

ROMANS 16:17, 18

DEALING WITH DOCTRINAL DEVIATION

“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. 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 naïve.”¹

Some professing Christians are to be avoided! To the spiritually astute, it is immediately obvious that despite protestations to the contrary, some supposed saints do not serve the Lord Christ; rather, they are utterly focused on gratifying their own desires. Consequently, though they may be unconscious of their own motives, it is nevertheless the case that their speech, though plausibly reasonable, is geared to deceive the naïve. We have no business entertaining any thoughts that we honour Christ through tolerating such individuals either in our assemblies or in our homes! It is not godly to tolerate deception—it is wicked.

The Apostle of Love has warned believers of the danger in entertaining such deceivers. “Many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward. Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works” [2 JOHN 7-11].

It is important to note that John did not say they were deceivers and opposed to God, though that would be a true statement. Rather, the Apostle uses the definite article, saying that such an individual is “*the* deceiver and *the* antichrist.” It is as though John is saying that the motivating spirit behind such individuals who are often resident within our assemblies is that of the coming antichrist. Such individuals stand opposed to truth; and through their teaching and actions they supplant the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. Perhaps you recoil from speaking so forcefully about those who wander from the Faith, but the Apostle of Love was not at all reticent about labelling such people as individuals who deceive and thus as people who are opposed to the cause of Christ.

There exists a woeful lack of discernment among the saints in this day so late in this dispensation. Trained by our culture to avoid becoming involved, we hold back from investing our lives in one another. Church discipline is unheard of. Should a congregation attempt to hold its members accountable, the courts seem eager to jump in to ensure that wayward members maintain their “rights.” In our rush to gain members, we are loath to hold those same members accountable for their lifestyle—for their words and for their actions.

We who are followers of the Risen Son of God are not called to engage in a witch hunt, searching for doctrinal deviation; however, when we observe professed believers turning aside from the path of righteousness, we are responsible to halt the error before it contaminates the assembly. Christians must bear in mind the apostolic maxim that “A little leaven leavens the whole lump” [1 CORINTHIANS 5:6]; a little error destroys the work of God.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Before going farther in our study this day, I must pause to point out a significant truth. Churches are not kept safe by a doctrinal review committee, or by learned scholars pouring over the writings that flood the market; churches are kept safe because the people of God have committed themselves to the written Word of God. Christians in this Dispensation of Grace are not dependent on “prophets” purporting to have a “word from God.” We have the written Word of God, the completed canon of Scripture. Moreover, the Spirit of God resides in each believer and He thus guides us as a congregation! This is John’s meaning when he writes, “I write these things to you about those who are trying to deceive you. But the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie—just as it has taught you, abide in him” [1 JOHN 2:26, 27].

It is not that we do not need teachers among the assemblies—the ascended Master Himself gives teachers to the churches [EPHESIANS 4:11-14]; rather, it is the Spirit of Christ resident within the congregation who guides us, watching over us to deliver us from evil. So long as the congregations walk in the Spirit—seeking the will of the Master and endeavouring always to do those things which honour Him—we should anticipate that we will be able to discern the will of God. Should a congregation become self-centred, seeking their own comfort rather than seeking the will of the Father, that congregation will be susceptible to every sort of evil and incapable of distinguishing between their own desires and the will of the Spirit. In fact, such people will impose their will on the congregation, all the while insisting that they are doing the will of God!

Let me speak very plainly to the congregation: doctrinal deviation is not theoretical, nor should we imagine that it is somehow remote; it lies always close at hand. History is littered with the husks of dead congregations and dead denominations that were once noted for their adherence to the Word of God. At some point, those congregations and/or denominations substituted man’s imagination for the revealed mind of the True and Living God. And though such religious groups may still attract a following at this time, the Spirit of God is long-since departed and “Ichabod” is writ large above the door. All one need do to verify this real and present danger is look at the desolate hulks that litter the Canadian landscape—derelict church buildings that once housed vibrant congregations that are long-since dead.

Our fallen nature is prone to promote our personal interests over the will of God; this is especially true whenever we take our eyes off the Lord. Any of us are capable of performing the most detestable and outrageous acts against the Spirit of Grace—and we shall perform such despicable acts if we fail to adhere to the Book or if we cease to esteem the people of God as His holy people. Ultimately, we are responsible as a congregation to fear God more than we fear any mere mortal; and fearing God, we are to hold fast to His Word. Then, holding to His Word, we will not tolerate doctrinal deviation.

THE MENACE — “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.” It is easy to imagine that Paul is speaking of the introduction of doctrinally suspect teaching. However, examination of the original text leads to the conclusion that he was addressing a much different issue than infiltration by unbelievers intent on disrupting the faithful, though such could possibly be included by the language. Paul speaks of those who cause divisions; what is in view are individuals who divide churches into factions. Especially does the Apostle have in view individuals who create factions that are loyal to themselves. They may be people who come into the congregation from outside, or they may be long-time, prominent members.

Perhaps these individuals show up in a congregation, having left another congregation where they had trouble. Usually, they give no indication that they had trouble in their former church, but investigation will reveal that is why they left. They are usually knowledgeable, perhaps even capable and able at providing a message or a Bible study. Though the Word warns us to make full proof of those who wish to be teachers, people like this are usually warmly welcomed, in part because the people of God lack discernment, or more commonly because they have grown spiritually lazy and don't want to exercise discernment.

However, problems quickly develop. These individuals want to push a particular point of doctrine to the exclusion of a more balanced view of biblical truth. They are critical of those who disagree with them, and there are always some who disagree because they are not so easily taken in by a glib story. When everyone does not go their way, they will leave and take those who follow them with them to establish another church which is more biblical, or more faithful.

Perhaps they are long established members of the congregation who have a reputation as spiritual leaders but without substance to their message. In this instance, they attack anyone who is teaching truth that challenges them or that does not accord with their own peculiar view of truth. They demand that the church expel those who threaten their comfortable existence. After all, they and those who agree with them are the vital component of the church. If individuals leave because they disagree with the power brokers, it is no great loss. They are convinced that they hold to truth, even if it means pushing out those who disagree with them.

Paul also warns of those who create obstacles. The word he uses is *skandalon*; we get our word "scandal" from this Greek term. However, Paul is not thinking of scandalous behaviour; rather, he is focused on people who add to the message of truth. They create rules, purportedly to give guidance for those who want to follow Christ. This is what the Pharisees were doing in Jesus' day, just as they were exposed when Jesus said of them, "They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. They do all their deeds to be seen by others" [MATTHEW 23:4, 5]. The Master also confronted them when He said, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in" [MATTHEW 23:13].

Those whom Paul identifies do not deny the essentials of the Faith, but they are prepared to introduce demands that are not part of the biblical message, and insist on conformity to their rules. Often, the concepts introduced are not wrong of themselves, but when they become a test of the Faith, they become wrong. It is not wrong to worship on a particular day, but to insist that only the day you choose is sanctioned by God is to introduce a rule which God does not establish. It is not wrong to maintain a diet consisting of some restrictions; but to impose that diet as a test of spirituality is wrong. Standards of dress are not necessarily wrong; but when we demand that any who wish to worship with us must meet our standard, we err. We must always bear in mind Paul's words that "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" [GALATIANS 5:1].

This is not to say that false teachers are not a problem—they are a serious threat to the churches. Jude warns, "Certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ" [JUDE 4]. Hear what the brother of our Lord said: "Certain people have crept in unnoticed." These vandals were even then present among the assemblies! And though God had warned against them, designating their character, the people of God were responsible to identify them and act to expel them from positions of influence.

Jude echoes Peter's warning written near the same time. "False prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed. And in their greed they will exploit you with false words" [2 PETER 2:1-3a]. Peter says so long as there have been a people identified as worshippers of the True and Living God, there has been a large body of liars who seek to dissuade the faithful from the truth. That trend will only accelerate as we approach the last days.

It has been said that a church is always one generation from apostasy. In reality, the descent into apostasy is often much more rapid than that; apostasy can happen within a matter of days! God appointed the elders of the congregation to guard against heterodoxy and against heteropraxy. What is fascinating is that the danger is not solely from outside the congregation—often the danger arises from within! It makes little difference whether the threat arises from outside or within, if it is not addressed, it must result in destruction and shame.

The point merits emphasis as it is vital for a healthy congregation and because it is neglected in so many churches in this day. A primary task of elders is guarding the flock. If an elder is unwilling to confront error, or if an elder is silent in the face of danger, he is disqualified from serving in that position. Let him find another calling to occupy his time, for he is of no value to the cause of Christ. Let me say very clearly that the pulpit is no place for cowards; the demands of the Faith require brave, courageous men.

Paul wrote Timothy concerning this matter. "Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared" [1 TIMOTHY 4:1, 2]. Did you notice the language employed? "Some will depart from the Faith!" These are professed Christians who are superficially committed to Christ and His cause. Later, in the same letter, Paul cautioned the young theologian, "Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers [1 TIMOTHY 4:16]."

Paul wrote Titus that an elder "must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.

"There are many who are insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party. They must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach. One of the Cretans, a prophet of their own, said, 'Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.' This testimony is true. Therefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith, not devoting themselves to Jewish myths and the commands of people who turn away from the truth" [TITUS 1:9-14].

The overseer must speak the truth, forcefully confronting error—both errant teaching and errant practise. God calls His shepherd to be faithful; He has never commended the minister for being innovative or creative. The modern view of preaching sees it as entertainment, or as a means of affirmation of preconceived ideas. Where is that celebrated verse that teaches us to make the complacent feel good about their lifestyle that emphasises personal comfort? Where do we find that notable passage that instructs the minister of the Word to affirm the slothful? Where did you find that apparently renowned verse that says to make the world feel comfortable in sin and in their rebellion against grace? We are warned of difficult times and opposition because we hold to the faithful Word. We cannot remove the warning that, "All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived" [2 TIMOTHY 3:12, 13].

Modern Christians too often ignore the command to “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love” and to “give preference to one another in honour” [ROMANS 12:10], deliberately choosing instead to make sinners comfortable even as they face damnation rather than esteeming the brotherhood of believers. It is an iteration of the warning “That in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people” [2 TIMOTHY 3:1-5].

As he drew his final letter to the young pastor who had shared so many hardships during his second and third missionary tours, Paul provided a final charge. “Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching” [2 TIMOTHY 4:1, 2]. The pastor is responsible to “reprove, rebuke and exhort”; he is not charged to affirm, soothe and stroke; the man of God must comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

The menace is that error, once entrenched, spreads until it contaminates every facet of the word of the Faith; and as error grows, the people of God become comfortable in its presence. They shortly approve of the most detestable practises, believing that they are pleasing God. They believe tolerance of wickedness demonstrates moral courage, when in fact it is evidence that the people have embraced moral turpitude and that they are suffering acute spiritual cecity. Evil, at first abhorrent and repugnant, is soon tolerated and at last becomes familiar and acceptable. Because evil presents itself through the intermediacy of one supposed to be godly, despite creating discomfort in those witnessing the evil, it is nevertheless tolerated.

As vital as pastors are in the economy of God, did you notice in the text that Paul addresses the entire congregation? Ultimately, it is not the preachers alone who are responsible to watch for error; the entire assembly bears responsibility before God for the conduct of the congregation. This means that when a congregation permits error to continue unchecked, all alike share guilt. You cannot hide behind the plea that you did nothing wrong, for if you did nothing in the face of error insinuating itself into the congregation, you are culpable. Let’s unpack this command. The word that is translated “Watch out,” is a present, active infinitive. The import of this information is that the thought communicated is that the congregation is to be on constant alert, watching in particular those who cause divisions and create obstacles.

It is particularly unsettling to note that these whom the Apostle is identifying are likely true believers; however, they are disseminating error and leading others into error. He speaks in a similar vein when he writes the Philippian Christians. He acknowledges that his imprisonment has emboldened some of the brothers to speak the Word without fear [see PHILIPPIANS 1:14]. Then, he speaks of the motive behind their preaching when he says, “Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of rivalry, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment” [PHILIPPIANS 1:15-17]. He does not question that they are believers! In fact, he seems to acknowledge them as fellow Christians.

Paul identifies these dangerous individuals, writing, “Many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things” [PHILIPPIANS 3:18, 19]. Focused on their own comfort, these deviating saints give no thought to the consequences of their teaching; and if the people permit this error to persist, they share in the evil that is perpetuated through the false teaching.

These individuals are a menace because they refuse to declare the Word of God in its entirety and they refuse to live according to the will of God. They are more concerned with finding comfort in the world than they are with doing what God commands. Because they seek approval from the world rather than from the Master, don't like to hear the Master say, "Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets" [LUKE 6:26].

THE MOTIVE — "Such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites." Though the menace of those who cause division and who create obstacles is grave, it is necessary to briefly examine the motive of these individuals. We are fortunate in that the Apostle identifies the motive of such individuals in our text. Older translations stated that they served their own belly; but it is far more accurate to say that "They are serving their own desires."²

These individuals—professing Christians—seek their personal comfort rather than the glory of God. They are not prepared to accept the instruction that admonishes the child of God, "Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus" [2 TIMOTHY 2:3]. Their attitude can be described as, "Let Jesus have the beatings and the sweat and the toil; give me the praise and the glory." These individuals are perfectly prepared to sing and dance, to wave their arms in the air and say that they have worshipped, but they are uncomfortable should the preacher confront them with any teaching that challenges thinking, or with teaching that exposes their private sin, or with teaching that confronts their self-centred desires.

For them, the Faith is a matter of personal comfort. Instead of being the Body of Christ, church is a building where they go to give an hour, perhaps, of their busy and boring lives. Worship is an act that they can schedule, turning it on and turning it off at will; worship is practised and presented as a production so that others can admire their skill in worship, rather than being a time when they meet the Risen Lord of Glory and become lost in wonder as they marvel at His mercies and admire the grace of the True and Living God. In short, the motive of the individuals who earned the apostolic censure is to ensure that they are not personally ill at ease in their lives.

I briefly pastored a congregation that chose to align with what was comfortable rather than with what was right. The congregation no longer exists, so I am at liberty to divulge some of the inside story of its demise. Shortly after I had arrived at that church, God began to bless and the congregation began to grow. Soon, we saw a great harvest of souls begin as people from the neighbourhood heard the message of life and began to respond to the appeal of the Spirit.

Their coming was deeply offensive to many of the older members of the congregation. You see, a large majority of those coming into the assembly and coming to faith were first generation Canadians. Their first language was Farsi, or Creole, or Mandarin, or Spanish—and that was a source of great discomfort to some, especially some who had held power for a long time. The first person to respond to the appeal from the pulpit was a gracious lady from Barbados. As she came on a Sunday morning to present herself as one who had trusted Christ and who now sought baptism as a believer in the Risen Son of God, I rejoiced with her and presented her to the congregation as a new creature in Christ.

Suddenly, a man stood up and shouted from the congregation, "She cain't be saved! I ain't talked to her yet. I'll decide if she is saved." It was the chairman of the board.

Now let me say that you will find no boards in the Word of God except from a shipwreck. Nevertheless, he was chairman of the board, and he was insistent that she couldn't be saved until he said so.

² **God's Word Translation** (Baker, Grand Rapids, MI 1995)

His rude interruption necessitated a meeting of “the board.” After considerable discussion, the board decided that I could determine if a person was saved or not. I gently rebuked them by pointing out that I was incapable of deciding anything. However, as a congregation, we could hear the testimony of those who confessed Christ and thus receive them for baptism and church membership. We had no ability to see the heart, though we could hold those who confessed Christ to the standard of the Word after they had openly identified with Him. This board seemed unable to grasp the concept.

The conflict had forced into the open a problem, however. It would mean many more meetings as “the board” tried to determine whether to adhere to the Word of God or defer to one cantankerous old man. The climax of our multiplied discussions came on an evening when I presented again the teaching of the Word concerning the assembly. We had a Bible study that looked into the issue of congregational polity and church structure.

That particular meeting did not end well as the “chairman of the board,” clearly exasperated at not being able to respond to the Word of God, ejaculated, “We are Canadian and we have a constitution. If there is a conflict between our constitution and the Bible, we have to do what our constitution says.”

I attempted to defuse the anger he expressed by offering him a copy of the constitution and saying, “There is nothing in our constitution that conflicts with the Bible. Read it for yourself.”

He shocked me when he said, “That is not the constitution we use.”

“Well, it is the constitution you gave me when I came here,” I stated.

“We have another copy that I use.”

With that, I looked at the other six men who constituted that “board.” Are you in agreement with this man that the constitution takes precedence over the Word of God? Do you really agree that what you have written is superior to the Bible?” I spoke to each man individually, compelling him to answer whether he accepted this situation or not. To a man, they hung their head and mumbled that they always did what Frank said.

One of those men was the president of a major Canadian missionary organisation. “Art, are you in agreement with this? Is this the way you conduct missions? Would you permit this among your missionaries? When you were on the mission field in the Caribbean, is this the way you built churches?”

He lowered his head and said, “Pastor, it’s different here. We’ve always done what Frank told us to do.” Then, as though pleading for understanding, he said, “Pastor, I’ve known Frank for a long time.”

I was astounded! I was nonplused! “Gentlemen,” I began, “I owe you an apology. I’ve assumed you were spiritually mature men, and now I realise that you are all spiritual imbeciles!” With that, I arose and left the meeting. There is no need to talk about the things of God when you are talking to people that seek only their own comfort.

Listen, there are congregations all around us that have no more spiritual perspicuity than did those foolish men. They elect boards composed of people who are unspiritual—people who say prayers, though they seldom pray, people who go to church, though they don’t understand that they are the church, people who know the words to the Christian life, but somehow never know the melody. Yet, these “boards” labour and strive to apply their best thoughts in order to make certain that the world likes them and to ensure that the congregation is acceptable to the inhabitants of this dying world. These boards are more concerned with pleasing politicians and lawyers than they are with pleasing the Son of God.

The first question any congregation must ask when confronting a challenge is, “What is the will of God?” The first response to any difficulty is to pray, submitting ourselves to the mind of the Spirit and seeking His guidance. The first place we should look for the answer to our questions is the Word of God. If we fail to do this, we dishonour God and disgrace that noble Name by which we are called. We will continue as a religious organisation, but we will have ceased to be the Church of the Living God when we permit the world to control our deliberations and when we seek its approval.

Make no mistake, when a congregation seeks the approval of the world, it is motivated by personal desires rather than by love for the Master. No matter how religious that group may be, control has been wrested from the Spirit of God and now resides in the hands of fallen mankind. I have one word of advice for you when you find yourself in such a group—don’t debate, vacate.

“Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said,

‘I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them,
and I will be their God,
and they shall be my people.
Therefore go out from their midst,
and be separate from them, says the Lord,
and touch no unclean thing;
then I will welcome you,
and I will be a father to you,
and you shall be sons and daughters to me,
says the Lord Almighty.’”

[2 CORINTHIANS 6:14-18]

THE METHOD — “By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naïve.” The menace is great, threatening the cause of Christ and the work He assigns to His churches. The motive of these who destroy is the elevation of personal desires—their desire has become their god. The method by which they perpetuate their dreadful work is described by the Apostle as deception dependent upon “smooth talk and flattery.” Rather than speaking the truth in love, they say whatever they imagine makes people feel good about themselves rather than declaring the unadulterated truth.

Moreover, they introduce this “alongside teaching” through “smooth talk and flattery.” “Smooth talk” captures the idea that lies behind the Greek word *chrêstologia*, which describes words or speech that appears loving or kind, or perhaps even easy to bear. The term refers to moral talk that appears loving and kind. To avoid the trap of “smooth talk” requires wisdom. Listening to a speaker, Christians must be trained to ask what motivates the speech.

The man of God does not depend upon flattery. Paul could declare to the Thessalonians, “We never came with words of flattery, as you know” [1 THESSALONIANS 2:5]. However, the Antichrist who is prophesied to come during the days of the Great Tribulation will come with flatteries [see DANIEL 11:21, 32-35]. Just so, those who lead the righteous astray in this day are motivated by the same spirit of opposition, and thus, as John states, they act as “the antichrist” in their deceitful work [2 JOHN 7].

These deceivers introduce teachings that sound plausible, but they dilute the message of life. In the Greek, Paul uses the words *para* and *didachê*, which mean “alongside” of “teaching.” He is thinking of those who put some other teaching alongside of what is taught in Scripture. Because these are matters that are not specified in the Word of God, they are issues that are not wrong for Christians to observe. However, they must not become the test of fellowship or the means by which we judge the spirituality of another.

Addressing the character of those who are turned aside, note that Paul speaks of them as “the naïve,” “the unsuspecting,”³ or even as “people who don’t know any better.”⁴ Assuredly, the naïve must be held accountable because they failed to learn of how to please God; however, those who occupy the sacred desk bear an awesome responsibility to teach. Should the preachers fail to declare the whole counsel of God, are they not culpable before the Lord for their failure to obey His command? The man of God must say, as did the Apostle, “I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable” [ACTS 20:20]. If he cannot, then he bears responsibility for the disaster than is surely coming. It does not excuse the naïve for being simple-minded, but it does impose responsibility on the one who purports to declare truth. If he does not wish to bear that responsibility, let him quit the pulpit and engage in some other profession. However, if he stands behind this sacred desk, let him know that he must give an accounting for his ministry to the Risen Son of God who appoints us to this service.

A pastor friend says of Christians, “It is not without reason that they are called sheep.” Sheep are easily deceived when they are at ease; they become incautious. Similarly, Christians, lacking hermeneutic sophistication are easily led astray. A glib tongue and swelling oratory lead many astray as they listen uncritically to what is said without looking into the Word to ensure that what is taught is in accord with the revealed mind of God. I recall attending a convocation at which an individual spoke. All around me people were speaking in glowing terms of how powerful his “message” was. When I challenged one knot of believers, asking them what was said, they were unable to state what he had said. When I recited several of his points, they agreed that he had indeed made those statements. When asked if they agreed with them, to a person they demurred, and yet, they had been swept along by his oratory. These were, for the most part, preachers who had been engaged in ministry for many years! If the pastors lack discernment, should we be surprised at the lack of theological awareness on the part of the pew? We need to encourage an attitude of becoming Berean Christians who examine “the Scriptures daily to see if these things” are so [see ACTS 17:11]. The appropriate response when errant doctrine or errant practise is introduced is to avoid those promoting such error [ROMANS 16:17].

God calls His people to seek unity, not uniformity. He calls us to peace; however, peace at any price is too great a price. We seek peace with one another on the basis of sound doctrine. The unity of the Faith is possible because the Spirit of Christ works in our hearts and we are submitted to His reign. Though we hold varying opinions, we have one heart and with one voice we glorify the Risen Son of God.

You will never know unity until you have the life of Christ. That life is freely offered to all who will receive it. The Word clearly says, “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ believing in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved. With the heart one believes resulting in a right standing with God and with the mouth one confesses resulting in freedom.” The passage concludes by promising that “Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord shall be saved” [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13]. Amen.

³ **The Holy Bible: Holman Christian Standard Version** (Holman Bible Publishers, Nashville, TN 2003)

⁴ **The Holy Bible: New International Reader’s Version** (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 1998, 2007)