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Dealing With Divisive False Teachers:
When Conflict Becomes Necessary

(Adapted from 'Watch Out for Those Who Lead You Away from the Truth': John Piper)

Paul instructs Believers to avoid quarrels, factions, and any form of division that elevates self over unity: *"I appeal to you, dear brothers and sisters, by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, to live in harmony with each other. Let there be no divisions in the Church. Rather, be of one mind, united in thought and purpose"* *(1 Cor 1:10).*

He urges the Church to be of the same mind and judgment, rejecting rivalry, and factionalism.

This kind of conflict, driven by pride, personality loyalties, or personal preference, is immature and destructive. It fractures the Body of Christ and undermines the witness of the Gospel. It is sinful.

However, Paul later acknowledges a different reality: *"But, of course, there must be divisions among you so that you who have God's approval will be recognised"* *(1 Cor 11:19).*

Here we are taught that sometimes conflict becomes necessary because it exposes who and what is genuine. It reveals hypocrisy, and ungodly behaviour.

Paul is not approving of division, but recognises that when divisive false teachers enter the Church, conflict becomes unavoidable *(Rom 16:17, Titus 3:10, 1 Tim 6:3-5)*.

In these moments, truth and error collide and the resulting tension reveals who is walking faithfully.

Note, a divisive false teacher is not simply someone who holds a different view on non-essential doctrines, rather it is someone who rejects sound Biblical teaching, substitutes distorted doctrine, and actively promotes the unwise or harmful application of it within their Church or ministry.

Conflict is needed when divisive false teachers arise in order to expose false motives, clarify doctrine, purify the Church, and ultimately strengthen unity.

It is not petty disagreement, but the necessary discernment that arises when truth is challenged.

Paul is not saying that division is good, rather he is saying that when truth is at stake, conflict becomes the tool God uses to reveal what is genuine.

He is aware that without doctrinal faithfulness, there can be no unity. He is aware that we cannot love people if we don't love the truth.

Hence, when divisive false teachers arise, conflict and avoidance become necessary.

Titus 3:10 instructs that when a divisive person disregards two clear warnings, it demonstrates a settled, contentious disposition and a hardened intent to disrupt the unity of the Church. We are then to have nothing to do with them.

This is reiterated in Romans 16:17-20: *I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. Such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive. For your obedience is known to all, so that I rejoice over you, but I want you to be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil. The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you*.

First we are commanded to identify those who cause divisions, and then to deliberately avoid them.

This two-step instruction reveals that true unity and doctrinal integrity are inseparable; a healthy Church and ministry cannot have one without the other.

Consequently, Paul spares no effort across his letters to advocate for deep Christian unity while demanding that congregations remain fiercely vigilant against divisive false teachers.

Paul teaches that when we spot a division-causing person, we must separate from them because sound doctrine is the sole foundation of Christian unity.

Departing from truth is a far greater threat to the Church than departing from and avoiding the divisive false teacher.

For the sake of genuine, truth-based unity, Paul is willing to call for a truth-based division.

The only alignment that matters in the Church is one rooted in sound apostolic teaching.

Although isolating and avoiding false teachers is the Biblical strategy for preserving doctrinal unity, it does not mean we stop caring about them or praying for them. It simply means we cannot carry on as normal in fellowship with them.

We also need to be vigilant because those who depart from sound doctrine do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own appetites, and they lead others astray through pleasant, plausible, and flattering speech.

False teachers rarely attract followers through harsh, unkind words. Instead they use charm, friendliness, and persuasion. Their words appear gracious and appealing, and this is precisely why the naïve are easily deceived.

This also means that resisting false teaching will seldom be popular because those who promote it often seem to bring blessing rather than danger.

In conclusion, Believers must refuse conflict that stems from pride or personal preference *(1 Cor 1:10),* but accept conflict that arises from confronting error and pursuing truth-based unity. Separating from divisive false teachers is the Biblical strategy for safeguarding a Church rooted in truth. In this vital sense, conflict becomes not only necessary but a duty of faithful discernment *(1 Cor 11:19, Rom 16:17–20, Titus 3:10).*