

On Schism

By John Wesley

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Sermon Title On Schism

Sermon Footnote (text of the 1872 edition)

Sermon Scripture "That there might be no schism in the body." 1 Cor. 12:25.

Iintro 1. If there be any word in the English tongue as ambiguous and indeterminate in its meaning as the word Church, it is one that is nearly allied to it, -- the word Schism. it has been the subject of innumerable disputes for several hundred years; and almost innumerable books have been written concerning it in every part of the Christian world. A very large share of these have been published in our country; particularly during the last century, and the beginning of the present: And persons of the strongest understanding, and the most consummate learning, have exhausted all their strength upon the question, both in conversation and writing. This has appeared to be more necessary than ever, since the grand separation of the Reformed from the Romish Church. This is a charge which the members of that Church never fail to bring against all that separate from her; and which, consequently, has employed the thought and pens of the most able disputants on both sides. And Those of each side have generally, when they entered into the field, been secured of victory; supposing the strength of their arguments was so great, that it was impossible for reasonable men to resist them.

2. But it is observable, that exceeding little good has been done by all these controversies. Very few of the warmest and ablest disputants have been able to convince their opponents. After all that could be said, the Papists are Papists, and the Protestants are Protestants still. And the same success has attended those who have so vehemently disputed

about separation from the Church of England. Those who separated from her were eagerly charged with schism; they as eagerly denied the charge; and scarce any were able to convince their opponents either on one side or the other.

3. One great reason why this controversy has been so unprofitable, why so few of either side have been convinced, is this: They seldom agreed as to the meaning of the word concerning which they disputed: and if they did not fix the meaning of this, if they did not define the term before they began disputing about it, they might continue the dispute to their lives" end, without getting one step forward; without coming a jot nearer to each other than when they first set out.

4. Yet it must be a point of considerable importance, or St. Paul would not have spoken so seriously of it. It is, therefore, highly needful that we should consider, I. The nature, and , II. The evil of it.

I I. 1. It is the more needful to do this, because among the numberless books that have been written upon the subject, both by the Romanists and Protestants, it is difficult to find any that define it in a scriptural manner. The whole body of Roman Catholics define schism, a separation from the Church of Rome; and almost all our own writers define it, a separation from the Church of England. Thus both the one and the other set out wrong, and stumble at the very threshold. This will easily appear to any that calmly consider the several texts wherein the word "schism" occurs: from the whole tenor of which it is manifest, that it is not a separation from any Church, (whether general or particular, whether the Catholic, or any national Church,) but a separation in a Church.

2. Let us begin with the first verse, wherein St. Paul makes use of the word. It is the tenth verse of the first chapter of his First Epistle to the Corinthians. The Words are, "I beseech you, brethren, by the name of the Lord Jesus, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no schisms" (the original word is schismata) "among you." Can anything be more plain than that the schisms here spoken of, were not separations from, but divisions in, the Church of Corinth? Accordingly, it follows, "But that ye be perfectly united together, in the same mind and in the same judgment." You see here, that an union in mind and judgment was the direct opposite to the Corinthian schism. This,

consequently, was not a separation from the Church or Christian society at Corinth" but a separation in the Church; a disunion in mind and judgment, (perhaps also affection,) among those who, notwithstanding this, continued outwardly united as before.

3. Of what nature this schism at Corinth was, is still more clearly determined (if anything can be more clear) by the words that immediately follow: "Now this I say," -- this is the schism of which I speak; you are divided into separate parties; some of you speaking in favor of one, some of another preacher, -- "Every one of you saith," (verse 12,) "I am of Paul, and I of Apollos, and I of Cephas," or Peter. Who then does not see that the schism for which the Apostle here reproves the Corinthians is neither more nor less than the splitting into several parties, as they gave the preference to one or another preacher? And this species of schism there will be occasion to guard against in every religious community.

4. The second place where the Apostle uses this word is in the eighteenth verse of the eleventh chapter of this Epistle: "When ye come together in the Church," the Christian congregation, "I hear that there are division" (the original word here also is schismata, schisms) "among you." But what were these schisms? The Apostle immediately tells you: (Verse 20:) "When you come together," professing you design is "to cat of the Lord's Supper, every on of you taketh before another his own supper," as if it were a common meal. What then was the schism? It seems, in doing this, they divided into little parties, which cherished anger and resentment one against another, even at the solemn season.

5. May it not be observed, (to make a little digression here, for the sake of those who are troubled with needless scruples on this head,) that the sin which the Apostle charges on the communicants at Corinth in this chapter is usually quite misunderstood? It was precisely this, and nothing else, "the taking one before another his own supper;" and in such a shocking manner, that while "one was hungry, another was drunken." By doing this, he says, "ye eat and drink" (not "damnation:" a vile mistranslating of the word, but) judgment, temporal judgment, "to yourselves:" Which sometimes shortened their lives. "For this cause" -- for sinning in this vile manner -- "many are sick and weak among you."

Observe here two things: First, What was the sin of the Corinthians? Mark is well, and remember it. It was taking one before another his own supper; so that while one was hungry, another was drunken. Secondly, What was the punishment? It was bodily weakness and sickness; which, without repentance, might end in death. But what is this to you? Your cannot commit their sin: Therefore, you cannot incur their punishment.

6. But to return. It deserves to be seriously remarked, that in this chapter the Apostle uses the word "heresies" as exactly equivalent with the word "schisms." "I hear," says he, (verse 18.) "that there are schisms among you, and I partly believe it:" He then adds, (verse 19,) "for there must be heresies" (another word for the same thing) "among you, that they which are approved among you may be made manifest." As if he had said, "The wisdom of God permits it so to be, for this end, -- for the clear manifestation of those whose heart is right with him." This word, therefore, (heresy,) which has been so strangely distorted for many centuries, as if it meant erroneous opinions, opinions contrary to the faith delivered to the saints, -- which has been made a pretense for destroying cities, depopulation countries, and shedding seas of innocent blood, -- has not the least reference to opinions, whether right or wrong. It simply means, wherever it occurs in Scripture, divisions, or parties, in a religious community.

7. The third and the only remaining place in this Epistle, wherein the Apostle uses this word, is the twenty fifth verse of the twelfth chapter; where, speaking of the Church, he seems to mean the Church universal, the whole body of Christ,) he observes, "God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to that part which lacked, that there might be no schism in the body:" (Verse 24, 25:) He immediately fixes the meaning of his own words: "But that the members might have the same care one for another: And Whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it. : We may easily observe that the word Schism here, means the want of this tender care for each other. It undoubtedly means an alienation of affection in any of them toward their brethren; a division of heart, and parties springing therefrom, though they were still outwardly united together; though they still continued members of the same external society.

8. But there seems to be one considerable objection against the supposing heresy and schism to mean the same thing. It is said, St. Peter, in the second chapter of his Second Epistle, takes the word Heresies in a quite different sense. His words are, (verse 1,) "There shall be among you false teachers, who will bring in damnable," or destructive, "heresies, denying the Lord that bought them." It does by no means appear that St. Peter here takes the word Heresies in any other sense that St. Paul does. Even in this passage it does not appear to have any reference to opinions, good or bad. Rather it means, They will "bring in" or occasion, destructive parties or sects, (so it is rendered in the common French translation,) who "deny the Lord that bought them:" Such sects now swarm throughout the Christian world.

9. I shall be thankful to any one who will point to me any other place in the inspired writings, where this word "Schism" is to be found. I remember only these three. And it is apparent to every impartial reader, that it does not, in any of these, mean a separation from any Church or body of Christians, whether with or without cause. So that the immense pains which have been taken both by Papists and Protestants, in writing whole volumes against Schism, as a separation, whether from the Church of Rome, or from the Church of England, exerting all their strength, and bringing all their learning, have been employed to mighty little purpose. They have been fighting with shadows of their own raising; violently combating a sin which had no existence but in their own imagination; which is to once forbidden, no, nor once mentioned, either in the Old or New Testament,

10. "But is there no sin resembling what so many learned and pious writers have termed Schism, and against which all the members of religious communities have need to be carefully guarded? : I do not doubt but there is; and I cannot tell, whether this too may not, in a remote sense, be called Schism: I mean, "A causeless separation from a body of living Christians. : There is no absurdity in taking the word in this sense, though it be not strictly scriptural. And it is certain all the members of Christian communities should be carefully guarded against it. For how little a thing soever it may seem, and how innocent soever it may be accounted, schism, even in this sense, is both evil in itself, and

productive of evil consequences.

11. It is evil in itself. To separate ourselves from a body of living Christian, with whom we were before united, is a grievous breach of the law of love. It is the nature of love to unite us together; and the greater the love, the stricter the union. And while this continues in its strength, nothing can divide those whom love has united. It is only when our love grows cold, that we can think of separating from our brethren. And this is certainly the case with any who willingly separate from their Christian brethren. The pretences for separation may be innumerable, but want of love is always the real cause; otherwise they would still hold the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. It is therefore contrary to all those commands of God, wherein brotherly love is enjoined: To that of St. Paul, "Let brotherly love continue:" -- that of St. John, "My beloved children, love one another;" -- and especially to that of our blessed Master, "This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you" Yea, "By this," saith he, "shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye love one another."

12. And as such a separation is evil in itself, being a breach of brotherly love, so it brings forth evil fruit; it is naturally productive of the most mischievous consequences. It opens a door to all unkind tempers, both in ourselves and others. It leads directly to a whole train of evil surmising, to severe and uncharitable judging of each other. It gives occasion to offense, to anger and resentment, perhaps in ourselves as well as in our brethren; which, if not presently stopped, may issue in bitterness, malice, and settled hatred; creating a present hell wherever they are found, as a prelude to hell eternal.

13. But the ill consequences of even this species of schism do not terminate in the heart. Evil tempers cannot long remain within, before they are productive of outward fruit. Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh. As he whose heart is full of love openeth his mouth with wisdom, and in his lips there is the law of kindness; so he whose heart is full of prejudice, anger, suspicion, or any unkind temper, will surely open his mouth in a manner corresponding with the disposition of his mind. And hence will arise, if not lying and slandering, (which yet will hardly be avoided,) bitter words, tale-bearing, backbiting, and

evil-speaking of every kind.

14. From evil words, from tale-bearing, backbiting and evil-speaking, how many evil works will naturally flow! Anger, jealousy, envy, wrong tempers of every kind, do not vent themselves merely in words, but push men continually to all kind of ungodly and unrighteous actions. A plentiful harvest of all the works of darkness may be expected to spring from this source; whereby, in the end, thousands of souls, and not a few of those who once walked in the light of God's countenance, may be turned from the way of peace, and finally drowned in everlasting perdition.

15. Well might our blessed Lord say, "Woe unto the world because of offenses:" Yet, "it must needs be, that offenses will come:" Yea, abundance of them will of necessity arise when a breach of this sort is made in any religious community; while they that leave it endeavour to justify themselves, by censuring those they separate from; and these on the other hand retort the charge, and strive to lay the blame on them. But how mightily does all this altercation grieve the Holy Spirit of God! How does it hinder his mild and gentle operations in the souls both of one and the other! Heresies and schisms (in the scriptural sense of those words) will, sooner or later, be the consequence; parties will be formed, on one and the other side, whereby the love of many will wax cold. The hunger and thirst after righteousness, after either the favor or the full image of God, together with the longing desires wherewith so many were filled of promoting the work of God in the souls of their brethren, will grow languid, and as offenses increase will gradually die away. And as the "fruit of the Spirit" withers away, "the works of the flesh" will again prevail, to the utter destruction, first of the power, and then of the very form, of religion. These consequences are not imaginary, are not built on mere conjectures, but on plain matter of fact. This has been the case again and again within these last thirty or forty years: These have been the fruits which we have seen, over and over, to be consequent on such a separation.

16. And what grievous stumbling-block must these things be to those who are without, to those who are strangers to religion, who have neither the form nor the power of godliness! How will they triumph over

these once eminent Christians! How boldly ask, "What are they better than us?" How will they harden their hearts more and more against the truth, and bless themselves in their wickedness? from which, possibly, the example of the Christians might have reclaimed them, had they continued unblamable in their behavior. Such is the complicated mischief which persons separating from a Christian Church or society do, not only to themselves, but to that whole society, and the whole world in general.

17. But perhaps such persons will say, "We did not do this willingly; we were constrained to separate from that society, because we could not continue therein with a clear conscience; we could not continue without sin. I was not allowed to continue therein with breaking a commandment of God." If this was the case, you could not be blamed for separating from that society, Suppose, for instance, you were a member of the Church of Rome, and you could not remain therein without committing idolatry; without worshipping of idols, whether images, or saints and angels; then it would be your bounded duty to leave that community, totally to separate from it. Suppose you could not remain in the Church of England without doing something which the word of God forbids, or omitting something which the word of God positively commands; if this were the case, (but blessed be God it is not,) you ought to separate from the Church of England. I will make the case my own: I am now, and have been from my youth, a member and a Minister of the Church of England: And I have no desire no design to separate from it, till my soul separates from my body. Yet if I was not permitted to remain therein without omitting what God requires me to do, it would then become meet and right, and my bounden duty, to separate from it without delay. To be more particular: I know God has committed to me a dispensation of the gospel; yea, and my own salvation depends upon preaching it: "Woe is me if I preach not the gospel." If then I could not remain in the Church without omitting this, without desisting from preaching the gospel I should be under a necessity of separating from it, or losing my own soul. In like manner, if I could not continue united to any smaller society, Church, or body of Christians, without committing sin, without lying and hypocrisy, without preaching to others doctrines which I did not myself believe, I should be under an absolute necessity of separating from that society. And in all

these cases the sin of separation, with all the evils consequent upon it, would not lie upon it, would not lie upon me, but upon those who constrained me to make that separation, by requiring of me such terms of communion as I could not in conscience comply with. But, setting aside this case, suppose the Church or society to which I am now united does not require me to do anything which the Scripture forbids, or to omit anything which the Scripture enjoins, it is then my indispensable duty to continue therein. And if I separate from it without any such necessity, I am just chargeable (whether I foresaw them or not) with all the evils consequent upon that separation.

18. I have spoke the more explicitly upon this head, because it is so little understood; because so many of those who profess much religion, nay, and really enjoy a measure of it, have not the least conception of this matter, neither imagine such a separation to be any sin at all. They leave a Christian society with as much unconcern as they go out of one room into another. They give occasion to all this complicated mischief. and wipe their mouth, and say they have done no evil! Whereas they are justly chargeable, before God and man, both with an action that is evil in itself, and with all the evil consequences which may be expected to follow, to themselves, to their brethren, and to the world.

19. I entreat you, therefore, my brethren, all that fear God, and have a desire to please him, all that wish to have a conscience void of offense toward God and toward man, think not so slightly of this matter, but consider it calmly. Do not rashly tear asunder the sacred ties which unite you to any Christian society. This indeed is not of so much consequence to you who are only a nominal Christian. For you are not now vitally united to any of the members of Christ. Though you are called a Christian, you are not really a member of any Christian Church. But if you are a living member, if you live the life that is hid with Christ in God, then take care how you tend the body of Christ by separating from your brethren. It is a thing evil in itself. It is a sore evil in its consequences. O have pity upon yourself! Have pity on your brethren. Have pity even upon the world of the ungodly! Do not lay more stumbling-blocks in the way of these for whom Christ died.

20. But if you are afraid, and that not without reason, of schism,

improperly so called, how much more afraid will you be, if your conscience is tender, of schism in the proper scriptural sense! O beware, I will not say of forming, but of countenancing or abetting any parties in a Christian society! Never encourage, much less cause, either by word or action, any division therein. In the nature of things, "there must be heresies," divisions, "among you;" but keep thyself pure. Leave off contention before it be meddled with: Shun the very beginning of strife. Meddle not with them that are given to dispute, with them that love contention. I never knew that remark to fail: "He that loves to dispute, does not love God." Follow peace with all men, without which you cannot effectually follow holiness. Not only "seek peace," but "ensue it:" If it seem to flee from you, pursue it nevertheless. "Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good."

21. Happy is he that attains the character of a peace-maker in the Church of God. Why should not you labor after this? Be not content, not to stir up strife; but do all that in you lies, to prevent or quench the very first spark of it. Indeed it is far easier to prevent the flame from breaking out, than to quench it afterwards. However, be not afraid to attempt even this: The God of peace is on your side. He will give you acceptable words, and will send them to the heart of the hearers. Noli diffidere: Noli discedere, says a pious man: Fac quod in te est; et Deus aderit bonce tuce voluntuti: "Do not distrust Him that has all power, that has the hearts of all men in his hand. do what in thee lies, and Good will be present, and bring thy good desires to good effect." Never be weary of well-doing. In due time thou shalt reap if thou faint not.

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