

Church Separations

History

We hopefully now understand the difference between the invisible and the visible church. This study is specifically looking at the visible church. A very rough estimate suggests there are 41,000 different Christian denominations. Unity in the visible church clearly is an issue.

For the first 1,000 years, the divisions and splits in the church would be considered minor by what came later. 2nd and 3rd century saw a group called the Montanists, centred around Asia Minor. Considered heretical due to their charismatic worship, prophecies, and belief in the imminent end. The 4th century saw a group from North Africa called the Donatists, who rebelled primarily against what we would now call the Catholic church, and the growing influence of the Roman Empire.

1054 A.D. saw the first major split across the lines of East (Orthodox) and West (Roman Catholic). The second major split was in the 16th century between Roman Catholic and Protestant churches (note plural).

John Calvin once wrote:

“Pride or self-glorification is the cause and starting point of all controversies ... Ambition has been, and still is, the mother of all errors, of all disturbances and sects.”

The main question now is: are there genuine reasons for churches to separate?

Doctrinal Reasons

There is no command in the New Testament, to separate from a true church if it is still part of the body of Christ. Consider some scriptures that “may” be incorrectly used to justify splitting.

2 THESSALONIANS 3:14-15 – If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy but warn him as a brother.

When people are excluded, we can be tempted to feel bad for them. In doing so we undermine the principle that by missing out on fellowship, people are being warned about their behaviour. This doesn't make them our enemy; it is a loving action. It is the one in the wrong who is separated.

1 CORINTHIANS 5:11-13 – But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolator or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. “Expel the wicked man from among you.”

Note the solution to ungodliness is not separation but expulsion of the ungodly.

TITUS 3:10-11 – Warn a divisive person once, and then warn them a second time. After that have nothing to do with him. You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.

Note that warped and sinful people are self-condemned. E.g., they have brought their expulsion on themselves.

None of the scriptures above support leaving a church, instead they support working on maintaining the existing one.

So now consider the following:

REVELATION 2:14-16 – Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teachings of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teachings of the Nicolaitans. Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

Even when a greater number of people in the church are wrong, there is no suggestion of leaving.

REVELATION 2:20-22 – Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways.

Even when Leaders already in the church are wrong, there is no suggestion of leaving.

So, given the above why are there so many different denominations?

Some are simply NOT churches. But also, how often are people prepared to put the above into practice? Leaving to start a new church is the easy option, but it certainly shouldn't be the first (or second, or third)!

Questions to consider

- How do you feel about the large number of different denominations? Can they all be "true" churches?
- Can you think of a genuine reason why a church split would be a good thing?
- Have you ever considered leaving the church rather than face a tough situation? If so, how did it work out?
- Have you even seen church discipline in action? Did you agree with it? How did it end?
- Can you think of something that a larger group within the church needs to repent of? What have you done about it?

Matters of conscience

What about when our conscience, informed by scripture, is not clear? Is withdrawal from church to form a new one then a valid option?

2 CORINTHIANS 6:14 – Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?

The concept of being yoked suggests a binding. When we find ourselves bound to others (through church membership, or other relationships), there must be a common purpose. We must be mindful of being yoked with unbelievers, but tread carefully. Calling others in your church unbelievers is a big conclusion. Are you sure that EVERYONE else is wrong, and you are the one that is right? Whilst not impossible, how likely is it?

Even when you are “under the authority” of one you do not agree with, we should consider the following:

ACTS 5:29 – Peter and the other apostles replied: “We must obey God rather than men!”

You can live under authority without agreeing and blindly obeying (see also Daniel 3:18, 6:10). If your conscience IS right, and you do find yourself under a hostile authority (a tyrannical church leader, unrepentant Christians) you can still avoid going against your conscience without leaving and starting a new church. Though it may be uncomfortable and difficult.

More questions for us to reflect on

- Do you regularly listen to your conscience when it comes to church matters? Is your conscience clear on how you engage with others in the church?
- Do you allow others that you should not be yoked with to determine your behaviour?
- Have you ever found yourself thinking, “I am right, and everyone else is wrong”? Do you still feel this way?
- What challenges might prevent you from staying to fight for the unity of the church?

Summary

Sadly, there is very little scriptural evidence to support church separation. There is definitely no evidence to suggest it should be as prevalent as 41,000 denominations. We cannot wind back the clock, but what can we do to stop it from getting worse?

- Do not indulge and protect those who are clearly wrong.
- Do not undermine the process of church discipline.
- Do not accept leaving as a viable option.
- Fight for the church where you currently reside.