



"The greatest sin is to be conscious of none."
—Anonymous

14-Sep-07

Unity and Division (Part Two): Who Scattered the Church?

As seen previously, the Creator is a [God](#) of unity *and* division. While God's ultimate goal is for His children to be united together with Him in His Family, in the meantime, instances will occur when the Sovereign judges that division is the best tool for bringing His perfect will to pass. This is especially true when salvation is under threat. In a physical type, God separated Israel from Egypt to save them physically from being oppressed to the point of annihilation. In another example, He commanded them to practice quarantine—separation for a short time—to keep diseases like leprosy from sweeping through the populace. Likewise, our Savior requires those whom He calls to separate themselves from [the world](#), and to distinguish between the holy and the profane.

For the last decade, the question of who divided—scattered, splintered—the church has been debated. Would God—a God of unity—scatter His own church, the apple of His eye? Or was it the work of [Satan](#), that "roaring lion" who "[seeks] whom he may devour" ([1 Peter 5:8](#))? Curiously—and significantly—many in the church have arrived at a conclusion that simultaneously impugns God's sovereignty and exempts them from responsibility.

Consider first the history of Israel and Judah. God says explicitly that the division of the [northern ten tribes of Israel](#) from the southern two tribes was *His* doing. He claimed responsibility for it when He said, "Let every man return to his house, for this thing [the

division of His people] *is from Me*" ([1 Kings 12:24](#)). There is no word about Satan sneaking in and surprising God with division.

Who caused the wholesale scattering of Israel and Judah a few hundred years later? Did Satan scatter these nations while God sat on the sidelines, powerless to keep them together? Was the scattering of Israel something Satan proposed to God, to which He reluctantly agreed? Who is sovereign, God or Satan? Can Satan do *anything* without God's knowledge or against His will? These questions seem so elementary as to be silly, but we must answer them correctly to arrive at a right understanding of why the church is in the condition it is today.

Even as a man, [Jesus Christ](#) was able to overcome Satan and qualify to replace him. Satan had to ask to sift Peter, showing that it was not in his power to do so on his own ([Luke 22:31](#)). Was the glorified Head of the church then overpowered by this lesser being 2,000 years later? Clearly, Satan has no power that God does not give him. The opening of the book of Job powerfully illustrates this. Yet, did God merely *allow* the church to be scattered—perhaps using Satan in the process—or was He the instigator of this tumultuous division?

A clear and consistent pattern in the Word of God is that He scatters as a result of [sin](#) ([Leviticus 26:33](#)). Large portions of the Old Testament are dedicated to warning God's people to [repent](#) in order to escape God's judgment, which—as Israel and Judah discovered—involved being scattered. The heavy books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel are almost entirely dedicated to such alarms, and many of the "[minor prophets](#)," such as the [book of Amos](#), are likewise aimed at helping God's people to reconsider their ways. Sadly, Israel and Judah did not really believe that *God scatters*—God, not Satan—because of sin. They did not believe it—until it happened to them.

The church is subject to the same principles and to an even greater degree. "For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required" ([Luke 12:48](#)). If we violate our covenant with God—which includes much more than simply keeping the commandments—we should not be surprised if He (not Satan) acts to bring us back around. We cannot claim that we are "delivered to do . . . abominations" ([Jeremiah 7:10](#)), as the ancient Jews did, simply because we are in the church.

Moreover, identifying Satan as the source of the division is a subtle, perhaps even subconscious, way to shift the blame. [Isaiah 59:2](#) points out that "[*our*] iniquities have separated [*us*] from [*our*] God; and [*our*] sins have hidden His face from [*us*]." If the scattered peoples of Israel and Judah were to conclude somehow that they were [innocent victims](#) of Satan's attacks, their delusion and self-righteousness would be

CGG Weekly: Unity and Division (Part Two): Who Scattered the Church? (14-Sep-07)

laughable—if they were not so deadly serious. It is likewise dangerously inconsistent to say that *God* punished Israel, but any calamity that befalls the [Israel of God](#) is because of *the Devil*.

The fact is that God is sovereign and consistent. God responded to the spiritual condition of His church by creating division. This can be seen as both *reactive*, in the sense of God reacting to the church's loss of focus (on Him); as well as *proactive*, to discipline His children and further instill His character in us. Our salvation was under threat by our drifting, so God—not Satan—caused a division. Put another way, perhaps, God formalized and manifested the divisions that already existed.

Nevertheless, because it came from God, it was the best possible result for us. Now it is our turn to [seek God](#) to learn in what ways we—corporately and individually—have been separated from God, so we can turn back to Him.

- David C. Grabbe

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[Poor in Spirit](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

John Ritenbaugh suggests that being poor in spirit (a precursor to humility) is a necessary, foundational spiritual state one must have to qualify for God's Kingdom. As the polar opposite of pride, poor in spirit describes a condition of being acutely aware of one's dependency and unworthiness. Because of this deep inner felt need and want, those who are poor in spirit are primed to receive and apply the Gospel's instruction to their lives. Poor in spirit (not a product of human nature) does not equate with physical poverty (there is often much pride in indigence), but instead a spiritual state of felt need in which one renounces his smug self-sufficiency, recognizing his intense dependency upon God for all things.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[God's Sovereignty and the Church's Condition \(Part One\)](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

How involved in man's affairs is God? Is He merely reactive, or does He actively

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participate—even cause events and circumstances? John Ritenbaugh argues that God is the Prime Mover in our lives and in world events.

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