

WITNESS



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Extract



ASK THE ST. GEORGE'S SCHOLAR

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How is the Kingdom of God served by division?

The answer to this question depends on what we mean by division.

Scripture clearly evidences division that seems to undermine God's plan. Perhaps the clearest examples are the division of Israel after David in the Old Testament and the problems faced by the early Christian churches in Acts or Paul's letters.

In the case of the former, division following the deaths of David and David's son, Solomon, led to civil war, and eventually the destruction and exile first of northern Israel and then of Judah and Benjamin, or southern Israel. The hundreds of years of civil war and strife were never ultimately resolved. It is hard to see how this division, caused by dynastic rivalry, and which itself caused centuries of suffering for God's chosen pedagogues (Galatians 4.2) while the world "in stillness lay", served the Kingdom.

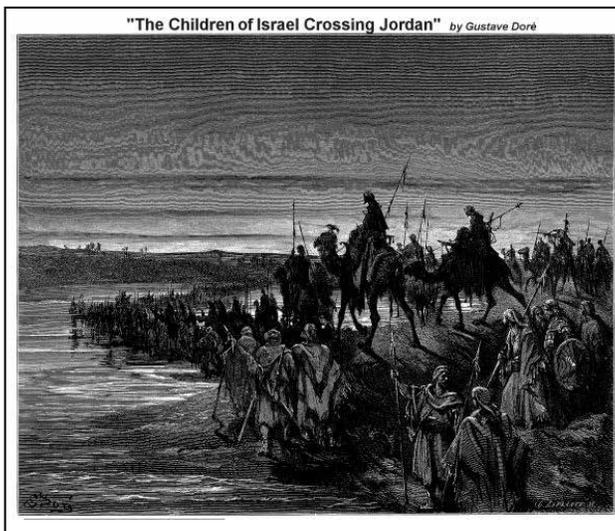
In the case of the early Christian communities, there are significant examples of division that put the early church in peril. It was represented early on in the duplicity of Ananias and Saphira (Acts 5), then in the concerns about feeding widows (Acts 6), and then in the very serious concerns over whether to permit Gentiles into the Christian communities without first requiring them to "become Jewish" (that is, to adopt the laws of Moses). While Acts 15 seems to provide a direction for how those with competing opinions are to live together when it comes to this latter issue, it is also clear that it didn't resolve all of the problems (cf. Acts 15.36-40). These examples of division stand in stark contrast to the single-hearted following of the Lord that is an individual and community model in Acts (e.g., Acts 2.42-44; 16.14-15).

The letter that Paul wrote to the Corinthians – the letter that we call "1st Corinthians" and that was the focus of our 40 Days of Discernment study – also testifies to Paul's great concern that the unity of the Christians in Corinth is being disrupted by some who, for reasons that Paul clearly identifies in the letter, are dividing the

body. Division in Corinth threatened the very foundations of Paul's sacrificial ministry and the future of the Gospel.

On the other hand, there is evidence in Scripture that not all division is bad. In fact, when it comes to the words of our Lord, division seems to figure prominently as something that we can expect from God for the very building of the Kingdom.

Jesus himself asserts that division is a fundamental part of the inauguration of the Kingdom of God: *Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's foes will be those of his own household (Matthew 10:34-36).*



Ultimately, he says, the Kingdom of God will involve a dividing of one group that has done the will of God from those who have not: *When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left. (Matthew 25.31-33, and for the full context, see 25.31-46)* In fact, throughout the Gospels there seems to be considerably more about how division actually serves the Kingdom.

The reason for this complex picture in Scripture is that division as such is not the problem: the question is who is the

cause of the division and what does the division do.

The Old Testament picture and 1 Corinthians reveal division to be a problem when it is caused by sin: dynastic pretensions, immorality, power-seeking. God, of course, could and did bring good out of the situation. In fact, that we have these texts from the Old Testament and Paul provides us with a perennial warning that reminds us of what sinful desires and machinations can do to God's work in the world.

On the other hand, in places where sin has taken root institutionally, and has taken refuge behind a façade of unity – one that masks both sin and the disunity and fragmentation at the core of the human heart –, there, as Jesus demonstrates again and again division is not wrong but necessary.

In his responses to the leaders of his day – who would never have thought of themselves as unorthodox Jews but rather among the *most* orthodox of all the people of Israel of their day –, Jesus prophetically announces God's own separating process – called in Greek *krisis*, which means a dividing (cf. John 3.19; 5.30; 8.16; 12.31). In this process, division is not only not wrong but is the very necessary – even if very difficult – requirement for building the Kingdom of God on a sure foundation.

It is hard for those who see themselves as already orthodox, as already believers, to believe that they may be the object of this "deconstruction" on God's part. This may

be true of those who stand against us; this may be true of us. For this reason, and following the lead of our dear Bishop, Don Harvey, I would conclude with the following: we must be constantly attentive and discerning to see whether we are a cause of scandal and division that hinders God's purposes or whether we are part of God's *krisis* that will build the Kingdom on a new and solid foundation. We must watch and pray for ourselves, as well as for those we think to have erred. For we trust in the One who has spoken, "the word of God", which "is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Hebrews 4.12).