

How To Handle a Divisive Christian
Romans 16:17-19

The era of the Reformation was filled with doctrinal battles. The Reformers entered into a theological battle with the Roman Church. That battle often resulted in accusations and trials. The result of those trials often ended in the death penalty.

Schaff writes, “The Reformers inherited the doctrine of persecution from their mother Church, and practised it as far as they had the power. They fought intolerance with intolerance. ... They banished, imprisoned, drowned, beheaded, hanged, and burned Anabaptists, Antitrinitarians, Schwenkfeldians, and other dissenters.”¹

One of the most famous persecutions was against Michael Servetus, a Spanish physician and theologian who denied the trinity and Eternal deity of the Son of God. He was sentenced to death by the Catholic Church in France. Escaped from prison, and fled to Geneva where he thought John Calvin would have mercy. **Calvin showed no mercy, put him on trial and had him burned at the stake.**

Are you thankful that we don't handle divisive Christians in the same way today?

Calvin was wrong in what he did, although for the day in which he lived, this was common practice. But how should we deal with division in the church today?

We are examining this question today in light of our arrival at Romans 16:17-19.
“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. 18 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. 19 Everyone has heard about your obedience, so I am full of joy over you; but I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil.”

This is one of several NT passages that address the question of church discipline. Specifically, we want to examine the question, when are believers in the local church commanded to separate from others?

Through our study of Romans 16:17-19, we can better understand how to protect the church from false teachers and from Christians seeking their own agenda.

¹Philip Schaff and David Schley Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997).

How to Identify a Divisive Person. Romans 16:17-19.

Our text begins with the instruction “*to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned*” (Romans 16:17).² The first characteristic of a divisive person is that **they draw others into their sin or false teaching.**

The word used translated “put obstacles” is the Greek word is σκάνδαλα. This word indicates more than two people having a disagreement over something. It is something much stronger. The lexicon defines this word as “Enticement to apostasy.”³ Specifically, this word was used to refer to the stick, or bait in a trap which entices the animal to its death. It is used in the following passages:

*“Jesus said to his disciples: “Things that **cause people to sin** are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. ”* (Luke 17:1)

*“Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any **stumbling block or obstacle** in your brother’s way. ”* (Romans 14:13)

The second description concerning divisive people is that **their interests are selfish.**

“For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites” (Rom 16:18).

Peter speaks of the same condition as he describes false teachers, as does Jude in his tiny epistle. *“In their greed these teachers will exploit you with stories they have made up. Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping”* (2 Peter 2:3). *“These are the men who divide you, who follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit”* (Jude 19).

Our text in Romans 16 continues with a third description of the false teachers. **Their talk is deceptive.** *By their smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people* (Rom 16:18). They are deceivers who use smooth talk and flattery. They sound very appealing. They use all of the right terminology. This deception continues today, just as the church was warned 2,000 years ago. *“I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments”* (Colossians 2:4). *“Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. ”* (Acts 20:30). *“This matter arose because some false brothers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the*

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³William Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature : A Translation and Adaption of the Fourth Revised and Augmented Edition of Walter Bauer's Griechisch-Deutsches Worterbuch Zu Den Schrift En Des Neuen Testaments Und Der Ubrigen Urchristlichen Literatur (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 241.

freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves” (Galatians 2:4).

Divisive teachers also **target the innocent**. *“By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people” (Rom 16:18).* The word translated “naive” in the NIV text means *moral innocence*. It is used only twice in the NT. The other reference is found in Hebrews 7:26 and describes the ultimate example of moral innocence, our savior the Lord Jesus Christ. *“Such a high priest meets our need—one who is holy, **blameless**, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens.”* So the warning is not for someone lacking in emotional or intellectual maturity. It is a warning that divisive people target new Christians, or those who are unsuspecting. Peter issues a similar warning. *“With eyes full of adultery, they never stop sinning; they seduce the unstable; they are experts in greed—an accursed brood! .. For they mouth empty, boastful words and, by appealing to the lustful desires of sinful human nature, they entice people who are **just escaping** from those who live in error.” (2 Peter 2:14-18)*

According to this framework, being divisive is more than two Christians who are having a disagreement, as much as we should seek to resolve our problems quickly. This type of divisive behavior centers on false teaching and its danger to young Christians.

What to do with a Divisive Person. Romans 16:17

Paul gives us two instructions here. The first is that we are to “watch them.” Literally, “keep an eye on them.” The Greek word is σκοπεῖν. It is the source of our English word “to scope.” Imagine a hunter scoping his prey. Or an astronomer peering into the night sky. It means to keep focused on something so that you can discern its every move. Note the following examples of this word. *“So we **fix our eyes** not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:18).* *“Each of you **should look** not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:4).* *“Join with others in following my example, brothers, and **take note of those** who live according to the pattern we gave you” (Philippians 3:17).*

Kittle sheds light on this word. “In ancient Greek, the word is used to describe a spy, or a scout.” He continues, “To consider something critically and then to hold something before one as a model of the inspection.”⁴

We should pause here and ask, whether or not it is it right for us to be critical? Is it right for us to judge?

⁴Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich and Geoffrey William Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995), 22.

There are some things that Christians are commanded to judge:

False teaching. 1 Tim 1:3; Tit 1:9-11; 2 John 7-10. *“He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it”* (Titus 1:9).

The truth of the gospel . *“Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment”* (John 7:24).

Sinful behavior inside the church. *“What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside?”* (1 Corinthians 5:12).

Believers in legal conflict. *“I say this to shame you. Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers?”* (1 Corinthians 6:5).

The words of preachers. *“I speak to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say.”* (1 Corinthians 10:15). Also, the Bereans were commended in Acts 17:11 for their investigation of Paul’s teaching.

Once we conduct this right and necessary judgment, what are Christians to do when we discover and discern a divisive teacher in the church? The first part of the command in our passage is that we are to **Avoid Them**. Laterally, “turn away from them.” The word here is only used 3x in the NT. The other two references also help us to understand the usage here. *“All have **turned away**, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one”*(Romans 3:12). *“He must turn from evil and do good; he must seek peace and pursue it”* (1 Peter 3:11).

In this verse the word means, to “purposely to avoid association with someone.”⁵

As we move to the last sentence of our text, we see the reason why doctrinal purity so important. Paul writes, *“I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil”* (Rom 16:19). He is warning us to so that we can be protected from corrupting influences. God’s people are to be innocent about evil things. A godly church will seek to protect its followers from deceptive teaching and destructive people. This innocence is referred to elsewhere in Scripture. *“I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as **innocent** as doves”* (Matthew 10:16). This is the only other place in NT where this particular word for “innocent” is used.

“Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe” (Philippians 2:14–15).

⁵Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, vol. 1, Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament : Based on Semantic Domains, electronic ed. of the 2nd edition. (New York: United Bible societies, 1996), 450.

When should we Separate from Divisive People?

When they practice false teaching. *“If anyone teaches false doctrines and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, he is conceited and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction between men of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain”* (1 Timothy 6:3–5). *“Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him”* (Titus 3:10). Interestingly, this was the verse used by John Calvin at Serratus’ execution!

Scripture is clear in many passages that it is necessary for God’s people to separate from false teachers. *“Having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them”* (2 Timothy 3:5).

The other type of people from which Christians must separate are those who practice unrepentant sin. This instruction comes to us from Matthew 18:17. It is further explained in 1 Corinthians, where Paul condemns the Corinthian church for tolerating sinfulness in their midst. He reveals the sin of the individual who was living in an incestuous relationship and instructs the church, *“you should have put this man out of your fellowship”* (1 Corinthians 5:2).

At what level is this division required? In the essential doctrines, Christians must separate from any association with those who claim to be Christian but do not obey essential Christian teaching. These teachings include the Virgin birth, the death, burial and resurrection of Christ, the atonement through his blood, the inspiration of Scriptures, the holy Trinity, salvation by grace through faith, and the sinfulness of man. We might add a few more doctrines to this list, but it must be clear that these are the essentials of the Christian faith. These are the doctrines that the early church deliberated and are contained in the main Christian creeds. These are not-negotiable.

However, there are other teachings that are important, that I believe are clear, but at the same time I admit that they are disputed among those who love the Lord and adhere to the essential doctrines given above. While we can and should hold to a strong and clear interpretation of Scripture, we should not be labeling someone a heretic for disagreeing with things that we believe, but are not essential to the Christian faith. Among these are the mode of baptism, spiritual gifts, prophesy, and the form of church government.

I believe that every local church should be clear on these issues, and that there should be unity within that body of believers. This is necessary to maintain agreement with the God-given leadership within the church.

A seminary professor of mine suggested the following four part guideline:

There are things that we DIE FOR
There are things that we DIVIDE OVER
There are things that we DEBATE
and there are things that we should DISMISS

Calvin and the Reformers were WRONG about church discipline. They confused civil and church government. What they should have done, and what we should do today, is to SEPARATE from those who teach or live contrary to the Scripture.