

THE SINFULNESS OF SCHISM

There should be no schism in the body ... the members should have the same care for one another. (I Cor 12:25)
... stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together. (Phil 1:27)

There is a true doctrine of separation, much misunderstood these days, and which I have written upon elsewhere. For certain doctrinal, ecclesiastical and moral breakdowns separation is not only acceptable, it is a command: *withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly; (2 Thess 3:6); have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them.* (Eph 5:11) However, this can be wrongly applied or taken too far. There are people who find it all too easy to withdraw from others at the drop of a hat or because they have taken unnecessary offence. Often it arises from insecurity in relationships or just plain pride. Whenever believers separate from other Christians for unbiblical reasons, it is a serious sin. What is said of marriage is as true for believers who are one in the Spirit: *What God has joined together let no man put asunder'* (Matt 19:6).

The Biblical state of believers is true spiritual unity

The apparent state of Christians on earth is a sad and false picture of their true spiritual position. All genuine believers are united to Christ, and in him they are united to each other. They have been made into new creatures with a vital and deep spiritual link which will one day blossom into a physical link when they are resurrected in a spiritual body. Real unity exists now. Jesus' prayer in Jn 17 did not go unanswered but was effected when the Holy Spirit was outpoured at Pentecost: *For by one Spirit we were all baptised into one body* (1 Cor 12:13). We are united in one body, not many factions.

A true spiritual union exists between every believer, even between those who fight and oppose one another: *There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.* (Eph 4:4-6). This is why party spirit and schism is so evil; it is the body of Christ tearing itself apart.

When God pours out his Spirit the first effect is brethren in unity

Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common. (Acts 4:32)

In revival God moves upon the world to convert the elect through the Gospel; but the same action of God has a different effect upon the church. Oftentimes he convicts erring believers of their sin, which needs confession, he brings a

worshipful spirit upon meetings, he leads people into selfless acts of good works and he joins believers into a practical and meaningful unity. Blessing flows from this: *how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! ... For there the LORD commanded the blessing.* (Ps 133:1-3) Before God uses a church in power, there must be unity and single-mindedness.

The Biblical demand of believers is a testimony of practical unity

Be of the same mind toward one another. (Rm 12:16)

Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus, that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Rm 15:5-6)

Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. (1 Cor 1:10)

Keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Eph 4:3)

Fulfil my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. (Phil 2:2)

Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, be tender-hearted, be courteous; not returning evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary blessing, knowing that you were called to this, that you may inherit a blessing. (1 Pt 3:8-9)

These scriptures need no comment from me; they are clear and straightforward to all.

The danger of wrongful separation or resentment in the local church

For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep. (1 Cor 11:29-30)

Paul teaches here that breaking bread must be done in good relationship within the body. If a brother has damaged a relationship with another brother or sister, there will be judgment. The reason for this judgment is to ensure that no one can continue in a breakdown of relationships within the church. The local body will be detrimentally affected by someone who resents another believer or who has hurt another believer and not repented or repaired the damage.

In extreme cases, as in Corinth, the judgment of God is to make a person sick or even to take them out of the picture. 'Sleep' here means death. Apparently many people in Corinth had been taken by God as a result of the divisions mentioned at the beginning of the letter.

God takes the unity of the body so seriously that any harm done by one member to another is treated with divine discipline, a chastisement that can sometimes be severe.

The Old Testament on the obligation of love

For the commandments ... are all summed up in this saying, namely, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." Love does no harm to a neighbour; therefore love is the fulfilment of the law. And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. (Rom 13:9-11)

For a theocratic people (a covenant people considered to be a nation united under God as King), everyone was to love his neighbour as himself. If you love your neighbour you fulfil the law, for how can you steal from someone you love? How can you kill someone you love? This was imposed by Paul (and Jesus) upon the New Testament church community. Those who are our neighbours must be loved. Our neighbour is someone close to us, either by proximity, relationship or duty. It especially means fellow believers: *Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith. (Gal 6:10)*

Therefore, even under OT law, we must love our fellow believers and this obviously means being united. But more than this, it means an actual caring for them, taking a genuine interest in their affairs, loving them. Now occasionally love can mean being cruel to be kind; if discipline is called for, then love enforces it. But we must take care to only withdraw from a love obligation under the most clear Biblical instructions e.g. for adultery, gross public sin, heresy etc.

The New Testament on the obligation of love

We are all aware of Paul's great chapter on love in 1 Cor 13, so we do not need to exegete this here. Love is a crucial part of the Christian life. Without love there is no testimony of genuine faith. A believer can be weak in many areas but still show his faith, which works through love. Love is vital, even when applying discipline, as any parent knows.

Weakness in doctrine or practice is not a reason for separation. We must be tolerant over non-critical issues: *Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things. (Rm 14:1)* It is wrong to spend time debating or arguing over issues that are not important. If a brother differs on an unimportant doctrine, tolerate his weakness and seek to help him better see the truth but do not put a stumbling block in his way, neither withdraw from him. *Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother's way. (Rm 14:13)*

The church is riven from top to bottom by people who oppose each other on eschatology. Now a proper understanding of the last things is quite important, it can encourage a believer to see the doctrine correctly or weaken a believer if he follows error here. However, this is not an issue to separate over. Some churches have been founded on a separation from others on this issue alone. This is wrong. Unity counts more than secondary doctrines.

Some Christians feel strongly about life-style choices and condemn believers for watching TV, going to the cinema, going to dances etc. None of these things are Biblical reasons for condemnation or separation. Indeed, it is quite possible for a person to glorify God and watch a good TV programme or be honourable by watching a good film. Some films ought to be seen by everyone because we learn from them in graphic ways (like *Schindler's List* for example).

The key is never to be dogmatic about a non-Biblical issue. If the Bible does not condemn an action, either directly or by implication, then we should be tolerant. Sometimes God even allows a person to take a course of action which appears to others to be wrong according to scriptural principle (though never against clear Biblical prohibition) and good finally comes of it in wonderful ways. The OT is full of examples of this: David's sin with Bathsheba, Boaz marrying a Moabite, Rahab being rescued by Joshua, the Hivites being included in the inheritance by guile [Jos 9], Jacob deceiving Isaac for the birthright etc. etc. God is a God of grace and often tolerates far more than we would expect. We need to be extremely careful before we launch into a condemnation of someone, even if we think we have good reason. We need to be even more cautious before we sin against Christ and divide the body by withdrawing from someone wrongly. *Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand.* (Rm 12:4)

It is a far greater evil to condemn someone wrongly and separate from them if God has given us no right to do so. In this we will reap what we sow (Gal 6:7). God is jealous for the body of Christ, it is the apple of his eye and the only object of his love in the universe. If we damage the union of this body by acting foolishly, we will suffer for it. *But why do you judge your brother? Or why do you show contempt for your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.* (Rm 14:10)

Paul explained to the Roman Christians, whom he had not met, the rule that governs this matter. There were divisions there over an unimportant issue – food. Some insisted upon being vegetarians (Rm 14:2) out of weak knowledge, while others ate meat as well because they understood the issue better. Another issue was a problem. Some had not fully moved on from Judaism and celebrated the Sabbath day instead of celebrating Christ's resurrection day (Sunday, Rm 14:5). In both cases Paul warned those that thought they were wiser (and they were doctrinally stronger) that they were totally wrong if they spurned or criticised the weaker believers over non-essential matters: *Yet if your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died.* (Rm 14:15) Their criticism grieved their brothers and Paul says that over zealous criticism could 'destroy' them (i.e. 'put him out of the way'). Christ died, out of love, to raise the brother. The food question killed the weaker brother by someone not walking in love. This is a great sin and rends the body from within.

We can be less correct and approved by God or more correct and not approved. If we wound our brother out of dogmatism, we spurn God by damaging his body. How much worse is it to wound a brother when our position is not even Biblically sound; when we condemn someone wrongly. Either way, the most crucial issue is to pursue peace within the body unless absolutely forced by scripture to withdraw or condemn. *For he who serves Christ in these things is acceptable to God and approved by men. Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another. Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are pure, but it is evil for the man who eats with offence. It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak.* (Rm 14:18-21)

Conclusion

The rule of fellowship is – never cause anyone else to stumble by your wrong action, in speech, writing, behaviour or attitude. The body is to be a place of peace and love; resentment, a critical spirit and outright condemnation should never be expressed in the body at all. There are times, however, when discipline against serious sin or gross behaviour is warranted. The causes for this are clearly laid down in scripture. To cause a division in the body for anything else is a worse sin than any perceived offence, and it will be judged by the Lord of the church.

Scripture quotations are from The New King James Version
© Thomas Nelson 1982

Paul Fahy Copyright © 2001
Understanding Ministries
<http://www.understanding-ministries.com>