

Ecclesiology
Semester 2 – Topic 10 – Church Factions
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Factions in a church are inevitable. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 11:19, “For there must also be factions among you, in order that those who are approved may have become evident among you.” So it is not whether there will be factions but when there will be factions.

We will look at what factions are, why factions are wrong, why they occur, what constitutes a faction, and what to do about factions.

What factions are

Cambridge (online): *A group within a larger group, especially with slightly different ideas than the main group.*

The Greek word for faction (HAIREISIS) is found in 1 Corinthians 11:19; Galatians 5:20; Acts 5:17 (“the sect of the Sadducees”); Acts 15:5 (“the sect of the Pharisees,” also Acts 26:5); Acts 24:5 (“the sect of the Nazarenes”); 2 Peter 2:1 (“destructive heresies”). In each case it points to a group that has separated itself from a larger group in a manner that includes doctrine.

A closely related word to factions in the New Testament is division (SCHISMA), found in 1 Corinthians 11:18, “For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions (SCHISMA) exist among you; and in part, I believe it. For there must also be factions (HAIREISIS) among you, in order that those who are approved may have become evident among you” (1 Corinthians 11:18-19). Therefore, the precursor to a faction is division.

Why factions are wrong

Simply put, factions are wrong because the Bible tells us they are. The cause of factions is classified as a deed of the flesh in Galatians 5:20 in contrast to a fruit of the Spirit. Titus 3:10 instructs us to “reject a factious man.”

The reason why we ought to reject a person who brings about a faction is found in Titus 3:9, because they create strife and disputes about the Law which is unprofitable and worthless. Titus 3:11 describes the person who creates the division in a church as “perverted and is sinning, being self-condemned.”

Factions damage the unity and peace of the church. This negatively affects the ministry of the church and the reputation of the church among outsiders. Believers suffer confusion, broken relationships, and turmoil when factious people stir up division.

Why factions occur

Factions occur because man is sinful. This explains why factions are inevitable (1 Corinthians 11:19).

More specifically, factions grow out of foolish controversies that lead to strife and disputes (Titus 3:9). Vine comments that the word for faction “denotes ambition, self-seeking, rivalry, self-will being an underlying idea in the word; hence it denotes party-making.”

The desire to serve self produces the certain deeds of the flesh such as jealousy, anger, strife, disputes, and dissensions that lead to a faction developing (Galatians 5:20). While not all selfishness leads to strife and not all strife leads to factions, all factions come from selfishness and strife.

In other words, we can have dissension but stop short of creating a faction. But under the right circumstances, i.e. the involvement of a factious person, dissension spreads to division in the church.

Likewise, a person can be selfish but stop short of causing strife and a person can dissent without producing a faction. Without actual division, there is no faction. Therefore, factiousness is a greater manifestation of the evil that originates with selfishness.

What constitutes a faction

A person may dissent and not have enough influence to create a faction. This does not absolve the person from the sinfulness involved in dissension but only notes that dissension requires a certain leadership ability to cause a faction.

Dissension also requires a willing group to participate in the dispute in order to become factiousness. There is no faction without a following.

Once there is a separate group united around a belief in opposition to the leadership of a church you have a faction. There are several confusions that should be addressed regarding factions:

1. Factions do not need to be separated by geography. A group does not need to leave a church in order for a faction to exist.
2. Factions are not limited to teaching in opposition to the Gospel. There is a common view that believes that because the English word “heresy” is derived from the Greek word for faction, this must involve heretical teaching regarding the Gospel. According to this view, before a church can address a factious man, a heretical teaching regarding the Gospel must be involved.

However, we ought to contend for the Gospel and separate from people who corrupt the teaching regarding salvation. A church that does not teach truthfully regarding the essential message of the person and work of Jesus Christ is a church in name only. Indeed, we cannot keep from speaking about the truth of Jesus Christ (cf. Acts 4:20). If the teaching of a church does not allow for the communication of the message of salvation, we must oppose this and leave.

Yet in the common case when churches teach what we do not agree with in areas beyond the Gospel, we cannot be divisive – even if we are right. The only righteous choices we have are to remain in the church and submit to whatever our disagreement is for the sake of unity or to quietly leave for a church that we believe better fits us. No church teaches or does everything that we would agree with and most Christians will find themselves needing to accept what they do not like for the sake of the greater good of the church.

What to do about factions

a. Prevention

The word translated “dissension” in Galatians 5:20 (ESV, NIV, NASB) does not mean simply disagreeing. It goes beyond that to the manner in which the disagreement is practiced. There are many passages that use negative terms that are related to dissension in the way people speak, such as contentious (1 Corinthians 11:16), boastful (2 Timothy 3:2), pugnacious (1 Timothy 3:3), quick-tempered (Titus 1:7); slander (2 Corinthians 12:20); enmity (Galatians 5:20).

There are inevitable disagreements in every church, big and small. By being filled with the Spirit we will avoid the deeds of the flesh, which include characteristics that produce dissension, potentially leading to factiousness.

Beyond being Spirit-filled we are instructed to work toward agreement in order to avoid divisions among us. “I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree, and there be no divisions among you, but you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment” (1 Corinthians 1:10). This can only occur when we are committed to the Scripture to form our belief and practice. Churches that do not pursue the aggressive teaching of the Bible leave themselves vulnerable to division.

b. Protection

The unity of a church is precious. It must be guarded against people who will come and seek to draw away followers of Jesus after them (Acts 20:28-30).

The most basic way that a church can protect itself against factiousness is to avoid being hasty in appointing people to positions of leadership and influence (1 Timothy 5:22). By advancing people who will serve themselves and lead people astray threatens the unity of the church. This is so important that one qualification for being an elder is to exhort in sound doctrine and refute those who contradict (Titus 3:10).

c. Preservation

Once the unity of a church becomes threatened church leaders have a biblical responsibility to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3). They must warn the factious man and if he does not listen after multiple attempts, they must warn the church (Titus 3:10-11). The response of the church must be to separate from the factious person.

d. Participation

The entire church must join in preserving the unity of the church. This certainly happens in following the church leadership (Hebrews 13:17), including the application of Titus 3:10-11.

Also, the church must participate in preserving the unity of the church by speaking to the need for it when it is threatened. There will be opportunities for church members to speak to the unity of the church when a person is engaging in self-promotion against the leadership of the church.

Ultimately, there is no faction without a group willing to follow and as church members resist the joining with factious behavior, the unity of the church will be protected.

Conclusion

Our country allows for the free exercise of speech and of religion. This does not mean that all speech is good. Simply because a person has a right to speak does not give him the right to divide a church. Church leaders also have the right to free speech and religion and a church has the right to preserve its unity and call people to separate from a factious person. A church as a private entity also has the right of association with whom they choose.

Many churches have been established because a factious person takes a group of people away from a local church. Some of those churches may even be viewed as far better places to fellowship. However, the end does not justify the means.

The sin of factiousness is a big deal. It is listed with grievous sins; it is addressed in several Epistles; it has caused great harm to the ministry, unity, peace and relationships within Christ's church. The church is more than a club; it is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16) and is Christ's representative on earth as His Body (1 Corinthians 12:27). It deserves our deep commitment to preserving the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3).