

09 - Falling Away From the Church and Divisions

by Ben Torrey

The church is made up of sinners, and we should not try to eliminate sin, but rather forgive and exercise discipline with care, following the process outlined in Scripture.

Duration: 8:53

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Matthew 13:25-30, Matthew 13:39-42, Matthew 18:15-35

Topics: "Divisions"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the instructions given to St. Paul to carry to the Gentile churches. While Paul enforced some of these instructions, he did not enforce others. The speaker emphasizes the need for careful exercise of discipline within the Church, erring on the side of love. The parable of the tares and the wheat in Matthew 13:25-42 is used to illustrate the importance of discernment and the ultimate judgment at the end of the age. The speaker also addresses the issue of divisions within the Church and the need to reconcile without accommodating sin, while acknowledging the growing understanding and cultural differences among the apostles and leaders in the New Testament.

Transcript

Good evening once again. This is Ben Torrey sharing with you more of my thoughts on the unity of the body of Christ, the church. Tonight I would like to tackle what may really be the thorniest problem that we have to deal with as we consider unity.

What do you do with those who have fallen away from the truth and taken others with them starting a new church or denomination? Some of the divisions are very real and cannot be reconciled without accommodating sin. This is all too true. St. Paul the Apostle, who is always calling for unity, even refers to this himself.

In 1st Corinthians 11:18 to 19 we read, 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, so that those who are approved may become evident among you. He is pointing out that there are those who are in sin and leading others into sin themselves, while on the other hand there are those who are standing up for truth and righteousness. This is a basic pastoral dilemma in any church.

How do you deal with those who are wrong, who are sinning, and are leading others astray? This broadcast is not the place to get into how to run a church or to lay out rules for such things, but there are a few things that I do want to point out from Scripture. First of all, nowhere in Scripture are we told to tolerate sin. We are told to forgive and as much as possible to be gentle.

We're also commanded in all things to love. This does not mean that we never chastise, punish, or even expel a wrongdoer. Jesus in Matthew 18 verses 15 to 35 lays out both a process for dealing with sin in the church and for expelling an unrepentant sinner, at the same time that he calls for unrelenting forgiveness.

This portion of Scripture is one of the most important in dealing with this type of thing. Let me repeat the reference again, Matthew 18, 15 to 35. On the other hand, as you read through the New Testament and see how the apostles and leaders wrestled with different issues, you can also see a growing understanding of many things about God and about the church.

Not everyone had the same understanding all the time. There's also evidence of cultural differences that carried over into church practice and there is also evidence of cultural differences that carried over into church practice and the people saw things. In Acts 15, we have that wonderful account of the first major council of the church, gathered to deal with different understandings and practices in different parts of the world.

The result of this meeting was that certain instructions were given to St. Paul to carry to the Gentile churches. As he later traveled and instructed, some of those stipulations he enforced, but others he did not. We also have Jesus' parables about the kingdom of God, especially what we see in Matthew 13, verses 25 to 42, the parable of the tares and the wheat.

Two things are very clear in this parable. The first is in verses 28 to 30, and he said to them, an enemy has done this. The slave said to him, do you want us then to go and gather them up? But he said no, for while you are gathering up the tares, you may uproot the wheat with them.

Allow both to grow together until the harvest. This shows us that the kingdom of God, and we may take this to mean the church, has both good members and evil members in it, but that we cannot always tell which is which. If we are not careful, assuming that it's not really clear where the sin lies, we can cut off the weak and those who struggle, rather than helping them, or others whom we fail to see as really innocent.

At the same time, by implication, we can leave some who look good, but really aren't. In other words, we need to be extremely careful about how we exercise discipline within the church. Better to err on the side of love, as a mentor of mine used to say.

We see the other thing that is clear from this parable as we continue further in verse 30, and then in verses 39 to 42. Verse 30. In the time of the harvest, I will say to the reapers, first gather up the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up, but gather the wheat into my barn.

Verses 39 to 42, Jesus explains. The enemy who sowed them is the devil, and the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. So just as the tares are gathered up and burned with fire, so shall it be at the end of the age.

The Son of Man will send forth his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, and will throw them into the furnace of fire. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. The point here is that the ultimate judge is not us.

It is God who will separate out the good from the evil in his church, and that at the end of the age, not at this time. People have tried to keep the church pure by eliminating sin. Jesus basically tells us that you just can't do that.

The church is made up of sinners. While we don't tolerate sin, we do forgive, and in some cases we even overlook it if we are not sure. To do otherwise is to run the risk of hurting others, not to mention the danger of becoming judgmental and falling into the sin of pride ourselves.

Many of the present divisions within the body of Christ have come about as people have tried to keep the doctrines true or deal with sin. Some of these separations have been necessary, but I fear that many of them have come about and been perpetuated by sin on all sides. I also think that in some cases later followers have come back to the truth, but the separation remains.

So what do we do now? Well, I would say we begin with humility and repentance. We look for ways that we can seek reconciliation. We also look to the basic fundamentals of the faith, although we often have a hard time agreeing even on what those are.

And we acknowledge others who have been joined to Jesus Christ as our brothers and sisters even if we don't agree on all points of doctrine. We begin to take what steps we can to close the gaps. Even as we acknowledge that many of the different denominations in existence today came into being in efforts in the past to correct errors or deal with sin, I hope that we can look forward, forgiving the past, and see where we can come back together again as we walk with Christ into the future.

This process of reconciliation between denominations and denominational leaders who want to remain true to what they have received, which is only right, is a process that cannot be rushed. It requires huge amounts of patience and forbearance with one another as well as continuous efforts to seek unity. Always, it requires humility, repentance, prayer, and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Without these things, especially the work of the Holy Spirit, we cannot hope for true unity. O Lord, enable us to draw closer to each other across the barriers of our histories and our hearts. May we learn from you what you consider important and make that the important thing for us rather than our preconceived ideas.

Teach us your ways and pour out your Holy Spirit upon us as your church, that we may come together in you. Amen.

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