

CHRIST THE DIVIDER

John 7:40-52

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When they heard these words, some of the people said, "This really is the Prophet." Others said, "This is the Christ." But some said, "Is the Christ to come from Galilee?" (Jn. 7:40-41).

At the edge of the Great Plains there is a mountain range that divides the United States. When Lewis and Clark sought to traverse the continent, this was the great obstacle that had to be overcome, dividing the East and West Coasts. The Rocky Mountains form the Continental Divide, so that all streams to their west flow to the Pacific Ocean and all to the east flow to the Atlantic.

What the Continental Divide is to the United States, Jesus Christ is to the human race. Like the Rocky Mountains jutting up to the sky, his very presence divides, and from him the two streams of humanity flow in opposite directions. Some people like to pretend otherwise, saying that Jesus is the model of religious tolerance. But he said: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Mt. 19:34). The fact is that Jesus was and is the great Divider of men.

Other people are divisive because of their sinful quality, but Jesus divides by his perfect holiness. Others divide by their harmful words, but Jesus divides by his message of gospel love. No greater example of this can be found than the response of the crowd to Jesus' gospel plea, perhaps the greatest invitation ever offered by human lips: "Whoever is thirsty," Jesus cried, "let him come to me and drink" (Jn. 7:37). Here is the gospel in concentrated form, and it brought division to previously light-hearted crowd at the Feast of Tabernacles. Jesus divided by focusing the people away from the mere festival of religion onto the true matter of all religion – salvation by grace

through faith in Christ alone. Immediately the mass of people began to seethe with division and dissent.

The same is true in churches and families today: as long as religion is made a matter of entertainment or self-help therapy, everyone gets along. As long as the name “Jesus” is left as a slogan for certain cultural preferences, then calm prevails. But when Christians begin to insist on the biblical message of truth and on the crucified Jesus as the only Savior for sinful mankind, strife always follows. Why is this? The answer is found deep in the hearts of men and women, who in their sinful state resent the truth about God and themselves, and who will embrace Jesus as a supplier of spiritual goods and services but not as the Messiah who calls us to repent and believe.

DIVISION WITHIN THE CROWD

First, Jesus’ preaching caused division within the crowd: “When they heard these words, some of the people said, ‘This really is the Prophet.’ Others said, ‘This is the Christ.’ But some said, ‘Is the Christ to come from Galilee? Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the offspring of David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?’ So there was a division among the people over him” (Jn. 7:40-44).

As always with Jesus, the streams of thought ran in opposite directions. There were those who were at least moving in the direction of faith in Jesus and those flowing to unbelief. John relates that “some of the people said, ‘This really is the Prophet’” (Jn. 7:40). It is possible that Jesus’ preaching about living water reminded them of Moses drawing water from the rock, so that Jesus might be the long-promised prophet who would be like Moses (Dt. 18:15). This was not a full-fledged profession of faith, but it was a step in the right direction; at least they were responding with reverence to him.

A similar opinion held that “This is the Christ” (Jn. 7:41). Here is the very profession of faith Jesus was seeking, although it seems to be offered here more as a conversation piece than as true belief. However sincere it may have been, this view was immediately shouted down by a torrent of opposition. “But some said, ‘Is the Christ to come from Galilee?’” (Jn. 7:41). These lifted their hands not

in praise but in anger, and “some of them wanted to arrest him” (Jn. 7:44).

If we sum up this scene, we may say that the crowd was divided by *ignorance*. They had wrong ideas about Jesus. Their ignorance was shaped by the conventional thinking of the day, in which the Messiah would be a military prince who came to vindicate their cause, just as the prevailing postmodern wisdom speaks so erroneously about spiritual matters today. Secondly, they used the Scriptures wrongly, appealing to the prophecies about the Messiah coming from David and Bethlehem in order to deny Jesus. We will often encounter this today; unbelief loves nothing better than to appeal to the Bible – partially read and wrongly understood – to justify its rejection of the Bible’s most important message: salvation through Jesus Christ.

Most important is a third feature of their ignorance: it was committed and culpable. Remember that these people were not reading Jesus’ sayings in a book; they were speaking in his presence, having just witnessed one of his most passionate sermons. “Come to me!” Jesus had cried. Yet that is the one thing they did not do. No one came to him to ask about the prophecies dealing with David and Bethlehem, in which case they might have learned how perfectly Jesus fulfilled them. You would think that members of a religion that had been waiting for its Messiah for over a thousand years – and who had just finished a festival celebrating his blessings – would take the time to investigate the claims of so likely a candidate as Jesus Christ. Why didn’t they? Because they were committed to their unbelief and comfortable with their ignorance.

Harry Ironside, who traveled the world preaching about Jesus, once remarked, “I have never met an infidel who has ever read one serious book of Christian evidence.”¹ There may be exceptions, but that is, in fact, the rule. Isn’t this why people consider it impolite to talk about Jesus at a social event? They complain that religion leads to heated controversy. But why then are we eager to discuss other controversies – national affairs or sports loyalties? The reason is that people are committed to their ignorance of Christ, whom they rightly perceive as a threat to their comfortable unbelief.

¹ Cited from R. Kent Hughes, *John: That You May Believe* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 1999), 225.

G. K. Chesterton's novel *The Ball and the Cross* humorously depicts this situation. A Christian and an atheist are hauled into court for disturbing the peace. When the Christian renewed their dispute in the courtroom, the judge interrupted: "You mustn't talk like that here... that has nothing to do with us." As the Christian replied, beginning with the word "God," the magistrate became angry: "Be quiet... it is most undesirable that things of that sort should be spoken about in public, and in an ordinary Court of Justice. Religion is too personal a matter to be mentioned in such a place." "Is it!" the Christian answered. "Then what did those policemen swear by just now?" "That is no parallel," replied the judge. "Of course there is a form of oath – to be taken reverently – reverently, and there's an end of it. But to talk at a public place about one's most sacred sentiments – well, I call it bad taste. I call it irreverent." The Christian and the atheist end up chasing all over England looking for a place to debate their beliefs, but everywhere it is forbidden as unimportant and impolite. In the end, they are committed to an insane asylum, where it becomes clear that it is their captors who are truly insane.²

Jesus always causes division and conflict. John tells us: "So there was a division among the people over him. Some of them wanted to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him" (Jn. 7:43-44). If this is what happened when Christ was on the earth, then we should not be surprised that an honest Christian witness incites division today. Jesus did not let this stop him, and we should not let it stop us.

DIVISION FROM THE SOLDIERS

This leads to a second division, that between the temple guards and the religious leaders. It begins with the frustration of the leaders over the failure of their plans to have Jesus arrested: "The officers then came to the chief priests and Pharisees, who said to them, 'Why did you not bring him?' The officers answered, 'No one ever spoke like this man!'" (Jn. 7:45-46). Donald Grey Barnhouse compares this situation with a judge who sends the police to make an arrest. How would he react if they came back empty-handed, saying, "Judge you've never heard anybody talk like that fellow. It's really

² Cited from Hughes, *John*, 223.

wonderful how he talks.” We can only imagine the fury of a judge in such an event.³ So it was in this case.

In his rich irony, John records the response of the Pharisees: “Have you also been deceived? Have any of the authorities or the Pharisees believed in him?” (Jn. 7:47-48). This was, of course, a snobbish appeal to superior authority. The irony is that this scene displays not their authority, but Jesus’ authority. Charles Spurgeon comments, “While the constables who had mingled with the throng were waiting for an opportunity of arresting the Lord Jesus, they themselves were arrested by his earnest eloquence; they could not take him, for he had fairly taken them.”⁴ The fearful authority exercised by the Pharisees over the temple officers paled before the palpable holiness manifested in the person of Jesus.

If there is one thing the Gospel accounts make clear, it is the power of Jesus’ words. When a leper came asking to be healed, Jesus merely spoke the words, “‘Be clean.’ And immediately the leprosy left him” (Lk. 5:13). When a paralyzed man was lowered through the roof before him, Jesus said, “Man, your sins are forgiven you” (Lk. 5:20). The Pharisees present did not like this, so Jesus added for their benefit: “Rise, pick up your bed and go home.” And he did (Lk. 5:23-25). Even more telling was when Jesus stood before the tomb of his dead friend Lazarus. There he displayed as never before the power and authority of his Word: “Lazarus, come out.” At his Word, “The man who had died came out” (Jn. 11:43-44).

It is small wonder that these guards were daunted by Jesus. Something similar would happen in a few months, when the guards would come for Jesus again, in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus asked, “Whom do you seek?” They answered, “Jesus of Nazareth.” When Jesus replied, using the great “I am” formula of his divinity, “they drew back and fell to the ground” (Jn. 18:4-6). Such is the majesty and authority of Christ! On that later occasion, Jesus intended to be arrested, so they went on to take him. But now, six months earlier, the time had not yet come, so, as John 7:44 tells us, “No one laid hands on him.” John Calvin comments, “Let us therefore learn

³ Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Illustrating the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1973), 111-112.

⁴ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* 63 vols. (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publ., 1970), 16, 517.

that Christ's doctrine has such power as even to terrify the wicked."⁵ If you have not experienced the awe of the person of Jesus Christ, then it is not the Jesus of the Bible whom you have met.

We may feel pity for these guards as they presented their failure to the Pharisees. What they received was unmitigated, frustrated scorn. In addition to flaunting their authority, the Pharisees added their contempt for the kind of rabble that could be influenced by Jesus: "This crowd that does not know the law is accursed" (Jn. 7:49).

This is the kind of elitist snobbery by which Christianity is often abused. People write off Christians as ignorant, impressionable, and unrefined. Assuming that the temple guards – men who ought to know better – had been influenced by Jesus' charisma in the same way that the crowd seemed to be, the leaders looked down on them with contempt. After all, were they not the religious experts? Were they not the masters of the law (actually, the 631 regulations by which they obscured the true law)? Were they not the refined, educated, and intellectually-qualified judges of religious matters? Jesus could not possibly be the Messiah, for the simple reason that they had not given him permission. Notice, too, their curse upon the simple-minded crowd: "This crowd that does not know the law is accursed" (Jn. 7:49). How greatly those words would rebound on their heads.

There is nothing wrong with refinement, education, and intellect. But when mixed with contemptuous pride they make a deadly poison. It never occurred to these leaders that the "rabble" might be right and they might be wrong. But how often this has been the case when it comes to Jesus! Cultural superiority is generally an obstacle to the humility required by faith. Paul admitted this, when he wrote to Christians: "Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God" (1 Cor. 1:26-29). For this reason, even while Christianity often produces refined and lovely arts and scholarship, there is never a high-brow air to the things of Jesus.

⁵ John Calvin, *New Testament Commentaries*, trans. T.H.L. Parker, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 4:202.

His rule is always: “Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted” (Lk. 18:14).

Along with the misuse of authority and snobbish elitism, what was the source of division between the temple guards and the religious leaders? It was a difference in *experience*. The worst part of the Pharisees’ pride was that it kept them and those who followed them from experiencing Jesus for themselves. Even on the occasions when they heard him personally, their hearts were cold and hard. The guards, in contrast, had experienced the power of his Word and they would never take him lightly again.

In a far greater way, this is why believers have been divided from the world. If you have been born again to faith in Christ, you have crossed a great divide and can never experience life as if you had not met Jesus. He calls you to be divided from the ways of the world and from the influence of unbelieving cultural elites, and to follow him as one whom God has “delivered from the domain of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col. 1:13-14).

DIVISION AMONG THE PHARISEES

Lastly, division entered the ranks of the Pharisees themselves. Little did these elites understand the length of Jesus’ arm, and they did not know that one of their own had met privately with Jesus. John tells us, “Nicodemus, who had gone to him before, and who was one of them, said to them, ‘Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?’” (Jn. 7:50-51).

How telling was this rebuke, because it struck a blow directly at the source of the Pharisees’ pride – in their educated pseudo-superiority. Apparently, a formal meeting of the Sanhedrin had been called, and even here there was division because of Jesus: one of their own exposing the corruption of their unbelief. Under the law, they had no right to condemn Jesus without a fair hearing. Nicodemus was not calling for faith, but merely asking the supposed guardians of the law to keep the law in Jesus’ case. Their unwillingness to do so exposes the sinful motive behind their unbelief; the same thing happens today when the supposed guardians of free speech and tolerance deny these

very things to anyone who wants to talk about Jesus. Far from repenting at the rebuke, the Pharisees struck at even one of their fellows with the sting of their scorn: “Are you from Galilee too? Search and see that no prophet arises from Galilee” (Jn. 7:52).

The Pharisees were at the center of Jerusalem’s unbelief, and as such, they embodied all the sources of this division over Jesus. They – the learned – were *ignorant*, as is so often the case. This is proved by their comment that no prophet ever comes from Galilee. In fact, several prophets came from there, including Jonah, Nahum, and possibly even Elijah. They also had no real *experience* of Jesus because of their pride, and therefore they were blind to his most evident divinity. Lastly, as Nicodemus exposed, they were divided from Jesus by the hardness of their *conscience*. Even if they had been able to see the truth about Jesus as the true Prophet and Christ, the bottom line is that their hardened state left them simply unwilling. How tragically these Pharisees symbolize the corruption into which Israel had fallen – indeed, the corruption into which sin has cast the entire human race!

In this entire account, Nicodemus stands alone as one whose conscience – not just his curiosity – was touched by Jesus. If he was still straddling the high ridge between faith and unbelief, we know that by the end he crosses over. When Jesus finally dies on the cross, Nicodemus is there to care for his body. It is Nicodemus’ hands that lovingly dress Jesus’ body with burial spices and wrap him in the cloth; and it is his arms that lay Jesus in the tomb from which he would burst forth three days later in resurrection life (Jn. 19:38-41).

Why was Nicodemus different? Because he had done what no one else in this entire account did. He had gone to Jesus, even if secretly and at night. He did the right thing with his ignorance: he came to Jesus to seek truth from his Word. Therefore, alone in that assembly, he had valid personal experience of Jesus. As a result, his conscience alone was warm and living.

This was the divide between Nicodemus and the others: a divide of conscience. Like everyone else, Nicodemus could tell there was something special about Jesus. But unlike the others, he humbled himself and came for an open-minded consideration of God’s Word. And out of his personal experience with the Jesus, Nicodemus found

life moving in his soul. His conscience was quickened in a way that made silence about Jesus less and less an option, despite the division it would cause.

In the end, Nicodemus made a full break with pride and unbelief, coming to Jesus in the shadow of the cross. Jesus had told him, so long before, “You must be born again” (Jn. 3:7). For how long did Nicodemus ponder those words, wondering at the presence of Jesus and the effect of his words on his heart. In that way, his conscience was renewed; seeking the truth, he found Jesus. Thirsty, he came to the living waters, and by faith he drank from the fountain of life.

GOD’S DIVIDING WORD

Nicodemus proves that Jesus is the divider of men, and also the divider of hearts. This is what the writer of Hebrews meant when he wrote: “The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb. 4:12).

There is no shame in honest ignorance, so long as you earnestly seek after truth. This is why God gave us the Bible. But how great is the tragedy awaiting those who turn from the truth, who never experience Jesus through the Word of God, and who ultimately find their consciences so hard that all they want is to rid themselves of Jesus and his disturbing presence. In this present life, here is the division – those who come to Jesus, finding faith and life, and those who want only to be rid of him, taking into their hearts the hammers that nailed Jesus to the cross. The time is not too late for you to come to Jesus, trust in him and cross this great divide.

But there will be another division on the day to come, and from it there will be no repentance or escape. Jesus said:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats... Then [he] will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world... Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared

for the devil and his angels'... And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life (Mt. 25:31-34, 41, 46).

Like the Continental Divide, which immovably separates the waters of the Pacific from the Atlantic Ocean, Jesus stands eternally as the Divider between the crystal sea of heaven and the sulfurous, flaming lake that is hell. On which side are you? The truth is that every life is flowing to one of these two eternal destinies, depending on their faith in Christ or their unbelief. Jesus calls you, as he called to others long ago: "Whoever is thirsty, let him come to me and drink" (Jn. 7:37). And though the people spoke much of the prophets, they did not hear them. For if the prophets could still have spoken, they would have urged them even as they call you now to cross over the great divide between unbelief and faith:

Seek the Lord while he may be found;
Call upon him while he is near;
Let the wicked forsake his way,
And the unrighteous man his thoughts;
Let him return to the Lord,
That he may have compassion on him,
And to our God,
For he will abundantly pardon (Isa. 55:6-7).