

# Unity and Division in the Church Part 2 - Division

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## Introduction

As much as the Reformation is the rediscovery of salvation by faith through grace, it is also the story of how Christianity became increasingly fragmented. By the time the Reformation came about, the Church had effectively been split into four wings: the Byzantine Orthodox, the Roman Catholics, the Nestorians (north-eastern Asian churches) and the Jacobites (Monophysite south-eastern Asian churches). The Nestorians and the Jacobites were in the process of being wiped out by pagan and Muslim powers in the east, so that to this day we have pretty much only the Armenian Orthodox and Thomasites in India representing the Nestorians and the Copts and Assyrian Orthodox representing the Jacobites.<sup>1</sup> The Roman Catholic church birthed the Protestant church by ejecting those whom she disagreed with and who would not submit to her rule without questioning it.

As the Protestant reformation movement progressed, the main leaders assembled in Marburg, Hessen, in October of 1529. Called together by Prince-Elector Philip of Hesse, these men were asked to draft a joint statement to unify the diverse theology of the Protestants, so creating a united front against Emperor Charles V and the Roman Catholic church. What got off to a good start came to a screeching halt when Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli of Zurich could not agree on the meaning of the Lord's Supper. The sticking point of the argument was that Zwingli saw the Lord's Supper as merely symbolic, whereas Luther believed Christ was actually present in the bread and the cup. The argument got so heated, that Luther (being Luther) is said to have carved the word *EST* (Latin for "is") into the table with his pen knife. The two great men could not get over this point and so the attempt at unifying the Protestant movement failed.<sup>2</sup> This failure led to more and more divisions within the Protestant movement, eroding a central authority and bringing us to this day where one cannot use a term to define Christian movements without a qualifier. When one says Presbyterian, for example, the other will ask *which* Presbyterian? PCA? PC USA? Cumberland? Canadian? Evangelical Presbyterian?<sup>3</sup> And forget about "Evangelical"! That term has been applied so broadly that it means vastly different things to the proponents and opponents of the Evangel!

Division in the church of Christ is a reality we all must deal with. Sometimes it is good, sometimes it is bad. It has happened in the past and it will likely happen again, whether over trespass, theology, personality, proximity or personal persuasion. In [my previous article we considered the topic of Christian unity](#) and how unity in the local church brings glory to God. We saw that Christian unity is what draws people to Christ. Unity can only exist where relationships exist. We also talked about how difficult it is to attain unity, because it demands sacrifice and commitment. In light of that someone is likely to say, unity is fine and good, and a worthy goal to strive for; but, must we preserve unity at all cost? May we not reach a point where we must say, enough is enough, and sunder? What happens if a relationship breaks, for whatever reason? What does the Bible have to say about this topic?

This is a very difficult topic and I spent much more time mulling over this than over [the article on unity](#). I talked with quite a few people about it, prayed about it and read about it. As I looked at division in the Scripture, I chose to focus on the New Testament, for this is the age we are in and our life and practice as a church arises from the teachings of unity found there. In looking at the New Testament, I found one very clear reason for dividing and two that are not so clear. They are as follows:

1. Persistent Sin (Mt. 18:15-17; 1Co. 5)
2. Theological Differences (Gal. 1:6-10; 1Ti 1:18-20; Rev. 2:14-15,18-29)
3. Differences of Opinion (Ac. 15:36-40)

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<sup>1</sup> For more on this, see J. Phillip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia—and How It Died* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> "Marburg Colloquy", *Wikipedia* < [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marburg\\_Colloquy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marburg_Colloquy) > (accessed 2017-10-03).

<sup>3</sup> "List of Reformed denominations in North America", *Revolv* < <https://www.revolv.com/main/index.php?s=List%20of%20Reformed%20denominations%20in%20North%20America&uid=1575> > (accessed 2017-10-03).

None of these points of division are easy, but all of them presuppose one thing: a relationship between those dividing. The Bible does not address denominations and that is perhaps a good thing, but it does make it more difficult as we approach this topic. So, let's pray for wisdom as we continue.

## Dividing Over Persistent Sin

The first and perhaps easiest point in regard to whether or not to divide is found in Matthew 18. Jesus, in talking about forgiveness, gives the Apostles a process for handling a brother or sister who sins against us. Let's read verses 15-17 together.

If your brother sins against you, go and rebuke him in private. If he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he won't listen, take one or two more with you, so that by the testimony of two or three witnesses every fact may be established. If he pays no attention to them, tell the church. But if he doesn't pay attention even to the church, let him be like an unbeliever and a tax collector to you.

This is a complex passage that demands a whole study by itself, so I would like to only point out three things here:

1. **The person who sins is a "brother" (or sister).** In other words, we have a relationship with him: we share the same faith in Christ and we can go to him in private.
2. **The goal of this rebuke is to win this brother back.** The aim is to restore our relationship with him. Only if that is not possible do we bring in more people, escalating to the point where he is brought before the congregation. *Only then* is that brother removed from Christian fellowship, which is what the phrase "let him be like an unbeliever and a tax collector to you" actually means. The relationship is broken, we have been divided.
3. **This is an individual who is divided from the body, by the body as a whole.** This is the primary point where we fail in applying this passage. In all the anecdotes I've read and heard, as well as historically in Martin Luther's case, it usually *not* the body as a whole that makes the expulsion, but rather the church leader(s), leaving partisans for this individual, thus birthing a new, separate and usually antagonistic movement.

Paul makes it even clearer as to why and how someone is to be removed in 1 Corinthians 5. Here a believer is living in abject sexual immorality and *the church is supporting it!* Paul is pretty harsh with the fellowship. Let's take a look at 1 Corinthians 5:1-5.

It is widely reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and the kind of sexual immorality that is not even tolerated among the Gentiles—a man is living with his father's wife. And you are inflated with pride, instead of filled with grief so that he who has committed this act might be removed from your congregation. For though I am absent in body but present in spirit, I have already decided about the one who has done this thing as though I were present. When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus with my spirit and with the power of our Lord Jesus, turn that one over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the Day of the Lord.

How can one express the loathing that the church should feel for what this man is doing? Perhaps the best example would be if a man were sleeping with his twelve-year-old step-daughter. What Paul is writing should make us all go "eww!" and want to take a shower just to get the thought out of our head. The thing this guy is doing is *nasty!* It is against both Jewish and Gentile custom! And the church is okay with it! Gah! This is why Paul is so harsh.

Note what Paul says for them to do in verses 4 and 5: "When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus ... turn that one over to Satan ... so that his spirit may be saved...."

In other words, make sure everyone in the congregation is present; make sure you are *all* there for the decision and kick this man out of the congregation until he repents! We find in [2 Corinthians 2:6-7](#) that this method worked and the brother was restored.

This should be pretty straightforward. If a sinning brother or sister is confronted multiple times and does not repent, they must be removed from the body by the body for their own good and for the good of the body.

## Dividing Over Theology

Where this gets more difficult, however, is what do you do with bad teaching? Is that considered sin? Is a false teacher to be removed as a brother in consistent sin? Does theology really matter to the body? And what exactly is the touchstone for theological division?

In my studies in the New Testament I found only two theological groups mentioned by name. There are a few individuals who have bad theology, like Hymenaeus and Alexander mentioned in [1 Timothy 1](#) and Jezebel in [Revelation 2](#), but as they are *individuals* they can be dealt with as individuals, so we leave them to our previous point.

The two groups mentioned in Scripture are “the circumcision party” ([Gal. 2:12](#)) and the Nicolaitans in the book of Revelation ([2:6,14-15](#)). The Circumcision Party, or Judaizers, taught that for a person to be saved he or she had to follow the Law of Moses, meaning all males had to be circumcised ([Ac. 15:5](#)). In effect, they taught that Jesus’ death was not enough; you had to work for your salvation.

What the Nicolaitans taught, on the other hand, is not so clear. Jesus makes the following statement about them:

But I have a few things against you. You have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to place a stumbling block in front of the Israelites: to eat meat sacrificed to idols and to commit sexual immorality. In the same way, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. (Revelation 2:14-15)

The Israelites were encouraged by the Moabite women to act against the holiness code of the Old Testament, worshipping other gods and following the desires of their flesh ([Num. 25](#)). As such, it is believed that the Nicolaitans advocated a sort of Christianized disregard of moral practices similar to what is practiced by certain individuals: “I’ve got my golden ticket to Heaven, so I can live as I choose. Let’s eat, drink and be merry! God will forgive it, after all. And you, Pharisee, have no right to judge me!” The fact of the matter is that not only do we have the right but also the duty to judge such a one in order to restore them to proper fellowship with Christ and his body.<sup>4</sup>

Both the Judaizers and Nicolaitans were guilty of syncretism: adding to, altering, redefining or removing from the message of Christianity so as to get rid of the offense of the Cross ([Gal. 5:11](#); [1Co. 1:21-25](#)). Paul even claims that the Judaizers are preaching another gospel and has some choice words to say about that in Galatians 1:6-9:

I am amazed that you are so quickly turning away from Him who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are troubling you and want to change the good news about the Messiah. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel other than what we have preached to you, a curse be on him! As we have said before, I now say again: If anyone preaches to you a gospel contrary to what you received, a curse be on him!

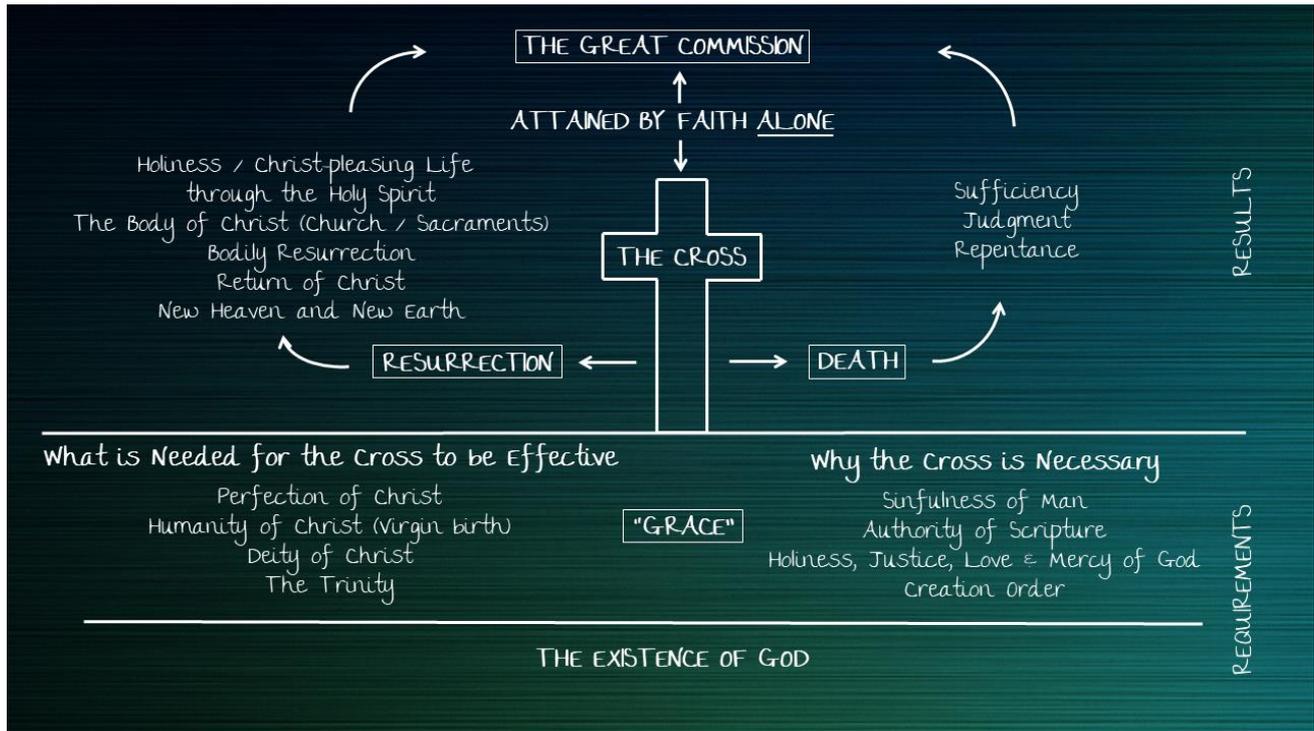
So, the sticking point over theology is the Gospel as the apostles preach it. For Paul, the central point is the “offense of the cross” ([Gal. 5:11](#)). In the same way for us the central point, the unchangeable thing, is the Cross and all that embodies.

Below is a graphic that I put together which is meant to summarize the core doctrines that surround the concept of the Cross. At the bottom, we have the doctrines that are necessary for the Cross to be needed and effective. Above we have the doctrines that result from the reality of the Cross itself. The doctrine of the sinfulness of man ([Gen. 3](#); [5:3](#); [8:21](#); [Ps. 51:5](#); [Rom. 1:18-22](#); [3:23](#); [7:7-25](#))<sup>5</sup> makes the Cross necessary in the first place. This doctrine rests solidly on the authority of the revealed word of God ([Ex. 24:12](#); [31:18](#); [Pr. 30:5-6](#); [2Ti. 3:16-17](#); [1Pe. 1:20-21](#)) and God’s standard of holiness ([Ex. 15:11](#); [Lev. 11:44](#); [Ps. 99](#); [Isa. 6:3](#); [40](#); [1Jn. 1:5](#); [1Pe. 1:16](#)). His standard of justice necessitates punishment of the sin of man ([Ps. 9:7-9](#); [11:7](#); [Jer. 9:24](#); [Ac. 17:31](#)). His mercy (“compassion”; [2Ch. 30:9](#); [Lk. 1:78](#)) and love ([Ex. 34:7-8](#); [Jn. 3:16](#); [1Jn. 4:7-9](#)) on the other hand, cause Him to provide substitutionary atonement for these sins so humans do not need to bear their punishment ([Lev. 4–5](#); [Heb. 9:22](#)). These doctrines only have a point if we live in a world that

<sup>4</sup> See J.M. Diener, “Reserving Judgment”, *WolfHawke.com* < <https://www.wolfhawke.com/musings/currents/reserving-judgment> > (accessed 2017-10-06).

<sup>5</sup> The verses quoted for each point in this summary are meant to be representative, not exhaustive.

was created by this God ([Gen. 1:1](#); [Rom. 1:18-22](#)) and this creation presupposes the existence of God ([Gen. 1:1](#); [Heb. 11:6](#); [Rom. 1:18-22](#)).



In the left column, we see the doctrines that are necessary for the cross to be effective, the first of which is the perfection of Christ ([Jn. 8:46](#); [2Co. 5:21](#); [1Jn. 3:5](#)), for without a perfect sacrifice, sin cannot be atoned for ([Heb. 4:14-15](#); [9:12-13](#)). The sacrifice must be human ([Heb. 2:14](#)), necessitating Christ being fully human ([Lk. 2:52](#); [Jn. 4:6](#); [1Jn. 1:1-4](#); [3:5](#)). However, the deity of Christ is also necessary ([Jn. 1:1,14](#); [8:58](#); [10:10](#); [Php. 2:5-11](#); [Col. 1:15-22](#); [Heb. 1:1-8](#)), for according to the doctrine of the sinfulness of man, no human is perfect enough to save us. Only God can do this. Acceptance of the virgin birth of Christ ([Isa. 7:15](#); [Mt. 1:18-25](#)) is a result of this. Also required for this to work is the doctrine of the Trinity, for we must have one God, but multiple persons for Christ's incarnation to be possible ([Gen. 1:26](#); [Ex. 3:1-6](#); [Mt. 28:19](#); [Ac. 5:3-4](#); [1Co. 8:6](#); [Heb. 1:8](#)). It is by His grace that God himself provides what is needed to make the necessary cross a possibility ([Jn. 1:14](#); [Ac. 15:11](#); [Rom. 3:24](#)).

This brings us then to the Cross itself, which has two parts, namely the death of Christ and the resurrection of Christ. The death of Christ must be sufficient for the removal of all sin, otherwise it is pointless ([Rom. 4:12-21](#); [Heb. 9:12,15,27](#)). It is the basis for judgment both now and in the future ([Jn. 5:24](#); [Col. 2:14-15](#); [Rev. 20:11-15](#)) and it is the symbol of repentance ([Ac. 2:38](#); [3:19](#); [Rom. 12:1-2](#)), because repentance requires death to self on the part of the sinner, acknowledging that I cannot do this, only God can ([Rom. 7:24-25](#)).

The other side of the cross is the resurrection of Christ, which makes it possible for the believer to be holy and live a Christ-pleasing life through the sending and indwelling of the Holy Spirit ([Jn. 14:26](#); [15:26](#); [Rom. 12:1-8](#); [1Co. 11:1](#); [12-14](#); [Php. 2:5](#); [1Pe. 1:16](#)). The works we do as Christians are not to earn salvation; rather, they are the evidence of the salvation we already have ([Eph. 2:8-10](#); [Jas. 2:14-26](#)). Because Christ rose again, He now has His chosen ones, His Body, that is the church with her sacraments ([Mt. 16:18](#); [28:19](#); [Ac. 2:38](#); [1Co. 11:23-28](#)). Our bodily resurrection, Christ's return for judgment and the promise of the new heaven and the new earth all hinge on the resurrection and are doctrines that make the Christian life with living ([1Co. 15](#); [Ac. 1:11](#); [1Th. 5:15-17](#); [2Pe. 3:10](#); [Rev. 19](#); [21-22](#)).

The Cross itself, Scripture is clear on this, can only be attained by faith alone. No work we do is sufficient to purchase it ([Eph. 2:8-9](#)). It is simply believing in my heart that Jesus Christ rose from the dead and proclaiming that He is Lord – that is my God (and, by extension, my master, my owner and my savior) – is sufficient for salvation ([Rom. 10:9-10](#)).

Because of this Cross, Christ commands His followers to make disciples by going forth, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit and teaching them to observe all that Jesus Christ Himself has commanded us ([Mt. 28:18-20](#)). That is the core of the Gospel, brothers and sisters.

This is the dividing point theologically. If any of these core tenets are denied or altered, then the teacher must be dealt with according to Matthew 18. The Judaizers added to salvation by faith, insisting that works were necessary for full acceptance by God. The Nicolaitans denied the need for a holy, God-pleasing life, removing the distinction between the church and the world. Both were rebuked for their heresy.

That being said, it is interesting to note that neither Paul, nor the very harsh Jude, nor John, nor even Christ Himself demand that the *groups* be ejected from the church! They focus on individuals, because there is a relationship there. It is not possible to repair doctrinal issues without a relationship. That is why it is generally fruitless to argue theology on the internet. The relationship necessary for the winning of this brother or sister usually does not exist. Theology ought to be discussed face-to-face and heart-to-heart. That way if one of us is actually wrong, then we can bring the other to repentance.

It should also be noted, that theological discussions are often not about the “what”, but about the “how”. That was what Luther and Zwingli argued about: not *that* the Lord’s supper was important to the continuation of the church, but *how* the Lord’s supper worked! One other key example of the mixing of the “what” and the “how” comes from the Nestorian controversy in the early church. Nestorius was removed from the church for the supposed heresy of denying the hypostatic union; the fact that Christ’s divine and human natures were united in one individual existence. Nestorius never denied that Christ was fully God and fully man. Rather he questioned the way that the Church explained the relationship of how these natures functioned together and the excesses that arose from that, namely calling Mary the mother of Jesus, the God-bearer.<sup>6</sup> I honestly believe that if the church had followed the proper protocols of Matthew 18, that the whole issue would have been resolved in the other direction, namely the rebuking of the ones trying to give too much importance to Mary and the exoneration of the motives of Nestorius.

Therefore, brothers and sisters, when you discuss theology be very, very careful to do it in relationship and be certain that you are discussing the “what” not the “how”, for the “what” will be scripturally clear. The “how”, on the other hand, is usually shrouded in mystery and expressed in paradox, reminding us of our finite minds. Paul reminds Timothy to, “instruct certain people not to teach different doctrine or to pay attention to myths and endless genealogies. These promote empty speculations rather than God’s plan, which operates by faith. Now the goal of our instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith. Some have deviated from these and turned aside to fruitless discussion” (1Ti. 1:3-6). He tells Timothy to “Warn them before God against quarreling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen” (2Ti. 2:14). Paul writes to Titus to “Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him” (Tit. 3:10).

But in each of these instances a *relationship* is necessary for the warning and the sundering to work. The basis of division must be *relationship*. Thus, I would argue, the local church or the national church is where these divisions will work themselves out as they should, *with the goal of winning the errant brother or sister back* rather than showing myself to be the better theologian. There is too much distance between the individual and the global church to be able to fix it on that level.

## Dividing Over Difference of Opinion

Which then brings us to the very important point of what to do with honest differences of opinion. There is one instance in Scripture where such an issue is recorded and that is in the relationship of Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15:36-41.

After some time had passed, Paul said to Barnabas, “Let’s go back and visit the brothers in every town where we have preached the message of the Lord and see how they’re doing.” Barnabas wanted to take along John Mark. But Paul did not think it appropriate to take along this man who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone on with them to the work. There was such a sharp disagreement that they parted company, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed off to Cyprus.

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<sup>6</sup> *Hıristiyanlık Tarihi* (Istanbul: Yeni Yaşam Yayınları, 2004), pp. 181-184; “Nestorius”, *Wikipedia* < <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nestorius> > (accessed 2017-08-18) and “Hypostatic Union”, *Wikipedia* < [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hypostatic\\_union](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hypostatic_union) > (accessed 2017-08-18). It should be noted that Nestorius’ ejection from the church was primarily personal and political as he had made himself an implacable enemy in Cyril, the patriarch of Alexandria. See *Hıristiyanlık Tarihi*, p. 183.

Then Paul chose Silas and departed, after being commended to the grace of the Lord by the brothers. He traveled through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Now it is difficult to bring prescriptive truths out of a narrative passage, so I want to merely make a few brief observations. First of all, I believe both Paul and Barnabas were right. They were simply approaching the same point from opposite perspectives. Paul was an apostle<sup>7</sup>: for him the point was to represent Christ to the people. Barnabas, on the other hand, shows the traits of a pastor<sup>8</sup>: for him the person of Mark was important. Paul saw Mark as a hindrance to the ministry; Barnabas saw Mark as the ministry. God had given them differing perspectives and in the end, their splitting up actually resulted in a greater spread of the Gospel, to the point that Paul, at the end of his life, even asks for Timothy to bring Mark to help him, stating that Mark is now useful to him (2Ti. 4:11). If Barnabas and Paul hadn't split up, Mark may have been lost. As such, he became an effective force for the Gospel<sup>9</sup> and that is due to Barnabas.

What is a pity is that the disagreement was "sharp". We have no evidence that Paul and Barnabas ever reconciled, but God used them both effectively. He doubled the output through the division of these two men. Who knows what might have been otherwise?

## When to Divide?

Thus, we come to the critical question: when is it right to divide? The clear answer is this: *when there is sin involved*. That is the biblical point for division and it is meant to be a division of the individual sinning member from the body, so the sinning member will come to repentance.

Doctrinal division will occur if an individual adds to, alters, redefines or removes from the core tenets in regard to the Cross. Again, the division occurs among the individual and the Body, *if sin is involved!*

For both of these points a relationship is required. Without a relationship, division is impossible. And the point of the division is for the sinning sibling to come to repentance *so that the relationship can be restored*.

As to division over differences of opinion, we do not see any prescriptions in Scripture, rather simply a description of what happened. Divisions over opinion will happen. The one prescriptive observation that I could make is that the divisions should occur if they will further the spread of the Gospel, as they did with Paul and Barnabas. For that reason, an amicable church split to start a new church is a great thing! A church split over how election and predestination work, on the other hand, is not. A brother or sister moving elsewhere is a good reason for division, especially if it is for the spread of the Gospel. If it comes to division over the spread of the Gospel, let there not be a breaking of relationship over the differences of opinion. Let there be an honoring of the mutual bond we have in Christ, based upon the centrality of the Cross in the Gospel and let us honor God and the unity that He has decreed for the Body even in our divisions.

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<sup>7</sup> According to Eph. 4:11, an apostle should be defined as a representative of Christ to people. See J.M. Diener, "Unity and Division in the Church Part 1 - Unity", *WolfHawke.com* < <https://www.wolfhawke.com/musings/devotionals/church-unity-and-division-1-unity> > (accessed 2017-12-20).

<sup>8</sup> According to Eph 4:11, pastors are those who care for and lead the people. See *ibid*.

<sup>9</sup> "John Mark", *Wikipedia* < [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Mark](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Mark) > (accessed 2017-10-05).