

Sermon on Romans 16: 17-18 - Avoid! **By Dr. Franz A. O. Pieper**

“Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple.” Romans 16:17-18 (KJV)

Venerable fathers and brethren!
In Christ dearly beloved hearers!

If we look around in visible Christendom, then we are chiefly confronted by an extremely distressing scene: its division. Those who in the same way call themselves after Christ's name are divided into a number of groups which are themselves engaged in mutual combat. This state of affairs is rightly deplored by all sides as miserable and is described as extremely harmful for church and world. Also we agree with full conviction in lamenting this state of affairs. But we are moved to examine the matter still more closer when we hear and read the accusation that also just we Lutherans of the Syndical Conference cause and continue division by the position of our church body, namely, in this way that we require the adherence to all parts of Christian doctrine and do not cultivate church fellowship with false doctrine. We reject the accusation raised against us as unjust and maintain the opposite with all determination that by the position of our church body we are not bringing about division, but union and agreement. Who decides the propositions in this conflict? God's Word. **God's Word clearly answers and decides all questions that have to be answered and decided in the church until the last day.** This is also the case concerning the division within the Christian Church. The entire Scriptures are full of instruction concerning this point.

In the text which has been read, we have **the instruction of the Apostle Paul concerning division in the Christian Church.** From this instruction we emphasize especially three points:

- 1) How division originates;
- 2) How it is to be judged; and
- 3) How it is to be removed.

1.

First of all, we learn from our text something for our **comfort**. Our text reminds us, namely, of the fact that division in the Christian Church is **nothing new**. When we in our time lament over this division and have to endure this division, then we should not think that something strange is happening to us. The misery of division occurred also in the church of the Apostles and before the eyes of the Apostles. We can deduce that from our text. When the Apostle still so urgently admonishes the Roman congregation with a final detailed explanation of

Christian doctrine, to direct their attention on the people who are causing the divisions and gives instruction to isolate such people, then he is not fighting a scarecrow (dummy), but opposing real existing dangers and actions which have already happened at other places.

However, above all things, the Apostle now teaches us about the important point **how or whereby division originates in the Church**. He says: **“Mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to (alongside of) the doctrine which ye have learned.”** Thus division is then caused, division then originates, when people arise in the Christian Church, who alongside of the doctrine, that is, teach something different than Christ's Apostles, speak something different in the Christian Church than Christ's Word and find supporters for these errors.

This results from the nature of the Christian Church. The Christian Church here on earth is a completely unique Kingdom, absolutely distinct from the kingdoms of this world. The different kingdoms of this world have different rulers and laws and accordingly are ruled differently. The Christian Church here on earth is not man's, but Christ's Kingdom and has in all countries and for all times until the last day **only one Ruler, Christ**, and only one Law for its Kingdom by which it is taught and ruled: **that is Christ's Word, the Word that He has given to the Church through His Apostles and Prophets**. There is no place in the Christian Church for a word alongside of Christ's Word and for a ruler alongside of Christ.

Christ says in regard to His Church: **“One is your Master, even Christ”** (Matt. 23:8), and therefore inculcates the following as a Law in His Kingdom: **“If ye continue in My Word, then are ye My disciples indeed”** (John 8:31). And that was valid not merely for the time, when Christ walked on earth, but for the Church of all times and at all places until the last day. In His High Priestly prayer Christ describes the Church until the last day as a community (fellowship) of people, who through their — that is, the Apostles' — word will believe on Him, John 17:20. St. Paul describes the Church as a house that is **“built upon the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets,”** Eph. 2:20, and says of his own teaching activity: **“I will not dare to speak of any of those things which Christ hath not wrought (Greek: worked, Ed.) by me,”** Romans 15:18. St. Peter lays down the principle for all teaching in the Christian Church: **“If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles (Word) of God,”** 1 Pet. 4:11. The unity of the Christian Church in all different kinds of circumstances, times, nations and languages consists in its adherence to the Word of Christ and its separation from those who cause divisions in departing from this Word. In order to preserve this unity and to prevent division, the Apostle Paul therefore, wherever he found himself, sent to the congregations and to their teachers the message and the admonition never **“to teach anything different,”** but to hold fast steadfastly to the form (model, pattern, example) of sound (wholesome) words (2 Tim. 1:15) which they have learned from the Apostles of Christ.

From Athens he writes to the Thessalonians: **“Stand fast and hold the traditions [oral teachings of God's Word which were proclaimed], which ye**

have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle [letter],” 2 Thess. 2:15. He left Timothy at Ephesus in order to command (order) some that they “**teach no other doctrine**,” 1 Tim. 1:3. From Corinth he writes to Rome: “**Avoid them**,” those who teach another doctrine! Romans 16:17. From Rome he writes to Galatia and admonishes the Galatians that they have allowed themselves to be turned away to another kind of gospel, which however is not another gospel of the same kind as Paul taught, Gal. 1:6 ff. And when he travels back from Europe to Jerusalem, he calls together the elders [pastors] of the congregation of Ephesus to Miletus and warns them against people who will arise out of their own midst and will speak perverse doctrines to draw away disciples for themselves, Acts 20:29ff.

Hence it is now clearly evident, when doctrine comes into consideration, on whom the cause (blame) for division falls in the Christian Church, namely, not on those who hold fast immovably to the doctrine of the Apostles, but it rests on those who depart from it and teach a different doctrine. We Lutherans of the Synodical Conference are now certain of it and have proven it before the church, that our doctrine, particularly also in the points raised in dispute, is not own word, but God's Word. We could and can in all points place the finger on God's Word and says: “There it is (stands) written.” It is a complete overturning of the usage of Biblical language, if a person claims that through our insistence on the pure, unadulterated teaching of the Word God we are causing and maintaining division in the church.

In our time people particularly demand “doctrinal freedom.” There is doctrinal freedom in the **state**, furthermore it is not a matter for the state to teach and to govern the Christian Church [Ed. in spiritual matters]. However there is **no doctrinal freedom in the Christian Church**, because in the Christian Church according to God's command and order everyone who steps forward to teach should speak God's Word. Whoever in the Christian Church makes for himself the claim of doctrinal freedom, thereby demands the right to cause division in the Christian Church and set himself up alongside of Christ and revolts against Christ as the One Head and Ruler in the Church. However, with these words we now come to the second point concerning which we want to be instructed by the Apostle Paul, namely, **how division is to be judged**.

2.

In our time a person is not free from self-contradiction in the judgment of division in the Christian Church. On the one hand, people mourn the division and emphasize -- correctly --, how much more the Christian Church could accomplish, if it was not divided, but externally was also completely united. On the other hand, people however also often speak, as if division does not have much significance, yes indeed even as if something good is intended by God through division in the Church. They say: Every church body has its particular gifts and preferences.

That is perverted human judgment. The Apostle's judgement reads differently. He says: “**Mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary**

to (alongside of) **the doctrine which ye have learned.**" He does not call those who cause division something good or also merely indifferent, but an **offence**. Already the mere fact of division is **an offence for the world and for weak Christians**. The world thereby excuses its unbelief and weak Christians are misled from the faith. Even more so is the offence evident, when we add that those who are causing the divisions have originated through **departing from the doctrine of Christ**. Different doctrine is brought as Christ's Word, **is a hit in the face of Christ**, who wants to teach and rule the Church through His Word. Different doctrine brought as Christ's Word, is also **a hit in the face of Christians**, whose Christian dignity and Christian glory exist in this that they have not submitted to the word of men, but have submitted alone to Christ's Word.

And also finally: Different doctrine brought as Christ's Word, **can always only bring harm to souls**. It is a question of life and death. **The word of men**, even if it be so well intended, **can never save a single person** of the human race dead in sins. **God's Word alone can do that**. Every word of men in the Christian Church is like grass and all his glory is like the flower of grass. The grass withers and the flower decays (falls away), when men also flatter themselves that they could bring light to the whole world by their "understanding" or "further development" or "supplementing" of Christian doctrine.

Only **God's Law**, in so far as it is taught without weakening [watering it down] and human addition, makes men to be **truly poor sinners**. Only **God's Gospel**, in so far as it is proclaimed without being intermingled with the works of this Law, **produces faith in Christ**, confers the highest good on earth, the certainty of grace and salvation, and gives power and joy to walk the narrow way to eternal life. Every alteration of the Gospel through admixture of the works of men, whether one directly calls it merit or only right behavior, is poison and death for the spiritual life, places itself as an obstacle, as a trap, as an offence between mankind and the grace and salvation obtained for them by Christ. Therefore we see the zeal of the Apostle that he pronounces the curse over all those who teach the Gospel of Christ different than he has taught it (Gal. 1:8).

Yet, are there not then any Christians in church bodies, which do not continue in all parts of Apostle's word? Do we condemn all, do we deny salvation to all those who depart from God's Word in any point? This judgment people assigns to us, but unjustly so. We know from God's Word: there is in certain doctrines an erring out of **weakness** whereby Christianity can exist, **if the person in his heart is a poor sinner and trusts alone in Christ as his Saviour**. So many take part in external division, but continue at the same time to cling to Christ in their **hearts**. We think of the two hundred, who, called from Jerusalem, went with Absalom and knew nothing about the evil matter (2 Sam. 15:11). Of this fact the Apostle also points out in our text, when he speaks of "**innocent hearts**," who "**through sweet words and excellent speech**" to whom division is an offence. God wants to have no other doctrine in the Church than His Word and to fellowship with those who teach otherwise is **an evil association forbidden by God and a constant danger for souls**.

[3]

Who places at our disposal a means, an effective means, to remove division? Who shows us the way how this offence of division in Christendom can be prevented? The Apostle indicates the means. The means is just as simple as it is thoroughly effective. He says: **“Mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to (alongside of) the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them.”** If people appear in the Christian Church who teach something other than Christ's Word and refuse to be instructed, then Christians should not stand with such people, but isolate them, have no fellowship with them, but separate from them. This is to be done in the manner prescribed by God. Had the Christians from the very beginning of the Church and of every time obeyed this simple and clear divine instruction, then there would be divisions in Christendom, but entire Christendom would be completely united. Where there are no buyers, there is also no market.

The **Arian division** in the Fourth Century would not have originated, if the Christians of that time had submitted to this divine instruction in regard to Arius who denied the eternal deity of Christ, instead of adhering to him. The offence of **Rome** would not have arisen and would not have spread over the entire world, if the Christians had shunned the pope as an abomination and had given him the true title, instead of calling him “holy father,” who under the name of Christ secured control for himself in the church with his own word. The division at the time of the **Reformation** would not have occurred, if Christians had avoided Zwingli and his adherents, who did not continue in the words our Lord Jesus Christ stated concerning the Lord's Supper and Baptism. There would be no division in the **American Lutheran church**, if Christians had kept a distance from the people who bring their own word concerning the doctrines of the Christian Church and the Office of the Ministry, concerning conversion and the election of grace.

In short, **avoiding** those who teach other than Christ's Apostles, that is **the simple, certain and effective means prescribed by God to remove division in Christendom**. According to God's Word those who teach a different kind of doctrine arise in the Christian Church with **God's permission**, not for the purpose that a person holds fast to these errors, but for the purpose that he avoids them. How the apostle expressly impresses this on us: **“For there must be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you”** (1 Cor. 11:19)! This lesson Christians must learn constantly from God's Word. But instead of following this simple and completely effective way prescribed by God, people attempt ways devised by men which only makes evil worse. Especially do people seek the way that exempts (releases) each other from continuing in all doctrines of God's Word. They call that unity, what according to God's Word is division!

Against the treatment which is prescribed by God's Word for those who teach a different doctrine many raise several objections. One says: The people who do not continue in all parts of God's Word, but teach differently, are often still learned, scientific, educated people, concerning whom one also can not deny

their honest intentions. You must still however have respect for the knowledge and the earnestness and good will of these people. Respect for those who teach a different doctrine -- that is truly an essential sign of our time!

This whole view is against God's Word. In vain do we find respect for those who teach a different doctrine in Holy Scripture. What their science and knowledge arrives at, the apostle says thus: **"If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing"** (1 Tim 6:3,4). Such a one **pretends knowledge** of divine things that he does not even have, and in self deception regards his ignorance as knowledge. And what their **noble motives** involve, the Apostle in our text says about those who teach a different doctrine the following: **"For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly."** In these words it is not being said that in all cases they are coarse gluttons and live in great sins of greed and of the flesh. **But it is indeed said in these words that in all cases they do not think of Christ, but of their own selves, they do not want to explain Christ's Word, but their own opinion, they have not the Christian Church, but their own glory or their own party in mind.** The Lord says: **"He that speaketh of himself seeketh his own glory"** (John 7:18). That is a powerful text [word] that we should all indeed take to heart! Only in so far as someone does not have his own interest, but has Christ's interest alone and believes His Word, he is also truly and without hypocrisy for Him, that is, **he also speaks God's Word and not his own word.**

But is not the avoiding of all those who teach a different doctrine an unattainable, ideal situation [state of affairs]? In this way men judge differently than the Apostle. The Apostle does not speak of an unattainable ideal, which is suspended in the mind and remains in the mind, but **of a feasible and an accomplished practice**, when he admonishes the Christians: **"Mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to [alongside of] the doctrine which ye have learned, and avoid them!"**

— Yet people call out: How can Christians — the simple [uneducated, plain] Christians — recognize with certainty those who teach a different doctrine and distinguish between truth and error? The simple Christians can do exactly that. Their Saviour, who calls them to continue in His Word, has also given them the means in their hands for this purpose. The Holy Scriptures, the Word of the Prophets and Apostles, is for the Christians not a collection of riddles, but a lamp for their feet and a light for their way. Christians can only then err in their thoughts, in their speech and in their judgment, if they put the light of the Word of God under the bushel. **If they use their Light and Right, if they hear and believe what their Lord speaks, then they will know the truth, and the truth will them free from all the slavery of the doctrine of men.** The Lord says expressly, that His sheep recognize their Shepherd's voice. But the voice of the stranger they do not know, but flee before him, John 10:3-5. Let us only remind each other, that we are to let the Word of Christ dwell richly among us, then it will also make the simple wise.

Finally, someone still objects: But the success! The success of preventing division in this manner is however a very doubtful one. A person must despair of success, if he looks at the past and views the present. **The success, dear fathers and brethren, is not our matter, but God's matter**, that we in the manner, which God has prescribed, create unity and remove division. Besides, we need not ourselves also complain about success. The Synodical Conference has not produced division, but has brought about a gathering together. It has grown steadily in spite of defections from it, and it is still the most numerous Lutheran church body in the United States. From the very first many have prophesied our downfall. In the last months they have repeated this prophecy. It will not become true while we cling to God's Word.

Above all, we need to ask God for **two things**. In the first place, for **humility**. **It is not due to our merit, but alone to God's grace that we do not teach other doctrines [false doctrines], but that we confess God's Word**. Also this humility should be noticeable in everything that we speak and write. Even though we certainly have the sinful flesh in us, yet **we should not fight in a fleshly manner**. Also we do not want everyone who falls into error occasionally, immediately to be treated as a false teacher. Is it not a miracle, Luther explains, that someone in these high (great) things, which are so foreign to us by nature, sometimes has one's own thoughts and perhaps blunders (errs) in the words [speech]. Luther confesses that about himself, and we will not refrain from the same confession. However we should not give in to our own thoughts, but immediately again seize hold of God's Word and thereby resist all our own thoughts and all wrong (perverse) speech. To that end we should in humility help each other.

Secondly, we need to ask God for His grace that just as we are to have humble heart, so also we are to testify with clarity and with determination to the doctrine of the Apostles and Prophets and uncover and refuse foreign doctrine. In this way we strive in the right manner for the unity of the Christian Church and for the removal of destructive division. May God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, to whom be the highest praise in eternity, bring that about! Amen.