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THE INTERPRETATION OF ROMANS 16:17-20  
IN ECCLESIOLOGY

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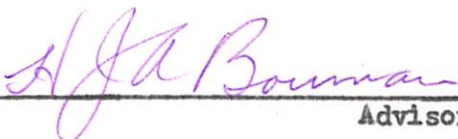
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by

Richard W. Kraemer

November 1968

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Advisor

## CHAPTER I

### A STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In a private paper entitled, "The Burden of Infallibility," written in November of 1948 Theodore Graebner expressed a sincere regret over some of the theological trends which had taken place in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in this century.<sup>1</sup> He expressed his regret, for example, over the course that the exegesis of certain texts had taken. He seems to have had in the back of his mind especially Romans 16:17 when he said this, stating that he really then wished that the St. Louis faculty had arrived at an unequivocal decision back in the 1930's over the matter of applying this text to the question of prayer fellowship with Christians of another denomination; but they had not. The question which Graebner then raised and the very question which this paper raises is whether or not this specific passage of Scripture has been properly applied in the official positions of Synod with respect to fellowship in all its aspects. It was Graebner's personal feeling that it has not, and it was his express fear that Synod was in danger of binding itself to an interpretation which might be doubtful. To compound the difficulty, it was his stated frustration that anyone who might question the Synod's historic exegesis of this text was in danger of falling under its condemnation. He ended his paper with the assertion: "There is only one remedy of the conditions here described: Biblical scholarship."<sup>2</sup>

During sessions of the Synodical Convention of 1950 the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod did finally pass a resolution which in effect set the limits of interpretation of this text. The resolution to date remains unchanged, though the proposed "Theology of Fellowship" of Synod as presented to the convention of 1967 can be read to cast doubt on the former interpretation; for it represents a possible exegetical shift with respect to this passage, a matter later to be

discussed. This paper proposes to explore by way of research various alternatives of interpretation on this text which do exist with the view to finding some criteria by which applications of this text can be tested.

This means, however, that a further step must be taken beyond that which Graebner suggested. Sound Biblical exegesis may not be enough to settle the question of where and where not the Romans 16 passage might properly apply. There remains a problem of bridging the hermeneutical gap between the text under question and present conditions in the Christian Church to which it may be thought to apply. One would be hard put to find Judaizers, Gnostics, or whatever the enemy described in the text, existing today to plague the Church in exactly the way in which they endangered the Christian community of the first century. This does not mean therefore that the warning of St. Paul need be taken lightly. R.C.H. Lenski in his commentary on Romans 16:17f. justifiably was angered by the mere suggestion: "that we cannot today apply Paul's admonition unless we are able to point to exact duplicates of these errors."<sup>3</sup> The problem, however, is that of being able to set some sort of possible limits to its application; this is already the stated problem of this paper.

In order to set limits of the kind required it is necessary first to examine the text to the best of one's exegetical ability to determine its meaning--and that in the context of the epistle of St. Paul to the Romans. It is equally important to examine the way in which this text has been subsequently used in the history of the Christian Church. This, indeed, will constitute the bulk of this paper; for the exegetical traditions of interpretation of this passage have a direct bearing on the way it is currently interpreted and will henceforth be interpreted. This is admittedly a stated hermeneutical assumption. It will undergird the very conclusions which will finally be drawn.

Note that in the body of the paper the text, Romans 16:17-20, will be variously referred to as "The Romans 16 passage," "the Romans passage," "Romans 16:17f." or specifically by reference to a single verse, for example, "Romans 16:18."

## CHAPTER II

### AN EXEGESIS OF ROMANS 16:17-20

This passage appears in the context of a chapter in which Paul extends a good number of greetings, not only to persons from the congregation at Rome, but also to others from other congregations known to be presently in Rome. Altogether there are fourteen greetings in number, and by them Paul seems to be strengthening the catholicity of the Church. He says, "Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you." (Rom. 16:16)

Many scholars have observed that the text under consideration appears almost as if it did not belong there. As Zahn put it in his commentary on the text, it seems to be clearly a digression cutting a line between the greetings begun at verse 3 and continued at verse 21.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, this need not imply that the text does not really belong there. In the context of strengthening the bonds of fellowship, Paul might have thought it appropriate to warn them whom they should not be accepting with open arms.

Secondly, it should be noted that there have been serious questions raised about the authenticity of this text, in fact, that of the entire chapter.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, some have questioned whether or not this chapter was originally sent to Rome at all.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, this paper runs under the assumption that even if it had not been written to Rome, or even if it had not been written by Paul, himself, but by the hand of one of Paul's co-workers (Tertius would seem to be suggested by verse 22), this passage remains consistent with Pauline thought, indeed that of this epistle. Therefore, despite all objections to the contrary, this paper will assume that the thought is Paul's and that of Paul to the Christian community at Rome. Manuscript evidence to the contrary is simply missing.

The Roman 16:17 passage, itself, forms a unit containing a warning (v. 17), the reason for the warning (v. 18), the reason why the Romans themselves are particularly in Paul's concern (v. 19), and finally the availability of God's help in Jesus Christ for their protection (v. 20).

Verse 17 begins with a familiar form of Pauline admonition: "Παρακαλῶ δὲ ὑμᾶς, ἀδελφοί," Elsewhere in this epistle Paul uses it substituting οὖν for δὲ at Romans 12:1 to mark the beginning of a series of exhortations which do not end until the epistle's conclusion; it is also used at Romans 15:30 in the very same form that we find here. Paul is making his final set of appeals to his Roman brothers to live as men newly born with the hope which is in them in Jesus Christ. At Romans 12:1 his appeal is for them to present their bodies as a living sacrifice to God; at Romans 15:30 his appeal is for them to strive together with him in prayer for his deliverance from the hands of unbelievers in Judaea who might seek to harm him during his contemplated trip to deliver the collection to the faithful in Jerusalem. Similarly, this passage in Romans 16 marks a serious appeal, an appeal not to be taken lightly.

First of all, then, Paul appeals to them to mark, that is, to take note of those who cause divisions and offenses among them contrary to the didache which they have been taught. C.K. Barrett<sup>7</sup> points out that Paul uses the verb, ἐκονᾶν, also in Philippians 3:17, but for an opposite reason. In that context he encourages his hearers to pay close attention not to those who are enemies of the cross of Christ, but rather to those who live as Paul and the other apostles, so to follow their example. In Romans 16:17, however, the appeal is to become familiar with the enemy and his tactics so that they may know just exactly whom they must avoid, and whose tactics they advisedly had best not emulate.

Of prime consideration is Paul's use of the word, *δυσκοτασία*; he uses it elsewhere only once, and at that, in Galatians 5:20 wherein it appears along with a listing of other "works of the flesh" which are to be avoided. They are shown to run counter to the fruits of the Spirit which blossom in peace, love, and concord. They are to be crucified with Christ so that a man may walk in the Spirit, giving no provision to the flesh to gratify its desires. Those who are by habit and impulse "division-creators" do not have the Spirit in them; since they are out to destroy, Paul's advice in Romans 16:17 is to avoid them.

Of equal importance is the word, *ἀκύνδαλον*. It is used elsewhere in the New Testament generally to describe a genuine and serious stumbling block to the faith. Christ, Himself, is considered to be an offense to Jews (I Cor. 1:23), so also the cross (Gal. 5:11). In the nearby context of Romans (Rom. 14:13; cf. 9:33, 11:9), Paul urges his hearers never to put a "stumbling-block" in the way of a brother which might cause his ruin. Now to sum up what, has already been said, up to this point in the text St. Paul gives indication that the enemy, whoever he may be, is decidedly bent on living according to the flesh, bent on creating strife among Christians and putting obstacles in the way of their faith.

One of the more controversial clauses of this entire passage is that which begins with the words: *παρὰ τὴν διδαχὴν*. There are some exegetes who would suggest that the *παρὰ* should be read in a locative sense, meaning, "alongside of" or "next to." This is how Luther seems to have interpreted it, translating it by the proposition, neben.<sup>8</sup> There are others, however, who would read it in an adversative sense, meaning, "contrary to" or "in contradiction with."<sup>9</sup> There are also some, like Hamann,<sup>10</sup> who, while interpreting the preposition in an adversative sense, would place this clause not in apposition to the nouns, "divisions" and "offenses," but adverbially in apposition to the participle, "making." This would



render the following possibilities of translating this passage:

- (1) Mark those who create divisions and offenses alongside of the doctrine which you have learned.
- (2) Mark those who create divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which you have learned.
- (3) Mark those who in opposition to the doctrine you have learned are bent on stirring up divisions and offenses among you.

It is possible for any of these three renderings to do justice to the text. Similarly, none of the three precludes the possibility of either of the other two. If the enemy were to try to introduce fatal offenses through deception by adding to the apostles' teaching something alien to it, as Luther had thought, this certainly would be as dangerous, or even moreso, than teaching things which openly would appear contradictory to that teaching. Likewise, if any were to be bent on creating divisions and offenses, a practice contrary to the apostles' admonitions, the very nature of an offense so created would constitute a distortion of the apostolic teaching. None of these alternative interpretations are mutually exclusive of the others.

What is that didache to which Paul refers in this verse? First and perhaps foremost, the teaching of salvation in Jesus Christ as outlined in the first verses of the first chapter of this epistle: that gospel, promised beforehand through the prophets, the gospel concerning God's Son, descended of David according to the flesh, and designated Son of God according to the Spirit by his resurrection, the Lord Jesus Christ, who had commissioned the apostles in the first place to work that obedience of faith noted to be present at Rome from the first chapter to our text (v. 19) in the last. Martin Franzmann makes note of other parallels to be drawn from the epistle to give meaning to this word: the didache is that standard of teaching to which Roman Christians "have become obedient to the heart" (6:17),

that gospel which set them free from sin and made them God's own slaves of righteousness (6:18, 22).<sup>11</sup> There is nothing trivial about this didache; it is a matter of life or death whether or not a person is in Christ.

From all that has been said it is quite apparent from the text that the enemy Paul has in mind is estranged from the brotherhood of those who are in Christ and is bent on destroying it, and verse 18 of the text makes this even more clear. Such persons do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ but their very own bellies. Various commentators interpret the serving of the Κοιλία in different ways. In his commentary written in 1879 Philippi interpreted it as an indulgence in good living or gluttony, noting a reference in Seneca to support his contention.<sup>12</sup> Barrett in supporting his view that the enemy was composed of Judaizers interpreted this to be a matter of preoccupation with food laws.<sup>13</sup> Paul uses the term in Philippians 3:19 to describe enemies of the cross of Christ, and whatever it means literally or figuratively it is the sort of service to self which closes oneself off from the reconciliation with God made possible in the cross. Such persons are ever more dangerous by the practice of deceiving the ἀκάκους with words which might sound pious and flattering, but in the end are devisive and destructive.

In verse 19 St. Paul asserts that his warning is for the Romans' own good, suggesting that if they are not wise and alert they could become caught off guard. It will do them no good to rest on their laurels and past obedience if the enemy should be permitted to reap his destruction.

Finally, in verse 20 Paul reassures them that they can count on the τῆς εἰρήνης to help and protect them. The God who had revealed Himself in Jesus Christ had shown Himself able to tread Satan under foot (I Cor. 15:24f.). Genesis 3:15 stands in the background as a promise being fulfilled. The work

of those devisive persons described in the earlier verses of this text is ultimately shown to be that of the arch-enemy Satan, himself, whose destructive purposes they are bound to serve. In II Corinthians 11:12f. Paul draws an even more explicit connection between Satan and his false apostles. By treading Satan under foot God is actually being shown in Romans 16:20 to be cutting off that source of power through which any demonic servants of his would gain the impetus to try to destroy the Christian community. Verse 20 of the text is then shown to be a word of encouragement and consolation for any who would be afraid of the threat of alien powers intent on disturbing the peace of Christians. To add consolation to consolation St. Paul concludes with words which mean more than simply farewell: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you." There are some manuscripts which omit it (D, G, it), though they are of the same general family; the omission is probably due to mistaking this part of the verse as a closing better placed after verse 23. As it stands, it is a final reminder of the  $\chi\rho\iota\sigma\tau\acute{o}\varsigma$  by which the Romans are secure from all threats to their faith.

The following are conclusions to be drawn from this exegetical study:

- (1) The warning of this passage comes as an appeal of utmost seriousness.
- (2) It is a general warning; the enemy is not clearly identified.<sup>14</sup>
- (3) The enemy is a threat from the outside to be avoided.
- (4) The enemy is a threat to the peace and confidence of those in the faith.
- (5) His practice is to divide the community, probably by trying to gain the ear of some through deception with words that strike at the heart of faith.
- (6) He does not serve Christ, but himself, and must be avoided.
- (7) The God of peace in Jesus Christ can be trusted to keep Christians secure.
- (8) If this exegesis is accurate, any application of this text which does not take into account completely the above description has not taken this text seriously.

There is one final exegetical note to be made of ultimate significance to this paper. In the way of a very strong contrast Paul's advice for those who are one in the faith is quite different. One need only look to the two previous chapters for a full discussion of the sort of conduct befitting those who are one in Jesus Christ. The goal for them is peace and concord. They may disagree on the significance of food laws. Some of the stronger may have no need of them. This gives, however, the strong no provision under the gospel to make folly of the weaker brother with whom he would disagree. It gives him no right to shun the weaker one for his error. He who would serve Christ should work toward the upbuilding of the brother in faith (Romans 14:18), and even more so if he is weak. Together, all are to live in harmony with one voice glorifying the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (15:5f.), welcoming one another as Christ has welcomed them (15:7). This is the sort of obedience of faith which God expects of His servants: the wisdom to avoid those alien agents who deliberately set out to destroy the faith of the brotherhood, the goal of the Romans 16 text here examined, and the love born of God which would seek to upbuild the faith of him who in Christ has become a brother (Romans 14 and 15).

## CHAPTER III

### THE USE OF ROMANS 16:17-20 IN THE WRITINGS OF THE EARLY CHURCH

#### Introduction

Romans 16:17f. is a passage used sparingly in the writings of the early Church. Most of the fathers that were examined for the preparation of this paper made no reference to this passage whatsoever, and those who did, did so each in only a single instance. It is hardly, therefore, to be considered a key passage in the formation of the ecclesiology of the early Church. The comparatively minor role which it seems to have played is itself instructive; of further significance is the use to which it is finally put when and where it is found. That is the subject of this section of the research paper.

#### The Third Century: Cyprian and Firmilian

During the decade of Church history between 250 and 260 A.D. there arose a controversy in Carthage over the discipline of those who had abandoned their faith during the Decian persecution. It was the considered opinion of Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, that those priests of the Church who had fallen under persecution and had actually sacrificed to idols should not be allowed to hold episcopal office in the Church again; still, they were not to be abandoned by the Church but were to be given a chance to repent along with all the others who had lapsed. Only after a long protracted period of penitance could they look forward to being received in full communion in the Church again.

In a letter to Epictetus, bishop of Assurae, Cyprian uses the above rationale in considering the case of one Fortunatianus who still endeavored to claim the

episcopal seat, even though he and his supporters were counted among the lapsed. It is in the context of this letter and under the circumstances described that Cyprian uses Romans 16:18 to support his proposed method of discipline.

In this letter to Epictetus he indicates really that he had thought that Fortunatianus had been on the road to denial long before the persecutions had set in. Making an allusion to Romans 16:18, Cyprian describes him and his supporters as persons who had had an insatiable hunger for excess in the suppers and banquets of the Christian community held before the persecution and their lapse; Cyprian suggests that even then they had not served God, "but their own belly with profane covetousness."<sup>15</sup> Because of their evident faithlessness which now is known to all, Cyprian asserts that they must be forced to penitance, especially one Fortunatianus. With another allusion to Romans 16:18 Cyprian takes the position that Fortunatianus and all the others who had lapsed should be set apart from the faithful in such a way so as not to infect the sound ones with their "contagion."<sup>16</sup>

Summing it up, Cyprian used a part of Romans 16:17f., primarily verse 18, to document his pastoral decision to discipline Christians who under persecution had entirely renounced their Christian faith. His interpretation of the clause, "to avoid" is not outright abandonment, but penitential separation, lest they be denied a possible change of heart and be damned eternally.

During this same period of controversy in Carthage Cyprian received word from Firmilian, bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia, in which there is found only an indirect allusion to the Romans 16 passage under question, but not an explicit quote. Firmilian apparently had written Cyprian to support his position over against that of Stephen, bishop of Rome, concerning the baptism of the lapsed.

Stephen had been attempting to force his opinion that the baptism of the lapsed should be accepted as valid, provided it had been done in the name of the triune God. Cyprian had pronounced to the contrary. In Cyprian's behalf Firmilian asserts that the blessed apostles, Peter and Paul, had never given warrant to such practices conducted outside the Church; for, "in their Epistles," he says, "they execrated heretics, and warned us to avoid them."<sup>17</sup> It is altogether reasonable to assume that he had Romans 16:17 in mind when he wrote this, as well as perhaps II Peter 3:17; and if he did, he took Paul's words--and Peter's as well--to be a warning to avoid heretics and all their practices.

Post-Nicaea: Athanasius, Cyril, Ambrose, Jerome

In a letter written on Easter, 339 A.D., Athanasius makes reference to the Romans 16 passage in a paragraph in which he condemns those guilty of the Arian heresy which was current in his time. They receive the description here as persons who are "Ario-maniacs" who would endeavor to overthrow the faith of "the simple."<sup>18</sup> Like Cyprian, he places the stress of interpretation on verse 18 of the text, stating the root of the Arian heresy to be that of opposition to Christ whom its advocates would blaspheme by asserting He is a creature deriving His being from things which are not. Because of this blasphemy against the Son of God, they must be considered enemies of the Church, says Athanasius, outright heretics who have thrust themselves into the pit of unbelief.

In summary then, Athanasius in all his extant works quotes Romans 16:17f. only here, and here he interprets it as a warning against outright heresy which might arise in the Church. All blasphemers, especially those of the Arian type, are to be avoided and expelled from the Church as long as they do not repent.

Cyril of Jerusalem took occasion to make use of Romans 16:18 in the introduction to the fourth of his catechetical lectures used in instructing catechumens in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre at about 350 A.D. in Jerusalem. It occurs at a point in which Cyril is about to consider his ten points of doctrine. He had begun this lecture with a general warning to his catechumens to be alert to things which could lead to their destruction; he says, for example, that wolves may make their appearance in sheep's clothing, just as Satan their master may have all the appearance of a beneficent angel to those he may want to devour. II Corinthians 11:14 stands in the background. Then, Cyril makes particular reference to three opponents whom the faithful are to avoid: (1) Greeks, presumably pagan philosophers, who would draw men into snares with their command of words, (2) Jews who deceive the simple by faulty Scriptural interpretation, and finally (3) the children of heretics who "by their good words and smooth tongue, deceive the hearts of the innocent, disguising with the name of Christ as it were with honey the poisoned arrows of their impious doctrines."<sup>19</sup>

By way of summary, Cyril is shown to interpret the Romans 16 passage, primarily by making reference to verse 18 of the text, as a warning against heretics, specifically those who fit the description of persons who disguise the name of Christ with deception in order to win others who are counted among the faithful to their heretical point of view. Cyril's advice based on the text: avoid them!

When he came upon this passage in his commentary on St. Paul's epistle to the Romans, St. Ambrose saw fit to make only brief comment. He took it to be a warning against Judaizers who might attempt to impose the tradition of the Law on the conscience of Christians at Rome.<sup>20</sup> By way of application he warns all Christians to remain faithful to the tradition of the apostles and not to allow zealots of the Law to gain a hearing and so to distort the Gospel to work unbelief.



Jerome mentions the Romans passage once in a work directed against the Pelagian heresy. It is located in the context of a dialogue modelled on the dialogue style of earlier Greek philosophy. At a point where the dialectic is taken up by the protagonist of the catholic Church, Jerome has his man assert that smooth and pleasant words are characteristic of heretics and any who would wish to deceive, and here he quotes Romans 16:18 to undergird his point.<sup>21</sup> He indicates by this that his understanding of the text is similar to that of Cyril.

#### The Antiochene Fathers: St. Chrysostom, Theodorus, Theodoretus

During the fourth and fifth centuries A.D. there arose in the Christian Church a reaction to much of the allegorical exegesis of Scripture that had arisen up to that time. The chief center of reaction was Antioch, its emphasis, meticulous attention to the text. Theodorus of Mopsuestia and Theodoretus, bishop of Cyrrhus, were two of the major exegetical exponents of this school of thought, while John Chrysostom provided an apt example of what happens when the Antiochene method is applied to preaching.

Theodorus of Mopsuestia, when he came across this text in his commentary, came to a decision that St. Paul must have had a particular group in mind when he admonished the Roman Church to beware. He suggests that they probably were Jewish legalists:

λέγει δὲ περὶ τῶν ἀπὸ Ἰουδαίων οἱ ἀπανταχόσε περιϊόντες  
τοὺς ἀπὸ ἔθνῶν πλοτεύοντας τῆς νομικῆς ἔχειν παρατηρήσεως  
πέθειν ἐπειρῶντο.<sup>22</sup>

Like Ambrose in the West, Theodorus interpreted Paul to be warning the Church

of the danger of those zealous for the Law who might go about everywhere trying to undo the work of the apostles.

Theodoretus of Cyrrhus gives a similar interpretation to this text in his own commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans. He emphasizes particularly that statement about the adversary in verse 18 concerning the fact that he does not serve Jesus Christ, but his own belly. He furthermore underscores that the doctrine referred to in verse 17 is the doctrine of the apostles. With a stroke of originality he focuses also on verse 20 as a key verse in Paul's admonition, given for their encouragement. He who attains to God's grace in Jesus Christ is made invincible to any peril that may come his way: "Qui enim Dei gratiam consecuti sunt, sunt inexpugnabiles."<sup>23</sup>

Also in like manner St. Chrysostom took this text to refer to Jewish zealots for the Law. In a homily over these verses he uses them to preach against any subversion of the Church by the devil (v. 19), whose prime weapon it seemed to him was the rending of the Church into factions of disunity. In Paul's time, he says, the Jews were guilty of doing this very thing. It was not, he asserts, that their evil stemmed from ignorance or error, but from sin and unbelief wittingly done. All along they were serving their bellies, threatening God's people with "δογματῶν τῆν παρά τῆν διδασχὴν τῶν ἀποστολῶν"<sup>24</sup> Paul would warn the Christians at Rome to avoid them, and Chrysostom warns his own people to do the same against any who would seek to undo the apostles' teaching. Chrysostom, like Theodoretus, also would point to verse 20 as a source of encouragement. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is shown to be the only real defense against Satan and all of his henchmen. St. Chrysostom calls it "that greatest weapon; that impregnable wall; that tower unshaken...(Paul) reminds them of grace, that he may give them the more alacrity."<sup>24</sup>

### In the Mid-Fifth Century: Leo the Great and Vincent of Lerins

Writing about the mid-fifth century A.D., both Leo and Vincent provide clear insights into the way the Romans 16 passage was then being read with the view of making then current applications. Both read it as a warning to avoid adherents of heresy, persons not to be considered in any way a part of the Church.

In a sermon on Lenten fast Leo took the occasion to inveigh against a group of persons in Rome whom he says are in danger of disturbing the Church. They held a common practice of abstinence contrary to that of the Roman Church. They are said to have done so, not to the honour of God, but to that of the sun and moon. Further, and most objectionable, is that they are said to reject salvation by a Christ who was true flesh, born of our nature, truly suffered, was buried, and truly was raised.<sup>26</sup> Leo says they are heretics of a blasphemous magnitude and a real threat to the Christian community since they are reported to have been secretly attending the holy eucharist of the Church. Making use of Romans 16:17-18, Leo recommends that they be expelled from the Church by priestly authority wherever and whenever they are found.

Vincent of Lerins likewise uses this passage against the threat of heresy, but in a slightly different way. In a section of his Commonitory he singles out as especially dangerous those who not only would defile Scripture to support their heresies but in addition also those who would defame the fathers by using them to support their heretical positions. In this section Vincent does not specifically name any one heresy which he would have in mind. His is a general warning against all heretics who must be considered accursed, separated, segregated, indeed excluded, lest the dire "contagion of a single sheep infect the blameless flock of Christ by poisonous contact when intermingled with them."<sup>27</sup>

His advice regarding the possible spread of the contagion is reminiscent of that of Cyprian with regard to the lapsed; and like Cyprian of two centuries before, Vincent makes mention of Romans 16:17-18 among other Scriptural passages which are there to provide a warning.

#### Summary

The above represents the positions of an unbiased sampling of fathers of the Early Church from the third century A.D. up to the mid-fifth century and Chalcedon. Several other documents not represented here were also examined, but none of them contained any reference to the passage in Romans 16. In every document, without exception, in which this passage actually was found it was understood as a warning to the Church against heretical dangers from the outside which would threaten to break apart the unity of faith in the Church. Even in the case of Cyprian concerning the lapsed who desired to return, it is used to segregate those who had lapsed from the rest of the community when it concerned full communion; for they might have returned without actually being repentant, and their loss of faith might work to endanger all.

Most frequently in the works examined this passage is considered to be a warning against adherents of a heresy which would blaspheme Jesus Christ and make a mockery of the witness of His apostles to His Lordship. From Cyprian to Vincent the tendency is to focus especially on verse 18 to describe what actually lies at the root of their error: disservice to Christ and service to themselves. Those who are discovered to evidence these characteristics, endeavoring to seduce the innocent with flattering words, are to be completely avoided and exterminated from the Christian community where found, as long as they remain hardened in unbelief.

Most of the fathers who made reference to this passage did not offer to speculate over what particular group of enemies St. Paul might have had in mind when writing this text--the supposition that he had a specific group in mind is itself open to question. Those, however, who did venture a guess decided without exception to give the enemy a Jewish name, describing the opponents as either Judaizers or simply Jews. Even if a name for the enemy were offered, no one actually sought by this to confine the text simply to a warning against these and no others who might arise to oppose the apostolic faith. To the contrary, there seems to have been a prevalent concern throughout the first five centuries of the Church to take this passage as a general warning to be taken seriously by the Christian Church in all ages and under any conditions so that she might be ever alert to all heretical enemies of Christ who might seek to gain an entry in her midst. The Church it was felt must be guarded at all times from those who would destroy her unity with her redeeming Lord and that unity of love and faith which in Him exists in her members, a unity which was thought to exist despite all the limitations of sin, error, and weakness which remain in the saints on earth. Heresy was a threatening matter and indeed disruptive, but the weakness of the Church's members was taken to be quite another thing--as Augustine is reported to have said somewhere: "Err I may; a heretic I will not be." So the fathers did not use the Romans 16 passage with reference to disagreements within the Church, but only with respect to dangers created by those completely outside of faith and driven by the old evil foe totally to pride and destruction. Theodoretus and Chrysostom were sharp to point out that the best of all defenses against enemies like these is the good offense which God has given, which is a total reliance on His grace so that He might be able to make us stand impregnable to Satan and the arrows of his heretical band.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE ROMANS 16 PASSAGE AND THE REFORMATION

#### Its Rare Use Among Lutherans

As in the days of the Early Church, so also in the period of the Reformation the Romans 16 passage under question was used only sparingly, if at all. It is not to be found in any of the confessional writings contained in the Lutheran Symbols. It is rarely found in the writings of Martin Luther; in fact, where one might have expected some comment upon these verses in Luther's early lectures on Romans, Luther says nothing though he expounds on the surrounding verses.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, his colleague, Philip Melancthon, in his Anmerkungen zum Brief an die Roemer refrains from making comment on this text.<sup>29</sup> One would have thought if either Luther or his companion had considered these verses at the time to be of prime importance to an understanding of this epistle they would have said so then. It is difficult to conclude a good deal from silence, except that it should be noted.

It is of further significance to note that the Lutheran Confessors at Augsburg did not make use of this text against any of their opponents with whom they disagreed. It is not a matter of not detecting grave differences between their opinions and those of the others. Nevertheless, as the preface to the Augsburg Confession points out, their intention at that time was to settle all grievances between them in an amicable and charitable spirit so that being reconciled together they all "may be united into one, true religion, even as we are all under one Christ and should confess and contend for Christ."<sup>30</sup>

Herbert J. A. Beuman stated in a recent article on ecclesiology in the Lutheran Symbols that the Lutheran fathers made room for the possibility of imperfection, shortcomings, indeed error within the true Christian Church,

and they did not consider such weaknesses of her members to constitute necessarily the overthrow of faith in her midst;<sup>31</sup> and here Professor Bouman quotes the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, article vii, 20-21:

There are also many weak people in it (the church) who build on this foundation (the Gospel) perishing structures of stubble, that is, unprofitable opinions. But because they do not overthrow the foundation, these are forgiven them or even corrected. The writings of the holy Fathers show that even they sometimes built stubble on the foundation but that this did not overthrow their faith.<sup>32</sup>

There is only one great error which the confessors in this document seem to find intolerable--the error that forgiveness of sins is not received through faith but is rather attained through a system of merit. This error, if persistently held, removes "Christ as the foundation."<sup>33</sup> It is tantamount to open heresy in the Church, a departure from the apostolic witness at its very core, and any who stubbornly expound it making folly of the cross are to be chastised and resisted.

The tone of this document, however, still remains conciliatory and hopeful of a resolution of conflicting opinions, as Melancthon states in the preface:

We take no pleasure in discord, nor are we indifferent to our danger... And so we shall commend our cause to Christ, who will one day judge these controversies. We beseech him to regard his afflicted and scattered churches and to restore them to a godly and abiding harmony.<sup>34</sup>

Given this concern for reconciliation, it is possible to see why a passage such as Romans 16:17f. should not have received prominent attention among Lutherans during the period of the Reformation, especially if this passage was traditionally interpreted as a serious warning against enemies infected with wholesale apostasy. It seems to have been their hope that faith was not dead in the opposition and among the "innocent" faithful who followed them; otherwise, complete abandonment and not reconciliation would have been the order of the day. It remains the task to examine where this passage does find a use in Luther.

### The Use of This Passage in Two Minor References

To the knowledge of this writer Luther uses this Romans 16 passage prominently only twice, and twice in the way of minor reference. The two minor references will be considered first.

In a section of a letter on rebaptism in which the Anabaptists are accused of being blasphemous with respect to the Christian doctrine of baptism, he compares them to the Jews whom Luther says in a digression of thought are known to be shamelessly blasphemous towards Christ to his day, endeavoring to frighten the heart of the innocent, "misleading it, as St. Paul observes in Rom. 16:18."<sup>35</sup> Luther does not clarify exactly if he means by that that Paul was also in his day in writing this text thinking primarily of the unbelieving Jews who might try to stir up trouble among those who believe in Christ. His interpretation of the nature of the enemy in this text is nonetheless clear. He takes it here to be a warning against those who would blaspheme Christ and endeavor by it to disturb the hearts of the faithful; he takes it here to refer to unbelieving Jews and by implication the Anabaptists in their sectarian practices.

A possible allusion to the Romans 16 text, and only an allusion, can be found in a section of Luther's exposition of Psalm 23 at the fifth verse.<sup>36</sup> Luther here explains that the devil wants always to assail the Church and its treasure whenever he can. His strategy in this is to torture the Church with fiery arrows from within and schisms and offenses from without. Luther did not, however, quote Romans 16:17 in the way of support in the original German text of this exposition, though the St. Louis American edition suggests that it stands in the background by placing this verse in parentheses at this point.



A factor which might cast doubt on the translator's conjecture is that Luther in the original uses "Rotten" for the word, "schisms," whereas in his German translation of the New Testament he used quite another word in the Romans 16 text: Zertrennung. Nonetheless there very well may be an allusion to this text at this point in the exposition of the psalm. If there is, Luther links the work of creators of dissension and offense with that of the arch-enemy, Satan.

#### Luther on Monastic Vows

In 1521 Martin Luther wrote a book on monastic vows, not for polemical purposes exactly, but for a guide to those who had already left the monastery or were thinking of leaving. He was primarily concerned that they know that they might leave with all good conscience and under the freedom which only the gospel can give.

In the final section of this work Luther has something to say about each of the three major vows: the vow to poverty, the vow to obedience, and that hard vow of chastity. It is in connection with this comments about the third of these vows that a reference to Romans 16:17-18 occurs. All along in this work Luther had asserted quite unequivocally that anything which does not proceed from faith to the glory of Christ's name belongs to sin and abomination. He said in one place that vows in themselves do not have any salutary effect and if not taken in faith do great injury to him who takes them:

Let him be anathema who teaches anything else but that justification and salvation are in faith alone...It is quite clear, therefore, that monastic vows, when they cannot be taught as being not more than and not other than faith, are ungodly, heathen, Jewish, sacrilegious, lying, erroneous, satanic, hypocritical, apostate, and even contrary to the examples of the saints.<sup>37</sup>

Given this distinction, it is possible to understand more clearly his understanding

of the Romans 16 passage as reflected in this work. After quoting Romans 16:17-18 in its entirety, he says in the way of commentary:

These words can only be understood as referring to those who, contrary to the Christian way, teach something different as if it were something better. Paul does not say they deny our teaching but that they teach another kind along with and other than course<sup>38</sup>

Luther then goes on to show that the monastic institution as it was currently being taught bore all the marks of those things to be avoided in the Romans 16 warning. He says that they create divisions and sects, promote servitude to the belly, and promote good works and boasting speeches to the deception of the hearts of the innocent. Using other Scriptural passages to undergird his assessment of the institution, he says it is alien to Christ and does not give glory to the God made known in Jesus Christ.

He takes this passage therefore to be a warning against any institution or practice which may go beyond the teaching of the gospel and faith. Note that it is the institution and its teaching that are being condemned and only those persons within it who have made of it their God in offense to the cross. Luther, however, has very kind words for those Christians within the institution who in spite of it have held to the faith given them in their baptisms and remain beloved of God. This is the first document examined in this paper which uses this passage with reference to an institution within the Church of long-standing. Luther's interpretation, however, remains consistent with the general tradition of exegesis which warns Christians to avoid adherents of unbelief who diverge from the core of faith in the gospel. It is not any old error which receives the condemnation but one which can cut directly at the vitals of faith in the saving work of Jesus Christ. The gospel remains for Luther the main measuring-stick of heresy, as it did in the documents of the Early Church.

## Luther's Comments on Psalm 19:13-14

Luther's most definitive interpretation of Romans 16:17f. comes, strangely enough, in a point of clarification over the meaning of a psalm. To understand his interpretation here it is important to describe some of the ingredients in his argument of this section. In commenting on Psalm 19:14 Luther divides all of humanity into two basic groups: (1) there are those who live by the Gottseligkeit des Glaubens; they are those einfaltigen Seelen who pray to God continually for their preservation and protection, but (2) there are also those who mask themselves sometimes as believers but are in fact hypocrites, Heuchler, wolves who devour the innocent by luring them into the Aberglaube der Gottlosigkeit und der Werke.<sup>39</sup> This battle between those in faith and the faithless is considered by Luther to be the most perilous; it is the groesste Gefahr. The peril is found in the fact that the way of pride and hypocrisy is so flattering and has such a godly aura about it, that without the Spirit the faithful could be caught quite unawares:

Eine so gar grosse Sache ist es, in der Gottseligkeit des Glaubens zu verharren, dass der Geist nicht gemag erinnern und einschaerfen kann, dass wir uns vor den schmeichelnden Lehren der stolzen Heuchler hueten sollen.<sup>40</sup>

It is at this point in the commentary that Luther introduces Romans 16:18 to clarify the psalm verse here under consideration. It is those godless hypocrites described above who would boast in the Law and its works who would endeavor to deceive the simple with "suesse Worte und praechtige Rede."<sup>41</sup> They are the persons whom the apostle warns Christians at Rome to avoid. By concentrating on small sins which they have not done, they heap upon themselves all the more condemnation for their Unglaube; for they do not take refuge in the God of mercy who in faith would save them.

In Luther's interpretation the difference between the flock of Christ and those who would rend it apart by their hypocritical deceptions is a difference of night and day. It is a difference between living by faith from the hand of God and living in pride in service to one's own belly. It is a difference between Glaube and Unglaube. Luther in this interpretation does not delineate possible degrees of truth and error among believers, distinguishing persons by the approximation which their doctrines may or may not have to truth. The distinction is much more radical than that. A man may finally serve God or Mammon, be a servant of God in Jesus Christ or a slave of Satan, live in a faith nourished by the Spirit of God or by works of the Law to his condemnation. Given such a distinction between the innocent in Christ and those who would live by idolatry, Luther could say of the Romans 16 passage:

Wahrlich, diese Stelle wirft Licht auf unzählige Stellen in den Propheten und Psalmen, und greift alle Satzungen der Menschen mit wunderbarer Kraft, Nachdruck, und aus drucksvollen Worten an; darum sollte ein jegliches christliches Gemüth sie fest und lebendig im Gedächtnis behalten.<sup>42</sup>

#### Summary

In the writings of Luther which have been examined above there appears a consistency of interpretation of the Romans 16 passage here under study. Like Ambrose and those of the Antiochene school he saw the danger forewarned by Paul in the text to be primarily the danger of a Judaizing legalism which runs counter to the faith of the apostolic witness to Christ. He sought to apply this passage to dangers he saw current in the Church of his day which he felt ran against the free grain of the gospel of justification in Christ by faith alone. He seems to have interpreted this passage as a general warning against heresy, and heresy defined as Unglaube reflected in a doctrine of salvation by merit.

### The Romans 16:17 Passage in John Calvin

Like Luther, Calvin rarely found occasion to make use of the Romans 16 passage in his theological writings. It is possible however to gain an impression of what he interpreted the warning to mean by noting his exposition of this text in his commentary on the Epistle of Paul to the Romans. He explains it to be a general warning against those "ministers of Satan" who seem always intent on disturbing the Kingdom of Christ by sowing discord.<sup>43</sup>

It is interesting at this point to note what Calvin understands the nature of discord to be. He says it is a disruption of the "unity of truth in the minds of men."<sup>44</sup> He says that it is possible to disrupt the truth of God by mixing in any new dogma devised by men, which he says is the work of Satan.

Secondly, it seems that Calvin is writing this interpretation of this text while on the defensive. It appears from his account that Roman Catholic opponents had been using this passage against him. His description is revealing of his general interpretation of the text:

There is no ground for the Papists to seek countenance from this passage, in order to raise ill-will against us; for we do not impugn and tear asunder the gospel of Christ, but the falsehoods of the devil by which it has been hitherto obscured: nay, Paul clearly shows that he did not condemn all kinds of discords, but those which destroyed consent in the orthodox faith.<sup>45</sup>

It is possible from this to summarize Calvin's interpretation of this passage in the following way: (1) Paul did not have in mind all kinds of discord but only one, which is (2) the destruction of truth concerning God in the minds of men. (3) Calvin describes this truth by another name, the gospel of Christ threatened by Satan's falsehoods or likewise (4) consent in the orthodox faith. (5) God is the author of true dogma, while men may distort it; any who do distort it are to be avoided as heretical.

John Calvin's interpretation of this passage may at first glance seem quite traditional. Like others before him, he interprets it to be a warning against heresy. There is still a certain degree of ambiguity in his exposition nonetheless. Are the distinctions, "truth" and "error", adequate enough to state the difference between those who are in Christ and those who are servants of their bellies (v.18)? Augustine said he might err and still not be heretical. Calvin states it is the duty of Christians to separate themselves from those who promulgate human errors that contradict God's truth. This still may not have gotten to the meaning of St. Paul in this particular text. Paul does not speak so much about error as he does about deception. He does not speak so much about falsehood as he does about destructive opposition to Christ. Calvin defined discord as a disruption of truth in man's mind. Paul here and elsewhere seems to be much more specific than this, calling it a dislocation of men from the apostolic witness to Christ with a corresponding rejection of God's mercy in the cross and a loss of love towards one's fellow men. It is more than a disruption of truth; it is a separation from God who outside of Christ is alien to man. Calvin makes mention of the "gospel of Christ" in his commentary, but it is not clear from what he says that this means anything more than a revelation of truth, rather than a redemption.

The stress of his interpretation on the truth of dogma becomes almost a major preoccupation among some who came after him. Unfortunately, this became the case among dogmaticians of the Lutheran Church of a century later. The result as shall be shown in the next section of this paper is the beginnings of confusion with respect to this particular Pauline text. This text becomes a warning against any doctrinal error; and any error is heresy.

## CHAPTER V

### IN THE PERIOD OF LUTHERAN ORTHODOXY

#### Introduction

As in the period of the Reformation so also in the period of orthodoxy which followed the Romans 16 passage here under study does not receive a good deal of attention. It does not appear at all, for example, in the major dogmatic works of Hollatz or Hutter. It appears only twice in the writings of Gerhard, and then only tangentially; because of the limitations of time and space this paper will not deal with Gerhard's use of the text since it is relatively minor.<sup>46</sup> This text does, however, receive prominent attention in the refutations of Calvinism which occurred at Wittenberg at the turn of the century. It is also found in a place of importance in Jehann Baier's major work. These two occurrences, since they have a direct bearing on the theological use of this passage in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod will receive attention here.

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The Opinion of the Wittenberg Faculty: July 30, 1619

Some eighty odd years subsequent to the signing of the Augsburg Confession the possibility of reconciliation between parties in the Church seemed to have ceased. It had become a time not of confrontation but of refutation. Rome, since the Council of Trent, had anathematized all who did not comply with her. Others in turn were building their refutations not only against Rome, but also against each other. In the heart of controversy the lines between parties were being firmly drawn and were in the process of hardening.

In 1619 Lutheran theologians at Wittenberg leveled a decided condemnation

against the Calvinists. The point of issue was whether or not the followers of Calvin should be considered part of the Christian Church or a pernicious sect. Walther in a work to be examined later quotes this refutation only in part. He quotes that section of the document which sets out in detail the criteria by which one must judge a religious body to be a sect; it is quoted here under the translation of Walther by Mueller:

From this appear four distinctive characteristics that mark a pernicious sect:

1. It must go contrary to the foundation of the Christian faith; 2. defend its error with premeditation; 3. cause divisions and offenses in the church; 4. resolutely refuse correction, insist that it is right, and obstinately persist in heresy. These characteristics rest upon the following Scriptural passages: 1Cor. 3:10ff.; Gal. 1:7,8; Rom. 16:17; 1 Tim. 6:3; 2Tim. 2:18; 3:13. If these four marks are applied to the doctrine of the Calvinists, it will be obvious how it is to be judged.<sup>47</sup>

Walther ends his quotation of the Wittenberg refutation at this point. The original document however goes on to say there is clearly but one fundamental doctrine by which a religious body is to be judged a sect, the very foundation of the Church itself, Jesus Christ and his salvation for sinful man.<sup>48</sup> The document goes on to evaluate the Calvinists by their doctrine of Christ and the gospel. The Calvinists are thereby condemned on the following counts: (1) They are shown guilty of separating the two natures of Christ, a revival of the Nestorian heresy of the Early Church. (2) They are shown not to consider Christ in their doctrine of salvation to be the Mediator and High Priest for all men or (3) the Saviour who died for all or (4) the one who extended the call to all the lost to be part of His Kingdom and in short (5) they upset the very fundamental article of justification by grace through faith in the cross of Jesus Christ. The Wittenberg faculty then came to this conclusion:



Dahero wurden unzweifelhaftig schliessen dass der Calvinismus eine recht verderbliche Secte sen, under die Secten gehoerig von wel chen S. Paulus gesagt: es müssen Rotten under euch senn, auf dass die so rechtschaffen sind, offenbar under euch werden. I Cor. 11:19.<sup>49</sup>

Insofar as these men made use of Romans 16:17 in the context quoted above from the extract in Walther and so further clarified their understanding of the nature of the error involved in the Calvinists with relation to Christology, but also in relation to the sectarian fashion in which they were seen to operate at that time, their understanding of the Romans 16 passage seems in line with that understanding accorded this text in the Early Church and also in the writings of Luther. Their opinion at Wittenberg in 1619 represents an understanding of heresy to be directly based on one's divergence from the gospel as witnessed by the apostles and preserved in the dogma of the Church. Whether or not their actual understanding of the Calvinist teaching was accurate or whether or not their evaluation would still apply to the reformed today is not to be debated here. What is important is that in apparent good conscience they felt compelled to use the Romans 16 passage and a host of others to undergird their conclusion that these opponents are pernicious in their heretical teaching and must be avoided.

Baier: Compendium theologiae positivae

By the time Johannes Baier had written his Compendium, Christian doctrine in the Lutheran Church was more and more being conceived as a system of dogma held together coherently according to sound logical principles. This was the major legacy of seventeenth century orthodoxy in this church. Christian faith was no less considered the work of the Holy Spirit and its object salvation in Jesus Christ; but the operation of faith was becoming altogether more complex

and disseminated by the systematization of dogma. Instead of describing faith primarily in relation to a single Fundament as the faculty had done at Wittenberg in 1619 (that foundation being Christ, Himself), the object of faith became more diverse, fastened on dogmatic fundamentals. Doctrine was being conceived as a system of articles of dogma built upon the foundation, our Lord Himself. If a man were to flounder in his belief at any point of the fundamentals, he was understood to be in danger of losing all. Fundamentals themselves were divided into those considered primary and those considered secondary, but even secondary articles were conceived of utmost importance. So Baier could write in his prolegomena:

Whoever denies a secondary fundamental article of the foundation of faith, he by his denial is not only opposed indirectly to the foundations of faith, but also overthrows by his error, resulting from his denial, the foundation of faith directly, and brings about that faith cannot be created or exist in him.<sup>50</sup>

Such an understanding of faith tightly bound in a system led Baier to conclude that anyone who erred on points of doctrine should not be permitted to assume the responsibility of public ministry within the Church for fear of endangering the purity of the Church's doctrine, not to say anything of the faith of the simple. Baier could likewise say that fellowship with any other religious denomination in which error could be found was tantamount to synergism and placing the church similarly in a dangerous position. His position on this point makes use of Romans 16:17 in the way of Scriptural support and reflects an exegesis of this passage later to be used quite ostensibly in the position of the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod with respect to fellowship. The following is an extended quote which contains the particulars of his position:

The unity of the church is opposed by synergism or the fusion into brotherly and ecclesiastical concord of parties disagreeing in religion despite the disagreement, so that there are tolerated either the doctrinal errors in the dissenting part or at least the erring persons themselves within the ecclesiastical communion as brethren in Christ or coheirs of eternal life, which toleration is wrong in both cases.<sup>51</sup>

What may strike the reader particularly about this position on fellowship is not simply its uncompromising character, but even more so, its general and non-specific quality. Baier simply states that a union between parties is impossible if they disagree in "religion." This marks a departure from the clarity of the Augsburg fathers who asserted the sufficiency of the Church's unity to be grounded in an agreement on the gospel and sacraments. It seems that the demand had been broadened to cover all points of doctrine, the divergence from many of which would be tantamount to open apostasy. This can also be shown in Baier's summary statement which uses Romans 16:17 in the way of Scriptural support for this position:

The toleration of erring persons, since it pertains not merely to the unlearned, but to the entire communion, and therefore at the same time to the very public ministry and the heretical teachers, is in opposition to the commands to convince, rebuke, and avoid false teachers and propagators of errors (Rom. 16:17; 2 Cor. 6: 14, 17 Gal. 1:8; 5:12; 2 Thess. 3:6; I Tim. 6:3; Titus 3:10)<sup>52</sup>

From this position of Baier and his use of Romans 16:17 among other Scriptural warrants the following summary observations can be made of his fellowship position: (1) He sees the main task of the Church to protect itself from error of any kind and to stick to the pure doctrine. (2) He interprets St. Paul's warnings to be against having anything to do with those claiming to be believers but may hold to certain questionable doctrines. (3) There is no distinction made between error and rank apostasy, so no given Christian responsibility towards those who may be weak but have not overthrown

faith's foundation once held by St. Paul (Romans 14 and 15) and those who set their signatures to the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, article vii; as noted above. (4) This document forms a direct background to the position of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod over against unionism as officially adopted in the Brief Statement and finally also in Synod's official exegesis of the Romans 16 text, which was adopted in the convention of 1950. This will form the subject of the next and final research section of this paper.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE LUTHERAN CHURCH--MISSOURI SYNOD AND ROMANS 16:17f.

#### Exegesis with a History

From its very inception the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod placed a great deal of importance on Romans 16:17f. In the constitution of Synod under article three, "Objects," the goals of Synod in the first instance were shown to be two-fold: first, the conservation and promotion of the unity of the true faith (Eph. 4:3-6; 1 Cor. 1:10), but secondly also "a united defense against schism and sectarianism (Rom. 16:17)."<sup>53</sup> From the very beginning this Romans 16 passage became linked to ecclesiological definitions regarding the Church's defense, defense against trouble within and without a denominational boundary.

As time went on this passage found a prominent place in the theological position of C.F.W. Walther. In an essay presented before the Synodical Convention at St. Louis on October 31, 1866, later published under the title, The True Visible Church of God on Earth, under thesis five of that essay, Walther quoted the first verses of this passage and offered the interpretation that it was meant to be taken as a warning against the spreading of "pernicious errors against the very fundamentals of the faith."<sup>54</sup> Thesis five itself is a definition which employs this interpretation above to condemn all denominations as heretical "which, though retaining God's Word essentially, nevertheless err obstinately in fundamentals of the divine truth."<sup>55</sup> This definition clearly has the work of Johannes Baier in the background as well as that of the faculty at Wittenberg in 1619, a fact which is revealed by the use of both these sources in the text of the essay at this point in the way of documentation; yet, the

general nature of its scope is closer to Baier than it is to Wittenberg where the condemnation had narrowed precisely to errors directed in opposition to the very Fundament of faith itself, our Lord Jesus Christ.

In all fairness to the sainted Walther it should be said that surely he meant most of all by the terms, "fundamentals of the faith," the gospel pure and simple; he had said already in thesis one of this essay that Christ is the Foundation on which the Church is built. Nevertheless, as it stands, his definition is vague concerning the error of denominations thought to be heretical, his exegesis of Romans 16:17 at best unclear.

This marks the beginning of a long line of adherents to an exegesis of Romans 16:17f. who interpreted this passage to be a Scriptural safeguard, as it were a rule, which prohibits the toleration of any doctrinal error in the public teaching office of the Church. As this passage was then applied, as indicated in the introductory chapter of this paper, to matters of church relation with other denominational groups, it began to be read as a prohibition preventing prayer fellowship with other Christians; but it also began to be used to set the limits of any contact with other Christian denominations whose orthodoxy might be in question with respect to altar and pulpit fellowship.

In a position paper delivered in 1893 before representatives from other Lutheran Bodies from this country, Dr. Franz Pieper underscored this position of Synod with respect to pulpit fellowship by making ample use of Romans 16:17. Dr. Pieper then asserted that all Christians are commanded to avoid those who teach doctrines contrary to the Scriptures (Rom. 16:17); teachers, therefore, who in any way proclaim false doctrines are not to be admitted into, but excluded from our pulpits.

Dr. Pieper's definition and his interpretation of the Romans 16 passage represent yet a further departure from the explicit concerns of Paul in his text.

"Doctrines contrary to Scripture" is a very broad distinction. The trouble forewarned by Paul in the Romans 16 text is more obviously from the text a threat to the teaching of the Gospel; the reference is first and foremost to Christ and those who would deceptively oppose Him, as was shown in the exegetical section of this paper. The trouble is more specific than doctrines in general, and the heretical danger more clearly manifested as opposition to Christ.

The broad scope of interpretation of this Romans 16 passage however persisted from the time of Walther and Pieper into this century. It became a main bulwark to the synodical stance with regard to unionism, a term which was coined in resistance to the Prussian Union of Lutheran and Reformed churches of Germany,<sup>56</sup> but a term which also received its theological content from Baier's description of what he had called "synergism" as examined above. In his Church Dogmatics Pieper had termed it the merger of any two church bodies where the agreement would permit the errors of one to invade the other. Pieper had said that a church body only gets into such a predicament "when it no longer applies Romans 16:17, hence does not combat and eventually remove the false doctrine, but tolerates it without reproof and thus grants it equal right with truth."<sup>57</sup> This understanding of the use of Romans 16:17 persisted until the cardinal statement of its use took place in the adoption of The Brief Statement by Synod in 1932, whose interpretation is still binding to this day. The background of this interpretation has been shown to be primarily found in documents of seventeenth century orthodoxy, primarily that of Baier's but also in documents of the early history of the Missouri Synod, which read this chapter and verse through the hermeneutical lens which was passed on as a legacy from the period of orthodoxy, the lens which saw in this passage a warning simply against error in doctrine, and nothing more.

### The Brief Statement

The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod in convention in 1932 adopted a statement of theological stance over against other Lutheran synods in America whose positions were thought to be offensive; this document became known as the Brief Statement. This statement was still considered binding until it was rescinded in the convention in 1962 on constitutional grounds. The decision of 1962 still holds. This document however remains important for this study since its interpretation of Romans 16:17 with respect to fellowship was later employed in Synod's official position on this verse as adopted in the convention of 1950, and though the Brief Statement itself might have been rescinded, its view on fellowship as reflected in the resolution of 1950 still has not been retracted. Under the heading, "Of the Church--On Church Fellowship," it states that all Christians are required by Scripture:

to have church fellowship only with orthodox church bodies, and, in case they have strayed into heterodox church bodies, to leave them, Rom. 16:17. We repudiate unionism, that is, church fellowship, with the adherents of false doctrine, as disobedience to God's command, as causing divisions in the Church (Rom. 16:17; 2 John 9, 10) and as involving the constant danger of losing the Word of God entirely, 2 Tim. 2:17-21.<sup>58</sup>

The beauty of this statement is that it crystallizes with utter clarity the tendency in definitions which arose before it, especially with respect to the use of the Romans 16 passage. It is taken to be a warning against the "adherents of false doctrine." The problem with this interpretation, like others of its kind, is that it involves a dogmatic assumption which Paul did not make when he wrote this passage: the assumption that error of any kind must not be tolerated in the Christian community. As was noted in the exegetical section of this paper, St. Paul in Romans 14 and 15 leaves room for a good deal of forbearance of error in the Christian community, as long as faith



remained intact and the purposes of Christ were being served. The weak in St. Paul's thought in this epistle demand an altogether different attitude than that advised in Romans 16 with respect to those who would persistently devise the actual ruin of those who are in Christ. The definition of the Brief Statement does not make any distinction in this respect; all "false doctrine" is simply condemned and all those with it who would hold it. This would make the application of Romans 16:17 extend beyond the actual limits which Paul prescribed. Further it opens the gates for a possible loveless attitude towards the erring for zeal of the truth, an attitude which in itself is condemned by St. Paul in Romans 14 and 15 as a dereliction of responsibility given by God for the weak. These objections to the interpretation above strike at the heart of the exegetical confusion which seems to have arisen about this text.

1932-1950

Since 1932 the interpretation of Romans 16:17f. remained a point of debate in this synod. Theodore Laetsch in his introductions to the Concordia Theological Monthly in January and February of 1935 stated that this Romans passage clearly applies to all Lutheran bodies who do not clearly denounce masonry.<sup>59</sup> H. Hamann of Australia in 1941 confessed that he had become confused by what he called a Tendenz in the American exegesis of this text where commentators are said to set out to defend a thesis rather than to find out exactly what Paul would say; he concluded from his own observations of this text: "in the eyes of the apostle these errorists were not weak, erring Christians, but enemies of Christ and of Christians."<sup>60</sup> Stoekhardt and Lenski would write just the opposite, the latter of which could state flatly:

Paul's injunction is not to keep away from total rejectors of the Gospel-- what Christian ever needed such a warning? His injunction is to keep away from believers who are errorists and teach falsely.<sup>61</sup>

Faith-Life carried a series of articles in 1942 which dealt with the battle over the interpretation of this text, a battle which did not come to a decisive end.<sup>62</sup> Finally by 1950 the demand for an interpretation of this text was brought to the floor of a synodical convention.

### The Synodical Resolution of 1950

The following resolution was adopted in the Synodical Convention of 1950 concerning the interpretation of Romans 16:17 in this Synod:

1. We reaffirm as Scripturally correct, the use of Rom. 16:17 in the Constitution of Synod, the synodical Catechism, and the Brief Statement.
2. In this passage and in many others...Scripture warns against unionism and the tolerance of error and requires that we deny church fellowship to all who persist in false doctrine. Under Church fellowship, we include pulpit fellowship, altar fellowship, and prayer fellowship, as defined by the synodical resolutions of 1944 and 1947.<sup>63</sup>

The tradition of exegesis originally begun in seventeenth century orthodoxy is here made official and binding as the theological stance of a church body in its relations to others. Lest there be any possible divergence from this rule, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in this same convention further resolved:

The question of "official" interpretation or exegesis, has been raised among us; be it

Resolved, that Synod recognizes that there may be legitimate differences of opinion in purely exegetical matters...but that liberty does not extend further and that no interpretation may be held which is contrary to the analogy of faith, and be it further

Resolved, that All members of Synod should guard against an abuse of this liberty, which would cause confusion and disturbance.<sup>65</sup>

This paper is hopefully not to be considered an abuse of the liberty granted. That the above exegesis of Romans 16:17 still remains under question is shown by an examination of the proposed "Theology of Fellowship" of Synod.

Here one may note that the resolution of 1950 is not explicitly reaffirmed. In fact this document may be read as a departure from Synod's traditional stance, but nevertheless as a return to the meaning of St. Paul and the interpretation of this text so presented in the writings of the fathers and the Lutheran fathers of the immediate period of the Reformation. It interprets Paul to be warning against heretics who attack the Gospel, and not their victims, nor erring Christians in the Church. As the document concludes, "A careful study of Romans 16: 17,18 underscores the importance of observing the distinction between erring Christians, who must be instructed, and heretics, who attack the foundation of the church."<sup>65</sup>

#### Summary Observations

(1) The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod might well continue to explore its currently proposed exegesis of the Romans 16 text as indicated in the document, "Theology of Fellowship," to understand the implications of this proposal as a reversal of a previously held position on this text.

(2) It represents a return to an earlier position on this text. In the literature of the early Church and also in that of the period of the Lutheran Reformation this text was interpreted then as now primarily as a warning against those who oppose radically the apostolic witness to Christ, that is, those who are unbelieving and heretical.

(3) Any vague description of the enemy, for example that which would describe them as "adherents of false doctrine", is not specific enough to make a responsible evaluation of whom it is one should really avoid according to this Romans 16 text.

(4) Romans 16:17f. should not be isolated from Romans 14 and 15 or any other such passage in which St. Paul asserts a given responsibility for all

Christians towards each other, irrespective of the factor of error or weakness in one another.

(5) The use of Romans 16:17f. to reject fellowship with other Christians on the grounds of dogmatic differences is not a legitimate use of the text. The enemy according to the text is not Christian at all, but Anti-Christ. If any would want to undergird Biblically an ecclesiology which would prohibit what has been called, "unionism," he will have to look elsewhere in Scripture for clear documentation. This conclusion is based not only on a current methodical exegesis of the text, but also on the historic exegesis of this text as revealed in documents written to the close of the Reformation period in the history of the church.

#### For Further Study

There still needs to be done some study over the difference between the Fundament of faith and fundamentals of faith. Similarly, a study such as this would need to include some clear distinction or relation between the Gospel and dogmas. Unionism itself needs to be still more clearly defined. There may exist conditions in the Church where the term might apply, and that rightly, but insofar as this is not a very theological word it would seem that another word might well be chosen so as not to muddy the waters any longer with possible offenses given to other Christians by this word, let alone other Lutherans. It is interesting to note that historically this Synod may not have sought fellowship with other groups, but at the same time done what is called, "cooperation in things external". Exploration into possible abuse with respect to this practice should be undertaken.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Theodore Graebner, "The Burden of Infallibility," Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly, XXXVIII (July 1965), 88-94.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 94.

<sup>3</sup>R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans, (Columbus: Wartburg Press, 1945), p. 914.

<sup>4</sup>D. Theodore Zahn, Der Brief des Paulus an die Roemer (Leipzig: George Boehme, 1910), p.612-613.

<sup>5</sup>cf. Paul Feine and Johannes Behm, Introduction to the New Testament, edited by Werner Georg Kummel and translated by A.J. Mattill, Jr. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1966), pp. 222-226.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>C. K. Barrett, A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), p. 285.

<sup>8</sup>Infra, footnote 38.

<sup>9</sup>cf. Walter Bauer, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, translated and adapted by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957) p. 616.

<sup>10</sup>H. Hamann, "Romans 16:17,18," The Australasian Review, XII (December 31, 1941), p. 110.

<sup>11</sup>Martin H. Franzmann, Concordia Commentary: Romans (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), p. 278-284.

<sup>12</sup>cf. Friedrich Adolph Philippi, Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans, translated by J.S. Banks (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1879), and also C.K. Barrett, p. 285.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>cf. Franzmann, Philippi, and John Murray, The Epistle to the Romans (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1965) II, 234.

<sup>15</sup>Cyprian, "Epistle LXV," in Library of the Fathers (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1844), p.200.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p.273.

- <sup>18</sup>Athanasius, "Letter XI," in The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, edited by Archibald Robertson (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1953), p. 536.
- <sup>19</sup>Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lectures, in The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, edited by Edwin Hamilton Gifford (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1955) VII, 19.
- <sup>20</sup>Ambrose, Commentaria in XII Epistolas Beati Pauli, in Patrologiae: Patrum Latinorum, edited by J. P. Migne (Paris: n.p., 1879), XVII, p. 190.
- <sup>21</sup>Jerome, "Against the Pelagians," The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912), p. 212.
- <sup>22</sup>Theodorus of Mopsuestia, In Epistolam Pauli ad Romanos Commentarii, in Patrologiae: Patrum Graecorum, Edited by J. P. Migne (Paris; n.p., 1864), LXVI, 875.
- <sup>23</sup>Theoderetus, Interpretatio Epistolarum S. Pauli Apostoli (Magdeburg: Impensis Orphanotrophi, 1771), pp. 160-161.
- <sup>24</sup>John Chrysestom, In Divi Pauli Epistolam ad Romanos Homiliae XXXIII, Library of the Fathers (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1849), p. 486.
- <sup>25</sup>Ibid., (translated), p. 488.
- <sup>26</sup>Leo the Great, "Sermon XLII," The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, edited by Charles Lett Felton (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1956), XII, 158.
- <sup>27</sup>Vincent of Lerins, The Commonitory, in Library of Christian Classics, edited by George E. Mc Cracken (London: SCM Press, 1957), p. 47.
- <sup>28</sup>Martin Luther, Vorlesung Ueber den Roemerbrief (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1960), II, 448-451.
- <sup>29</sup>Philip Melancthon, Anmerkungen Zum Brief an die Roemer (Erlangen: Verlag von Carl Herder, 1828).
- <sup>30</sup>Philip Melancthon, "The Augsburg Confession," The Book of Concord, translated and edited by Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), p. 25.
- <sup>31</sup>Herbert J. A. Bouman, "Some Thoughts on the Church in the Lutheran Symbols," Concordia Theological Monthly, XXXIX (March 1968), 191.
- <sup>32</sup>Philip Melancthon, "The Apology of the Augsburg Confession," in Book of Concord, p. 171-172.
- <sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 172.
- <sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 99.
- <sup>35</sup>Martin Luther, "Concerning Rebaptism," Luther's Works (Muhlenberg Press: Philadelphia, 1966), XL, 259.

<sup>36</sup>Martin Luther, "Psalm 23," Luther's Works (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955), XII, 174.

<sup>37</sup>Martin Luther, "The Judgement of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows," Luther's Works (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), XLIV, 292.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 378, Note that Luther deliberately translates the Greek, "para" by the German, Neben. He does not take it to mean contrary to but beside.

<sup>39</sup>Martin Luther, "Anlegungen ueber die Psalmen," Saemmtliche Schriften, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1895), col. 1169.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., col. 1170.

<sup>43</sup>John Calvin, Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul, the Apostle, to the Romans, translated by John Owen (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1947), p. 548f.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p. 548.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p. 549.

<sup>46</sup>cf. Johann Gerhard, Loci Theologici (Berlin: Schawitz, 1863), I, 202 and V, 355.

<sup>47</sup>C. F. W. Walther, The True Visible Church of God On Earth, translated by John Theodore Mueller (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), p. 23.

<sup>48</sup>-----, Consilia Theologica Witebergensia, (Frankfurt am Main: Johann Andreas Endter, 1664), I, 526. The significant passage to be noted is the following: "Denn dass der Calvinismus im Fundament Christlicher Lehre irre ist daher offenbar (anderer Irrthumben juetzt zugeschweigen) dass sie von Christo (welcher das einige Fundament des Glaubens ist) nicht also lehren wie er sich im Wort seiner Person und Amptshalben geoffenbahret hat."

<sup>49</sup>Ibid.

<sup>50</sup>Baier quoted in Walther, p. 102.

<sup>51</sup>Walther, p. 28.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>53</sup>-----, Handbook of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (St. Louis: 1967), p. 15.

<sup>54</sup>Walther, p. 20.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid.

<sup>56</sup>Herbert J. A. Bouman, "Unionism and Proper Practice," Proceedings of the Forty-fifth Regular Convention of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), p. 31.

<sup>57</sup>Francis Pieper, Christian Dogmatics (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), III, 423.

<sup>58</sup>-----, "The Brief Statement," in Church in Fellowship, edited by Vilmos Vajta (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1963), pp. 58-59.

<sup>59</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "Foreward," Concordia Theological Monthly (February 1935), p. 92.

<sup>60</sup>H. Hamann, p. 109.

<sup>61</sup>R. C. H. Lenski, p. 914f.; cf. also George Stoeckhardt, The Epistle to the Romans, translated by Erwin W. Koehlinger (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary, 1943), p. 207f.

<sup>62</sup>Faith-Life, XV (January 1942), 15; (February 1942), p. 9; (July: 1942), 11.

<sup>63</sup>-----, Proceedings of the Synodical Convention, 1950 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955), p. 656f.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid.



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