

## Romans 16:17, 18

[This paper was first delivered at doctrinal talks between the WELS and the CLC held at Eau Claire, Wisconsin, on January 13, 1988. It was agreed by both parties that the discussions should begin with two exegetical studies of this key passage. This was the WELS presentation.]

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When we think of the doctrine of church fellowship, the first Bible passage that comes to mind is Romans 16:17, 18. Difference of opinion about the exegesis of this passage played a significant role in the inter-synodical debate in the 1950s and 60s. Let us then turn to a careful restudy of this important passage.

ROMANS 16:17, 18: Παρακαλῶ δὲ ὑμᾶς, ἀδελφοί, σκοπεῖν τοὺς τὰς διχοστασίας καὶ τὰ σκάνδαλα παρὰ τὴν διδαχὴν ἣν ὑμεῖς ἐμάθετε ποιοῦντας, καὶ ἐκκλίνετε ἀπ' αὐτῶν· οἱ γὰρ τοιοῦτοι τῷ κυρίῳ ἡμῶν Χριστῷ οὐ δουλεύουσιν ἀλλὰ τῇ ἑαυτῶν κοιλίᾳ, καὶ διὰ τῆς χρηστολογίας καὶ εὐλογίας ἐξαπατῶσιν τὰς καρδίας τῶν ἀκάκων.

On the other hand, brothers, I urge you to keep an eye out for those people who keep on causing dissensions and offenses in opposition to the teaching which you learned. Avoid them! For people of this sort are not serving our Lord Christ but their own interests, and with promises of benefits and fine-sounding words they totally mislead the hearts of unsuspecting people.

To us, the two verses cited above have always been one of the key passages that address an important aspect of the doctrine of fellowship. It may come as a distinct surprise, therefore, to realize how lightly these verses are treated by many who undertake to comment on Paul's letter to the Romans. They will note how late these words come in the letter; how brief Paul's treatment of errorists is; how abruptly the subject supposedly is introduced. The conclusion they draw is that the topic of severing fellowship with errorists is an incidental feature of the letter, added almost as an afterthought on the apostle's part.

To deal in that way with any part of Scripture, whether it be with a longer or shorter section, is a cavalier treatment of God's inspired Word. In this case, however, it is also to ignore one of the syntactical "road signs" that confronts us at the outset of verse 17, and that is the conjunction δὲ. This adversative conjunction introduces the counterpart to what has been the point of the whole preceding section. In verses 3 to 16 Paul has used no fewer than sixteen times the aorist middle imperative ἀσπάσασθε, "greet." In verse 17 he is now going to use the counterpart or antithesis to "greet." That is his command: "avoid, stay away from."

Note that both categories of action enjoined in the imperatives, both the "greeting" and the "avoiding," are to be done by the same persons, the ἀδελφοί, the "brothers" addressed in verse 17.

How did these people become brothers? Purely and simply by their common faith in Christ Jesus, by their adherence to the plan of salvation which had been laid out so clearly and forcefully in Paul's letter now drawing to a close. Agreement in doctrine draws people together into unity. Hence it is only natural that they should render ready obedience to the imperative ἀσπάσασθε and greet the various Christians whom Paul now proceeds to name.

Under the entry ἀσπάζομαι, the lexicographer Thayer confidently asserts that this verb is "from σπάω with alpha intensive; hence properly 'to draw to one's self.'" One wishes that this etymology could be substantiated a bit more conclusively, particularly in view of the fact that other lexicons, such as the *Dictionary*

of *NT Theology* (Vol. 1, p. 206), state that the etymology is obscure. Although labeling the etymology as "uncertain," Kittel (Vol. 1, p. 497) nevertheless grants: "The basic meaning of the term seems to be to embrace."

With repeated imperatives Paul urges the brothers to welcome or to "greet" their fellow believers with outward expressions of friendship which reflect the invisible bond of fellowship that binds them together in faith and unity of doctrine. Those same expressions of fellowship, however, can not be used in dealing with those who disrupt the unity of the Roman church. Hence Paul with his  $\delta\epsilon$  introduces the adversative idea culminating in the imperative "avoid" or "stay away from." To "stay away from," of course, is the exact opposite of "drawing to one's self."

But before he gets to the imperative enjoining withdrawal, Paul brings another aspect of Christian activity to the scene, the activity urged in the infinitive *σκοπεῖν*, complementary to *παρακαλῶ*. While the activities described in the verbals *σκοπεῖν* and *ἐκκλίνετε* certainly work hand in glove, it might be worth noting that these two actions are not identical nor do they correspond exactly with one another as to their timing or type of action. There would seem to be at least two discernible differences: a) the differing lexical meanings of the two verbs; and b) the difference in syntactical construction (i.e., infinitive vs. imperative), as well as the possibility that reading an aorist here is preferable to the UBS reading *ἐκκλίνετε*, thus giving a contrast in tense between these two verbals.

As to vocabulary meaning, *ἐκκλίνω* with its concept of "avoiding," or "keeping away from" is always negative, whereas *σκοπέω* of itself is neutral and means "to watch," "to observe," "to keep an eye on." The positive or negative slant of the verb is determined by context. When Paul urges the Philippians, "Take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you" (3:17), he is obviously urging them to follow a good example.

That the case is quite different in Romans is evident from the vastly different object that *σκοπεῖν* here has. Here the object of observation is "people who keep on causing dissensions and offenses in opposition to the teaching which you learned." Paul packages everything very neatly and concisely. The eleven words between *τοὺς* and *ποιούντας* are all in the attributive position and serve to show very clearly the kind of trouble that is being perpetrated by the errorists who are to be "observed," or "watched," or we might say "watched out for" (negative) by the Roman Christians.

While we are on the subject, let us at once consider the nature and character of the trouble-makers as they are described by the apostle. Observing that the participle *ποιούντας* is in the present tense is critical to understanding the character of the people under consideration. They are not unlearned or ill-informed people who have unwittingly fallen into an error. It is not a chance slip of the tongue that has resulted in a misstatement on their part. The present participle tips us off as to their mode of procedure. They regularly, habitually or by design, keep on pursuing their course of action and hold out for their teaching and interpretation which is "in opposition to the teaching which you learned."

In the New Testament, *διδασχὴ* (teaching) seems regularly to refer to a teacher's whole body of instruction, not simply his exposition of a particular doctrine (e.g., Jesus' teaching—Mark 1:22; the Apostles' teaching—Acts 2:42; Paul's teaching—Romans 6:17). So also here, the *διδασχὴ* to which the errorists' teaching runs counter would be the whole truth of God as Paul has presented it very systematically to the Romans in this epistle. Sanday and Headlam are undoubtedly on target when in their paraphrase of our section they say, "Beware of those breeders of division and mischief-makers who pervert the gospel which you were taught."

Nothing is said about the motives or the sincerity of conviction which the errorists bring. Nothing is said about the specific doctrines that are being subverted, whether they be major or minor points, fundamental doctrines or non-fundamental. The only thing stated is that by departing from the "teaching which you learned," the errorists are effectively "causing dissensions and offenses." The term *διχοστασίας* could conceivably be

dissensions in civil or social matters, but *σκανδαλα* leaves no room for doubt that a theological and spiritual concern moves the Apostle. In this context offenses are those things that are injurious to faith, things that could in fact bring an unwary soul to destruction. Persistently adhered to and carried out to its logical conclusion, every error ultimately is faith-destroying. It is against the bringers of such evil that Paul urges his readers to be on guard (*σκοπεῖν*).

In returning to our previously introduced distinctions between *σκοπεῖν* and *ἐκκλίνετε*, let us now note the syntactical differences, thus reinforcing the cautions against drawing too close a correlation between the two verbals *σκοπεῖν* and *ἐκκλίνετε*. To be sure, "keeping an eye out for" and "avoiding" are activities that work in close concert, but they are not to be identified or equated, as Paul also indicates by his syntax. Note that Paul does not follow *παρακαλῶ* with two complementary infinitives on a coordinated basis, i.e., "I urge you to watch . . . and to avoid." Rather, he casts his sentence in the form of a complementary infinitive followed by an imperative. Hence the *καί* preceding the imperative actually is connecting the two finite verbs *παρακαλῶ* and *ἐκκλίνετε*. In our translation we have attempted to show the parallelism between these two finite verbs by letting them stand next to each other, each as an independent sentence. The sense is not appreciably changed, but it does serve to indicate that we do not have two fully coordinated infinitives.

A weighty consideration is the tense of *σκοπεῖν*. Paul chooses to use a present infinitive, indicating that the watching is a process, an activity having duration. He does not indicate how long the "watching" is to be extended. Nor does he specify how this "watching" is to be accomplished. It would seem of necessity to differ considerably depending on the person or persons being dealt with—whether they are locally present or physically absent; whether they are well-known or total strangers; whether they are brothers in fellowship with the Romans or people outside of the church. If they were absent, inquiry might be made by letter to ascertain precisely where they stand; local people who were well-known might be confronted on an apologetic basis to observe their reaction and test their tenacity to error. Church members might be rebuked and admonished and their response evaluated.

If it be contended that the *σκοπεῖν* does not admit of the possibility of an accompanying action or activity, then we need to look at a passage such as Galatians 6:1, where Paul urges: "Watch yourself, lest you also be tempted" (*σκοπῶν σεαυτόν, μὴ...πειρασθῆς*). A mere detached, passive observing of oneself would hardly accomplish the warding off of temptation that Paul here enjoins on the "strong" Galatians.

Sometimes it is conceded that *σκοπεῖν* allows or even presupposes additional activity, but that such activity is always for the benefit of the "observer" or "watcher." To be sure, in the half-dozen places where *σκοπεῖν* occurs in the New Testament, that is usually the case, but insisting on that as the only meaning would seem to confound the sense of Philippians 2:4, where Paul cautions his readers "not to look out only for your own things, but also for the things of others" (*μὴ τὰ ἑαυτῶν ἕκαστος σκοποῦντες, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὰ ἐτέρων ἕκαστοι*). The context, with its *καί* (also), really allows for the supplying of no verb other than the previously used *σκοποῦντες*. Hence, *σκοπεῖν* does permit the possibility of the "watching" being for the benefit of others. In fact, restricting the *σκοπεῖν* to allow only a self-interested watching would seem to run the risk of reducing the "watcher" or "observer" to one who is serving only his own *κοιλία*, an activity that Paul scores in the next verse.

To summarize: With its present tense *σκοπεῖν* speaks of an activity that has some duration. The text does not specify how long. It is the activity of watching or observing, which may be accompanied by other action. The verb itself does not specify by commanding one type of accompanying action or forbidding another. The situation observed during this process of observation admits of one or the other of two outcomes: It will or will

not change. If there were no possibility of change, if all were an accomplished fact both for the observer and the observed, then there would be no point in Paul's strongly urging (παρακαλῶ) them to watch (σκοπεῖν).

If there is a correction of the situation that resulted in dissensions and offenses, then Paul can follow with the imperative ἀσπάσασθε and thus urge the Romans to greet or welcome the former troublemakers. If the situation does not change, if the errorists remain unreconstructed and keep on making (ποιοῦντας) dissensions and offenses, then Paul and the Romans have no choice but to resort to the imperative of another verb, i.e., ἐκκλίνω.

It was previously implied that in our verse the imperative of ἐκκλίνω might better be read as an aorist. True, both Nestle and the UBS text print the present imperative. That the editors of the UBS choose not even to list a variant here in their critical apparatus perhaps says more about their lack of interest in fellowship matters than about the weight of the variant in question. Be that as it may, Nestle indicates that the present imperative which he has elevated to the text is supported by Gothic H (the Hesychian block of manuscripts) namely, the Alexandrian text. That manuscript evidence is genuinely ancient. If, however, one follows the principle of textual criticism that the reading which is both ancient and widespread is to be preferred, then one needs seriously to consider the reading in the aorist which also has Hesychian support (p46 & A), as well as the support of the Western or Latin Church (Uncials D & G), plus the Gothic K, i.e., the long line of Byzantine manuscripts. The reading ἐκκλίνατε (aorist) is every bit as ancient as the present imperative and certainly wider spread. Add to that the fact that reading an aorist imperative would be a most fitting counterpart to the sixteen aorist imperatives (ἀσπάσασθε) which come before Paul's adversative δὲ.

The point of this for our study is the relationship between the ἐκκλίνατε and σκοπεῖν. The present infinitive σκοπεῖν implies a durative action, which the aorist imperative does not. The difference between a present and an aorist imperative can perhaps be demonstrated from the workplace. If a foreman is confronted with a worker who wants to begin his coffee break twenty minutes early, the foreman would be likely to use a present imperative: Keep on working! Conversely, if a worker is inclined to stretch out his coffee break and not return to the job, the foreman's appropriate command would be an aorist imperative: Get to work! Start doing what you presently are not doing!

Thus, by sense, the aorist imperative is the better suited to call for an activity that speaks of a decisive and vital action which works in close harmony with but is subsequent to the preliminary and durative σκοπεῖν. The case, however, by no means rests entirely on having an aorist rather than a present imperative. Also the lexical meaning of ἐκκλίνω leads us in precisely that same direction of suggesting a decisive and final action, one that does not admit of repetition or durative action. The verb ἐκκλίνω means "to avoid; to separate from; to put distance between." Though etymologically the verb derives from κλίνω (to lean), the perfective prefix ἐκ and the accompanying preposition ἀπό leave no room for the idea of "leaning away from" while retaining some form of contact. Rather, Paul is speaking of a clean break, as Peter is also when he says of the person who "would love life and see good days," that "he must turn from evil" (ἐκκλίνατω ἀπὸ κακοῦ—1 Pe 3:11). The apostle is hardly condoning an indistinct and fuzzy situation in which the Christian continues to play footsie with evil.

The imperative of ἐκκλίνω calls for a clean break with errorists. That means a clear declaration that there no longer is any religious fellowship with former brothers in the faith. Every expression of joint worship and religious life is to be avoided. What Paul is here asking of the Romans is termination of fellowship, the earnest and loving testimony to errorists that their doctrine and/or practice is at variance with the gospel, and as such is putting their souls and their eternal salvation into jeopardy. This is not necessarily to be equated with

excommunication, which is essentially the declaration to an individual that he has fallen from the faith and is now to realize himself as being outside of the realm of salvation.

It might be in place to remind ourselves that termination of fellowship is a religious function. It does not mean social ostracism or boycotting those with whom we are not in fellowship. This is evident from 1 Corinthians 5:9,10, where Paul indicates that if all contact with fornicators were to be avoided, than we must perforce have to take leave of this world.

As the second word of verse 17, the δὲ, gave us the drift and the slant of that verse, so the second word of verse 18, the γὰρ, tips us off as to the emphasis of this verse. Verse 18 does not continue with a description of the troublemakers or give us additional clues as to how to identify them or to deal with them. The γὰρ rather gives us the reason for the earnest and serious action of avoiding all joint religious activities with errorists. The Holy Spirit, through the Apostle Paul, gives us two reasons justifying this avoiding.

First of all he says, "People of this sort are not serving our Lord Christ." It was noted that the terminology of verse 17 is broad enough to cover a rather wide range of situations involving error and errorists. The word τοιοῦτοι, "people of this sort," continues that. It does not pinpoint whether the errorists are malicious deceivers or themselves deceived, whether they are in the church or outside of it, whether they are on the scene or absent, or perhaps still coming in the future. Paul's purpose here is simply to emphasize why such people must be avoided. In their opposition to the gospel, to the "teachings which you have learned," they are an affront to God. In a common literary device (chiasm) Paul declares: "Our Lord Christ they are not serving, but (they are serving) their own κοιλία."

The key term is δουλεύουσιν, which reflects the role of a δοῦλος, a slave. Recall that Paul called himself a δοῦλος in the opening verse of this epistle. The most notable feature of a slave is that he does not exercise his own will. He is subject to the will of his master and hence is in service to him and totally subject to him.

To become our Redeemer, Christ purchased us at the price of his own life blood. We belong to him. He owns us. He has every right to expect all of our life and our teaching to conform to his Word and will.

Consistently and persistently to teach or to live otherwise than God's Word teaches is not only heresy but rebellion, and in the final analysis, blasphemy. Obviously God's honor demands that we not only avoid such heinous activity ourselves, but also that we disassociate ourselves from all who do. They are not serving our Lord Christ but their own selfish interests (κοιλία), regardless of how subtle or how crass their disobedience may be. In opposing God's will and substituting their own, they have really become tools of Satan, whom "the God of peace will soon crush...under your feet" (v. 20).

But in addition to protecting God's honor, there is another kind of protection that is of concern to the Apostle, and that is the defense of blood-bought souls. Paul says that separation from errorists is absolutely essential, because "with promises of benefits and fine-sounding words they totally mislead unsuspecting people."

Error is nothing to be toyed with, even by the strongest of Christians. It is, however, doubly dangerous to the ἀκάκων, simple folk who themselves think or devise no evil against others and hence suspect no attack on themselves. As the Savior's heart went out to these, so must the shepherd's heart. Such people need to be protected and insulated from the onslaughts of error. The two words used to convey the concept of false teaching do not conclusively tell us whether the errorists are ill-informed people and themselves misled or whether they are vicious wolves consciously and intentionally fleecing the flock. Nor does it make any appreciable difference. The damaging effect on the simple is the same. Such unsophisticated people are thoroughly deceived (perfective prefix ἐκ on ἐξαπατῶσιν) by the errorists' speech which is well or convincingly spoken (εὐ-λογία) by virtue of promising things that are useful or beneficial (χρηστο-λογία). The errorists promise good things, but they do not deliver. Again, that is a ploy of Satan, the arch-deceiver, whose evil plan must be thwarted by separating his henchmen from the simple.

Paul's words in verse 17 may at first sight seem unduly harsh and severe, but they have a beneficent purpose. As verse 18 indicates, separation from error and errorists is absolutely necessary, both to vindicate God's honor and to protect his redeemed. Obeying the Lord's command "Avoid them" is vital for the health of the church. Hence we should not be embarrassed by it but should practice it eagerly.