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THE

LOVE

IN ROMANS 16:17-18

- C. RUEHNE

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THE LOVE IN ROMANS 16:17-18.

"Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them.

"For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple."

This passage of Scripture is used much by us in our congregational and private lives as Christians. It tells us clearly that it is our gracious God's will that we avoid those who come along with teachings or practices which do not agree with the apostolic Word, and who cause divisions in the church and set traps which can destroy faith. The word "avoid" is clear, and it is broad. It surely forbids any and all religious fellowship, whether public or private, with those who are promoting or supporting false doctrine!

But, in all honesty, haven't we at times felt uncomfortable about that Scriptural principle of separation which is taught in this and other passages of Scripture? Religious separation is very unpopular in our day, since it is just the opposite of the religious unionism (outward union without unity in confession) which is being pushed by most churches in our day. Obeying God in this matter can lead us into some very awkward and trying situations, and our flesh shies away from such difficulties. How hard it was during the recent war for some of our boys to refuse to attend the religious services on base together with their buddies -- and then to have to defend their separation before their commanding officer! How difficult it can be to tell friends or relatives whom we are visiting that we cannot join them in their worship or prayer because we do not share the same Scriptural confession! How uncomfortable it can be to say "No" when we are asked to support a United Fund drive in our community -- to say "No" because some of the money we give would be used to support such religious or semi-religious groups as the Salvation Army or Boy Scouts! Our common sense

other Christians in their worship or prayers or church work? Doesn't love demand rather that we take part in such religious activities with them, lest we hurt their feelings or disturb their consciences?

It will always be difficult for us to apply the separation principle, especially in our everyday lives, simply because of that flesh that we all carry around with us. But there is something in this passage, Romans 16:17-18, which can help our spirits to follow God's will in this matter -- it's the love that we find in this passage. We can, in fact, speak about three areas of love that Scripture connects with the admonition to avoid:

God's Love to Us

First, there is God's love to us. God wouldn't have to give us a reason for asking us to avoid those who support religious error. He could simply tell us to avoid, for He is God! But God, in His wisdom, chose to give us a reason. In verse 18, He points out that false teachers are dangerous -- through the "good words and fair speeches" with which they have clothed their errors, they are able to deceive Christians in their simple, child-like faith! God is therefore speaking to us in His love when He asks us to avoid. He wants to keep our souls safe from the deadly leaven and gangrene of religious error. When we hear the word "avoid," we should recognize the voice of the Good Shepherd, as He carries out for us His promise: "I give unto them (my sheep) eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand." (John 10:28)

Our Love to God

But there is also our love toward God. This love is, of course, but a faint reflection of His love to us, for He so loved us that He gave His dearest Treasure, Jesus Christ, into death for our salvation. But if we have received this love of God for us in faith, we will also love Him in return. For Scripture says: "We love Him, because He first loved us." (I John 4:19) And how will this love express itself? The Bible tells us: "This is the love of (toward) God, that we

keep His commandments: and His commandments are not grievous." (I John 5:3) So surely as the Gospel has created faith and love in our hearts, we will want to heed the will of our heavenly Father, even when He in His love asks us to do something that is difficult for our flesh -- like avoiding. How can this commandment to separate ourselves from religious errorists really be "grievous," when God's purposes to us are so full of His own love?

We must never forget that we are to fear, love, and trust in God above all things. It was surely not easy for Abraham to go and sacrifice his son, his only son, his beloved son, the son in whom the promises of the Savior were centered. It was indeed hard for him to do this, but we are told that he got up early the very next morning and proceeded to carry out God's will. The love of Abraham toward God was deeper even than his love toward his own flesh and blood. And this was right and proper, for as the Lord tells us: "He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." (Matt. 10:37) Will not our love to God prompt us also to be quick and ready to heed His will, even when He asks us to "avoid" religious fellowship with those who may be near and dear to us?

Luther, in his commentary on Ephesians 6:12, puts the matter of obedience to God's Word very pointedly. Notice that he is speaking about this very matter of separation from those who uphold error:

"This (attainment of eternal life) is so great a good that no human heart is able to grasp it. (Therefore it involves also a great and hard fight, and yet it happens so every easily that a person loses it forever by not holding on to the precious Word with all his strength.) And indeed it must not be treated so lightly as the world does, and as some foolish people assert, who are deceived by the devil in the matter of the Sacrament, or another error, and who say that we should not fight so hard about a single article of faith, and so forth, and for its sake destroy Christian love, even to the point of consigning each other to the devil. But rather, so they say, although we err on one small

point, since we agree on everything else, we should yield a little and give in, and thus preserve Christian unity or fellowship. No, my dear man, do not talk to me about peace and unity if thereby God's Word is lost, for then eternal life and everything else would be lost. In this matter there can be no yielding nor any giving in, no, not for love of you or any other person; but everything must yield to the Word, whether it be friend or foe. For the Word was not given for the sake of outward or worldly peace and unity, but rather for the sake of eternal life. The Word and doctrine shall create Christian unity or fellowship. Where there is agreement in doctrine, the rest will surely follow. Where there is no such agreement, no unity remains. Therefore do not talk to me about love and friendship if that means breaking with the Word or faith. For it is not love but the Word that brings eternal life, God's grace, and all heavenly treasures." (St. Louis Walch, IX:831)

Thus obedience to God's Word, including the principle of separation, must ever be part of our life and walk as Christians. Such obedience dare never be set aside by appeals to what some wrongly call "love" to others!

Our Love to Our Neighbor

Finally, there is our love toward our neighbor. This too is a fruit of Christian faith, one which we will surely want to exercise. But are we indeed showing love to others when we tell them that we cannot join them in religious fellowship because of the errors which separate us? Indeed this is love, for those errors are, according to God's own Word, dangerous to their salvation. Scripture admonishes us to "speak the truth in love." (Eph. 4:15) We owe such people the truth, because we owe them love!

An example would be in place here. Do you remember how Peter on one occasion urged Christ not to go to Jerusalem to suffer and die? Peter's intentions were, humanly speaking, very noble -- he wished to spare Christ from such a horrible ordeal. And yet Peter's suggestion brought forth from Christ the stinging rebuke: "Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of

God, but those that be of men." (Matt. 16:23) It was Christ's love to Peter that called forth these words. Peter was entrapped in a religious error, and Christ wanted nothing more than to free him from his wrong and dangerous beliefs.

Here is another example from everyday life. A doctor discovers that his patient has a cancer which can be cured if an operation is promptly performed. Does he show love to that patient if he hides the fact and pretends that everything is satisfactory? Hardly! Neither would we be showing love to those whose souls are being exposed to false doctrine if we should join them in religious fellowship and thereby cover over or make light of the danger that is confronting their souls. Again, we owe them the truth, because we owe them love.

When a Christian, in a loving way, suggests to a friend or relative that he cannot join him in prayer or worship because the two of them do not share the same Scriptural confession, nothing but good can result. That neighbor may, because of his flesh, at first resent such words, but he will surely remember them and ponder them. And if he is in time led to investigate the teachings of his erring church body in the light of Scripture, the Holy Spirit may thereby lead him away from its errors into a church body that is completely faithful to the Word. This blessed result has happened on more than one occasion! Let it be recognized, then, that when we refuse to participate in prayer or worship or church work with those who deviate from God's Word, this is indeed an act of love to them. For by such God-directed avoiding on our part, they may be moved to see the seriousness of the errors with which they are associated!

In Summary

So we see, then, that there is really a lot of love which Scripture connects with the "avoid" of Romans 16:17-18. There is God's protecting love to us. There is our obedient love to God. And there is our concerned love to those who are involved in religious error. May all this love prompt us to a willing obedience to this important commandment of our gracious and wise God!

-C. Kuehne

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