

Doctrine of the Church: Service

We are thinking about ecclesiastical separation. I was recently reminded by one person's comments that schism could be not only individual, but also corporate. That is a group of believers who have the true Gospel but have cut themselves off from all other believers. They believe they are the only true church, or at least act like that. Even other believers who baptize the same way they do would have to be re-baptized to join their church. That is example of a schismatic attitude in sectarianism. It is often coupled with pride. Everything, by the way, is not going to fit on this chart because, for example, it does not include attitudes.

Let us go on and talk about some biblical principles that pertain to this topic. We have defined terminology, and we have talked about that perspective in terms of grades of errors. I think you will find that more helpful as you continue to think along those terms.

I have four biblical principles on page 45 of Edmund Clowney's book, *The Church*. The first is that it is the duty of pastors to protect the flock by holding fast to the truth. The second is that heretics, if they were people of integrity, ought to leave the church. Occasionally they do. If they will not leave, churches should show them the door. They should discipline heretics who will not leave. They should try to help them, but ultimately they cannot allow them to hurt the flock anymore. They have to put them out. Third, Christians ought to separate from a church that rejects fundamental Christian doctrine. Rejecting fundamental Christian doctrine rejects the marks of the church. It rejects that which makes the church a church, that which distinguishes the true church from the false. It is the duty of pastors to protect the flock by holding fast to the truth. In Acts 20, as Paul counsels the Ephesian elders, he says a lot of good things. After saying in verse 27, "I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God," he says, "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock." He is writing to spiritual shepherds. They are to be vigilant for wolves. The figure is easy to understand: lazy shepherds cause sheep to get devoured by hungry wolves. On the spiritual sphere it is the same thing. "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock" (verses 28-29). Paul is a realist. In verses 30-31 he says, "Even from your own number"—Does he mean literally the people with him there? At least he means from their church.—"men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears." These are strong words, are they not?

Let us look at the qualifications for the elder or overseer. The terms are used interchangeably in Titus 1. An elder must be, among other things, blameless, the husband of one wife, and so forth, down to verse 9. "He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine." That is the elder's heart. He likes to build people up in the faith. That is his delight. But there is something else going on. The verse ends with this: "and refute those who oppose it." Now we have to be careful; an elder cannot be an aggressive person. If you are a fighter, you are disqualified from the eldership. You cannot enjoy this second part of the work too much. On the other hand, you have to do it at times. You must not turn away from doctrinal error and pretend it does not exist. I am not talking about splitting little details over our understanding of future things, which we do not understand perfectly. But I am talking about the fundamentals of the Christian faith. To look the other way is not to act in love. Remember the words I said earlier about the unity of the church and receiving each other. Some of you could be convicted if you are of a doctrinaire temperament. Truth means something; it is important to you. You think your truth should be contended for. But balance it with love and embracing other Christians.

This may make uneasy those people who are filled with love, who are easy going, who have no problem living out the unity of the church. They hate to make waves and they do not like strife. You could be a spiritual coward. The combination is to speak the truth in love, as it says in Ephesians 4. Christ was the perfect epitome of it. He was strong and firm, but He was also loving. We have a personality, and you probably have a propensity one way or the other. May God show us the perfect balance.

It is the duty of pastors to protect the flock by holding fast to the truth. Show me a pastor who does not do that, and he is not worthy of the name pastor. Secondly, by rights, heretics have no place in the church. They should leave. Sometimes they do. First John 2:18-19 is instructive in this regard: “Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.” If only all heretics had the integrity of these first century heretics. If they went out from us, they have previously identified with the Christian church. These heretics are also apostates. They professed to the end and they left. They did what heretics ought to do by rights: they left. They departed from the church, they went out from us. It was not only a departure in teaching but a physical separation. They did not really belong to us. They were not the genuine article. They were not true believers in Christ.

Paul believes in the perseverance of the saints because he says, “if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belong to us.” In that way apostasy, at least from this text, is more complicated. Going out is an indication that the person never knew the Lord. But we have to be careful; somebody could depart from the church and later on come back. So we cannot tell whether someone knows the Lord infallibly the way He can. But certainly departing the church is a very bad sign.

These heretics are also apostates. They are heretics in that they teach serious subversive error. They are apostates because they left. They departed from the faith. You could be a heretic and not an apostate. We kind of wish that the heretics who stick around would be apostates. That is, if they would leave it would be better. If they stick around and will not leave that makes for trouble because they can start to siphon off disciples after themselves. That is where the church should discipline them.

Some may ask what makes these first century people heretics or apostates? It might be a proto or early gnosticism, or it might reflect certain teachings that later came to full flower in gnosticism. There is not actually first century gnosticism. There seem to be some sympathies and agreement with what was later called gnosticism.

The first biblical principle is it is the duty of Christian leaders to protect the flock by holding on to the teachings of God’s Word. Second, by rights, heretics are to leave the church. Sometimes they do. In the flowering of the old liberalism in Germany, one Old Testament professor was an honest man. He came to the conclusion that none of Christianity was true. He resigned his professorship and Bible at the university—if only all people who come to those conclusions would have the integrity that man had.

Churches, what should we do if the heretics will not leave? We follow the steps of church discipline because heresy is sin. Ultimately heretics should be ex-communicated. They should be finally put out of the church. Churches should discipline heretics who will not leave. That sounds rather strong. We will see if it is what the Bible teaches. Titus 3. If you love to discipline you probably should not do it. It should be a heart breaking thing to put people out of the church. And your attitude is so important when

dealing with them. Galatians 6 sets the tone. Go to them the same way you would like somebody to go with you. I would appreciate if it would be private. I would like it if the person had prayed beforehand and was coming in the power of the Holy Spirit and wanted to help me. Who knows, maybe the Lord would even give me a spirit of repentance and change my heart if I were in serious error. I would hope so. Titus 3:10 and 11 say, “Warn a divisive one once and then warn him a second time. After that have nothing to do with him.” Some may say that looks like a schismatic rather than a heretic, and you might be right. But look at verse 9: “Avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless.” The implication is the divisive person from verse 10 is involved with bad teachings as well. There are overlaps here. The categories overlap so that it looks like both heresy and schism. After warning the person a couple of times, have nothing to do with him. “You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.”

Look at the first few verses of 2 Peter 2. “But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction upon themselves. Many will follow their shameful ways and will bring the way of truth into disrepute. In their greed these teachers will exploit you with stories they have made up. Their condemnation has been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping.”

Verse 9 says, “The Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment, while continuing their punishment.” Churches should discipline false teachers who will not leave on their own accord. They should be ultimately barred from the Lord’s table, thereby signifying that they are not believers in Christ to the best of our ability to discern.

Last, and it is a hard saying but it is the teaching of the Bible, Christians are to separate from a church that rejects fundamental Christian truth. In light of what we have been talking about I will define fundamental Christian truth as the marks of the church. We are not saying you should leave a church because it has a different view of the millennium or even of Christian baptism or some other details of things. But if it does not have the pure preaching of the Word, discipline, or the proper administration of the ordinances (it rejects Christian ordinances, for example, or has other ones as in the case of Rome) there may indeed be grounds for leaving that fellowship.

In 2 Corinthians 6:14-15 Paul says, “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial [the devil]? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?” This is not saying get rid of all your unsaved neighbors and friends and have nothing to do with them. It is speaking in terms of the church. The church should not be a company of believers and unbelievers. Although the church welcomes unbelievers and seeks to win them to the Lord, it should not be dominated by unbelief. In addition, unbelieving persons should not hold office in the church. Of course they are welcome to hear the Gospel preached. This is not prohibiting all contact with unsaved people. How else would unsaved people hear the Gospel? But it is saying the church should not be a divided entity with a mixture of Gospel truth and unbelief. We are talking about major false teachings, what we have been calling heresies. The passage continues, “What agreement is there between a temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: ‘I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.’ Therefore come out from them and be separate,’ says the Lord. ‘Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters,’ says the Lord Almighty. Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God” (verses 6:16-7:1). I cannot answer every specific question you have

about this. I have known believers who are members of mixed denominations, whose local churches fight for the truth. I will speak personally here and say that is not my own choice for my family. But, on the other hand, that is not my heritage. Someone could have been raised in a church where the Gospel was preached formerly but because of changes in the leadership on a national level, the Gospel is now under attack. Yet, if there was still freedom in our local church to believe the Word of God, I can respect the person who would stand and fight. In the history of American Christianity, the Missouri-centered Lutherans and the Southern Baptists have purified their churches by fighting the battle and not throwing in the towel. I respect that completely. You and I cannot make other people's decisions for them on an every-case basis. But if you are simply sitting back and taking your ease in a place where liberalism is fostered, that is a serious problem indeed.

There are believers who are working for a Gospel testimony within mixed churches. It still is problematic, though. If somebody in your church moves across the country you cannot, without discrimination, say, "Find the closest local church of our denomination." This is because more likely than not, it does not believe the truth. Great problems result. But I respect people who stand and fight.

I will let the four principles stand on their own. Obviously here we have parameters and not detailed instructions for every possibility. It is good for us to give some attention to this matter of ecclesiastical separation.

That completes our study of what the church is. Now we are ready with that background to talk about what the church ought to do. I will give a brief introduction to the service of the church.

The service of the church includes worship. I am on page 46 of Edmund Clowney's book, *The Church*, where it talks about evangelism, edification, and diaconal ministries as barebones essentials for the service of the church. These are so commonplace I put them here for your own reference. The service of the church includes worship. I will just read one passage for each. In contrast to those who reject the Gospel, Peter says in 1 Peter 2:9 and 10, "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into this wonderful light."—Here is the primary purpose of the church.—"Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." The service of the church includes worship. The main thing the church is about is the worship of God. But if the church is sincere about the pure worship of God, it cannot be the only thing the church is concerned about. To do other things and neglect worship is wrong; it is to get our priorities wrong. But to have a heart for God and to love to worship Him also means to be concerned for the salvation of others. You want to glorify God by bringing more people into His family and creating more worshippers. You see unsaved people not as just jewels to be added to your crown, but you see them as worshippers. You see them as people in need. They need to know the Lord, now and forever. But even more importantly you see them in light of God who seeks people to worship Him. You want them to know the same Lord that you know. So it is for the glory of God that we are motivated that way.

Look at John 20:21-23, which says, "Again Jesus said [after appearing to his disciples], 'Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.'" Here is the mission of the church. The great missionary with a capital M, the Lord Jesus Christ sent by the Father, sends His disciples into the world. Verse 22 says, "And with that he breathed on them."—I take this as an anticipation of Pentecost, an acted parable.—"He breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'" This receiving of the Spirit is in conjunction with them being sent. It implies the preaching of the good news. In that capacity He says in verse 23, "If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." What is the meaning of that? As we preach the Gospel, if people believe it, their sins are

forgiven. In that sense we dispense forgiveness. This does not happen through us personally, but in bearing the Gospel we dispense forgiveness. If people reject our message they are not forgiven. That is true even of the humblest saint who brings the Gospel sincerely and with a good attitude. If the listener rejects the Gospel, he or she is lost. The person is not forgiven. However, if the person believes, he or she is forgiven.

The service of the church includes evangelism. It also includes the building up of the people of God. First Peter 4 includes the edification of believers. This is a neglected spiritual gifts passage. In general Peter gets the short shrift compared to Paul. In 1 Peter 4:10 Peter says, “Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others,”—Our gifts are not just to make us feel good. They are to glorify God and build up others.—“faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms.” I love this. The spiritual gifts are viewed as manifestations of the grace of God. We have limited the grace of God! The grace of God saves us, keeps us, and imparts spiritual gifts to us. As we use our gifts to the glory of God and to the service of other people, we are actually ministering grace. Is not that beautiful? It is God’s gifts and graces that He chooses to bless by His Spirit in building up His people. As you use your gifts in God’s service, it is God who is doing the building up. And He is using you and me to accomplish His end.

Verse 11 gives some examples: “If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.” Here is the purpose of spiritual gifts: worship. We win people to the Lord that there might be more worshippers in the church Sunday morning. They are blessed, too, in that. We edify the people of God that God might be praised and worshipped by people growing in their faith.

I will close with this. The service of the church includes diaconal ministries. I have got a lot of examples. (I will go over this once again and mention some of the ramifications in order that it might be more solid in our minds.) Remember in Galatians 2 when Paul went up to Jerusalem to lay his Gospel out to those who were Apostles before him and to receive their stamp of approval? He says in verses 9 and 10, “James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews. All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.”

We need to have deed ministries along with word ministries, especially if people we minister to have basic physical needs. We need to meet those needs in the name of Jesus and not just become a secular soup kitchen. We should become a Gospel soup kitchen if the people around us need soup, bread, and clothing to live. The service of the church includes diaconal ministry because it is subservient to the Gospel and ultimately the worship of God. It is pretty hard to listen to the good news of the Gospel if your stomach is growling. And the words sound hollow if you say, “Jesus loves you,” and meanwhile the person is really hurting. We should seek, in God’s grace, to minister to those needs. That is why God has appointed deacons to the church. It is in order that people might have full and warm tummies and their ears might be opened up to the Gospel. As a result, they might be brought into the fellowship of the church and ultimately become worshippers of God.