

Chapter 75

Wisdom and Innocence

(Romans 16:19–20)

Paul has warned his friends against false teaching (16:17) and has described the motives and methods of such people (16:18). He explains his concern. ¹⁹*For the report of your obedience has reached everyone, so I am rejoicing over you, but I want you to be wise in what is good, and innocent in what is evil.* Paul is concerned that they should not be misled by false teachers. Their loyalty to the gospel is famous. Everyone in the Christian world has heard about the spiritual maturity of the Christians at Rome and their dedication to God. In that Paul rejoices. But that makes him all the more concerned that nothing should entice the Roman Christians away from such loyalty to God and his word. He would like them to be ‘wise in what is good, and innocent in what is evil’.

1. **False teaching is often not faced at all.** There is a danger that the Christians at Rome should be so sweet and nice to everyone that they can hardly bear the thought of facing the fact of false teaching. The false teachers do not appear to be false teachers. They do not advertise their wolf-like intentions beneath the sheep’s clothing. They use smooth and flattering speech. So Christians – who hardly like to have any over-suspicious mentality – can be deceived by their own sweetness.

2. **Paul would like them to develop a more discerning alertness in this matter.** He acknowledges their spirituality but wants them

to show more wisdom than most Christians show in connection with false teaching.

As always we need to apply this to our own times. What is the false teaching today? What is it that in our circles is actually moving away from the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, or is perverting or ignoring the message of God's grace? Surely we face the same danger as ever. We do not think – or do we? – that our age escapes the danger of a perverted gospel, and that we need not bother very much with Paul's warning. Surely our day and age is no different. What then are the dangers we face?

We need to remember also that the devil constantly changes his tactics. He comes to us as an angel in disguise, and when we recognize him in one disguise he comes to us in another disguise. It is always easier to see **yesterday's** false teaching than it is to see **today's** false teaching. A few decades ago the church needed to see the devil's false trail as he sought to lead the church into (i) scepticism or (ii) dead orthodoxy. A generation ago, these were perhaps the two great problems. I doubt whether these are the two great problems today! Not so many Christian people are deceived now by **yesterday's** heresies. The scepticism of a previous generation more or less killed off the churches of those times. Those who believed in the destructive biblical criticism of a previous generation might still be influential in certain academic posts but nowadays they are not to be found in pulpits very much. They don't even believe in pulpits! They do not have a message that is capable of being preached in order to change the lives of men and women. All they can do is spread their dead and deadly scepticism in colleges and lecture halls. Equally the kind of boring dead orthodoxy of a generation ago has largely ceased. It is to be found in certain very conservative churches whose meetings are boring and whose numbers drop every day. It is only too easy to see yesterday's mistakes.

But what about today's mistakes? This is surely much more important for us. You are perhaps a good and sincere Christian.

The report of your obedience has reached everyone – as Paul would say, ‘I am rejoicing over you’ in this. Yet this is not the end of the matter. Paul has to add: ‘but I want you to be wise in what is good, and innocent in what is evil’ – and he is still thinking of false teaching.

I suspect that **today’s** heresies are revolving or will revolve around (i) excessive love of entertainment, and (ii) excessive concern with ‘phenomena’ – both to the neglect of the central message of the Scriptures. The devil does not go away; he is always a liar; he puts on one angel-like disguise after another.

Paul recommends that we get to be ‘wise . . . and innocent’ – wise to what is good and right, innocent of what is corrupting or destructive. How do we get such wisdom? (i) By being aware of the danger. If we gullibly accept everything that is happening in the churches we shall soon be led into something which damages the gospel. (ii) By developing habits of Bible-reading and by encouraging biblical teaching by the pastors in the churches. There must arise **habits** of comparing what is happening with the Scriptures. Let the true displace the false. (iii) By prayerfulness and watchfulness in the life of the churches, especially by the pastors whose task it is to protect sheep from wolves.

3. **He has a promise for us:** ²⁰*And the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.* False teaching might be successful for a while, even for a generation, but soon its fruit appears and it is seen for what it is. Paul would like the Christians at Rome to see it soon, but it will be seen for what it is eventually. And Paul is praying. *The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.* With care and prayer Satan will be defeated, and the gospel will triumph over his deceptions.