

“MARK THEM WHICH CAUSE DIVISIONS”

The discourse below is by Robert G. Brand.

May we turn our Bibles to Rom. 16:17: “Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them.” We will use this text as a basis for our consideration this afternoon. But first, it should be pointed out that our purpose today is NOT to analyze the current situation among Bible Students. Such is not our desire; rather we would like to objectively take a look at the Biblical subject of divisions in the Church, especially during the period of the early Church. We will examine the Apostle Paul’s numerous admonitions along this line in an endeavor to get a proper perspective as to just what a division is, and why divisions occur.

In our text, it is quite obvious that the Apostle Paul did not think very highly of divisions, as a matter of fact he strongly opposed them. But didn’t our Lord say: “Suppose ye that I am come to give peace on earth? I tell you, Nay, but rather division.” And, furthermore, hasn’t the Lord instructed the Church to come out of Babylon—to divide from the nominal systems? If so, how do we harmonize these thoughts with Paul’s strong opposition to divisions? Well, we’ll later see that there is a definite link between divisions in the Church and sound doctrine; so let’s review some of Paul’s admonitions on doctrine.

The Apostle Paul had the awesome responsibility of being an overseer—a shepherd to the early Church. And as he looked at the Church in its beginning stages of development, he could ALREADY see trouble on its way: contentions, divisions, false doctrines, strifes, and so forth. Therefore, the Apostle gave numerous warnings and admonitions to the Church, pleading with them to remain steadfast in the faith, to not submit themselves to wolves in sheep’s clothing, and to remain united in Christian love and doctrinal purity.

There were several false doctrines that were serious enough to divide the early Church. One of them was the teaching that Christ, the Messiah, had not actually come in the flesh. We read this account in 1 John 4:1: “Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God, because many false prophets are gone out into the world.” Already there were false teachers in their midst. Verse 3: “And every spirit that confesses not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God, and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come, and EVEN NOW ALREADY is it in the world.” And then in 2 John 7 we read: “For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist. Look to yourselves, that we lose not those things which we have wrought, but that we receive a full reward.”

Error was slowly creeping into the early Church, so the apostles took it upon themselves to warn the brethren. The Pastor had some interesting comments along this line. On Reprint 550 he stated: "Some at the present day, in looking back to the early Church, appear to think that they, unlike the Church of today, moved along very smoothly, and that because they had actually seen the Lord and heard from his own lips there was little or no trial of faith, and no differences of opinion among them; that having the Apostles directly appointed of the Lord and present with them, their teachings were all received without doubt or questioning; and, in short, that all was harmony, save the trials that came from the outside world, from those who did not profess to love or follow the Lord Jesus. But this we find is far from the facts in the case." "... soon difficulties arose among themselves. Some began to 'depart from the faith once delivered to the saints,' to be 'corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ,' and their evil influence was great. It was in the very beginning of the outcropping of error, that Paul's clear teachings and manifest leadings of the Spirit marked him as the very chief of the Apostles, a teacher of teachers, the special mouthpiece of the Lord." "The trial came not only to the Church in general, but to the Apostles also, and here we see Paul's clear faith and bold self-sacrificing zeal defending the entire Church against the assaults of error."

Where WERE some of Paul's warnings to the Church? Let's review several of them. 1 Tim. 1:3-6: "As I besought thee to abide at Ephesus, when I went into Macedonia, that thou mightest charge some that they teach no other doctrine. Neither give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which minister questions, rather than godly edifying which is in faith. Now the end of the commandment is charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned, from which some having swerved have turned aside unto vain jangling."

And then in his closing remarks to Timothy in 1 Tim. 6:20, 21 he states: "O Timothy, keep that which is committed to thy trust, avoiding profane and vain babblings, and oppositions of science falsely so called: which some professing have erred concerning the faith." To the Hebrews, Paul said, "Be not carried about by divers and strange doctrines." (Heb. 13:9) And to Titus, he firmly states, "Speak thou the things that become sound doctrine." (2:1)

And Paul was not the only apostle who warned the Church against false doctrines. Consider the words of Peter (2:1, 2)—"... there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. And many shall follow their pernicious ways, by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of." And, also, John had some strong admonitions concerning doctrinal purity. 2 John 9-11: "Whosoever transgresses, and abides not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abides in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: for he that

biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds.” And finally, our Lord gave a warning to those who would deceive the Church—Matt. 18:6, 7: “But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!”

Yes, the early Church was given many guidelines to remain in doctrinal purity. But what does this have to do with divisions? To clarify this point, we would like to use an example as an illustration. Let’s picture in our minds a gathering of Christians, about 100 in size. The time-setting could be anytime at all. At any given year, the entire congregation is in doctrinal harmony. However, as time goes on, some of the brethren began to introduce false doctrines, although in a very small degree at first. But after a number of years, about half of the congregation accepts the new, false teachings. The other half, who remained steadfast in the faith, could not tolerate the error, and left the ecclesia (for the sake of harmonious study and so forth, while still bound in Christian love to their other brethren). Here’s the question: who, in this example, did the dividing? Who is guilty before the Lord—of division?—the kind that Paul opposed. We believe that the division had already taken place before anyone left the congregation because divisions are doctrinal, not geographical. In other words, a division occurs when doctrines are changed, not merely when brethren split up and go to different locations.

This principle is illustrated in the effect that our Lord’s words had on the multitudes that sat at His feet. For example, after one of our Lord’s “hard sayings” the people became divided in their opinions, and the Bible records the account by stating “there was a division among the people.” (John 7:43) The people did not run away from one another. They simply differed in their viewpoints, and yet a division had still taken place. Therefore, those who had changed their beliefs from true to false doctrines would seem to be those guilty of division. After all, the true Church is spread throughout the entire world, but they’re not divided. In fact they are united, because they are in doctrinal agreement and united in the one hope of their calling. So the kind of division that Paul strongly opposed has to do with doctrinal deviations.

Let’s lend some scriptural support to this: 1 Cor. 1:10-13—now notice how Paul directly links divisions with straying from a common unity of belief: “Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the SAME THING, and that there be no DIVISIONS among you: but that ye be perfectly joined together in the SAME MIND and in the SAME JUDGMENT. For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, that there are contentions among you. Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul, and I of Apollos, and I of Cephas, and I of Christ.” Now notice the Apostle’s challenging words: “Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were ye baptized in the name of Paul?”

In Vol. VI, page 81, the Pastor had the following to say: “The factional or sectarian spirit had broken out amongst the Corinthian brethren: and not satisfied with the names of Christ and of God, they were seeking to add to these, and were Pauline Christians and Peterite Christians and Apollosian Christians. The apostle under inspiration, reproveth this spirit, and points out that it is not the Holy Spirit, but a CARNAL one, which prompts to this division of the body and the following of one or another of the Lord’s servants. The apostle’s argument fits equally well today. His interrogation, ‘Is Christ divided?’ or only one? And if only one, why should it be divided? ‘Who then is Paul? Who is Apollos? Who is Peter?’ They were merely servants of the Head of the Church, whom he used for the blessing of his body—his ecclesia. Had they been unwilling, he could have found others to have done the work which they did. The praise, therefore, and the honor for whatever blessing has come through the apostles, belongs chiefly, especially, to the Head of the Church, who has made this provision for the necessities of his body.”

Yes, Paul declared that straying from the Truth demonstrated a spirit of carnality, of Christian immaturity. For he said in 1 Cor. 3:3, 4: “For ye are yet carnal; for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not yet carnal, and walk as men? For while one saith, I am of Paul, and another, I am of Apollos, are ye not carnal?” And in Eph. 4:14 and 15 he requested that the brethren “henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and by cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive, but speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ.”

Now the early Church was not, of course, made up only of false teachers. There were many brethren who rejoiced in the “faith once delivered unto the saints.” For example in Acts 4:32 we read: “And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul.” Also in Acts 2:41: “Then they that gladly received his word were baptized, and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.”

So we see that the Church was having growing pains at first. Some were endeavoring to remain faithful to the gospel as given to them by our Lord and His apostles, and some were scheming to DECEIVE the young Christian Church, and attempting to corrupt the faith. We might do well to ask ourselves a question along this line. Why do doctrinal deviations have to occur at all? What is the purpose of them? In answer we would like to examine three verses from the Bible that illustrate what might be considered as a Divine principle, and this may help us to understand one of the causes of divisions. But first, it is interesting to note that there is one particular question that, undoubtedly all of us have wondered about; and that is simply, what is God’s will for us? What does the

Lord want us to do? Well, there is a scripture that comes right out and says what God's will is for His children, and that is found in 1 Thess. 4:3: "For THIS is the will of God, even your sanctification." Or, to put it another way, God's will for the New Creation is its sanctification—sanctification meaning purification, through trials and testings—the proving of one's obedience to the Heavenly Father, and thereby being acceptable to Him.

The second scripture that we would like to consider is Rom. 8:22: "For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together;" and verse 19: "for the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God." In other words, the world, even though largely in ignorance, is waiting for the manifestation of the sons of God, the glorification of the Body of Christ; and we know that the Body members must be sanctified before they are glorified.

And then the third scripture we would like to consider along this line tells us the method used, under the Lord's arrangement, for the Church's sanctification. The text is found in John 17:17, perhaps the most beautiful chapter of the Bible, where our Lord prayed: "Sanctify them through thy Truth, thy word is truth." It is the Word of God, the study and application of the Word of God that sanctifies the Church this side of the veil, because, as the scripture says, "... the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart." (Heb. 4:12)

So to summarize our three texts. It is the will of God that the prospective members of the Church be sanctified. The world can not receive its share of full restitution blessings, and the reign of sin and evil can not come to an end until the Church is glorified. The Church must be sanctified before it is glorified, and the sanctification process is accomplished through the study and application of the Word of God—the Truth. This is a divine principle. Our Lord knew it; Paul did; but so does the Adversary. THEREFORE, if Satan wants to prolong his evil influence over mankind; if he wants to stay in power a bit longer, and if he desires to hinder the development of the Church, he doesn't have to cause earthquakes, or volcanoes, or otherwise demonstrate his miraculous power!! He doesn't have to bother! He's too smart for that! Basically, in a general sense, the only thing the Adversary has to do is, in some way, interfere with the root of the Church's sanctification—mix up the Truth, the true doctrines of the Bible. And when he disturbs the Truth, he interferes with and hinders the development of the New Creation. When a portion of the Truth is lost, a corresponding portion of its sanctifying power is also lost; and we can look at what has happened in the history of the Church to plainly see that Satan has followed this course of action.

We quote from Vol. 6, page 201: "While the apostles remained with the Church they were able to point out some of the false teachers through whom the Adversary was seeking, privily, privately, secretly, to bring in damnable heresies to undermine the faith and to

turn the faithful aside from the hopes and promises and simplicities of the Gospel. The Apostle Paul speaks also of some of these in general terms, as beginning the working of iniquity; but he names some of them personally, Hymenaeus and Philetus, and so on, 'who concerning the truth have erred... overthrowing the faith of some.' Respecting these false teachers and their errors, he again warned the Church through the elders at Ephesus, especially pointing out that these would flourish after his death—grievous wolves, they would not spare the flock... Our Lord clearly shows that these false teachers and their false doctrines were the agencies of the Adversary who sowed the tares amongst the wheat that he and the apostles had planted. He says, 'While men [the special servants, the apostles] slept, an enemy came and sowed tares.'"

Let us read the scripture that Bro. Russell was referring to. Acts 20:27-31: "For I have not shunned to declare unto you, all the counsel of God. Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Spirit hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears."

We can see how close to Paul's heart was doctrinal purity. He said that, after he would die, more grievous wolves would enter into the flock; but even when he was still alive, and only briefly away from Timothy, Paul wrote to him and said, "Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine... Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them; for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee." (1Tim. 4:13, 16)

But, unfortunately, many brethren did not heed the apostle's strong admonitions, for he said to the Galatians in chapter 1:6-8: "I MARVEL that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel. Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ. But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed." THESE were the ones who were causing the divisions. They were "perverting the gospel" and hence were dividing the Church. But the Lord permitted it. In fact the scriptures state that "God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie."

And along this line, Paul said that there HAD to be divisions, because they produced a "sifting effect." 1 Cor. 11:18, 19: "For first of all, when ye come together in the Church, I hear that there be divisions among you; and I partly believe it. For there MUST also be heresies among you, that they which are approved may be manifest among you."

Those who did divide and who departed from the faith really had no excuse, because of the many admonitions given. Earlier in our lesson we reviewed some of the warnings that the Apostle gave. Now let us consider some of the encouragements to remain sound in doctrine. As we have been endeavoring to give the fullest of scriptural support to the thought presented, let us briefly list several verses, and we'll read them in succession, omitting the citations: "therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord... Be of the same mind one toward another... Continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and has been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them... Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be likeminded one toward another according to Christ Jesus; that ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ... Fulfill ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind... I have no greater joy than to know that my children walk in truth." And the last in our list: "Finally, brethren farewell. Be perfect, be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you." (1 Cor. 15:58; Rom. 12:16; 2 Tim. 3:14; Rom. 15:5, 6, Phil. 2:2; 3 John 4; 2 Cor. 13:11.) And there are many scriptures to consider.

When we speak of the wonderful reward that awaits those who are aspiring to be of the Body of Christ, there are two words that always must be inserted at the beginning of the sentence: "IF FAITHFUL". "IF" is such a small word, but it encompasses a life-time of endeavoring to serve the Lord, to grow in the fruits of the Spirit, and, yes, of being loyal to the Word of God. "IF we hold fast the confidence and rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end"; "IF ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel;" and "If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed." Truly then, remaining in the faith is a requirement of all who will be of the Church.

There is a brief account in Philippians that might be considered puzzling in view of Paul's strong doctrinal position for the Truth. The account is found in chapter 1, verses 15, to 18. Paul is writing from prison. "Some indeed preach Christ even of envy and strife; and some also of good will. The one preach Christ of contention, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my bonds. But the other of love, knowing that I am set for the defense of the gospel. What then? notwithstanding, every way, whether in pretence, or in truth, Christ is preached, and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice." Why would Paul, especially in view of his stand for the true faith, state that he rejoiced whether Christ was preached in Truth OR pretence? Why would he make a statement like that?

The answer is easily understood when the scriptures are read very carefully and the proper emphasis is placed upon the appropriate theme of the verses. But first, let's ask a question: Who, today, is preaching Christ? Who is preaching the gospel of the Kingdom? Actually, only the Church is, isn't it? The nominal systems aren't preaching

the Kingdom—they do not even know what the Kingdom is, so they cannot be preaching it. And if they are sending forth a message about an individual who is part God, part man, and part Holy Spirit, and is Jehovah, all at the same time, then they are not preaching Christ—they are preaching someone else, under the name of Christ. So, with this in mind, returning to the account in Philippians, let us remember that when Paul mentions that Christ is preached, he means just that—Christ is preached, not false doctrines. The Apostle is not discussing the message so much as the method used in spreading the gospel. So let's read it again, but this time more carefully. Verse 15: "Some indeed preach Christ even of envy and strife; and some also of good will. The one preach Christ of contention, not sincerely... But the other of love... What then? notwithstanding, every WAY [now notice that he is talking about the WAY—the method used] whether in pretence [even if the true gospel is unfortunately spread for dishonest reasons], or in truth [using truthful, honest methods of preaching], CHRIST is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice." of course, we know that Paul preferred that proper means were employed in spreading the truth, but even if such were not the case, at least the gospel was going forth.

And as our lesson draws to a close, let's briefly see what the Apostle Paul had to say when he was about to die, as he looked back upon his life in Christ. To Timothy he said: "... thou hast fully known my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, charity, patience, persecutions, afflictions..." (2 Tim. 3:10, 11) And after admonishing him to be on the watch, he said in 2 Tim. 4:6: "For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand." And then in verse 7—his life in a nutshell, so to speak—"I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I HAVE KEPT THE FAITH." So important to Paul was holding to the faith that he used that expression in summarizing his Christian walk. And then verse 8: "Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day; and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing."

And brethren, may each of us, at the close of our life, be able to join the Apostle Paul in saying—"I have finished my course; I have kept the faith." May the Lord add His blessing.