

# How to Heal Rather Than Deepen Divisions



JAMES DURHAM (1622-1658)

# How to Heal Rather than Deepen Divisions

## Contents

Introduction by Matthew Vogan.....	3
1. Recognize the dreadful plague of division.....	5
2. Recognize division as a fearful snare.....	7
3. Recognize our personal responsibility. ....	8
4. Recognize failures in repentance before God.....	9
5. Do what you can to recommend unity. ....	10
6. Make unity the priority.....	10
7. Act with sensitivity and respect. ....	11
8. Stir each other up in the things that matter.....	14
9. Appeal to God. ....	15

© Copyright 2021 Matthew Vogan. This is an updated and abridged section from James Durham's *Concerning Scandal*. Original in the public domain.

Printed in the USA. All Scripture quotations are from the King James Version. Chapel Library does not necessarily agree with all the doctrinal positions of the authors it publishes.

Chapel Library sends Christ-centered materials from prior centuries worldwide without charge, relying entirely upon God's faithfulness. We therefore do not solicit donations, but we gratefully receive support from those who freely desire to give.

**Worldwide**, please download material without charge from our website, or contact the international distributor as listed there for your country.

In **North America**, for additional copies of this booklet or other Christ-centered materials from prior centuries, please contact

**CHAPEL LIBRARY**  
**2603 West Wright Street**  
**Pensacola, Florida 32505 USA**

*Phone: (850) 438-6666 • Fax: (850) 438-0227*  
*chapel@mountzion.org • www.ChapelLibrary.org*

Please see also *Remedies for Division among God's People* by Thomas Brooks (1608-1680), available from Chapel Library.

The *Free Grace Broadcaster* is a quarterly digest of six to ten articles from prior centuries, developing one theme, with a different theme each issue. Request a subscription

– worldwide, free eBook sent via email:

*www.chapellibrary.org/subscriptions/*

– in North America, free printed copy sent via mail:

write Chapel Library

– in a country with an international distributor, printed copy sent via mail: write to them directly

*www.ChapelLibrary.org/about/distributors/*

# How to Heal Rather than Deepen Divisions

## Introduction

*by Matthew Vogan*

We live in a time of deepening and widening divisions, and the church of Jesus Christ is not exempt. Churches are vulnerable to fractures from doctrinal and practical disagreements, misunderstandings, and sin. Christians' deeply held concerns become the occasion for many potential and actual divisions. Especially when the world at large is experiencing major disruption, anxieties, distance, fatigue, and uncertainty easily facilitate misunderstanding and mistrust among the brethren. Beyond this, highly polarized and political differences can separate people once united on almost every other issue. Many pressing issues currently impact church life, and they often prove divisive. What can you and I do, not only to avoid deepening divisions, but also to start to heal them?

Probably no one has written more on this subject than James Durham—certainly there has never been anything wiser and weightier. He takes the issue as seriously as possible, and is very realistic

about the difficulties involved. Yet he brings biblical counsel to bear on a truly difficult area. He points out that divisions are not easily healed, even among the best (Pro 18:19). It is easy to deepen divisions by the way we contend for what we believe to be right and by putting labels on those with whom we disagree. What language do we use about those with whom we disagree? Is it dismissive disrespect that harms their reputation? Or do we still seek to have others think respectfully about them? Here are some things that deepen divisions, according to Durham:

- *Heat and contention.* Division engenders heatedness, strife, and contention, and, in this way, makes people carnal (1Co 3:3).
- *Alienation.* Division breeds alienation in affection and separates the fellowship even of those who have been most intimate.
- *Jealousy and suspicion.* Division breeds jealousy and suspicion about one another's actions and intentions.
- *Harsh language.* Division leads to harsh expressions and reflections on each other.
- *Personal attacks.* Divisions can reach the point where people do not spare to publish even personal attacks on each other.
- *Abuse of church discipline.* Division has sometimes been followed with discipline as extreme as deposition<sup>1</sup> and excommunication.

---

1 **deposition** – removal of a church leader from office.

Durham's book, *A Treatise Concerning Scandal*, maintains that division is a great evil—indeed that no greater evil can befall a church. At one point, Durham seeks to tackle the following perplexing question: What should an orthodox church do when it is divided in itself in what we may call some circumstantial truths or in contrary practices and actions, when still agreeing in the fundamentals of doctrine, worship, discipline, and government, and having mutual esteem for one another's integrity? What are they called to do for healing that division? Durham gives his answer in the following abridged and updated extract. Healing division according to Durham is not about ignoring problems and hoping they will go away by refusing to discuss the differences. Neither is it about one side having to concede to the other. It requires mutual concessions and genuine reconciliation. The following are the considerations we need to address before we start to implement the principles or practical solutions and methods that will heal division.

## **1. Recognize the dreadful *plague* of division.**

All, especially ministers, should have a deep impression of how terrible the plague of division is. If we thought of God as angry at a church and at ministers

in a time of division, it is likely that people would be in a better condition to speak concerning healing.<sup>2</sup>

Some time should be bestowed on this, therefore, to let this consideration sink down in the soul, so that the Lord's hand in it is recognized. The many sad consequences of division should be brought before the mind, and the heart should be seriously affected and humbled with this—just as if sword, pestilence, or fire were threatened. Indeed, it is as if the Lord were spitting in ministers' faces, rubbing shame on them, and threatening to:

- make them despicable,
- blast the ordinances in their hands,
- bring to nothing their authority among the people,
- remove the hedges of the visible church to let in boars and wolves to spoil the vines and destroy the flock,
- and, in a word, to remove His candlestick.

Ministers, or other persons who are involved in the division, do not only have to look to human opponents who are angry with them. They also have to look to the Lord as their opponent, for it is the Lord's anger that has divided them. Failing to register this makes people more foolishly confident under the judgment. Rather, seeing it is a plague, even those who suppose themselves innocent as to the immediate origin of the division ought to humble

---

<sup>2</sup> When the plague of division strikes a church, we must recognize that God is the one striking the church, and it could be due to His displeasure with the sin of the church and its ministers.

themselves under the mighty hand of God on account of this plague, just as they would with other plagues.

## **2. Recognize division as a fearful *snare*.**

People should also view division as a snare. How many temptations accompany divisions—especially for ministers! How many afflictions, crosses, and reproaches come on the back of them. Might it not make a minister tremble to think that now, due to the division, there is a snare and trial in everything (besides all his former difficulties and troubles).

In every sermon that he preaches, the temptation is that his own affection will steal in to make him hotter and more vehement against those who oppose him in the current controversy than he ordinarily is in things which more directly concern the glory of God. The snare is that he will make his ministry despicable before others if someone might provoke him by contradicting him. Even supposing no one would contradict him, he is in danger of laying less weight on what is edifying, because it is spoken by someone who differs from him on the controversial points.

When he sits in any meeting of a church court, there is a temptation waiting in the least hint of the controversy, to discompose everything and make the meetings burdensome and stumbling-blocks to edification.

Because of division, almost all conversation becomes disheartening and comfortless. The most



intimate brother is either suspicious or suspected. All constructions put on people's sincerity in anything comes to be based on their interests. There is a failing of sympathy among brethren.

May not these considerations, and many such like, make ministers circumspect,<sup>3</sup> so that they would be slow to speak what may foment division, and wary in approaching these snares. Alas, in times of division, many people act with more confidence and liberty, and with less sensitivity, in speaking, acting, and attributing motives, than at other times. Yet if people were impressed with the fear of sinning due to divisions, they would be much more disposed to speak of union.

### 3. Recognize personal responsibility.

Ministers and others should take time in secret before the Lord to take a sober view of their own spiritual condition and see if they have kept their own vineyard. They should examine things such as these:

(a) How have I prized union with the Lord? Have I striven to be in Christ, and to abide in Him? Have I striven to keep myself in the love of God?

(b) Is there any ground of quarrel in current trends or bygone practice, that might provoke the Lord to smite us in general?

(c) Have I been an accessory<sup>4</sup> in any way to bring in this evil of division, for example by negligence and unfaithfulness, imprudence, heat, passion,

---

<sup>3</sup> **circumspect** – cautious; watchful on all sides.

<sup>4</sup> **accessory** – accomplice in wrongdoing.

tenaciousness, addictedness to personalities and too much reluctance to displease them, prejudice against others, uncharitableness to others, or the like?

This should include a view of both the sins that procure division and the evils which create a breeding ground for it and increase it. It also requires impartiality and thoroughness. For it is preposterous<sup>5</sup> for someone to begin removing differences when they do not know how it stands with themselves.

#### **4. Recognize failures in repentance before God.**

Once they have taken stock, there should be repentance appropriate to what is found, in special humbling and secret prayer to God. This should be not only for themselves and for their own condition but for the whole church. In particular, for healing the division so that by healing the breach God would spare His people and not allow His inheritance to be a reproach. It is no little furtherance to union to have people in a spiritual and mortified condition. For we are sure that even if it does not remove the difference, it will moderate the division to a great degree and restrain the carnality that usually accompanies it. It will also dispose people to be more impartial to hear what may lead further towards unity.

---

<sup>5</sup> **preposterous** – absurd.

## 5. Do what you can to recommend unity.

People should not stop here, but should seriously endeavor by speaking, writing, and imploring, to commend union to those who differ. Indeed, even those who differ should commend union to those who differ from them! We see the apostles do this frequently in the New Testament, not only in general to churches, but also to persons who are particularly entreated by name (Phi 4:2).

People should encourage others with whom they agree, to be conciliatory, and should seriously entreat them. When they go to extremes, they should rebuke them for the good of the church. This is often very effective. Often also, those who are most prominent in a difference will be hotter and carry things further than others of the same opinions will allow. Those who are less involved in the controversy ought not to be silent in this case.

## 6. Make unity the priority.

Serious and single-minded thoughts of union should be proposed, and union should be purposely driven at as the great duty, so that endeavors would not principally tend to strengthen one side, or to let anyone exonerate<sup>6</sup> themselves, or get advantage over others, but to make one out of them both. Therefore, when one means or opportunity fails, another should be

---

<sup>6</sup> **exonerate** – absolve; relieve of responsibility.

attempted. Neither should they be weary in this, although it often proves a most wearisome business.

## **7. Act with sensitivity and respect.**

All this should be attempted with sensitivity and respect to people's persons, actions, and qualifications. For often when division occurs, people are alienated from each other in their affections, which then disposes them to put bad constructions both on their opinions and their actions. Indeed, this is often the sticking point, that people's affections are not satisfied with one another, and that prevents them from trusting each other.

We see in Scripture that commending love, as well as honoring and preferring others above ourselves, is ordinarily subjoined to the exhortations to union, or reproofs for division (Phi 2:1-8; Eph 4:1-3; Mat 18). This giving of respect should be manifested in ways like this.

(a) *Being respectful when mentioning them and their concerns*, whether in word or writing, especially those who are most eminent among them.

(b) *Putting good constructions on their aims, intentions, and sincerity*, even in such actions as are displeasing.

(c) *Refraining from loading their opinions and actions with plain absurdities and high aggravations*, especially in public. That only tends to make them odious, and it stands in the way of a future good understanding, when one has represented another as so absurd and hateful a person.

(d) *Abstaining from all personal derogatory remarks*, as well as slighting answers, disdainful words and greetings, and such like. Instead, there should be love, familiarity, and tenderness. If there has been any reflection or bitterness which has occasioned misunderstanding, and even if it has been unjustly understood, there should be willingness to back down to remove it. I have heard of a worthy person who had been led away in an hour of temptation. Many of his former friends disapproved of him, which only led him to defend what he had done and resent them for losing respect for him. It almost ended up in a division. But then he encountered one who, although he was most opposed to his present way, nevertheless, as lovingly and familiarly as ever, embraced him, and did not mention anything about it. It is said that his heart melted instantly in conviction over his former opposition. In this way any further drift toward a division was prevented, when he saw that he still had a place in the affections of the most eminent of those he differed from.

(e) *Expressions of mutual confidence in one another*. Mutual confidence should be expressed, not only regarding the persons, but also the ministry, of those they differ from, endeavoring to strengthen and confirm it.

(f) *Supportiveness towards them and confidence that they are trustworthy and fit to hold leadership positions in the church*. This is a way of not only engaging with a particular person, but all who have the different opinion or practice, and it demonstrates confidence in them notwithstanding the difference.

But the contrary is disobliging<sup>7</sup> and irritating to all, because it proposes that all who follow that opinion or practice are unworthy of office-bearing or trust, which is hard for anyone to stomach. And in a way, it forces them in their state of division to endeavor some other way of holding office, and to increase their reservations about those who manage matters with so much favoritism (in their esteem at least). It occasions those who disagree to believe that their opponents prefer the strengthening of a side over the edification of the church. Of course, any opposing party cannot but see it this way, since they believe their own integrity in the main work.

(g) *Mutual visits and fellowship*, both in everyday things and specifically Christian fellowship. If this has been happening already, it should be increased even more. For if people have some confidence that others love their persons, respect them as ministers, and have a high esteem of them as Christians, they will be easily induced to trust the others in these ways also.

(h) *Treating pejorative terms as unacceptable*. If anyone uses bitter terms or casts aspersions in debates (as even good men are too ready to give themselves liberty in debate to exceed<sup>8</sup> in this), they should be careful to avoid them in such fellowship visits and meetings.

---

<sup>7</sup> **disobliging** – offensive; injurious.

<sup>8</sup> **exceed** – go too far.

## **8. Stir each other up in the things that matter.**

In their own practice, in their teaching, and in other ways, ministers should stir up others to the practice and life of religion. We constantly find the Apostle Paul, coupled with his exhortations to union, urging them to work out their salvation with fear and trembling. And in the Epistles to Timothy and Titus, when he exhorts ministers to stay away from foolish and jangling questions, strifes, and contentions, the remedy is stated either previously or subsequently, that they should press the believers to be zealous of good works, and careful to maintain them (Ti 3:8-9); and that they would follow after love, righteousness, faith, and peace “with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart” (2Ti 2:22-23).

This is very effective in dealing with disunity, because when either ministers or church members are exercised and taken up with these things, there is little opportunity for other things! Then also they discern the necessity of union the more, and are the more disposed for it themselves, and others are the more easily induced to unite with them. Besides, it is never in the practice and life of religion that the godly and orthodox differ, but differences arise when they are diverted away from these. That is why much heat in particular differences so often carries with it a decay and lukewarmness in more practical things, while on the contrary, zeal in these essential things

ordinarily allays<sup>9</sup> and mitigates heat and fervor in the other.

## 9. Appeal to God.

There should be solemn appeals to God for directing and guiding in the way to this end. For He is the God of peace and ought to be acknowledged in removing the great evil of division. Hence the apostle subjoins<sup>10</sup> prayers for peace to his exhortations to peace (Rom 15:1-7). Indeed, we are commanded to “pray for the peace of Jerusalem” (church peace; Psa 122:6) no less than civil peace.

It may be that the neglect of these appeals to God is the reason why those who love the welfare of Zion and are sound, godly, and peaceable continue to be divided and cannot find any means of healing the division. Perhaps (a) this inability to find healing will demonstrate to us the necessity of the Lord’s intervening, (b) so that we would purposely appeal to the Lord for this peace, and also (c) so that we would not underestimate the seriousness of division, whether by:

- failing to recognize it as a rod (seeing it is God with Whom they have to do);
- being content to live with it without seeking to have it removed by Him, just as we would plead with Him for the removal of any temporal plague; or

---

<sup>9</sup> **allays** – subdues; abates.

<sup>10</sup> **subjoins** – adds.



- fruitlessly expecting a blessing on the gospel in the absence of peace.

