecked can ultimate fragment and divide the church.

James Montgomery Boice – "They are critical of people who do not see things as they do or join them in pushing their personal concerns. When everyone does not go their way—and not all do, because God always has some in any church who are not so easily taken in, who care for other believers and who are not serving themselves—these unbalanced and divisive teachers pull most of their following away and start another fellowship. That fellowship is always presented as a more biblical, more faithful, or truer church."

II. Second, Paul commands the church to turn away from them

Romans 16:17 NAS - "Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them."

- A. Paul commands church discipline as the ultimate way to resolve this situation
 - 1. We must treat every member with love, patience, and respect
When a member sins or does something that is disruptive to the church we should patiently seek to resolve the situation
 - 2. All sin should be considered dangerous to the health of our church
 - a. Most is dealt with through prayer and the merciful work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of God's people.
 - b. The nature of a Christian is a humble and repentant heart
 - c. When sin persists in the life of a member he must be lovingly but firmly confronted by the elders.
 - d. When the sin persists it must be brought before the church
 - 3. This procedure is described fully in Matthew 18 & 1 Corinthians 5
Matthew 18:17-18 NAU - "tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸ Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven."
 - 4. Being delivered over to Satan is a fearful thing. We read of the sad result of Saul's persistent sin in **1 Samuel 16**
1 Samuel 16:14 NAU - "Now the Spirit of the LORD departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the LORD terrorized him."

Matthew Henry – “He having forsaken God and his duty, God, in a way of righteous judgment, withdrew from him those assistances of the good Spirit with which he was directed, animated, and encouraged in his government and wars. He lost all his good qualities. This was the effect of his rejecting God, and an evidence of his being rejected by him. Now God took his mercy from Saul (as it is expressed, 2 Sa. 7:15); for, when the Spirit of the Lord departs from us, all good goes. When men grieve and quench the Spirit, by willful sin, he departs, and will not always strive. The consequence of this was that *an evil spirit from God troubled him*. Those that drive the good Spirit away from them do of course become prey to the evil spirit. If God and his grace do not rule us, sin and Satan will have possession of us. The devil, by the divine permission, troubled and terrified Saul”

- B. Although church discipline is a grievous and fearful thing no church should fail to exercise this important duty
 - 1. The offending member must be removed
 - 2. Sometimes this means absolute separation. He must not be permitted to remain in the church to continue to sow seeds of discord. In order for the church to continue in the peace and comfort of Christ he must be removed. Paul says, "turn away from them." NIV - "Keep away from them." KJV & ESV - "avoid them."
 - 3. Sometimes, with regard to other sins they may still be able to attend and sit under the preaching but they are excluded from the fellowship and no longer considered a brother or sister in Christ.
 - a. But they are not treated with the previous warmth and affection. They are not treated as other unbelievers where we try to enter into their lives with the Gospel.
Jesus describes it:
Matthew 18:17 - "let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.
 - b. Paul described one who departs from the faith as being worse than an unbeliever.
1 Timothy 5:8 NAS - "But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith, and is worse than an unbeliever."
 - c. This breech of fellowship is demonstrated by exclusion from the Lord's Table
1 Corinthians 5:11 NAU - " I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler-- not even to eat with such a one."

Conclusion:

1. Being a Church of Christ demands great caution and a commitment to holiness and purity.
Christ takes notice of this in His churches:
Revelation 2:1-3 NAU - "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this: ² 'I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them *to be* false; ³ and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary.'"
2. No church is immune to disruptions. Paul commends the church of Rome again:
Romans 16:19 NAS - "For the report of your obedience has reached to all; therefore I am rejoicing over you"
Romans 1:8 NAU - "First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, because your faith is being proclaimed throughout the whole world."
BUT - "I want you to be wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil."
3. Every church must be on guard.
We have lost members through the past several years over the pursuit of protecting the Church.
 - We have angered some by not allowing them to be teachers – and their anger vindicated our judgment.
 - We have resisted those who have come in pressing change based upon their personal agenda. There are many single-issue agendas today that become the chief concern of some. We've resisted being drawn into these agendas. Change should always come slowly and with a long-range agenda set forth by the elders based on biblical principles and a balanced theology.
 - Some have left over our determination to teach sound doctrine.
4. It takes great wisdom and discernment:
Romans 16:19 NAU - "I want you to be wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil."
5. This demands much grace from God. We need wisdom from above. May God bless us as we seek to build His church.