



The Cause of Division ... and the Cure

Dean Taylor

In A.D. 449, in the famous New Testament city of Ephesus, bishops from all over the world gathered to discuss what they saw as a life-or-death point of theology. The issue? They wanted to nail down just how the two natures of Christ co-existed in the person of Jesus. Fully divine and fully human, they all agreed. But that wasn't enough. Precisely how those two natures existed in the person of Jesus was the debate. At first glance you would probably think that this must have been some fine point of theology reserved only for the elite theologians. But no ... this got big.

Just as always, the root of the issue wasn't theological. Personal differences and political agendas fanned the fires of dispute and contention. There's an old saying that goes, "If you want to beat a dog, it's easy to find a stick." Through the centuries there have been a lot of dogs.

In the case at Ephesus, the dispute went public. The local "Christians"—who probably had never experienced an ounce of the engrafted nature of Christ—were getting in on the debate everywhere. Akin to our presidential elections or sporting events, people were taking sides. There even is a report that at the sporting complex, the Hippodrome, the "Christians" could be seen wearing colors on their sleeve to represent their theological sides! Seriously, the ones known as "Orthodox" wore blue, and what came to be called the "heretic Monophysites" wore green ones.

Once the theological debate got underway, things went from bad to worse. When one side of the debate didn't feel that things were going their way, a group of monks, accompanied by a gang of militia, proceeded to take over the debate by force. Threatening everyone with their life, they

took a blank piece of paper and made the bishops all sign it. They planned to later simply put what they wanted on the blank section. After they got the signatures, they turned to their leading opponent, Flavian, and cried out, "Slaughter him!" Immediately a band of monks proceeded to beat the bishop so badly that he died a few days later.

At last, when they felt the debate was settled, the synod proudly pronounced, "May those who divide Christ be divided with the sword. May they be hewn in pieces, may they be burned alive." Through the centuries, this little meeting has affectionately been named "the Gangster synod."

Just last night I heard Leroy Beachy say that "we study history so we can see a reflection of ourselves." Perhaps it's easy to look at these Ephesus bishops and say, "Wow, they obviously had some issues." True, they did. Hopefully we won't hire a group of gangsters to accompany us to the next brothers' meeting. But I wonder sometimes that during difficult church disputes if we don't have more of these Ephesus gangsters in our hearts then we care to admit.

We all like passionate churches, right? Well, passion comes in two packages: good passion and bad passion. If you study radical church movements and times of first-generation revival, almost always you find some pretty rocky roads. What's surprising is that if you were to roll out the annals of church disputes over the centuries, it's amazing just how confident each side was.

Are we any different? I don't think so. The Bible has much to say about everyday, practical things like this. Let's look at just a few Scriptural principles that can help us discern if we are on the right track during difficult times.

1. Ask yourself, "Am I falling into the trap of getting the right answers to the wrong questions?"

Jesus, warning us about future contention, said, "They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service." Jn. 16:2 Like the gangsters at the Ephesus synod, these synagogue guys that Jesus was talking about *thought* they were doing the right thing. Jesus told us that they even thought God was happy with them. I assume they all had good Scripture quotations for their causes. But even in their zeal to be right with God ... Jesus tells us they were missing everything. They were getting the right answers to the wrong questions.

To further explain this point, consider a young man who, although he is in a cult, is serious about trying to please God. Wanting to hear God's will, the young man asks God, "Should I buy a new sports car or go to the mission field?"

Looking from our perspective, we know that both of his questions are wrong. More than anything else, the young man needs to get out of the cult. But that's not the question he's asking. Now imagine him there, studying the Scrip-



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tures and praying to God for the right answer. Finally he comes up with the deduction: "The Scriptures teach that it would be better for me to go to the mission field than to buy a sports car." You see, he got a "**right**" answer but he asked the **wrong** question.

In the case of the Ephesus gangsters back in A.D. 449, whether or not the "Orthodox" ended up with a **right** answer to this fine point of theology is a bit beside the point. Someone should have asked a different question. Like maybe, "Is it ok to slaughter fellow Christians simply because they don't understand the nature of Christ like I do?" That would have been a better question to ask.

2. Be careful with your spirit and your attitude. Be painfully honest with how you are feeling deep inside.

The book of James has some very good guidelines to gauge the spiritual temperature of our heart. James said:

Who is a wise man and endowed with knowledge among you? let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom. But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth. Ja. 3:13-14

James stressed that our character and demeanor would reveal the source of our wisdom. In several places throughout his epistle, James stresses the great need for wisdom. He reveals in chapter 3 that we can actually receive wisdom from a good or from a bad source—from God or from the devil. Furthermore, he provides a great way to check if our wisdom is coming from the wrong place.

This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish. For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work. (vss. 15-16)

So, ask yourself, "Is there envy or strife or confusion in my heart?" Now be careful how you answer. It is easy to see

those flaws in your "opponent's" attitude. However, God wants us to look at our own heart. If any of these problems are there, then James puts it to us straight ... we have received wisdom from the wrong place. That's scary! That might mean that we may feel pretty smart. We might even be winning the argument. But if these flaws in our attitude are there, then we are practicing "every evil work."

Paul also put it sternly to his young disciple Timothy: "And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men." 2 Ti. 2:24 My feeling is that Paul was speaking here from experience. History might have been different if the bishops at the "Gangster Synod" in Ephesus would have used these Scriptural checks before pulling out their swords and chanting, "May those who divide Christ be divided with the sword. May they be hewn in pieces, may they be burned alive!"

3. Was your issue a big issue for Jesus?

I remember once years ago I was in a church that was going through some major doctrinal crisis. I can't even remember now what the issue was, but I can remember taking it hard. I remember going out on my porch that night, looking up into the night sky, and crying out to God, "Why didn't you just tell us what things were the most important to You?"

Years later I finally realized that He *had* told us. The words of Jesus are those "most important things." Jesus came to give us God's perfect plan for humanity. The Gospel of His kingdom is the answer to every problem. If Jesus' teachings and plan for humanity would become our emphasis, the whole world would change.

Think about it, when was the last time that you heard of a church split over something like not giving to the poor, or not visiting the sick? If we could be saturated with the red letters of our Bibles, we will become instinctively aware of the things that are important to God. Again, bringing up the gruesome Ephesus debate ... think about it. What if the Ephesus bishops, instead of excommunicating people for having the wrong definition of how the two natures of Christ can be mixed in one person, actually disciplined people for things like storing up treasure on earth, or not visiting people in prison (not to mention hacking other believers in two)?

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Luke recorded Jesus saying, “He that is not with me is against me: and he that gathereth not with me scattereth.” Lu. 11:23 I know we all want to say we are “with Jesus.” But do we seriously hold on to what He said? Are the teachings of Christ the things that matter most to us? Do we really believe that Jesus meant every word He said? Jesus is saying in this passage that if we are not “gathering” with Him, then we cause division.

Christian unity is an essential theme throughout the New Testament. And since the hallmark of Jesus’ teaching is the ushering in of the new kingdom here on earth, we better take it seriously. A look at Jesus’ rebuke to the seven churches of Revelation reveals that He still expects the church to continue to “hear His voice”

and act on it while we address the crisis of every age. Re. 2, 3

Church unity is one of the things that was very important to Jesus. He said that His testimony was at stake by how unified we are. “That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.” Remember also that the same Lord also gave us another test of true Christianity: “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.” Jn. 13:35

Jesus said it well: “Smite the shepherd, and

the sheep of the flock shall be scattered abroad.” Mt. 26:31 As long as the people of God disparage the teachings of Christ, the church will scatter.

So the next time you find yourself in a church crisis or theological meltdown, ask yourself these three things:

1. Even though I feel I am right, could I possibly be getting the right answers to the wrong questions?
2. Am I careful with my spirit and attitude? Am I honest with how I feel deep inside?
3. Was this issue a concern for Christ, or is it of the spirit of Christ? ~

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