

On Schism

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That There Might Be No Schism in the Body of Christ

Wesley at age eighty-two preached a crucial homily entitled "On Schism" in which he pleads: "Do not rashly tear asunder the sacred ties which unite you to any Christian society." His text is from 1 Cor. 12:35: "That there might be no schism in the body of Christ." Schism opens the door to destructive tempers, both in ourselves and others, which elicit evil surmisings and uncharitable judgments, "bitterness, malice, and settled hatred," which in turn become "a grievous stumbling-block" to the church's unity and mission. [Homily 75, B 3:59-69; J 6:401-410, March 30, 1786, Newcastle]. He thought little good would come from these temperaments and controversies within the body of Christ.¹ Wesley's purpose in this sermon is to resist quarrelsome separationist tendencies within the Methodist societies, and to reassure Church of England that his intentions were not schismatic.

The verb schisma means to cut or tear or split. Wesley himself was charged with splitting the church. In answering he returns to the New Testament understanding of schisma. In Paul's Letters, a schism is "a disunion in mind and judgment, (perhaps also in affection) among those who, notwithstanding this, continued outward united as before."²

Wesley distinguished schism from separation. Some in his connection wanted separation from the established church. Wesley did not, and steadfastly resisted separation. A schism is not a separation from a church or church body. It is a cutting or splitting within the body of Christ.³

The Nature of Schism

Wesley defines schism as "a causeless separation from a body of living Christians."⁴ Where the word 'schism' occurs, it refers "not a separation from any church (whether general or particular, whether the catholic or any national church) but a separation in a church,"⁵ "a disunion in mind and judgment (perhaps also in affection)" among those who were previously united in faith and practice.⁶

About what were the schismatics in Corinth skirmishing? The divisive issue in Corinth was specific: Negligent and uncharitable attitudes at the Lord's table. At Corinth this happened: "When you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers" (1 Cor. 11:21). This was occurring "in such a shocking manner that while 'one was hungry, another was drunken."⁷ Bad, but was it bad enough to prompt splitting the one body of Christ?

The Greek word for "heresy" differs in tone from schism, though closely related. The original meaning of the word heresy has been "strangely distorted for many centuries, as if it meant erroneous opinions." Heresy means the pretense of transcending apostolic truth, the proud imagination that we can improve on the gospel. Schism refers to tearing the fabric of the unity that we have in the one Body of Christ.⁸ Suppose you were a living organism able to function as a unified whole, but someone tore away a member so as to distort the unity of the body.

¹ "On Schism," B 3:59-60; J 6:401-402, Pref. 2.

² "On Schism," B 3:60-61; J 6:403, I.2.

³ "On Schism," B 3:60-61; J 6:403, I.2.

⁴ "On Schism," B 3:64; J VI:406, II.10.

⁵ "On Schism," B 3:60; J VI:402, I.1,

⁶ "On Schism," B 3:60-61; J VI:403, I.2.

⁷ "On Schism," B 3:61-62; J VI:403, I.5.

⁸ "On Schism," B 3:61-62; J VI:403, I.5. In this passage, Paul uses the words heresy and schism as functionally equivalent, since upon raising the question of schism immediately turns to remarks about heresy.

Paul grasps the providential and corrective purposes of heresy in the history of the church: to correct. "For there must be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you."⁹ "The wisdom of God permits it so to be for this end, for the clearer manifestation of those whose heart is right with him'. "¹⁰

Schism is a matter of the heart. It does not necessarily imply "a separation from any church or body of Christians."¹¹ Rather in 1 Cor. 12.35 schism means: "an alienation of affection in any of them toward their brethren, a division of heart, and parties springing therefrom." ¹²

The Evil of Schism

Schism is both an evil in itself and it leads to circumstances that create greater evil.¹³ "It is evil in itself... to separate ourselves from a body of living Christians with whom we were before united."¹⁴ If we love as Christ loved, we do not separate from the unity we have in Christ. "It is the nature of love to unite us together." By their love for one another, even willing to die for one another, the ancient Christians showed their love and unity in Christ,¹⁵ "It is only when our love grows cold that we can think of separating from our brethren... Want of love is always the real cause" of separation among believers.¹⁶

Schism is not only evil in itself, but it produces the fruits of evil. Schism opens a door to destructive tempers, both in ourselves and others, which elicits evil surmisings and uncharitable judgments, "bitterness, malice, and settled hatred." Schism "brings forth evil fruit; it is naturally productive of the most mischievous consequences," including "severe and uncharitable judging of each other. It gives occasion to offence, to anger, and resentment." These affections "may issue in bitterness, malice, and settled hatred." ¹⁷

Evil in the heart brings forth appalling fruits in practice. "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." From this will arise "bitter words, talebearing, backbiting, and evil-speaking of every kind."¹⁸ "How mightily does all this altercation grieve the Holy Spirit of God!" This will cause those who are "promoting the work of God in the souls of their brethren [to] grow languid...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."¹⁹ The schismatic heart leaves behind it a burnt path of destruction.

To "those who are strangers to religion" this pettiness becomes "a grievous stumbling-block" to mission. The consequence: "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." The consequences of the schismatic heart reverberates in the social order: "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 to the world in general."²⁰

2. How the Same Issue Remains

⁹ 1 Cor. 11:19 ERV.

¹⁰ "On Schism," B 3:62; J VI:404, I.6.

¹¹ "On Schism," B 3:63; J VI:405, I.9.

¹² "On Schism," B 3:63; J VI:405-6, I.7.

¹³ "On Schism," B 3:64; J VI:405-6, II.10.

¹⁴ "On Schism," B 3:64; J VI:405-6, II.11.

¹⁵ Tertullian, Apologia, 30.

¹⁶ "On Schism," B 3:64; J VI:405-6, II.11.

¹⁷ "On Schism," B 3:65; J VI:406, II.12.

¹⁸ "On Schism," B 3:65; J VI:407, II.13.

¹⁹ "On Schism," B 3:66; J VI:407, II.15.

²⁰ "On Schism," B 3:66; J VI:408, II.16.

Do Not Countenance the Partisan Spirit

The last part of the Homily on Schism (sec. 17-21) has particular application to all those in the Wesleyan connection of churches today, especially those troubled about a failing church that forgets its own core teaching.

All modern Wesleyan traditions today are facing similar questions of separation especially regarding sexuality, even more clearly now in connection with the ordained minister officiating at weddings that demean classic Christian teaching of covenant fidelity in marriage between one man and one woman.

The liberal and conservative wings of the Protestant tradition are in conflict within some of the Wesleyan traditions. Some members argue for "amicable separation" from a failed church, just as did those in Wesley's day who argued that they are "constrained to separate from that society [the Church of England] because we could not continue therein with a clear conscience" ("On Schism," B 3:67; J VI:408, II.17). Wesley was talking about the separation of Methodism from the Church of England, but today the issue still visits us with talk of separation.

Though the separation is usually portrayed as the splitting off of evangelicals from liberally dominated churches, the more accurate way of portraying it is the splitting off of liberal clergy from their roots. The threatening schism is not caused by laity who are faithful to the classic Christian tradition but clergy who are unfaithful to it. Talk of separation arises from those who demand that the church must disavow its classic teaching on enduring covenant responsibility in the marriage of a man and a woman, and its consequences for their children and their society. It is the pretended improvers of this settled doctrine that have created the enmity.

The evangelicals have not created a breach of settled doctrine and pastoral practice. But should they leave the corrupted church, or stay to reform the erring minority leadership? Every evangelical church today faces the same basic dilemma that troubled the early Methodist Societies: Stay or leave. The homily on schism prompts me to speak of its consequences for Wesleyan bodies today. This requires precise language and a conscience attuned to the Spirit.

A Question of Conscience

After lengthy reservations, Wesley argues that the conscience-stricken "could not be blamed for separating." But his heart is with the unity of the body of Christ.

In all his determination to maintain the unity of the church, Wesley concedes that there is one crucial exception: "Suppose, for instance... 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."²¹

If the erring church requires you to do that which Scripture forbids, you must leave. But if it does not require you to do what God forbids, you must stay. He thought the Church of England was in the latter category, since it did not require him to do what God forbids. So he stayed.

The problem of conscience narrows to whether the church commands you to do something wrong. Is this the case in the present controversy over sexual ethics? I can say with good conscience for myself that I have not been commanded by my church to do something contrary to God's command. That has not happened to me. I speak personally because Wesley spoke personally on what constitutes grounds for separation from the church. I respect those who feel otherwise.

Wesley candidly revealed his own personal struggle of conscience in regard to the purity of the church into which he was baptized and received ordination: "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 nor design to separate from it till my soul

²¹ "On Schism," B 3:67; J VI:403, II.17.

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."²²

Activist dissenters do well to listen carefully to that last sentence. The question: Is the modern liberal church not permitting you to remain within it by "omitting what God requires"? To this point I do not think that the failing liberal church is requiring me to do something that God requires me not to do. As an ordained minister, I pronounce the wedding vows, but only to those I have in good conscience come to regard as fit for marriage. That duty is embedded my ordination vows and in church discipline.

The analogy between Wesley's Church of England and my own United Methodist church is illuminating: If my Church might wrongfully require an action causing sin or commanding idolatry, then it would be my "bounden duty to separate," according to Wesley." This would be "separation with cause" and not a needless schism. But Wesley did not think that a sufficient cause existed for his connection to leave the Church of England. He thought his own fallen church was reformable. He called for its renewal and worked within it to make it happen.

Wesley seeks precision in his Homily on Schism: "To be more particular. I know God has committed to me a dispensation of the gospel." If I were unable to preach 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 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."²³ With Wesley I say: so long as "the church to which I am now united does not require me to do anything which the Scripture forbids, or to omit anything the Scripture enjoins, it is my indispensable duty to continue therein."²⁴

It remains a question of conscience to be settled inwardly as to whether this analogy applies to the tragic divisions within the Wesleyan connection today. It is a matter of conscience more than of policy or legislation. Wesley carefully summarizes the precise alternative to be addressed to conscience: "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 justly chargeable (whether I foresaw them or no) with all the evils consequent upon that separation."²⁵ This is a strong caution to those who too quickly assume separation is preferred. It remains a problem of conscience for me. It should not be answered too quickly.

Some might imagine that far from being a sin, separation is a requirement. To them Wesley admonishes: "They leave a Christian society with as much unconcern as they go out of one room into another. They...wipe their mouth, and say they have done no evil!" They may be "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."²⁶

Do Not Rashly Tear Asunder

Wesley reveals his heart when he pleads fervently in the final paragraphs: "Do not rashly tear asunder the sacred ties which unite you to any Christian society.... Take care how you rend the body of Christ by separating... Separation is a thing evil in itself. It is a sore evil in its consequences.... Do not lay more stumbling-blocks in the way of these for whom Christ died."²⁷ Do not break further the unity of the body of Christ by your petulance: "O beware, I will not say of forming, but of countenancing or abetting any parties in a Christian society! Never encourage, much less

²² "On Schism," B 3:67; J VI:408, II.17.

²³ "On Schism," B 3:67; J VI:408, II.17.

²⁴ "On Schism," B 3:67; J VI:408, II.17.

²⁵ "On Schism," B 3:67; J VI:408, II.17.

²⁶ "On Schism," B 3:68; J VI:409, II.18.

²⁷ "On Schism," B 3:68; J VI:409-410, II.19.

cause either by word or action, any division therein."²⁸ Do not fuel disruption: "Meddle not with them that are given to dispute, with them that love contention. I never knew that remark to fail, 'He that loves dispute does not love God.'"²⁹

Be rather a peacemaker: "Happy is he that attains the character of a peacemaker in the church of God".³⁰ "Indeed it is far easier to prevent the flame from breaking out than to quench it afterwards." Do your part in nurturing the body, "and God will be present and bring thy good desires to good effect.' Never be weary of well-doing."³¹

A Personal Note

As a founder of the Confessing Movement Within the United Methodist Church, I know its purpose: To restore unity in the body of Christ through doctrinal renewal. The schismatic forces have been those who have insisted on repudiating classical Christian doctrine, and forcing these revisions on all others in the church through legislation and direct political action. They are the ones who have left the church. Whether they are bishops or laity, they have conspicuously left the church by leaving her teachings.

My own decision about whether to leave the United Methodist Church hinges on this steady and clear conviction: As long as the classic Wesleyan doctrinal standards (Wesley's Standard Sermons, Notes, and Doctrinal Minutes) are in place and constitutionally guaranteed, my intention is not to leave the church that baptized me and ordained me. Nothing that the political activists do will cause me to think that either my baptism or my ordination is deficient. But if the church requires of me some act to which I cannot in good conscience consent, I will, like Mr. Wesley, consider it "my bounden duty to separate from it without delay." I hope and pray that such will not be required. For now I appeal to classic Wesleyan doctrinal standards on those matters of sexuality that are rending the body of Christ.

Wesley remained steadfast during his lifetime in his conviction to remain in the church that baptized him until either he was forced out or compelled by unavoidable conscience to depart. He never left, and neither have I, nor do I intend to. I find myself ironically in a position analogous to Wesley's in 1784: After a lifetime of fighting schism and seeking to renew the church from within, I will have to deal with my conscience now and in the future.

"Within" is the decisive word for me and for the movement I helped initiate in July of 1993-- the Confessing Movement Within the United Methodist Church, which has sought to renew the church from within. I have steadfastly resisted the well-intentioned voices that wish, sadly, to separate. The morality of separation is not as wrenching for respected believers in other Reformation traditions who were born with the élan of separation. For Wesley and for me, the very thought of leaving or threatening to leave the church that baptized and ordained me is repugnant. It would be for me like a tragic divorce from a solemn covenant.

The burning questions of our time are often perceived as legislative decision to be settled by vote. But Wesley frames the issue of separation not as a question of passing laws or voting, but as a matter of conscience to be settled in the presence of God. The civil law on marriage rights is quite different from the minister's liturgical responsibility in Rite of Holy Matrimony. The judge has the task of rightly seeing that just laws are obeyed. The minister is called to the care of souls in the body of Christ. In marriage the minister is voluntarily asked by a man and a woman to bless their union, their love, their future children in a way that does not demean will of God in the creation of man and woman. If church legislative bodies in the Wesleyan connection ignore or reject the settled Christian teaching of Holy Matrimony, every lay person in the connection will face a question of conscience: Am I being coerced by such legislation in a way that would require me to do what God forbids?

²⁸ "On Schism," B 3:68-69; J VI:410, II.20.

²⁹ "On Schism," B 3:68-69; J VI:410, II.20.

³⁰ "On Schism," B 3:69; J VI:410, II.21.

³¹ "On Schism," B 3:69; J VI:410, II.21; see also *Farther Thoughts on Separation, and Reasons Against Separation*.