

## Chapter 74

### Heresy

(Romans 16:17–18)

Paul has given his greetings to the Christians at Rome, but he still has three matters on his heart to share with his friends: a warning (16:17–20), more greetings (16:21–23) and a doxology (16:25–27).

1. **The threat of false teaching is a real danger.** <sup>17</sup>*Now I urge you, brothers and sisters, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from such people.* It is not any kind of divisiveness that Paul is mentioning here. Rather it is one particular kind of divisiveness. Paul especially has in mind opposition to Christian teaching, and any kind of behaviour which severely clashes with Christian teaching. Paul allows difference of opinions in minor matters of conscience (Romans 14) but he will not allow differences of opinion within the churches in connection with the major teachings of the Christian faith. Although Paul is a highly ‘doctrinal’ thinker, his thinking is always applied to the situations he meets. Paul wants his friends to know that opposition to Christian teaching is likely to come, both in teaching and practical living.

2. **We have to be ready to respond to false teachers of this kind.** Paul says: ‘and turn away from such people’. Since this is obviously a very serious matter we shall do well to ask ourselves what kind of false teaching Paul has in mind. In Romans

14:1–15:13 Paul asks us to be gracious and tolerant when seeking to relate to Christians who have different opinions in matters of conscience. He has spoken firmly about not being judgemental, and of accepting the person who misguidedly has ‘weakness’ of conscience. Part of this weakness is clearly ignorance concerning the goodness of God’s creation. There will be some people around who do not like Paul’s teaching that nothing is unclean in itself (14:10). Others will not like his doctrine of grace. Statements like those in Romans 6:14 and 7:1–6 will arouse their opposition.

Paul can be very tolerant about what I have called ‘differences of opinion’ – even though he lays down firmly what those opinions ought to be. But on the other hand there are certain matters that are too serious for easy complacency, and it is the more serious matters that Paul has in mind here. When deviation from his teaching is serious, Paul acts strongly. ‘Turn away from such people’, he says (16:17). What particular matters might be involved? A basic list might be the following. Errors concerning: (i) The reality of God and the supernatural, and the goodness of his creation. (ii) The supernatural events of the gospel. Paul will resist those who deny the cross of Christ (Philippians 3:19) or the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15). We remember John’s attitude towards those who deny the reality of Jesus as the Son of God, come in the flesh. (iii) The denial of grace (see Galatians 1:6–9). (iv) The authority of the apostles. The reality of revelation. Paul acts sternly towards those who deny his authority as an apostle. (v) Disinterest in the godly life. We might think of Jesus’ teaching concerning the false prophet who stands outside the narrow gate and the narrow way that leads to life. The twisting of the grace of God into licentiousness in 2 Peter and Jude.

There is room for differences of opinion in the Christian life. Paul himself has allowed for this in his teaching in Romans 14:1–15:13. He knows that we might be slow to grasp one aspect

of our salvation or another. He is sympathetic towards our weaknesses in this respect. But as we saw in connection with Romans 14, weakness is one thing, heresy is another. Here he is thinking of matters that destroy the gospel. Such false teachers are to be sternly resisted. Although we should not be too quick to be sure that someone has destroyed the foundation of the gospel, it does happen, and it happens in a way that varies from generation to generation. The fact that we can be quite clear about yesterday's heresies does not mean we are so aware of today's destructive heresies.

Paul regards false teaching of this kind as a moral problem, not just an intellectual problem. Although no one likes resisting heresy it has to be done.

**3. We should understand the motivation of false teaching.** <sup>18</sup>*For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Jesus Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting.* What is it that leads a man or woman to become some kind of false teacher? Paul says they are not servants of Christ but they are in the grip of their own appetites. False teachers generally want fame, influence and money. They speak sweetly and deceptively, and large numbers of Christians listen to them; the influence of their teaching may last a long time.

**4. We must be ready for Christians who are somewhat unsuspecting and easily deceived by false teaching.** Some Christians are vulnerable at this point. Paul says of the false teachers: 'By their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting' (16:18). The majority of Christians are gullible! And if we think we are not so gullible, we might be gullible ourselves but at a different point from the gullibility of others.

**5. Paul outlines the methods the false teachers use.** They use, Paul says, smooth and flattering speech, and they deceive people. Even highly intelligent, intellectual people sometimes are totally deceived by false teachers. One thinks of how Absalom 'stole

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the kingdom' from David. We have to face the fact: false teachers are a reality. We are gullible if we do not face reality. We are in danger of not protecting the flock of God if we are in positions of pastoral responsibility but do not realize the ever-present threat of losing sight of the gospel. Of course, our concern is not a negative concern; it is a positive one. We have no interest in harshness of spirit or a heresy-hunting mentality, but we must be positively loyal to our Lord Jesus Christ and keep his gospel authentic in the churches.