

IS THE CHURCH DIVIDED?

Text: 1 Corinthians 1:13

INTRO: No religious group is totally free from division. I was once a Southern Baptist. I knew of ABC, ABA, Freewill, Primitive, Missionary, General, Hardshell, 7th day, Landmark, etc.

Gardner Hall received a letter from Costa Rica in which the writer said, "Several years ago a pastor told me that in the U.S. the church of Christ is divided into no less than 16 different parts. What he told me has caused me a lot of sorrow. Brother Gardner, could you please inform me if there are in reality that many segments of the church?"

Several years ago I had a brother-in-law who used to say pretty much the same thing.

A. How would you answer that?

B. Have heard others who express themselves that way:

'Church divided into institutional, non inst. one cup. no class,' etc. "Why I left the liberal church," "conservative brotherhood," "the church split over instrumental music & missionary societies," etc.

C. The Bible does not use that way to describe problems among brethren.

I. YOU CANNOT DIVIDE THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH. It is "spiritually gathered."

A. The universal church is the body of those whose past sins have been forgiven, thus "the saved," Acts 2:47 Only Christ can put them in; only He can take them out.

B. The universal church is the body of persons whose names have been written in the Lamb's Book of Life, Heb. 12:23. Only He can record them there; only He can blot them out.

C. The universal church is not a building, an organization, a movement, or a religious philosophy

D. Man cannot divide universal church, 1 Cor 1:13.

II. THEN WHY ARE THERE WARNINGS AGAINST DIVISION?

A. Local churches (congregations) CAN divide & sometimes do. But that is contrary to God's will.

B. There was division in the church at Corinth.

1 Cor 1:10-13, 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 & in the same judgment. For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe's household, that there are contentions among you. Now I say this, that each of you says, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Cephas," or "I am of Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

- B. Paul warned of those who would cause division among the saints in Rome, Rom. 16:17.
- C. He also warned about division in the church in Ephesus, Acts 20:29-30, For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves.
- D. Such division produces anger & resentment & is one of the greatest hindrances to spiritual & numerical growth. Division is almost always caused by one of two reasons, or a combination of both.
 - 1. Lack of respect/understanding of Bible authority.
 - 2. Lack of love/respect for our fellow Christian.

III. GOD GIVES THE ERRING TIME TO REPENT, THE IGNORANT TIME TO LEARN.

- A. Christ & the apostles. Fire from heaven. Who is the greatest? O ye of little faith. Forsook Him. Denied Him. Slow to believe in His resurrection. But they were HIS PEOPLE, & He gave them time to learn & grow & become stronger.
- B. The church in Corinth was in terrible condition. But they were addressed as "the church of God." He gave them time to repent & most of them did.
- C. The 7 churches to which the book of Revelation was addressed had numerous problems. All but one of them was rebuked. Two of them were not commended. They

were in danger of ceasing to be people of God. But God was giving them a chance to repent. He had not yet given up on them. And there were some, even in Sardis, who had not defiled their garments, Rev. 3:4. Tho the congregation as a whole was not pleasing to God, His judgment is of individuals, not as a group.

- D. These weak, spiritually sick, brethren were not fragments of the church. They were weak/sinful disciples. They needed to repent & correct their problems. Their relationship with God was in danger. Had they died in their current condition, only God knows what their eternal fate would have been, but He had not completely given up on them. He continued to appeal to them to repent.
- E. If I had been alive in the first century, I could not have recommended some of these congregations to travelers or other contacts, but that does not mean there were NO Christians there who were in fellowship with God. I would have suggested that if your travel to that part of the world, try to be in Philadelphia or Smyrna, or even Ephesus or Pergamos on the first day of the week, not in Laodicea or Sardis if you can help it.

IV. IN THE LIGHT OF CURRENT CONDITIONS AMONG CHURCHES, WHAT SHOULD BE OUR PRACTICE?

- A. We should seek to follow God's word carefully & respectfully.
- B. We must work & worship with those who accept us as faithful Christians, & who will allow us to practice our faith without violating our conscience. We are not likely to find a group where every individual has reached exactly the same conclusions we have reached on every subject. What is important is that we be able to worship God acceptably & in good conscience.
- C. If brethren worship unscripturally, make unscriptural use of the contribution, or promote false doctrine, we must serve elsewhere rather than participate in such activities. God will be the final judge of WHO is responsible for our not being able to work together. We must see that we face Him in good conscience.

CONCLUSION: Is Christ divided? No. Are there 16 (more or less) fragments in the Kingdom of God? No. Are there weak Christians in some congregations? Yes, probably in all congregations. Are there congregations that are weak and sinful? Yes. Some because they have bound where God has not bound; others because they have loosed where God has not loosed. Can we dogmatically say that no member of such a congregation could possibly be in a right relationship with God? God will judge & He will judge us as individuals. I want to be a member of a congregation that is careful to respect & follow God's instructions. I fear the influence of any who would do otherwise. But God will judge us on what we are & what we do. May He have mercy on all our souls. We will all need it.

Susquehanna, Marietta, PA, January 5, 2003

Shiloh, Mexia, TX, August 28, 2005 (meeting)