

## The Dangerous Duty of Discernment

### Romans 16:17-18

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Have you heard of the terms, “deconversion” or “deconstruction”? These are new terms. Deconversion describes someone who once claimed to be a Christian but has now left the faith—often after a period of deconstruction, where someone dissects or reexamines their faith piece by piece. This doesn’t always end in deconversion, but frequently does. Unfortunately, deconversion is a common occurrence these days for a celebrity Christian: well-known pastor, author, musician, or the child of a celebrity Christian. They post on Instagram something like, *I never thought I would say this, but I’m no longer a Christian. Or I’m being true to who I am and now I want the world to know that I’m seeking spirituality apart from Christianity.* Our theology would say, these are people who were never truly saved in the first place, thus they are not losing their salvation. But that’s not my point; go back to Romans 8 and 9 for more on that or read the warnings in Hebrews against it.

This is hardly new as the New Testament reminds us of people like Judas and Diotrephes and Alexander and even Satan himself, who de-converted from his place as archangel to become the enemy of God. People have been de-converting from the beginning; Satan just didn’t have an Instagram account to announce it on.

Today I’m asking the question, *how do these deconversions come to be?* How does someone claim to believe the true gospel and then take a path away from the true gospel? Most deconverts don’t say, *I thought I was saved from God’s wrath by Jesus but now I’m seeking reconciliation from a false gospel.* Most of them believe their new path is the right path, a self-saving path, and in their announcements, they urge others to follow their example.

How many children of Christians go off to the university and leave no longer believing in Jesus? That humanities class was too much for their faith. The party scene overwhelmed them. Most college students who walk away from the faith think their new path is better and happier. So, they tell their parents. They have seen the light and claim greater fulfillment in their new life direction. A new direction that the Bible says leads to hell. It’s a real danger today. It was a danger when Paul wrote Romans. So here we are, nearly done with the whole letter. Chapter 16 is a Christmas card of greetings and hellos. Warm words and holy kisses. Then very abruptly Paul says this,

*“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”* (Romans 16:17-18 ESV).

This sharp warning is so abrupt it makes some scholars question if Paul wrote it in the first place. We can be confident it was, as this kind of warning is common in Paul’s writings and ministry. I suspect this is kind of like parents dropping off their kids at summer camp, *Oh, one more thing, don’t forget!*

*“I appeal to you.”* Perhaps the ESV could have made it stronger as the Greek word has much emotion in it. *I strongly appeal, I urge you!* This is no sidenote. This is a wakeup call.

And rightly so, as Paul sees real danger lurking for the Roman Christians. What does Paul fear is lurking in the shadows of the Roman congregation? To use the language he used in Acts 20, *wolves*. Wolves among the sheep. The sheep is a common metaphor for Christians in the church. What we have here is a description of who the wolves are, what they do, and how they do it. The admonition is to *watch out*. Why? Wolves are especially effective with who Paul calls in verse 18, "the naïve."

## Who are the Wolves?

Paul is describing two kinds of wolves here. Some wolves are teaching/theological wolves. Some are congregation-dividing wolves. False teaching wolves and divisive wolves. Both are divisive, both eat the flock up, but they do so in different ways.

## Divisively Deviant

*"Watch out for those who cause divisions"* (Romans 16:17).

I'm going to spend more time on the doctrinal wolves but these divisive wolves are prevalent as well. A divisive wolf isn't necessarily teaching something that's blatantly wrong or heretical, but they are really good at creating fissures and cracks in the relationships of the church. Unity doesn't matter to them. This is the person for whom every molehill is a mountain. Every issue is the most important thing in the history of the church. They create disunity by personality or for the sake of their cause. They typically draw a tribe of people around them who share some sympathy with them. Sometimes this is a new idea or a new direction or a new whatever. The naïve, which is what Paul calls them, are drawn into their influence. There's something new and exciting about it. At the center is a wolf.

Now, does this person have fur and sharp teeth? No. The wolf never says, *Hi, I'm a wolf. So nice to meet you!* Divisive people ALWAYS are appealing type people, otherwise nobody would follow them and nothing would divide. Paul describes them in verse 18 as smooth talkers and flatterers. Think of Absalom at the city gate. Handsome. Well spoken. But turning the people's hearts against King David. Therein lies the problem. The appealing personality hides the poison of a divisive spirit and intent. It takes discerning eyes to see them for who they really are. Here is what Paul warned the elders of the Ephesian church, *"I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them"* (Acts 20:29-30).

Wolves don't care about the sheep. They use the sheep. Wolves don't care about harmony in the church. They don't care about unity. Unity keeps them from their goal.

- *"...with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace"* (Ephesians 4:2-3).
- *"There are six things that the LORD hates, seven that are an abomination to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil, a false witness who breathes out lies, and one who sows discord among brothers"* (Proverbs 6:16-19).
- *"As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him"* (Titus 3:10).
- *"I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment"* (1 Corinthians 1:10).

All of these reinforce Romans 16's appeal to look out for divisive wolves. Beware when someone seems to be dividing people.

Any of you that have kids who love nature documentaries like mine, you know this. I've watched many a documentary on the big cats. Cheetahs. Lions. Their strategy in the hunt is always the same. They create confusion and the wildebeests go off in all directions. They look for the young or vulnerable or any adult animal who is separated from the herd. As you watch, you see that wildebeest separated from the herd, and you think, *bye-bye*. Some of my favorite videos are the ones where the lions have the water buffalo by the neck. It's almost dead. But then here comes the herd together and they chase off the lion. When we stick together, we can run off the lions.

The point is that these divisive wolves prey on the vulnerable, the naïve, and the immature, by creating division and rallying the naïve to their new thing. Watch out for them.

### **Doctrinally Deviant**

*"...to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught" (Romans 16:17).*

Some people are just divisive people. Put them in a small group or any group, and soon people don't like each other. But the doctrinally deviant are not so much divisive by personality as much as they are divisive by their persuasive teachings. Sometimes people are both but this type of wolf captures the sheep with their ideas, their doctrine. When I say doctrine, I think many of you check out thinking, *Oh, doctrine, that's like for theologians*. All doctrine means is teaching and this teaching is any kind of influencing away from the one true gospel or pillars of historic Christian truth.

These are NOT the minor issues Paul dealt with in Romans 14—matters of Christian liberty, tertiary matters good Christians can disagree on. These are matters of gospel truth. They may be something heretical around the person and work of Jesus, like the Mormons or the Jehovah's Witnesses. I understand these cults find more converts from Evangelical Christians than any other group. That's why they come to your door with leading questions.

Much more prevalent these days are not the obvious heresies but the subtle ones. Are you familiar with the term *worldview*? Our worldview is the set of beliefs through which we see the world. The glasses we wear that tell us this is true or this is false, this is important or this is not. A worldview revolves around who or what is enthroned in my heart.

To my eye, attenders of Bethel Church are less likely to turn Mormon than we are to become functionally secularized in our life priorities. The gravity of the culture around us pulls us away from loving God—being all about him. The constant drip of media and culture whispers to us that life is about something other than God and eternal values.

What does the world value? Materialism. Power. Sensuality. Money, sex, power, and things that relate to them. An approach to life with nothing transcendent, nothing miraculous, nothing eternal. The call to live for myself and to live for today. When my identity isn't grounded in who I am in Christ, these cultural values imperceptibly become the functional priorities of my heart.

To give you an example, I was recently on a Zoom call with some national pastors. One pastor expressed his dismay at how many of his people seem to hold their political identity more closely than their spiritual identity. Another pastor jumped on that, affirming the

epidemic of political worship among Evangelical Christians. Can politics be too important to a Christian? Anything other than Jesus can be too important to a Christian.

Question: if you could push a button and make America what you think it should be OR push a button and make the church what it should be, which would you choose? Your answer will indicate where your heart citizenship really is. That's just one example. But there are so many ways that false teaching and values creep into a church or a Christian's heart.

The Internet and social media give the wolves a platform, a microphone, and access to all the sheep. Paul says, avoid them, but it's harder than ever to do when they pop up constantly in your media feed. I don't know who you are listening to. I don't know who you are podcasting. I don't know which financial guru, life coach, Internet influencer, talk radio host, cable news commentator, or whoever you are engaging with. Who you listen to indicates who the real pastor of your heart is. Who is your trusted source of truth? Most of you listen to our leadership teach for 45 minutes a week. While during the week, other "teachers" urge you to look at the world from their perspective: the news commentator, the podcaster, the life coach. Don't be naïve! Anyone who says this is how you should think about things, is either doing so from a biblical worldview or not. And most are not.

In Paul's day, wolves didn't have Instagram accounts or YouTube channels. Now, the vast majority of the media we consume is far from a biblical worldview.

### **How Wolves Operate**

*"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" (Romans 16:18).*

They may appear to be in Christian ministry, but they are not really serving Christ. Paul identifies two hidden qualities. First, they want to exploit the sheep. They are not serving Christ, they are serving their own appetites. Literally "bellies" but the idea is that they are fleecing the flock. Not serving. Not protecting the flock, which faithful shepherds do. They are fleecing the flock. Here's one easy way to spot them—they won't wait long to ask you for financial support. They are about their bellies. Some of the most egregious examples I see on TV ministries, as they constantly appeal for money. I think, what crazy people send them money? Wolves are great fundraisers. Beware dear church.

You say, *but they are so good at what they say. Their words me feel so good about myself.* Yeah, that's just what Paul says here. *"By smooth talk and flatter, they deceive the hearts of the naïve."* They will be eloquent. Appealing. Attractive. They leverage all of these qualities to deceive and fleece the sheep.

### **What Do We Need? Discernment!**

*"I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out...avoid them" (Romans 16:17).*

Discernment is the opposite of believing everything you hear. Discernment is the opposite of being naïve. Be mature enough in your biblical knowledge to discern their character and their error and avoid them. *How do we do that, Apostle Paul?* I think he would say, *you must know gospel truth really well. What truth, Apostle Paul? The truth I just spent 15 chapters in Romans explaining to you.* The gospel. Who God is. Who we are. Who Jesus is. How salvation happens, by faith in Christ and not by works. It centers on the person and work of Christ. I think he would say, start with *It's All about Him.*

When these are understood and treasured, there is a grid of evaluation by which God's people can cry, *Wolf!* Doctrinal wolf! Divisive wolf!

Here's the problem: we live in a Christian church culture that has largely moved away from doctrinally based ministries and sermons and Bible studies toward more attractational, entertainment-based ministries. Dumb it down. Make it as simple as possible. Short and lite and easy.

This past week I attend the national conference of *The Gospel Coalition*. At one lunch I happened to sit next to the president of one of the largest seminaries in the world. He said one of the biggest challenges they have are students coming to the seminary—mind you seminary requires an undergraduate degree. So, these are not 18-year-old types; they're likely more educated. They are likely more study oriented to go to seminary. He said, *many of our students arrive and they don't know anything about the Bible. We start from scratch*—in the graduate school! This is a symptom of the larger problem of Christians in churches who don't know their Bibles and then are easily led astray into all manner of doctrinal and divisive truth. Today, we make it so easy for the wolves.

*Pastor Steve, can you give us some more to go on?*

I ran across an article by Kevin DeYoung which asks 15 diagnostic questions<sup>1</sup> to identify false teaching. These are too good not to share.

1. *Does the teaching sound strange?*
2. *Does it sound too good to be true?*
3. *Does it involve trinkets or relics or holy water?*
4. *Does it involve prophetic words?*
5. *Do angels or aliens or seed money play a major role in the teaching?*
6. *Does it feature prominently the word "code"?*
7. *Does the teaching involve secrets?*
8. *Does it rely on a cartoon view of God?*
9. *Does the teaching use big themes to negate specific verses?*
10. *Does it promote an unmediated approach to spirituality?*
11. *Does the false teaching traffic in under-defined terms and slogans?*
12. *Does the teaching neglect the need for repentance?*
13. *Does the false teaching or teacher seem obsessed about one person, one doctrine, or one idea?*
14. *Does it result in an unbalanced presentation of the truth?*
15. *Does the teaching fit with the Bible's story line of sin and salvation?*

To these I would add, if no one in the history of the church has held to this, that's a sure sign of a heresy. It's not new, it's heresy. How often have I urged you to look at everything through the lens of Scripture? And that includes everything I teach too. Evaluate it! Like the Bereans in Acts who searched the Scriptures to see if what Paul said was true.

As our culture spins further away from any remnants of a Judeo-Christian worldview, it becomes even more critical that God's people are on the alert because holding to Christian beliefs will increasingly cost us. Compromise is easy, particularly to avoid suffering. What hope do we have?

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin DeYoung, 15 Discernment Diagnostics, [thegospelcoalition.org](http://thegospelcoalition.org), May 13, 2016, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/15-discernment-diagnostics/>

Look at verse 20, "*The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.*" This is part of next week's message but let it encourage you this week. Satan is Alpha wolf, the father of all lies. Soon, the ultimate wolf will get his comeuppance and the God of peace and truth will reign. More on that next week.

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