

Church Unity: Divisive Attitudes

by Casey Head

In Proverbs 6:16-19, we find a list of seven things which are abominable to God, and listed among them is “He that soweth discord among brethren.” The Lord clearly does not approve of those who possess divisive attitudes. With this in mind, let us define some New Testament terms that relate to division. As we consider these terms, examine yourself. Is it possible that you are guilty of being divisive, whether habitually or occasionally?

We find in 1 Timothy 6:3-5 a condemnation of divisive men. This rebuke contains many descriptive terms which can be applied to divisive people, whether men or women. Notice the following terms: proud, strifes of words, envy, strife, railings, and evil surmisings. We all know what the word “proud” means. It refers to being “high-minded” or lifted up. Whenever you have proud people in the church, there will eventually be division- someone will challenge or question them and as a result, they will throw a tantrum and threaten division. It is important that prideful attitudes are rebuked and humility preached from the pulpit. If someone refuses to be humble, then they are in sin and must be rebuked lest the church split. The phrase “strifes of words” means “to wrangle about empty and trifling matters.” This describes people who are constantly stirring up trouble over silly questions and meaningless issues. Compare this to the words of Paul in 1 Timothy 1:4, “Neither give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which minister questions, rather than godly edifying which is in faith.” The word “strife” refers to contention and would describe the Christian who constantly is trying to stir up trouble. Railing is defined as “slander to another’s good name,” and would certainly include slander and gossip. It is sad that some Christians will hate their own brothers and sisters in Christ to such a degree that they will do anything to destroy their reputation. This is evil. And finally, a divisive individual can be one who “surmises” or basically “supposes without having evidence.” This means that they make charges and claims against their brethren with no basis or evidence in an attempt to ruin their reputation. Does any part of 1 Timothy 6:3-5 describe you?

There are a few terms in 2 Timothy 3:3-5 that also describe someone who is divisive. Those terms are false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, heady, high-minded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God. The term “false accusers” is one that we are familiar with and is very comparable to the term “surmising.” We need to recognize that if we are ever tempted to make an accusation against a brother, it better be based on sound information and it better be worth fussing over (a matter of sin or doctrine). The term “incontinent” means “without self-control” and could certainly describe someone who is driven *fiercely* by emotion and perhaps even wrathful or seditious. Have you ever known a Christian who was a volcanic eruption just waiting to happen, a person who at any moment could become evil and cruel? And then there are “despisers of those that are good.” Some carnally-minded Christians, when their sin or weakness is exposed, will seek to destroy those who stand for the truth. It is sad that so many good men and women are constantly attacked for their strength and fortitude. Compare the term “heady” to its more descriptive cousin “headstrong.” These people are rash and impulsive and will destroy church unity. How do you compare to the words of Paul in 2 Timothy 3:3-5? Are you vindictive and proud? Would you say that you are driven by emotion or reason? Do you often say and do mean things to your brethren that you may later regret? Or could it be said of you that you are loving, selfless and humble?

While many other descriptive terms could be discussed, the many that we have examined above adequately define those who are divisive. Clearly, these wicked and hateful attitudes should never enter the church. Sadly, however, they do, and rather than tolerating these kinds of people, we need to discipline them so that unity might prevail. As seen in 1 Timothy 6:3-5, we are to withdraw ourselves from those who are divisive,” and Titus 3:10-11 says, “A man that is an heretic (divisive) after the first and second admonition reject; knowing that he that is such is subverted, and sinneth, being condemned of himself.”