AMRIDGE UNIVERSITY

ROMANS 16:17-20: MARK AND AVOID IN APPLICATION

AN INTERPRETIVE JOURNEY RESEARCH PAPER SUBMITTED TO

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROMANS 16:17-20: MARK AND AVOID IN APPLICATION</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

In the hypermedia world of today, there are those who will pursue a principle that is believed to be outlined in parts of the Bible, specifically in the book of Romans in its concluding chapter. That principle is the calling out of false teachers or those that oppose what may seem like any and everything regarding one’s beliefs and not just doctrine. Paul records some instruction to the church in Romans 16:17-20 regarding this particular concept of principle, but is the practice of today in fulfillment of what Paul was addressing in principle for the time of the church in Rome in this passage?

Paul’s words seem to be an aggressive statement. This writing falls in the midst of some encouragement and some gratitude for fellow-laborers of the Lord. So, why does he feel that he must address these concerns? There are several areas of remote context that can help to identify this in part; however, the text of Romans 16 seems to be able to stand upon its weight in interpretation. This essay will identify the marks of hermeneutical interpretation based on the theories presented in the textbook, “Grasping God’s Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible.”

The identifying questions that will be asked are as follows. What did the text mean to the biblical audience? What are the differences between the biblical audience and us? What is the theological principle in this text? How does our theological principle fit with the rest of the Bible? How should individual Christians today live out the theological principles? This essay will endeavor to answer these relative questions in an interpretive journey.
In his writing to the churches in Rome, the Apostle Paul closes out his letter in a little different approach than can be seen in most of his epistles. He has made several statements of gratitude and commendation to those who have been laborers with him in his journey through Christianity. Paul names many that would be recognized and some who had only a part in his ministry. He closes this section, however, by making a statement regarding false teachers and division. What does this section of text mean to its audience?

Who are the people that Paul is seeking to identify in his statement to his audience? In his book on Romans, Brad Price states that the text of this particular passage “may refer to the material in chapters 14 and 15.” The chapters that he mentions being of a nature of how to treat others concerning traditions and ideas of mankind might indicate that this could be the case. However, this is not completely identified, so one must look at the topic more objectively. The Christians being addressed at the time were living in an era in which there was much religious contention. So, whether this be the case or not, the people that were in the audience of the time would certainly have some things that needed to be sorted out. Charles Caldwell Rylie calls these types of people “factious people” in his notes on Titus 3:8-11, going on to say, “These include those who cause divisions over worthless and unprofitable disputes, unsettling the church. Such people are to be warned twice, then rejected or avoided. Romans 16:17 commands similar action, “turn away” which includes personal, social, and spiritual contact.”

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1 Brad Price, Living by faith: a commentary on the Book of Romans from [www.abiblecommentary.com](http://www.abiblecommentary.com) (Elkhart, IN: Price, 2005), 345.

Other sources, such as longtime gospel preacher, James William Boyd would also give us a look into the character and the identification of the men or women in question that Paul has remarked. Boyd says, “They are men who are persuasive, and who can use language in a way that makes error appear to be the truth.” He also says of these people that, “Paul identified false brethren in most inglorious terms as being those who do not serve the Lord, but serve their own ambitions, ‘their own belly.’” These false teachers, or those that caused division, would be somewhat nameless in presence, but certainly would be seen in their actions and words. Jimmy Allen makes note comparatively to that of James Boyd in that “they were not to be ignored or looked upon as non-existent.”

Whoever the identification would point to in this process, there is one thing noted for certain by Paul, given in the language of the text at hand. He instructed the audience of the time to “mark” or “take note” of these people that cause division or teach contrary to what they had learned. These were not people that were to be welcomed in into fellowship, nor were they to be given any blessing in their teachings. Various other scriptures teach this same concept in theology and identifiable in step three of the interpretation process in this essay.

In looking at the text in the biblical audience, one must look at the overall picture of the text. In explanation of the first verse at hand, Jimmy Allen identifies the language used in the common tongue during Paul’s writing of Koine Greek to expound upon the interpretation of what is being said. Of Paul’s writing, he says, “He used the Greek, “skopeo,” in telling them to mark,


4 Boyd, 260.

guard against, behold, beware or, or keep their eyes on a particular group of men who had already arisen or who might arise.”

Price also expands upon this term in his research of the word “mark” in its grammatical sense. He says, “mark (Skopeo) is a present tense verb, and it is found only a few times in the New Testament.”

Vine’s Expository Dictionary would also identify the term in the following way: “Skopeo - mark - to look at, behold, watch, contemplate, is used metaphorically of looking to and translated “mark” in Rom 16:17 of a warning against those who cause divisions.” Finally, in closing out the definition of marking in the original tongue, one must also observe the Lexical entry in the Louw-Nida Lexicon:

“24.32 σκοπέω: to continue to regard closely—‘to watch, to notice carefully.’
σκοπεῖν τοὺς τὰς διχοστασίας καὶ τὰ σκάνδαλα παρὰ τὴν διδαχὴν ἢν ὑμεῖς ἐμᾶθετε ποιοῦντας ‘take careful notice of those who cause divisions and upset people’s faith contrary to the teaching which you have received’ Ro 16:17. It is also possible to understand σκοπέω in Ro 16:17 as being predominantly a mental process of paying close attention in order to be prepared to respond appropriately.”

From this point, the text also has some other key elements under consideration when concentrating on the application of the initial audience. The verse goes on to use the word translated into English as “avoid.” Most translations of the Bible agree on this translation as a common word used. The term may carry somewhat of a unique meaning in comparison to the other scriptures that relate to this idea. In the New American Commentary, Mounce notes that this term is

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6 Allen, 311.
7 Price, 579.
translated in one translation as “disassociate yourselves,” and goes on to state that “false teachers are identified by their teaching. To be true, their doctrine had to agree with the teaching that already had been delivered to the church. Truth does not contradict itself. Teaching that deviated from the apostolic teaching was by definition spurious.” Vine’s Dictionary would also give a relatively lengthy and genuine definition of the term translated as “avoid” by defining it this way, “ekklino - to turn away from, to turn aside, lit., to bend out of…of turning away from his who cause offenses and occasions of stumbling.” These definitions would carry weight throughout the remaining passage of scripture in how one marked is to be treated in all consistency.

Paul goes on in this text to tell the Romans why such a one might teach or cause division. He notes that there was a problem of people wanting to please themselves in any way fashionable and even uses the words that would propagate that they were not serving the Lord Jesus Christ, but would be serving to satisfy their own bellies. These men and women that were doing these types of things would prove to have an agenda of sorts that would focus on their own elevation, their own desires, or their own likings. That is the idea behind what Paul says in pleasing their own bellies. Allen suggests, “they are described as serving their own appetites (the Greek is “koilia,” meaning belly; see KJV) (16:18). This may mean they used the gospel as a pretext for indulging in their own sinful desires (if so, Gnosticism or Antinomianism could be the problem).” He goes on to give a more thorough thought in their identification of origin. “Who were those people? The question has been answered with Judaizers, Gnostics, Antinomians, the

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10 Vine, 83.
strong who pushed their views on the weak, or Gentiles who may have felt superior to the Jews (11:17-20).”

The passage continues with some woes and prophecy of what would happen to those who were causing such division and participating in false teaching. In essence, Paul is telling his audience that there would be these types of teachers in their midst, something that he had written about many times, and he is giving them a process in which to identify them and follow in practice. He is not trying to undermine the understanding of his audience, but more so helping them to identify something that might not be as readily able to see on the surface. In this thought, Price writes, “in verse 19 Paul assured these Christians that he had confidence in their spiritual maturity. He knew they had enough wisdom to hold to what was right, and that their obedience was well known. He was sure they would do what was right, but he did want to give them a gentle reminder.”

The focus now turns to the differences between the biblical audience and the audience of today. While there seems not be a lot of identifiable differences, there are some to note on the surface. As stated, this group of heretical teachers may have been part of a group that existed during Paul's time; however, that does not delineate from the fact that there are still false teachers, some of which would be measured in a much broader sense with the avenues of media today. The audience of Paul’s letter understood the factions of their day. Some of those still exist in today’s audience. There have also been many changes as well. In the first century, there were not

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11 Allen, 312.

12 Price, 346.
multiplicities of faith and belief outside of the Gnostics, and others identified. Today, many different beliefs, segments, and religious tribes exist. The spawning of the Catholic Church in the early centuries would begin an element of division that one could view in the term denomination today. Now, there are thousands of divisions or denominations that identify themselves. With this being said, the audience of today needs to pay close attention to the words of Paul and grasp how to accomplish the task at hand.

James Boyd says, “Surely none in their right mind would consider it proper for God’s people to appear to condone and fellowship people whose doctrines run contrary to the Lord’s, and whose interests are primary to them before the cause of Jesus Christ according to the revealed truth of God in the Bible.” There is an approach in this statement that could fit the audience of Paul, as well as the audience of today. With all of the opportunities that one has to learn today and the closeness of the original text of Paul’s day, the concept is still the same. People will teach a false doctrine to satisfy their own desires or the desires of others. It is a Christian’s responsibility to follow the principles outlined by Paul here in this passage. Boyd goes on to say of people led astray, “it means people who are honest and sincere in wanting to do what is right, but who obviously lack the knowledge of right and wrong, and therefore can be misled by those who have persuasive, subtle, and deceptive manners.”

In comparison, there is not a lot of difference to the interpretation for the audience of Paul and the audience of today. Paul writes to this group of people to thwart false teaching and keep their souls whole. The danger exists in both timelines. Allen says, “if those who divided brethren in the first century with false doctrine were not servants of Christ, would not the same

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13 Boyd, 261.
follow today?" This statement gives paramount thought to the similarities of the times and audience.

In addressing the theological principle in this passage, one must view the first two interpretive questions and answers alongside the context of what will give a complete picture of the passage. There are several passages of scripture that compliment this particular passage and will identify the theological theme. John writes, “If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him;” (2 John 10, NKJV). In this verse alone, one can see the parallel in what Paul has said in Romans 16:17-20. There is a plea for scriptural unity and doctrine in the theme of the New Testament. This theme is in part because of the proper exegete of the word “division.” This was not a very common word at this time. Price says, “divisions (dichostasia) is a relatively rare word in the New Testament (it is found only here, 1 Cor. 3:3; Gal. 5:20), and here it is plural.”

Paul also writes to the church in Colossi, these words, “Now this I say lest anyone should deceive you with persuasive words.” (Colossians 2:4, NKJV). This principle would ring and resound all through this message from Paul much like the one for the Romans. Peter would also address this same principle in one of his letters by stating, “By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words; for a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber.” (2 Peter 2:3, NKJV). Boyd addresses the principle theological element in understanding much like the verses here. He says of those that teach falsely and cause these divi-

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14 Allen, 312.

15 Price, 345.
sions that, “they cause many brethren who would otherwise grow and be faithful to lose their souls because they turn from the truth and follow after a lie.”

Identification of the theological principle continues through the process of this interpretive journey; however, the idea that supposes the text is that one must identify (mark or take note of) anyone that may be teaching false ideas or causing divisions among the church and avoid them. This idea of avoiding carries extensive weight in which it would translate into a much bigger theme in practicality.

How does this theological principle fit with the rest of the Bible? This journey of interpretation has already supported this thought. However, there is much more detail in supporting element that can help with this answer. In the context of the entire New Testament pattern, there are several passages of Scripture as well as ideas that support the theme of the Bible. Salvation through obedience with longstanding and unwavering faith would be the ultimate result of the principle in practice.

One can note that Paul began this text with a plea. The Revised Standard Version uses the word “appeal” in its translation. This would give an idea that this was something that Paul was pleading with the people to consider. Paul had used similar language in other areas of this same epistle when referring to the lost state of the Jews in chapter 9 and chapter 10. He also uses the same thought in chapter 12 when he is encouraging this same audience to look at their lives in a perspective of change toward God. The weight of the term translated fits the overall theme of the plea for one to be saved through God’s divine institution of faith through His grace. Paul’s

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16 Boyd, 261.
appeal is somewhat of a reminder that one has to make a conscious decision in which to obey God, remain faithful, and win the race at hand.

In the perspective of the actual text, Paul’s words would parallel with some of Jesus’ own words. “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.” (Matthew 7:15, NKJV). One might find even a text of the Old Testament to be quite valuable in comparison as well. Jeremiah writes, “And the Lord said to me, “The prophets prophesy lies in My name. I have not sent them, commanded them, nor spoken to them; they prophesy to you a false vision, divination, a worthless thing, and the deceit of their heart.” (Jeremiah 14:14, NKJV).

Paul’s writing and instruction here can be viewed as quite challenging; however, as is noted by James Boyd, it is essential to the correction of error. “This is a strong medicine to take, as one learns from other teaching in the Scriptures regarding discipline. But this action is for the purpose, and administered in the hope, of recovery and restoration of the erroneous brethren. There is never to be any manifestation of hatred toward those involved, but there must be hatred for the false ways being taught and practiced.” He goes on to say, “it would not be the practice of Christian love to allow the one in error to continue in his error and allow him to think that it made no difference with God or brethren. The one who was wrong would then think he could do wrong and still be right.” In the following paragraphs, he says, “They are to be marked, identified, pointed out, and they are to be avoided. This means the church is to have no more to do with them, and they are to be sent on their way, rejected by the brethren, because the brethren refuse to accept those who reject the doctrine of Christ.”

17 Boyd, 260.
pline is in full alignment with what Jesus had said in Matthew 18, the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 5, and other places in which the Bible gives an edict for such.

How is this principle to be lived out today? Price writes this: “In a day when doctrine is pushed aside for entertainment, “feel good preaching,” and “just Jesus,” this is a very helpful text.” Within this thought, the answer can be found. The problem still exists. There is nothing new about this principle; however, the way the principle is identified and practiced is quite different and may not even be recognized in today’s time in contrast to Paul’s audience.

Boyd reminds one of the purpose of this passage in summary. He says, “with the ever growing tide of atheism, digressions, worldliness, liberalism, immorality, hobbies, and the exaltation of human intellectualism and reason above the wisdom of God, the Lord’s people must bolster themselves and mark those who cause such doctrines that are contrary to the truth to be taught.” The principle has an overwhelming need to be practiced today, but it needs to be practiced in the nature in which Paul describes. It does not need to be practiced to “police” Christians, undermine the work of those serving the church, or to make a name for the one who is marking the other. In the time of today, it seems that most times this text is misapplied and used in a manner to prove one person over another.

Paul Earhart writes,

“In this very irenic age, which treasures peace and harmony even above truth and righteousness, the plain language of the Savior will make many uncomfortable. The Son of God was never cute or needlessly severe in His treatment of false teachers but He did not hesitate to ‘call names’ when it was necessary to identify the well from which His people were being poisoned. It needs to be remembered today that Jesus attacked the religious establishment, not out of personal vanity

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18 Price, 345.
19 Boyd, 261.
or ambition, but because the souls of men He loved hung in the balance. We would do well to imitate Him. We must be prudent and fair but we must speak plainly when the salvation of lost men requires it.”

These statements by Earhart capture the element in which one needs to focus on this passage in the times of today. The practice of marking and avoiding has become somewhat of a watchman and town crier fashion with the practice of literally exposing every error or doctrinal disagreement seen in the church, not even considering those of denominational teachings at times. This does not seem to be what Paul had in mind when he wrote to “take note and avoid.” The concept of avoiding would carry the idea that one would fashion their fellowship after the visible proof of correction and repentance as identified in 2 Corinthians 2:5-11 (cf. 1 Corinthians 5). Allen gives a sharp reminder on the point of avoiding by saying, “since Christians surely do not want to avoid faithful brethren, Paul’s language should be understood as having no fellowship with such men (II Thes. 3:6, 14; I Cor. 5:11).”

The principle of this text as a whole in an interpretive journey gives a meaning that can be transferred to today. The text goes on to say that those marked would soon find demise through the crushing of Satan. Paul does not seem to be implying that these marked individuals would and could not return in being faithful to the Lord and to the doctrine in which had been learned, but more so that the actions and obedience of the hearers of this epistle would help to overcome these ailments of the church in that time. The same can and should apply today in principle and practice. Christians should be watchful, taking note of those that cause divisions and waver from the doctrine that has been delivered once for all. There should be an avoidance

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21 Allen, 313.
of those individuals to bring them back to the faith and not just in an effort to bring them back to
the faith and not just to announce in a herald cry among all mankind of their error and disobedience. There is a right and a wrong way in which to bring this passage to life in interpretation, and the right way leads to repentance and faithfulness in overcoming divisions and false teaching.
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We need to understand that Paul is not saying that true teachers avoid all controversy! Jesus Himself provoked a lot of dissension by confronting the hypocritical religious leaders (Matt. 10:34-36; 23:1-36).

Application Questions. Jesus told us not to judge others and yet a few verses later He said not to cast your pearls before swine and to beware of false prophets, both of which require judgments (Matt. 7:1-5, 6, 15). How do you reconcile these commands? Paul here gives at least four marks of false teachers (motivation, message, master, and methods). Can you think of others? Romans 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. Luke 12:51 Suppose ye that I am come to give peace on earth? I tell you, Nay; but rather division: John 7:43 So there was a division among the people because of him. Romans 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. Luke 12:51. Suppose ye that I am come to give peace on earth?

Romans 16:17 Parallel Commentaries. Library. Persis 'Salute the beloved Persis, who laboured much in the Lord.'--ROMANS xvi. 12. There are a great number of otherwise unknown Christians who pass for a moment before our view in this chapter. A Crushed Snake 'The God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly.'--ROMANS xvi. 20. There are three other Scriptural sayings which may have been floating in the Apostle's mind when he penned this triumphant assurance. 'Thou shalt bruise his head'; the great first Evangel--we are to be endowed with Christ's power; 'The lion and the adder thou shalt trample under foot'--all the strength that was given to ancient saints is ours; 'Behold!