



Romans 16:17-27

I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. 18 For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive. 19 For your obedience is known to all, so that I rejoice over you, but I want you to be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil. 20 The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

21 Timothy, my fellow worker, greets you; so do Lucius and Jason and Sosipater, my kinsmen.

22 I Tertius, who wrote this letter, greet you in the Lord.

23 Gaius, who is host to me and to the whole church, greets you. Erastus, the city treasurer, and our brother Quartus, greet you.

25 Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages 26 but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith— 27 to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.

We are picking up where we left off last Sunday, in the middle of the list of greetings at the end of Paul's letter to the church in Rome. I trust we learned that this is not just a boring list of names but that it represented half a lifetime of deep relationships. Paul depended on each of these people and they were dear to him.



But this last section of chapter 16 reminds me of pictures like these. You have to take a second look to see that doesn't belong. There is something that does not seem to belong in this chapter. Verses 1-16 is a list of greetings and verses 21-23 contains more greetings and names. But verses 17-20 completely breaks off from personal greetings and gave strict warnings—watch out! What follows is a stern warning about false teachers and the damage they inflict.



This warning does not fit here for three reasons. First, because it seems to be crammed right in the middle of the personal greetings. These greetings were all full of good feelings, thanksgiving and each with a personal touch. Second, it does not fit because this is not what Paul normally does in his letters. And thirdly, it is out of place because Paul did not warn against false teaching in the rest of the book of Romans. Now he did give this warning in

his other letters. It is a fairly common theme of his but it just seems so out of place stuck here at the end of the book.

But maybe that's all the more reason why we should play close attention to it. Because it does not seem to fit it may be all the more significant for us. But are we really in danger of succumbing to false teaching? Could any of us be led astray by false doctrine? Could we be convinced to believe something to be true that we currently know to be false? Maybe you are thinking that only the weak-minded and poorly trained Christians can fall for these things.

Well first, let look at their method and the result. Verse 18—*by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naïve*. There again you might be thinking that this could never happen to you because you are not naïve. But there's the problem, isn't it? You may not realize that you are naïve until you are led astray. And then once you are led astray, since you are deceived, you don't realize what has happened.

But the key is how people are led astray in the first place. “By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naïve.” We are not told what the false teachers are peddling. It is something that is “contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught.” But we are told how it happens—by smooth talk and flattery. And the more skilled they are at smooth talk and flattery, the more successful they will be at deceiving the hearts of the naïve.

We see that this immediately becomes a leadership issue. We know that these leaders will be charismatic and convincing. For a variety of reasons, they will be likeable. And if they are not inherently likeable, they will convince you to like them. I have seen this so many times that it is starting to make my head spin.

One of the first times I encountered it was at my former church. I have told this story before in some detail, but let me summarize it. About two years after I left, they hired a senior pastor that was in many ways the opposite of the man I worked with and who served that church for almost 25 years. This guy was much younger and had a bunch of new ideas. He was of the charismatic type—and by that I mean his personality, not his theology. Now you have to understand that this was a very loving and forgiving church. If you messed up, they would forgive you and keep working with you to succeed. But even in this healthy environment, the senior pastor began to deceive and lie. But he was such a smooth talker that whenever you went into his office to confront him, you would leave fifteen minutes later convinced that everything was fine. He was that good. Even those who knew something was dreadfully wrong could never quite nail him down.

Eventually after confronting him and doing all they could, the church leadership decided that they had to let him go. In his final sermon he carefully divided the congregation with his words. He would criticize the church for firing him and half of those seated there would cheer. I listened to this sermon and it was one of the most horrific things I have ever heard. The very next Sunday he divided the church and took almost half of the people with him.

And here's the crazy part—this new church met the following Sunday and they already had their tax exempt status. It takes months and months to get this exemption which means that he had been planning this out for months. He was a smooth talker and was able to deceive people by flattering them and slowly dividing them. He literally divided families in half. It's exactly how Paul described it— *watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles*. Twelve years later there is still healing going on in that church.

But that story pales in comparison to a church the Call Committee learned about this past week. By the way, thank you for praying for us. It was an exhausting two days but very fruitful. We had 7 skype interviews on Monday and Tuesday and the result is that we decided to invite three of the seven to a 3-hour on-site interview in the next few weeks. At least 2 of them will take place next weekend already.

One of the candidates is from Eau Claire and told us about a situation he had with a church called Valleybrook. Over ten years, their smooth talking, flattery saturated pastor created a cult-like atmosphere in the church. It culminated when the 49 year old Sr. pastor literally adopted the 32 year old associate pastor, Nate, who has a wife and kids of his own. They legally changed the last name of the associate to the sr. pastor's last name. I don't understand the teaching because I don't think anyone does, but they called it "the knitting." The two families were forced to resign and both moved to Texas and have started another cult down there. I watched a video of Nate's parents talking about how their son rejected them and gave them a copy of the adoption papers. Can you imagine how devastated they are?

And what we need to understand is that these incredible abusive situations are happening within evangelical churches. My former church is an EFCA church and the one in Eau Claire is Baptist General Conference, now called Converge, that in my experience is a healthy denomination. John Piper's church in Minneapolis is a Converge church.

Of course there are countless instances of sexual misconduct and abuse happening within evangelical churches but I want to stay focused on leadership abuses—those who smooth talk and flatter their way into deception of all kinds. But in reality, the predatory nature of those who commit sexual abuse is not much different than the cases I am talking about. These men are predatory by nature. They move from one church to another committing the same kinds of acts over and over again. Before he was hired at Sauk Prairie, he closed down a church in Milwaukee. Apparently, the church never asked many questions about that incident.

In the past two weeks I also learned sad news about two large ministries. You may have heard of Teen Mania, one of the largest ministries aimed at youth who would put on the Acquire the Fire conferences with tens of thousands of youth in attendance. On Thursday, a warrant was issued for the founder and president of the ministry.

He got into massive financial trouble because he was extravagant with his spending and refused to be accountable to anyone else. For just one of their conferences, they spent \$125,000 for one speaker. They paid him a \$100,000 honorarium for speaking one time. They flew him and his family in a private Lear jet and put him up in a \$2,000 per night hotel. When you spend money like that, you're bound to get into trouble. They are listed as the fifth worst charity in the nation. They owe over five million dollars. The president was supposed to appear in court to answer about these debts but since he didn't show, they issued a warrant for his arrest.



CHARITY NAVIGATOR
Your Guide To Intelligent Giving

TOP 10 Charities in Deep Financial Trouble

Rank	Charity	Working Capital
1	Seattle Symphony	\$-12,800,355
2	Hale House Center	\$-11,042,958
3	Canary Foundation	\$-7,304,373
4	Childhelp	\$-6,112,196
5	Teen Mania International	\$-5,197,150
6	Child Welfare League of America	\$-4,511,819
7	Agape Villages	\$-3,724,297
8	A Contemporary Theatre	\$-3,502,841
9	Livermore Valley Performing Arts Center	\$-3,107,957
10	Ballet San Jose	\$-2,837,451

You may have heard that R.C. Sproul Jr. was caught having signed up on the Ashley Madison website, potentially looking for a one-night stand. Ligonier Ministries suspended him from his leadership position for one year. This is obviously sad news. But this is not the first time he has been in hot water. In 2006, Sproul was kicked out of his own denomination. He was charged with spiritual abuse of church members, tax fraud, identity theft.¹ Sproul allegedly repented for these actions. However, a mere two days later, his church reinstated him as an elder, despite the fact that according to their own denomination, it was illegal to do so.

By the way, I became aware of most of these in just the past week. All of these men, serving in evangelical churches and ministries, have done just what this passage says. They have used smooth talk and flattery to get their way. They have been spiritual bullies and manipulated people into being completely loyal to them and deceiving them into thinking everything was fine when in reality, they were on a sinking ship. They have caused divisions and created obstacles contrary to sound doctrine. They all might be able to sign a good statement of faith. Maybe they don't hold to any blatant heresy. However, their actions in relation to their leadership positions represent a long list of Scriptural violations. By their actions, they have gone against sound doctrine.

Unfortunately, I have saved the worst for last. If you are familiar with Gospel for Asia, you no doubt have had the highest respect for the work they do and especially for their founder and president, K.P Yohannen. KP was just a young Christian who took great steps of faith. For eight years, with practically no support and through great suffering, he went go from town to town

preaching the gospel to those who had never heard. One man grew this ministry that supports thousands of Indian pastors who work tirelessly for the Lord. The ministry has grown so much that they now bring in 1.5 million dollars every week. There was and still is much to celebrate about Gospel for Asia.

Unfortunately, there is a very long list of problems with the ministry and they all point back to KP. Yohannen. Just this past Friday, the ECFA-the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability, removed them from their membership for multiple violations. The ECFA has a reputation of being extremely lax in their oversight, so for them to make this decision is a huge deal.

Terminated for failure to comply with Standard 2 Governance, Standard 3 Financial Oversight, Standard 4 Use of Resources, Standard 6 Compensation-Setting and Related-Party Transactions, Standard 7.1 Truthfulness in Communications, and Standard 7.2 Giver Expectations and Intent²

It is reported that on Friday, KP's son held an emergency staff meeting and told everyone that the ECFA removed them because they don't understand how international ministry is supposed to be run. There is over 20 million dollars that are currently unaccounted for. The Department of Homeland Security is investigating the ministry and KP Yohannen specifically. It is not out of the question that he will spend some time in prison if he can't plea bargain down the charges.

This week I spoke with an employee that worked for GFA for nine years. He reported directly to KP and spent a large amount of time with him. KP demanded respect at every turn. It was expected that every time he entered a room for a meeting, everyone would stand in his honor. On the field, his title is "His Eminence Most Reverend Dr. K.P. Yohannan, Metropolitan Bishop," When new pastors are ordained in India, KP would sit in his bishop's chair with his white robe and high bishop's hat and new initiates bow down and kiss his ring. Already, about 100 staff have left the ministry because they have finally seen the problems in their true light. There are 60 former staffers have signed onto in an attempt to bring changes to the ministry.³ This man told me that KP was almost always harsh with the staff. He would routinely get chewed out for all manner of minor infractions.

The damage to the gospel from these is incalculable. The Hindus in India hate, I mean hate Christians. They hate the gospel and will use this to further persecute and denigrate Christianity. What will happen to the thousands of itinerant pastors in India when the money stops flowing to support them? What kinds of ripples will flow through the U.S. once this makes the headlines? The damage is incalculable.

These men do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive. Any of these stories are tragic by themselves but the combination of just a sampling of abusive leaders is overwhelming. What are we to do? How should we respond? Let me give a few brief responses from this passage.

1. Watch out, avoid them. This is exactly how Paul starts his warning. What do Wisconsinites do when driving country roads this time of year, especially at dusk? We watch for deer! We know they are there and we know they will suddenly throw themselves in front of our cars. In the same way, we need to be aware that these kinds of false teachers and abusive leaders are all around us. The stories I have told have come from evangelical churches and ministries. Paul is not warning us to avoid Satanists and occultists. These people arise from within our own ranks.



These men and in some cases women, are all wolves in sheep's clothing. But the problem is, like this (above) picture, they don't take off their masks to show their true selves. They are much more like this picture—they blend right in and tend to look like everyone else, which makes them that much more dangerous.

We need to watch out for them and avoid them because once you are deceived, it's very hard to come out of that deception. That's the nature of deception, isn't it? The man I spoke with from Gospel for Asia took nine years to finally

see the truth. Unfortunately, countless people still give him their full devotion. So we need to watch out and be on guard.

And it's not just "out there somewhere" where we have to be on guard. There have been 4-5 church splits that I know of in Viroqua. And whenever there is a church split you have a leadership problem.

2. Be wise and innocent. Paul wrote, *I want you to be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil.* This is probably a paraphrase of Jesus' teaching in Matthew 10:16. "Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves."

Wisdom comes from being on guard and knowing how to discern between truth and error. Now that we know what is happening, our church has stopped supporting GFA for now. Not one more dollar of your generous giving will be sent to this ministry until their house is cleaned and they can prove that everything has changed.

3. Pray. Pray that ministries like GFA will clean house and continue to do good work. A few years ago, it was discovered that the president of Voice of the Martyrs has been involved in child sexual abuse. When this was discovered, he took his own life. This was absolutely tragic news but their ministry was able to recover and continue.⁴

4. Claim the promise of ultimate victory. Paul encouraged his readers with these words. *The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.* I think Paul probably meant an ultimate victory. Satan is a defeated foe but like a wounded animal, he is meaner and more evil than ever. But when we submit to God and resist the devil, God promises us that he will flee from. So this is a promise of ultimate victory but also of potential daily victory over our ancient foe.

5. Don't follow men! This is the logical result of Paul's warning to avoid false teachers. Don't follow and put your faith in men. Now Paul did say, "Follow me as I follow Christ." So there is a sense that it is good to pattern our lives after Godly men and women. But don't put your full trust in them and be devoted to them in an unhealthy way. The faith and lives of countless people have been absolutely shattered by the sins of these so-called leaders.

6. Follow Christ

Follow the Lord Jesus who is so beautifully described in tis closing hymn. Please read this with me.

25 Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages 26 but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith— 27 to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.

Rich Maurer
October 4, 2015

¹ <http://hushmoney.org/RPCGA-judgment.pdf>

² <http://www.ecfa.org/FormerMembers.aspx>

³ <http://www.gfadiaspora.com/>

⁴ But then I just learned that VOM also has its own share of ethical and legal dilemmas:
<http://www.lighthouse Trailsresearch.com/blog/?p=14889>