



St. Paul's Lutheran Church
Minot, ND
www.anchoredminot.com



The Epistle of Romans

The Justification of the Ungodly

Romans 16:1-27

In the early portions of chapter 16, the Apostle Paul shows us the urgency for encouraging each other – as Christians. That is to say; it is good to greet and welcome one another in the Church. However, even though the Church is called to be 'welcoming,' we must always understand that the church 'never' compromises regarding false teachings. The Church must be welcoming but not at the expense of compromising the doctrines of the faith. (See the warning in Rev. 2:18-28)

In verses 17-20, though, Paul takes a moment to give a warning. He warns the Church to be on alert for those who are creating divisions and laying forth stumbling blocks. While it may be hard to see in the English language, the way this is written in the original language is to emphasize the watching over the 'divisions and stumbling blocks' caused by people in the Church. In other words, while it is easy to look to the people creating the problems in the Church, it is more beneficial to be alert to the tactics of division and the smooth talk that brings forth trouble in the Church via certain people.

We must remember that the early Church – right after Jesus' resurrection – did not exist in peace. No! The early Church was quite messed up. In fact, the Church has 'always' been messy. People who set out to look for the 'perfect' Church have better luck finding a unicorn jumping over a pot of gold

at the end of a rainbow. The Church has always been messy and always will be. For example, the Church in Corinth was full of drunken, crazy, naked, weirdos – living in the big city and out of control. The churches in Galatia were full of legalistic nitpicks that were frantically concerned with outward appearances and not faith in Christ. The Church in Thessalonica was a group of people sitting in their lawn-chairs waiting for the rapture while calling in sick to work because they have it all figured out when Jesus is coming back. And John; he wrote to a group who had no love for their neighbor while believing that Jesus did not come in the flesh. The point being, and as already stated, the early Church was messy because we humans are messy – we are sinners. We should expect the mess and be ready to address divisions, obstacles, conflict, and more.

And so, since the Church is always full of sinners, there will always be individuals who cause division and create obstacles. Again, it is important to not direct the attention to the individuals but instead to direct attention to the problems created by certain individuals. Why? Because when divisions and obstacles are created in the church, it pulls the whole Church

(especially the simple, naïve and gullible) away from the central teachings of the Church. Paul says something similar in 1 Timothy. He tells the young pastor, Timothy, not to pay attention to silly myths and fanciful family trees. Pastors and Christians are to keep the main thing, the main thing. We keep alert for divisions, for divisions create factions, and factions tear us away from the Word and Sacraments and direct our attention away from confessing our own sin, to picking out the sin in everyone else. We keep alert towards obstacles because obstacles can mute the Word and Sacraments. Indeed, the devil loves when a church is overtly busy with silly mission statements, foolish ministry plans, and endless planning meetings that result in the Church not giving or receiving the Word and Sacraments. Divisions take the Church away from what is most fundamental – the core doctrines of the Church (*think of the Small Catechism as that which is central to our theology*). Obstacles cause the Church to think it is going somewhere grand, but in reality, the church is only spinning its wheels.

So, it is important to know, as a church, when to address divisions or obstacles. For the pastor and leaders, the primary question should always be, "How does this affect the Word and Sacraments?" What this means is that it is often beneficial to ignore petty divisions in the Church, because addressing a petty divisions may only add fuel to the fire and then cause a more significant division resulting in pulling people away from the Word and Sacraments. Also, sometimes it is wise to simply step over or around a small obstacle in the Church, because trying to remove a small obstacle may divert too much time away from the Word and Sacraments. However, when divisions begin to divide the already existing unity of the Church from the Word and Sacraments, and when an obstacle obstructs people from the Word and Sacraments, the pastor and leaders must work to address these harmful situations.

People who create division and lay down obstacles - so that sheep are kept from the Word and Sacraments – can be classified as wolves. And how are wolves to be treated? They must be fought against. Wolves are 'not' about uplifting the Word and Sacraments but are about feeding their appetites. Wolves want power, control, and their way in the Church, and often do it through smooth talk and flattery. Wolves usually do not bite with loud bloody bite but seduce sheep into the dark woods through eloquence – only to devour them in the shadows.

But as a church, pastors and parishioners must remain steadfast to the Word and Sacraments – the chief parts of our doctrine - neither giving into factions nor stumbling over obstacles. We must always be rooted and built up in Christ. And tragically, when needed, pastors and leaders must enact discipline upon wolves, not as a power struggle but to protect the sheep from wolves seeking to take them away from the Word & Sacraments. May the Lord strengthen us by the Gospel to keep steadfast.

