

# Division — More Harmful Than You Think!

By Steve Burchett



We don't create unity among God's people. That was already accomplished at the cross when Jesus died to "create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace" (Ephesians 2:15). In the Ephesian context, Paul was speaking of the unity that comes to all Jews and Gentiles who are in union with Christ by faith. The principle, however, is for all time: in Christ, we are one.

Nevertheless, we are to be "eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (4:3). True, all believers are forever one. Still, there is such a thing as division in the church

experientially. We must zealously seek to avoid this through Christlike, selfless attitudes and actions such as humility, gentleness, patience, and forbearance with love (v. 2). After all, Paul writes, think about all that we share in common — one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all (vv. 4-6). How foolish to let lesser matters, often minor and trivial, divide us!

But what happens when division comes? Let's think about this from one specific angle — the harm we do to people, in and out of the church. How does disunity hurt others?

*First, we give lost people an excuse not to listen to the gospel they so urgently need.* Jesus said, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). But if love is lost, our words about our Savior will not seem believable. Love between believers is what Francis Schaeffer called "the final apologetic." Reflecting on John 13:34-35, he writes, "If people come up to us and cast in our teeth the judgment that we are not Christians because we have not shown love toward other Christians, we must understand that they are only exercising a prerogative which Jesus gave them. And we must not get angry. . . . We must go home, get on our knees and ask God whether or not they are right" (*The Mark of a Christian*, 22-3).

*Second, we fail to give our children a healthy church that could be instrumental in bringing them to faith in Christ.* This is similar to the first answer, but the effect of disunity on our children is even more extreme because they have a front-row seat to the negative consequences of division. The responsibility of parents is to bring their children up "in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4). We rightly think about that verse as it relates to what happens in the home. Yet it also includes raising children to love Christ's people, including a local body of loving followers of Jesus. Churches that lack unity give children an excuse to say, "If that's what the gospel you keep telling me about leads to, I think I'll pass."

*Third, we give young and/or immature believers an excuse to walk away from the church, if not the faith.* The mature believer will often endure disunity by praying for God's help and working tirelessly to bring reconciliation to clashing parties. What about young believers or those who are not as strong? When love is lost, they might decide it's not worth persevering and move on to something more enjoyable. "At least people are friendly at the golf course."

*Fourth, we keep fellow church members from participating fully in the body of Christ.* For example, God gives churches "shepherds . . . to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (4:11-12). Conflict and disunity decimate this.

"Where is Pastor Brent? Is he training some men this morning?"

"No, he's at another meeting dealing with that difficult situation. . . . You know the one I'm talking about."

Meanwhile, instead of using their spiritual gifts, which Paul says are "for the common good" of fellow believers (First Corinthians 12:7), church members are either quarreling or forming cliques or just staying away from one another.

*Fifth, we might cause church members to walk away from the church (and Jesus).* When disunity comes and is not addressed biblically, resentment settles in, questions come, gossip flows, and people are hurt. Soon, people start leaving the church, and not necessarily for another. I have been in multiple homes of neighbors who used to attend a church that preached the gospel. I've heard a number of reasons why they no longer participate, but have been surprised at how often their departures were related to relational conflict that (they say) was not handled properly. I recognize they may have completely misunderstood what happened and may be in the wrong, but these types of departure stories are worth remembering the next time there is disunity in our churches.

## ***Eager!***

Think about all of the people harmed by disunity: lost people in the community; unsaved children of church members; young believers; immature believers; pastors and those under their care. That's just about anybody with any connection to the church. It's no wonder, then, that Paul charges the Ephesians to "be eager" to preserve unity among them. Paul used that word, "eager," elsewhere to speak of striving with great effort to do something critical, such as when he said to Timothy, "*Do your best* [same original word] to come to me soon, for Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Galatia" (emphasis added).

So don't put off being reconciled with that fellow believer until "week after next, when I'm not so busy." No! Make it a priority! Do it now! Do it tonight! Pursue unity right away! Otherwise, you may contribute to harming more people than you realize.

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