

Unity And Division: The Blessing And A Curse (Part Two)

by Charles Whitaker

Forerunner, "Ready Answer," September-December 2018

Part Two: Judgment, Division, and Reconfiguration

“And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful.” — Colossians 3:15

In Part One, we stressed the profound contrast between unity and division. God is the wellspring of unity and of the peace it brings, while Satan is the source of division and of the lack of harmony it unfailingly fosters. Unity and division make up a dichotomy, as much opposites as are good and evil.

We concluded on the note that there exists a distinctive sort of division, the sources of which are only secondarily Satan and human carnality. Rather, the prime mover of this sort of division is God Himself. It is the division—or the culling, if you will—that inexorably results from His judgment. Often as not, as part of God’s judging activity, He divides His (superficially) unified people into two groups, treating each group quite differently. In essence, the original group becomes two groups, separated by their level of commitment to God.

Gary Garrett, in his comments at the 2017 Feast of Tabernacles, finds two inexplicit though inarguable examples of this type of division among God’s people in Revelation 12 (where it is stated in highly symbolic terms) and in Galatians 6. He concludes his remarks: “Two groups of people are pointed out in Galatians 6:15-16. The first group is ‘as many as walk according to this rule,’ and the second group is in ‘the Israel of God.’”¹

It is true. Examples of God’s dividing His people into *two* groups abound in the Scriptures.^{2 3} In this article, we shall look at several other illustrations of God’s judgments that result in division, noting some crucial commonalities among them.

New Testament Examples

Christ’s comments recorded in Matthew 24 and 25 make a good starting point. The context of these first two examples is an ancient, though terrifying, day of judgment:

For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left. (Matthew 24:38-41)⁴

These two back-to-back examples, appearing near the conclusion of the Olivet Prophecy, squarely fit into the judgment-resulting-in-division model. In them, we see an unmistakable context of judgment on God’s part as well as a concomitant division into two groups, in this case, a fifty-fifty split.

Another example comes on the heels of the field hands and the women grinding. In this instance, Christ speaks of two individuals, both servants of God. God finds one to be wicked, the other wise:

Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. But if that wicked servant says to himself, “My master is delayed,” and begins to beat his fellow servants and eats and drinks with drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know and will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 24:45-51)

Again, note the fifty-fifty split in the context of judging. Christ judges the two servants, blessing the faithful one by setting him over His possessions, cursing the wicked one by cutting him in twain—the ultimate two-part division!⁵

The wicked servant finds himself “with the hypocrites” because, all the while, he has led a double life, pretending to serve God while actually laboring at cross-purposes to God by abusing God’s other servants. Like Satan, he has disguised himself as a minister of God (II Corinthians 11:12-15). As a result, he has scattered God’s people rather than gathered them (Luke 11:23). Unlike the wise servant, “who walk[ed] not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (Romans 8:4), the wicked servant walked according to his own desires (II Peter 3:3-4; Jude 16-19), all the while feigning faithfulness to God and His work. The wicked servant, like all hypocrites, has led a mock life, one of pretense.

Christ’s teachings segue nicely into Matthew 25, where the central theme is the reality of God’s judgment and how that reality should affect our thinking—and action. In the Parable of the Ten Virgins (Matthew 25:1-13), the ten virgins represent the entirety of God’s people as they go out to meet the bridegroom (verse 1). Their even-split is clear: “Five of them were foolish, and five were wise” (verse 2).

Their destinies were vastly different, though, as the wise were ready for the bridegroom, the foolish were not. Upon the latter “the door was shut” (verse 10). Here, the blessing and the curse is ever so poignantly expressed. We are left with the feeling that the five foolish ones were never true followers of Christ, having failed to renounce all (Luke 14:33). Christ tells them, “I do not know you” (verse 12).

Again, in the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30), Christ mentions two (not three) groups, distinguished by their members’ attitudes toward obedience. One group is comprised of those who fulfill their responsibilities by actively growing their talents, no matter how many (or few) God originally gave them. The other group contains those who refuse to grow their talents.

An Old Testament Example

Of the plethora of Old Testament examples of God’s judgment resulting in division, one stands out.⁶ It is the vision of the two baskets of figs, witnessed by the prophet Jeremiah. While we cannot be sure of a fifty-fifty split here,⁷ it is patently clear that God is apportioning His people—Judah—between two groups, judging both in diametrically opposite ways.

Near the end of Jeremiah 24:1, the prophet writes⁸: “. . . the Lord showed me this vision: behold, two baskets of figs placed before the temple of the Lord.” These two baskets represent two groups of people, both subsets of a larger group, the people of Judah. Continuing in verse 2: “One basket had very good figs, like first-ripe figs, but the other basket had very bad figs, so bad that they could not be eaten.” Verses 5-7⁹:

Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Like these good figs, so I will regard as good the exiles from Judah, whom I have sent away from this place to the land of the Chaldeans. I will set My eyes on them for good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up, and not tear them down; I will plant them, and not uproot them. I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord, and they shall be My people and I will be their God, for they shall return to Me with their whole heart.

God “regards” (that is, He judges) the “bad figs” entirely differently.

But thus says the Lord: Like the bad figs that are so bad they cannot be eaten, so will I treat Zedekiah the king of Judah, his officials, the remnant of Jerusalem who remain in this land, and those who dwell in the land of Egypt. I will make them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth, to be a reproach, a byword, a taunt, and a curse in all the places where I shall drive them. And I will send sword, famine, and pestilence upon them, until they shall be utterly destroyed from the land that I gave to them and their fathers. (Jeremiah 24:8-10)

Commentators Keil and Delitzsch observe that the words “sword, famine, and pestilence” refer to the curses cataloged in Deuteronomy 28.¹⁰

Considering these various examples in overview, we can identify a few commonalities. In them all, we recognize that God is judging, usually in an end-time context.¹¹ Evaluating a unified group (that is, workers in a field, grinders at a mill, virgins awaiting the bridegroom, servants of the same master, Judahites), He detects some type of essential disunion. The unity is superficial, more apparent than real in terms of the level of commitment and obedience He seeks. As a result of this evaluation, God divides the group into two parts—sometimes overtly a fifty-fifty split.

The destinies of individuals in these two new groups differ vastly.¹² One part is blessed, the other cursed. The Scriptures bear no salient indication of a period of church unity at the end. All this is consistent with Paul’s comments in I Corinthians 11:19 that “there must in fact be divisions among you, so that those of you who are approved may be evident.”¹³

These examples also illustrate another commonality: More often than not, God’s judgment involves an element of surprise, even bewilderment, catching us off-guard—sometimes tragically so. The line of division He creates may be unfamiliar to us, unexpected. His judgment is not what we might expect, or the lines of division are unfamiliar to us. The wicked servant was not looking for the return of the master. The foolish virgins did not expect to run low of oil. The blessed were those deported from Jerusalem as slaves, not those who remained there.

That is all to say that God’s judgment is usually athwart ours. His act of division is, in fact, one of *reconfiguration* along lines that can be quite different to what we are accustomed.

Next month, we shall focus on one of the Old Testament's best examples of this culling activity, and one that has real significance to the church of God.

Endnotes

¹ Garrett, Gary (October 9, 2017). "Who Is the Israel of God?" See the "Related" sidebar.

² As an aside, the division is polar, God separating or culling His people into two highly distinct groups. As a consequence of His judgment, He in essence bifurcates His people. This work of judgment parallels His creative work, which also centers around the building of various dichotomies: The pairings of good-evil, heaven-earth, light-dark, day-night, land-sea, male-female, and Jew-Gentile. Other important dichotomies appearing in God's under-the-sun creation include life-death, presence-absence, appearance-reality, subject-object, and hidden-revealed.

³ Some Old and New Testament examples are highly inexplicit. One of the subtler New Testament examples of the judgment-resulting-in-division model appears in I Corinthians 3:12-15:

Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

Three of the six substances the apostle Paul mentions in verse 12 are valuable: gold, silver, and precious stones. Three are lacking in value: wood, hay, and straw. Note the fifty-fifty split in this context of judgment.

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all scriptural quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* ®, ESV® Text Edition: 2016. Copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

⁵ In verse 51, the Greek verb translated "cut in pieces" ("cut asunder" in the King James Version [KJV]) is *dichotomeô* (*Strong's Greek Concordance* #1371), appearing four times in two verses in the New Testament: twice in Matthew 24:51 (first use) and twice at its parallel passage, Luke 12:46. It literally means "to cut into two pieces." English derives its noun "dichotomy" from this word.

⁶ Some other Old Testament examples of binary divisions (often) related to God's judgment include the following:

1. Jacob's separating his family into "two companies" when he met Esau upon his return to the Promised land (see Genesis 32 and 33). Historically, this may be the first instance of such division. In it, however, is no explicit statement of a fifty-fifty split, nor is God's judgment clearly in view.

2. The division of Jerusalem into two halves by a powerful earthquake. The setting is clearly a day of judgment:

Behold, a day is coming for the Lord, when the spoil taken from you will be divided in your midst. For I will gather all the nations against Jerusalem to battle, and the city shall be taken and the houses plundered and the women raped. Half of the city shall go out into exile, but the rest of the people shall not be cut off from the city. Then the Lord will go out and fight against those nations as when he fights on a day of battle. (Zechariah 14:1-3)

3. A relatively unknown parenthesis in the narrative of Elijah's battle with Ahab and his cadre of false priests:

Obadiah was a devoted follower of the Lord. Once when Jezebel had tried to kill all the Lord's prophets, Obadiah had hidden 100 of them in two caves. He put fifty prophets in each cave and supplied them with food and water. (I Kings 18:3-4; *Holy Bible, New Living Translation*, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.)

This narrative ends the story as far as the biblical account goes. Here, the ratio is 50-50, though the concept of judgment is not at all explicit.

4. The classic and well-known division of Israel, namely, the God-initiated division of the United Kingdom (II Chronicles 11:1-4) into two parts under Rehoboam and Jeroboam (I Kings 12) and their successors, is not the best example. There is in this case no indication of a 50-50 split, either in terms of tribes or population, though the notion of judgment runs strong in the narrative.

⁷ The Hebrew word underlying "basket" is the same, whether referencing the good or bad figs. It is the feminine noun *te'en* (Strong's #8384). The word appears 39 times in the Old Testament, where the KJV translators render it "fig tree" (23x) and "fig" (16x). Its first use is in Genesis 3:7, where Adam and Eve sew fig leaves together for clothing.

⁸ See also Jeremiah 29:15-23.

⁹ Notice the reference to "first ripe" in Jeremiah 24:2. While at one level this prophecy is relevant nationally and historically, we are unable to miss the New Covenant language evident throughout this prophecy.

¹⁰ Keil, C. F., & Delitzsch, F. (1996). *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Vol. 1. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson.

¹¹ The Parable of the Wheat and the Tares may be relevant here (see Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43). While God is aware of the presence of the tares, sown by Satan, He does not judge them by separating them from the wheat and destroying them by fire until the end of the age, at the time of harvest.

¹² A variation on this theme may appear in the narrative regarding God's choosing of Matthias over Joseph as an apostle replacing Judas (see Acts 1:15-26).

¹³ *NET Bible*® copyright ©1996-2006 by Biblical Studies Press, L.L.C. <http://netbible.com>. All rights reserved.