

Divisions

If we read Paul's letter to the Romans, it seems clear that the church was not started by Paul, and although Paul knows a number of people in the church, he has never visited the church. In fact, the letter seems to be in the form of a letter introducing Paul, who is planning to visit Rome, and the church in Rome. Therefore, he is not responding to specific questions or problems, as he does for example in the Corinthian correspondence.

In the whole of the letter, and particularly in chapters 9-11 Paul indicates his desire to reach his people, the Jews, with the good news of salvation, by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. He goes as far as saying Rom 9:3 "*For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen by race.*" He never the less recognizes that God has not called for that sacrifice, nor has God called him to the apostle to the Jews. The letter as a whole presents Paul's vision of what it is to be a Christian, and if the church in Rome would agree with this, perhaps they would be willing to help underwrite his further missionary efforts. In Chapter 16 he concludes and sends greetings, and by the Holy Spirit he is reminded, as it were, to add the rest of the story. You see, although there is much of importance to all Christians in the history of Israel, salvation does not come from being Jewish, but from being in Christ. There were however unbelieving Jews and Judaizing Christians who spread much dissension throughout the church.

It would probably have been a familiar story to the readers in Rome, how the Jews had opposed Paul at almost every corner. At Psidian Antioch, the Jews incited the city to riot. At Iconium, the Jews stirred up the Gentiles so that they were almost molested and stoned. The Jews followed Paul to Lystra and persuaded the people there so that Paul was stoned and left for dead. This is a short account of the beginning of Paul's first missionary journey, as we find in Acts 13-14. When we look at those who are opposing Paul in the Letter to the Galatians, it is the Judaizing Christians. If we consider the 1st apostolic council in Acts 15, it is in response to dissension and division being cause and created by the Judaizing Christians. In fact, one might be bold enough to say that there was no single group that seems to have created as much dissension and strife in the early church than the Judaizers, who kept stressing the keeping of the law, and the traditions of men, thus impeding the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is in this context that our text fits:

Romans 16:17 Παρακαλῶ δὲ ὑμᾶς, ἀδελφοί, σκοπεῖν τοὺς τὰς διχοστασίας καὶ τὰ σκάνδαλα παρὰ τὴν διδαχὴν ἣν ὑμεῖς ἐμάθετε ποιοῦντας, καὶ ἐκκλίνετε ἀπ' αὐτῶν·

I appeal to you, brethren, to take note of those who create dissensions and difficulties, in opposition to the doctrine which you have been taught; avoid them.

Now while it is fruitful to know and to study all of the text, and it particular what it means to mark σκοπεω and to avoid ἐκκλινω - before that, we must know *what* we are to mark and avoid.

Who is meant by the words "*who create dissensions and difficulties*" τὰς διχοστασίας καὶ τὰ σκάνδαλα -?

I believe that something very special is occurring here, and that we are missing something very important when we rely on our English translations for guidance. The word which sheds so much light is διχοστασίας - it is a noun, and occurs only twice in the NT, here [Rom 16:17] and:

Gal 5:20 εἰδωλολατρία, φαρμακεία, ἔχθραι, ἔρις, ζήλος, θυμοί, ἐριθείαι, διχοστασίαι, αἰρέσεις, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, The LXX only uses it once:

1Mac 3:29 καὶ εἶδεν ὅτι ἐξέλιπεν τὸ ἀργύριον ἐκ τῶν θησαυρῶν καὶ οἱ φόροι τῆς χώρας ὀλίγοι χάριν τῆς διχοστασίας καὶ πληγῆς ἧς κατεσκεύασεν ἐν τῇ γῆ τοῦ ἄραι τὰ νόμιμα ἃ ἦσαν ἀφ' ἡμερῶν τῶν πρώτων Then he saw that the money in the treasury was exhausted, and that the revenues from the country were small because of the dissension and disaster which he had caused in the land by abolishing the laws that had existed from the earliest days.

Louw & Nida in their Greek Lexicon define διχοστασία: a division into opposing groups,

generally two - In some languages the equivalent of 'causing division' is literally 'to cause two groups in place of one group,' but more frequently the equivalent is expressed in terms of attitudes, for example, 'to cause people to be angry at one another' or 'to cause people not to like one another' or 'to cause people to think of one another as enemies.'

Now the noun has a related verb, διχάζω : to cause people to rebel against or to reject authority - 'to incite to revolt, to cause to rebel.' This is also used once in the NT.

Matt 10:35 ἦλθον γὰρ διχάσαι ἄνθρωπον κατὰ τοῦ πατρὸς αὐτοῦ καὶ θυγατέρα κατὰ τῆς μητρὸς αὐτῆς καὶ νύμφην κατὰ τῆς πενθερᾶς αὐτῆς, For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;

Another verb may also shed some light - διχοτομέω : to cut an object into two parts - or (a figurative extension of διχοτομέω) to punish with great severity - this is used twice in the NT.

Matt 24:51 καὶ διχοτομήσει αὐτὸν καὶ τὸ μέρος αὐτοῦ μετὰ τῶν ὑποκριτῶν θήσει· ἐκεῖ ἔσται ὁ κλαυθμὸς καὶ ὁ βρυγμὸς τῶν ὁδόντων. and will punish him, and put him with the hypocrites; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.

Luke 12:46 ἤξει ὁ κύριος τοῦ δούλου ἐκείνου ἐν ἡμέρᾳ ἣ οὐ προσδοκᾷ καὶ ἐν ὥρᾳ ἣ οὐ γινώσκει, καὶ διχοτομήσει αὐτὸν καὶ τὸ μέρος αὐτοῦ μετὰ τῶν ἀπίστων θήσει. the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know, and will punish him, and put him with the unfaithful.

Now the context of Paul's life, which the Romans would have been aware of, at least in part, had been one where the Judaizers had incited to riot, worked to create divisions, spread dissension, and work to divide the church, working in the church saying that it was necessary for people to choose sides, but in areas outside of God's command.

After such words of hope and encouragement, and after expounding on the rich history of Israel, the Holy Spirit seems to have reminded Paul about his constant adversary the Judaizers, and these words in the closing of Paul's letter seem to be a warning to the congregation in Rome, that within Israel, there has also been this group, which no doubt the Romans had heard of, who spread division and scandal. You will know them by their fruits [divisions and scandal] and these you would be wise to mark and avoid. There are some who come into the church with the express purpose of dividing the church - have nothing to do with these people. This is suggested by the text, and the word ἐμάθετε - you see not only are they working to create divisions, but they are working to move church member from being disciples of Jesus Christ, and lead them to a "new master." How can a Christian have anything to do with such a person? The plain answer: He cannot.

It seems important that there are two "requirements" mentioned that would lead to the mark and avoid response. The first is that occasioned by σκάνδαλον the stumbling block, death trap or scandal. This is never a petty matter, but is always something which endangers salvation. It seems that this alone, while it is something which must be dealt with, is not something which requires a mark and avoid response. It is however the scandalous person who is also working to create divisions within the church. This is the person who must be marked and avoided, for such a person is not simply misguided, but is an agent of Satan working for the destruction of the Church.

Paul's own involvement stems from his kinship with them, and from his having come out from them. Paul's example is that he has worked with them, until they have proved that they are of the type that seeks to divide the church. The Romans do not have this bond, or obligation. They should not feel so obliged, nor should they listen should some come, claiming a superior knowledge, or a more complete Christianity. What they have learned, and what Paul has always preached, is all that is necessary.

So from the context, it would seem that this passages, is not one to be used with the broad brush to paint an exclusive separatist fellowship practise, one that well might be referred to a Pharisaical, where the rules of man must be strictly observed, else all fellowship must be

terminated. It is however an important passage, for there remain those who would command a “new judaism” and a law based religion - and who will work within the church to secure its establishment - these must be marked and avoided.