

Are Protestant Groups ‘Schisms’?

By Steve Ray

Dear Paul:

In our recent correspondence you claimed that a schism is a theological difference, not a visible rending of the visible body of Christ the Church. I, on the other hand, claim that a schism is a visible rending or tearing (division) of the Church. The rending of the body can be caused by doctrinal difference, heresy, or any number of other reasons, most usually caused by pride, arrogance, or personal reasons which cause people to divide or have hurt feelings. I have been part of several denominational splits in my Protestant days and they were usually more personal than doctrinal. However, the schism is a visible faction, split, or division, no matter what the cause. Doctrinal difference is not a schism. It is only a schism when it causes a split.

The Greek word for division, as used by Paul is *schizo*, from which we get the word “schism”. For your info I have collect a few passages from the New Testament where the inspired writers use the Greek word *schisma* and/or *schizo*. I think it is instructive, especially to show that *schism*, according to the etymology and usage, refers to the breaking or rending of “something” not just a disagreement or departure from a pure doctrine (though that may be the root cause of a schism). I also include one quote of many Church Fathers from Ignatius of Antioch, and didn’t have time to collect the other references from the Fathers of the first few centuries. I will do so if you like, but you may find enough just by reading the *First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians* where the schisms were caused by a rejection of the authority of the bishops. Remember that Clement knew Peter and Paul and was the third bishop of Rome after Peter and wrote in the first century.

John 7:43

“So there arose a *division* (Gr.: *schisma*) in the multitude because of Him. And some of them wanted to seize Him, but no one laid hands on Him.” Here we have a visible division among people.

Mt 9:16

“But no one puts a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment, and a worse *tear* (Gr. *schisma*) results.”

John 9:16

“Therefore some of the Pharisees were saying, This man is not from God, because He does not keep the Sabbath. But others were saying, How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs? And there was a *division* (Gr. *schisma*) among them.”

John 10:19

“There arose a *division* (Gr. *schisma*) again among the Jews because of these words. And many of them were saying, He has a demon and is insane. Why do you listen to Him?

Others were saying, These are not the sayings of one demon-possessed. A demon cannot open the eyes of the blind, can he? “

1 Cor 12:24-25

But God has so composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that member which lacked, that there should be no *division* (Gr. and AV *schisma*) in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another.”

1 Cor 1:10-13

“Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree, and there be no *divisions* (Gr. *schisma*) among you, but you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment. For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe’s people, that there are quarrels among you. Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, I am of Paul, and I of Apollos, and I of Cephas, and I of Christ. Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” (denominational Protestantism!)

1 Cor 11:17-19

“But in giving this instruction, I do not praise you, because you come together not for the better but for the worse. For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that *divisions* exist among you; and in part, I believe it. For there must also be factions among you, in order that those who are approved may have become evident among you.”

Mark 15:38

“And the veil of the temple was *torn* in two (Gr. *schizo*) from top to bottom.”

Mt 27:51

“And behold, the veil of the temple was *torn* in two (Gr. *schizo*) from top to bottom, and the earth shook; and the rocks were *split*” (Gr. *schizo*).

Luke 5:36

“And He was also telling them a parable: “No one *tears* (Gr. *schizo*) a piece from a new garment and puts it on an old garment; otherwise he will both *tear* (Gr. *schizo*) the new, and the piece from the new will not match the old.”

John 19:23 24

“The soldiers therefore, when they had crucified Jesus, took His outer garments and made four parts, a part to every soldier and also the tunic; now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece. They said therefore to one another, Let us not *tear* (Gr. *schizo*) it, but cast lots for it, to decide whose it shall be.” (The Fathers taught that the seamless robe of Christ was a type of the visible unity of the Church the body of Christ clothed with the seamless white robe of holiness and unity. The seamless robe has now been rent and torn, not by Roman centurions, but by those who bear the name of the Christ himself, for the sake of their denominations and for their human traditions, especially during and since the Reformation.)

John 21:10

“Jesus said to them, ‘Bring some of the fish which you have now caught.’ Simon Peter went up, and drew the net to land, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three; and although there were so many, the net was not *torn* (Gr. *schizo*).

Regarding usage of the concept and word schism in the Early Church:

Ignatius (died c. 106 ad) writes to the Philadelphians:

CHAP. III.--AVOID SCHISMATICS: “Keep yourselves from those evil plants which Jesus Christ does not tend, because they are not the planting of the Father. Not that I have found any *division* among you, but exceeding purity. For as many as are of God and of Jesus Christ are also with the bishop. And as many as shall, in the exercise of repentance, return into the unity of the Church, these, too, shall belong to God, that they may live according to Jesus Christ. Do not err, my brethren. If any man follows him that makes a *schism* in the Church, he shall not inherit the kingdom of God. If any one walks according to a strange opinion, he agrees not with the passion [of Christ].

“Keep yourselves, then, from those evil plants which Jesus Christ does not tend, nor that wild beast, the destroyer of men, because they are not the planting of the Father, but the seed of the wicked one. Not that I have found any *division* among you do I write these things; but I arm you beforehand, as the children of God. For as many as are of Christ are also with the bishop; but as many as fall away from him, and embrace communion with the accursed, these shall be cut off along with them. Take ye heed, then, to have but one Eucharist. For there is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, and one cup to show forth the unity of His blood; one altar; as there is one bishop, along with the presbytery and deacons, my fellow-servants: that so, whatsoever ye do, ye may do it according to [the will of] God.”

These are just a few passages. I didn't go into the Old Testament, Jewish thoughts on schisms, Greek thought, nor did I take much time to demonstrate the uniform teaching of the Church Fathers. It is all the same though, and certainly not in line with your non-concrete, rather intangible concept of schism being a simple theological disagreement.

Before closing, look at the teaching of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

CCC 817 “In fact, in this one and only Church of God from its very beginnings there arose certain rifts, which the Apostle strongly censures as damnable. But in subsequent centuries much more serious dissensions appeared and large communities became separated from full communion with the Catholic Church for which, often enough, men

of both sides were to blame. The ruptures that wound the unity of Christ's Body here we must distinguish heresy, apostasy and schism do not occur without human sin: Where there are sins, there are also divisions, schisms, heresies, and disputes. Where there is virtue, however, there also are harmony and unity, from which arise the one heart and one soul of all believers."

And in paragraph 2089 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* we find the definition of *schism*. "*Incredulity* is the neglect of revealed truth or the willful refusal to assent to it. *Heresy* is the obstinate post-baptismal denial of some truth which must be believed with divine and catholic faith, or it is likewise an obstinate doubt concerning the same; *apostasy* is the total repudiation of the Christian faith; *schism* is the refusal of submission to the Roman Pontiff or of communion with the members of the Church subject to him."

Schism has always been damnable and a great pain to the heart of our Lord Jesus who desires a visible unity among His people. How do we know this? In Jesus high-priestly prayer in John 17, He prays to the Father for the visible unity of all His sheep (cp. Jn 10:16). One must ask what good an "invisible unity" is when we are trying to demonstrate the love of God to the world. The world sees every possible sect and schism claiming to have the truth, even though they compete and disagree among themselves. What a scandal!

"I do not ask in behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one; even as Thou, Father, *art* in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in Us; that the world may believe that Thou didst send Me. And the glory which Thou hast given Me I have given to them; that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them, and Thou in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, that the world may know that Thou didst send Me, and didst love them, even as Thou didst love Me" (John 17:20-23).

The world has the right to judge whether the Father sent the Son and loved Him and us. The Protestant denominations, living in unhappy schism, 30,000 factions and sects and growing, are a scandal that gives Jesus a bad name and defames the Gospel. There is no justification for such a scandal.

Yet, in the midst of a divided Christendom, there remains the true visible Body of Christ, the Catholic Church. It spreads elegantly over the whole world and one billion strong (cp. Mt 13:31f.)! The teaching is uniform and faithful to the teaching of Jesus and the Apostles and is the only Church that has maintained the moral teachings of Christ without compromise or failing. The Church Jesus founded, though many have separated themselves from her to their own peril, is the "one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church" which was founded by Jesus and continues in unbroken succession and continuity from the Apostles until today. Blessed be God forever.

