

## Divisions

Genesis 1:1–10, Acts 28:17–22

Many people have observed that our cultural and political climate has become more divisive. The whole idea of *e pluribus unum* (“out of many, *one*”) seems quaint and outdated, along with “*one* nation, under God.” This week a country music superstar repeatedly called boycotters of a certain brand an obscene term of disgust—people that he has no use for. So much for “love one another” and civil discourse. Gone are the days when political rivals disagreed on policy yet treated their opponents with mutual respect. One writer observed that instead of finding middle ground, “we fight each other from the safe distance of our separate islands of ideology and identity and listen intently to echoes of ourselves.”<sup>1</sup> America is divided.

In our New Testament text the Roman centurion responsible for bringing a large group of prisoners to Caesar has given the apostle Paul alone special permission to live in his own rented house while he awaits his day in court. The centurion did not consider Paul a flight risk. Over the course of the voyage Paul had shown himself to be trustworthy. He spoke the truth but showed a genuine concern for his fellow travelers’ physical wellbeing, and their making it to land safely.

Now that Paul was settled into his lodging, he summoned the leaders of the Jews and gave his testimony. He explains that though he was innocent of any crime, he was delivered into the hand of the Roman authorities, and when they conducted a preliminary examination, they were initially of a mind to let him go, because there was no legal ground for the death penalty; but Paul appealed to Caesar. Significantly, he made a point of stating that it was “for the hope of Israel” that he was in chains.

The phrase “the hope of Israel” is a striking phrase. It is first found in Jeremiah 14:8: “O the *Hope of Israel*, his Savior in time of trouble.” The phrase is used only one other time in the whole Old Testament: in the prayer “O LORD, the *hope of Israel*” (Jer. 17:13). Jeremiah, known as the “weeping prophet,” the last prophet before the Babylonian captivity, was appalled at the moral and religious disintegration that was happening before his very eyes; apart from God, the kingdom of Judah had no hope, so he alone among the prophets appeals to Yahweh, the hope of Israel. So likewise in our own time, as we witness the moral taking place in our own culture, we must learn that God alone is the hope of Israel, his faithful church. Significantly, in our current text, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul says that it was “for the *hope of Israel*” that he was in chains. It

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<sup>1</sup> Bret Stephens, *The Dying Art of Disagreement*, quoted here: <https://case.edu/president/speeches-statements/thinking-out-loud-what-ever-happened-civil-discourse> accessed 6-10-23

was this hope—the hope of Israel—that Paul earnestly desired to share with his fellow countrymen, the Jews.

For Paul, the “hope of Israel” was the Messiah the tribes of Israel had long awaited, he who alone is eternal life and salvation. The Messiah had already come—had already suffered and died, and risen again from the dead. Who is this Messiah? Jesus of Nazareth, the Lord of glory.

Sometimes we use the word *hope* in the sense, I wish this would happen: “I sure *hope* it rains today.” What we mean is, I would be really happy if it rained. This is *not* the way the Bible uses the word *hope*!

Consider an incident in Ezra 9–10, which took place after the Babylonian captivity. Israel has sinned—broken God’s explicit command—by taking Canaanite wives. Because of this, Israel is coming under God’s judgment. Ezra prays a formal, public prayer of confession. He says, “O my God . . . our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has grown up to the heavens. . . . And now for a little while grace has been shown from the LORD our God, to leave us a remnant to escape . . . and give us a measure of revival in our bondage. . . . Yet our God did not forsake us in our bondage; but He extended *mercy* to us.” Essentially, what Ezra was praying was the *gospel*: a merciful God holds out the promise of forgiveness, in anticipation of the coming of the promised Savior. This realization dawns upon one of the “leaders” (הַשָּׂרִים lit. *princes*), who speaks for the crowd. He says, “We have trespassed against our God, and have taken pagan wives from the peoples of the land; yet now there is *hope* in Israel in spite of this” (Ezra 10:2). In spite of man’s sin and guilt, there is hope! This hope is the legal property of those who belong to Christ—and no others. This is the Christian gospel! As Paul taught the church at Thessalonica, we “sorrow not, even as others which have *no hope*” (1 Thess. 4:13). Let me be crystal clear: the person who has Christ has hope, the person who does not have Christ has *no* hope. I’m not trying to be unkind in any way; I’m just faithfully expounding to you the teaching of the Bible, the word of truth: your *only* hope is Christ!

You might think, if only I had a little more money—more time, more strength, more luck, more opportunities—*then* I could solve my problems, then I would achieve success. That’s a lie! You may work hard, you may become the richest and most successful person in the whole world, yet when you draw your last breath and stand before God, you can’t take it with you. The Psalmist says, “Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee. My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my *portion* forever.” The things of this earth are passing way, but Christ is our eternal portion that can *never* be taken away. God has given this to his elect—those who were chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world—and to no one else. God himself has made a division among the sons of men!

And so Paul comes to Rome preaching the hope of Israel. The “Israel” to which he refers is the Israel of God—spiritual Israel, those who receive the message of the gospel by faith. As he clarifies in Romans, “they are not all Israel, which are of Israel . . . . The children of the flesh, these are *not* the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed” (Rom. 9:6ff.). Those who receive the promise are not the physical descendants of Abraham, but his *spiritual* seed; *these* are the children of the promise. And under the gospel this includes believing Gentiles. Galatians 3:29 declares, “And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.” Did you hear that? Those who are united to Christ by faith—whether Jew or Gentile—are Abraham’s seed, Abraham’s spiritual children. Salvation is not a matter of *heredity* but of *faith*. If you are trusting not in yourself, but in Christ alone, then the hope of Israel is yours!

God does *not* have two elect peoples—only one. He does not have a separate plan for unbelieving Israel. Dispensationalism teaches that the church is the heavenly people of God, but Israel is God’s earthly people. The church’s destination is heaven, where we will surround the throne, singing the praises of the Lamb who was slain, for all eternity; but Israel, the physical descendants of Abraham, will inherit the land of Palestine. But what is the benefit of a plot of land in Palestine when you could have heaven? I for one would rather stand in the presence of the Christ who died for me than sit under my own vine and fig tree in the land of Palestine.

Make no mistake: God does not have two elect peoples—only one. As one preacher put it, the gospel is “the story of the *one* glorious God who sent *one* gracious Savior to mercifully save his *one* elect people.”<sup>2</sup> One God, one Savior, one elect people, one way of salvation! “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.”

Christ, our true inheritance, is our portion forever. We will stand in his blessed presence, singing his praises for all eternity. This will be pure joy for all who know and love him: to be in the presence of the one who left his Father’s side and came to earth to save us from our sins.

The Jews who came to listen to the apostle Paul didn’t understand the gospel. They didn’t believe that Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah sent by the Father to save his people—the fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures. Rather, they thought that the followers of Jesus were a sect who were distorting the message of the Hebrew Scriptures. They said to Paul, “concerning this *sect*, we know that it is spoken against everywhere.” They considered Christianity to be a schismatic body that mistakenly or sinfully separated from Judaism.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://heidelblog.net/2023/06/discovering-the-reformed-confession-part-2-young-restless-and-dispensational/> accessed 6-6-23

“Sect” is related to *section*—a division. To *bisect* is to divide into two equal parts. To *dissect* is to separate into pieces, expose the several parts of something (such as an animal) for scientific examination. Did you ever have to do that in high school biology? In modern usage sect means “*a dissenting or schismatic religious body, especially: one regarded as extreme or heretical.*”<sup>3</sup>

Without doubt, God’s will is that there should be one religion, the pure worship of the true God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—as he is revealed in Holy Scripture. To worship any other being, or to worship any other way than he has revealed in his word, is idolatry, a grave sin that is prohibited by the second commandment: “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; and showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.” The second commandment, as explained in our Shorter Catechism, forbids “the receiving, observing, and keeping pure and entire, all such religious worship and ordinances as God hath appointed in his word” and forbids “the worshiping of God by images, or any other way not appointed in his word.”<sup>4</sup>

All human beings are required to bow before the Lord Jesus Christ and worship him in Spirit and in truth. Make no mistake, to do otherwise—to neglect the pure worship of Christ and introduce manmade elements into Christ’s worship—is to infuriate the God of heaven and bring down wrath upon yourself. As Paul observed of the Thessalonian Christians, they “turned to God from *idols* to *serve* the living and true God.”<sup>5</sup>

Are divisions a bad thing? It depends. Significantly, God’s work of creation was a work of dividing. In our Old Testament text we read, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep.” When God created the heavens and the earth on the first day it was undifferentiated; it was without form. God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. God *divided* the light from the darkness. On the second day he *divided* the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament. On the third day he divided between the dry land and the seas.

Clearly, these divisions in the natural world are good. Life as we know it would be impossible without them. The world around us is a lovely place. God has made everything beautiful in his time.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sect> accessed 6-9-23 (emphasis added)

<sup>4</sup> Westminster Shorter Catechism 50, 51

<sup>5</sup> 1 Thess 1:10

Imagine a nice vegetable soup made with a tasty broth, perfectly seasoned. One of the delights is to savor the various textures: the rice or barley, the various vegetable pieces, each cooked to perfection, the small chunks of meat.

Now imagine that nice vegetable soup run through a blender. Of course, sometimes this is necessary, as for someone who is unable to chew, whether an infant, or a person who has had all his teeth pulled. Think of how the soup run through a blender would taste: all the flavors would be there, but there would be no recognizable texture. Some of the enjoyment in eating a hot bowl of vegetable soup is savoring the texture. As God's creatures enjoying the beauty of creation we can be glad that there is texture—division and differentiation—in the natural world.

Divisions in and of themselves are not bad—only sinful divisions that are in defiance of the God who alone is wise. Sinful divisions are evil and to be avoided. Paul says, "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 and in the same judgment" (1 Cor. 1:10). It is regrettable and tragic that the church often falls short of this ideal. Just as the Jewish leaders in Rome considered the Christian church to be a sect because it did not follow the opinions of the rabbis, so churches that follow manmade traditions consider faithful churches that follow the Bible to be sects. They insist that *they* are the original church, and that all churches are to be in subjection to them. But Christ taught, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4). Christians—and churches—are to live by *every* word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. The church has no authority to modify or annul this plain command of Christ. According to the Jesus, tradition is not authoritative. The Word of God alone is authoritative. That's the teaching of Christ. Imposters say otherwise, but Christ's sheep follow the voice of the Shepherd. Those who lead away from Christ are false shepherds. Departure from true doctrine and worship invalidates any church's claim to be the true church.

Faithful churches follow Holy Scripture. They preach and teach everything that's in the Bible—and nothing that's *not* in the Bible. The fact that faithful churches regard as authoritative every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God—and nothing more—and unfaithful churches regard as authoritative the traditions of men, necessarily causes division within the body of Christ. Such division is the result of sin—of human leaders attempting to take the place of God who alone is Lord of the conscience.

Christ is Lord of all, and demands his disciples' obedience and service. There will necessarily be a division between those who humbly follow him and those who obstinately follow someone else. In Luke 12 Jesus asks, "Do you suppose that

I came to give peace on earth? I tell you, not at all, but rather *division*. For from now on five in one house will be *divided*: three against two, and two against three. Father will be *divided* against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.” Why does this happen? Because when the claims of Christ are presented, some believe and obey, while others disbelieve and disobey. In John 7:43 the apostle observes that “there was a division among the people because of him.” The word for “division” here is σχίσμα, schism.

In our present text the word is αἵρεσις, which comes into the English tongue as *heresy*. This word occurs six times in the book of Acts—more than any other book. Five times it is rendered “sect”: “sect of the Sadducees” (Acts 5:17), “sect of the Pharisees (Acts 15:5), “sect of the Nazarenes” (Acts 24:5), “the strictest sect of our religion (Acts 26:5), and in our present passage, “this sect . . . everywhere spoken against.” Since his ultimate loyalty was to Christ, and not the opinions and dogmas of men, Paul gladly accepts the reproach of those Jews who called the Christian faith a sect: he says, “this I confess to you, that according to the Way which they call a *sect*, so I worship the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the Law and in the Prophets” (Acts 24:14).

And so it is with biblical Presbyterians today. Because we gladly confess that “God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men” (WCF 20.2), those who want to put us under the bondage of men say that we are divisive, schismatic, sectarian. But the plain fact of the matter is that the gospel divides. *Christ* is the Lord. He alone is Lord of the conscience. He commands us to live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God—and no other word. And he tells us to depart from iniquity:

“Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity.”<sup>6</sup>

“Depart from me, all ye workers of iniquity; for the LORD hath heard the voice of my weeping.”<sup>7</sup>

“Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it.”<sup>8</sup>

“By mercy and truth iniquity is purged: and by the fear of the LORD men depart from evil.”<sup>9</sup>

As Christians we are all to promote the peace, purity and unity of the church. We are not to promote peace at the expense of purity—big-tent Christianity: everyone doing what is right in his own eyes, as long as he says, “I love Jesus.”

If we are part of a church that says, “Obey us, even if what we are doing is contrary to the Bible,” then our moral duty is to separate from iniquity.

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<sup>6</sup> 2 Tim. 2:19

<sup>7</sup> Ps. 6:8

<sup>8</sup> Ps. 34:14

<sup>9</sup> Prov. 16:6

Faithfulness to Christ demands it. Our loyalty must be to him, rather than to any human system. In the words of the hymnwriter, “Who is on the Lord’s side? Who will serve the King? Who will be his helpers, other lives to bring? Who will leave the world’s side? Who will face the foe? Who is on the Lord’s side? Who for him will go? By thy call of mercy, by thy grace divine, we are on the Lord’s side; Savior, we are thine!”<sup>10</sup>

If we refuse, then we show that our faith is not real. At the final day, “when the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory: and before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats: and he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world . . . . Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire . . . . And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.” This will be the final, permanent separation, and as your computer might tell you, “Are you sure you want to do this? This action cannot be undone.”

The bottom line: there should be no unnecessary divisions, there should be no factions based on personalities; the only legitimate divisions are between truth and untruth.

But Christ is the truth, and our ultimate loyalty must be to him alone. Amen.

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<sup>10</sup> Frances Havergal (1877)