

WHY CHURCH SPLITS?

(A Look at How Church Splits Happen)

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Church splits come in all shapes and sizes. There are splits between leaders and laity, between elder and elder, or between member and member. The list could go on. As if that wasn't enough, the underlying causes leading up to a Church split appear to be endless. All too frequently, there are splits over doctrine, splits over practice, splits over organisations and splits over that most divisive of institutions – the local Church choir or music group!

Furthermore, it's possible to see that, although the causes of Church splits may vary widely, their consequences do not. Burnt-out pastors, frustrated elders and disillusioned members are seen all too frequently. The cost of a Church split is often horrendous in terms of the human suffering it inflicts. Sometimes a complete mental and physical breakdown can result. On a wider scale, things are not much better; for the whole Gospel is brought into disrepute as people exclaim, "*see how these Christians hate one another.*"

It is just such consequences as these, which make an easily understandable analysis of Church splits to be all the more necessary. Surrounding this issue is a marked sense of urgency, for in these days of religious turmoil, Church splits are more likely than ever before to take place.

What exactly constitutes a Church split? To answer this question we need first of all say what is NOT. It is not the kind of division, which takes place when a large group agrees to divide into two or more subgroups for administrative reasons. Indeed, such a '*benign*' split may well be a sign of growth and spiritual blessing. By using this type of division whole Churches are planted and new works established. Neither does a Church split refer to a situation where external circumstances (i.e. unemployment) force people to leave a church. Sadly, such events form part of daily living and have little to say about the internal life of a particular group of God's people. Rather, a Church split is that division which divides a given group of Christians into two or more contentious factions who deliberately take either open or covert hostile action towards one another. Found here is a "*Corinthian-type*" party split which seeks to generate personal feuds and rivalries. What also becomes quickly apparent are '*the works of the flesh*' as listed in Galatians 5:19-21.

At this juncture, it needs to be made clear that the term '*Church split*' does not only refer to division within local churches other types of Christian group, including house fellowships, relief agencies, missionary societies, theological seminaries or youth clubs are also covered by this analysis.

Any hostile action taken by the feuding parties concerned could range from the secretly covert to the blatantly overt. Examples of covert hostility could include such things as backbiting gossip, a withdrawal of resources, and the censoring of articles within the groups "*in-house*" magazine. Examples of overt hostility could include violent public argument and threats of legal action. At the very worst, physical violence may ensue. However, the usual pattern is that such blatant conflict only occurs when there has been a prolonged period of tension and covert hostility. Major Church splits rarely happen without a lengthy run-up period.

Having carefully explained what is meant by a Church split, it is now necessary to answer the question "*Why Church splits?*" Perhaps the easiest way to answer this and avoid a great mass of detail is to view a Church split as resulting from A PROGRESSIVE BREAKDOWN IN COMMUNICATION. Usually, any serious split occurs only after a fairly long process, which can be divided into a number of stages, all of which gradually merge into one another. These stages are shown in the following page.

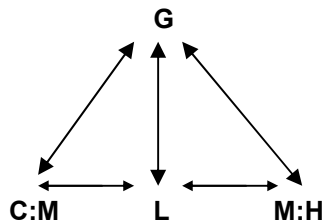
Pre-Stage

This is characterised by: -

1) A strong healthy two-way spiritual (or vertical) communication (\updownarrow) between the Church (**C**) and God (**G**).

2) A strong healthy two-way social (or horizontal) communication (\leftrightarrow) between leaders (**L**) and members (**M**).

3) All the signs of good organisational and spiritual health (**H**). In diagrammatic form this situation is outlined below: -



Stage One: Vertical Breakdown

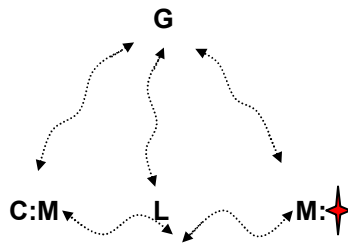
This stage is characterised by: -

1.1 A weakening in spiritual communication between the Church and God.

1.2 A still healthy two-way social communication between leaders and members.

1.3 An atmosphere of apathetic complacency and exclusive insularity (**A**).

Again in diagrammatic form this situation is outlined below: -



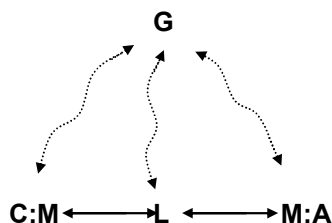
Stage Two: Horizontal Breakdown

This stage is characterised by: -

2.1 A continued weakening in vertical communication between the Church and God.

2.2 A weakening of horizontal communication within the Church itself.

2.3 Growing tension and friction, causing problems to become more noticeable. Covert hostility may begin



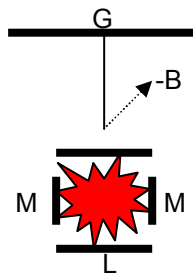
Stage Three: Total Breakdown

This stage is characterised by: -

3.1 A withdrawal of divine blessing as God gives a group over to its own devices, **(-B)**.

3.2 A 'Church split' as open division leads to hostile conflict between various factions within the Church. Barriers are erected between people and God.

3.3 Strong feelings of anger, bitterness and resentment as the people begin to leave the group. Present are varying degrees of open hostility.



When assessing the three stages leading to a definite Church split, local variations must be taken into account. With some groups stages one and two will occur almost simultaneously, while with others they follow one neatly after the other. Also the time-scale can vary widely. In some group with a naturally higher turnover rate of people (e.g. college Christian Unions) the process can happen within weeks, while in others (e.g. local churches) it can take years. This has been particularly the case within historical denominations where loyalty to past tradition and greater organisational safeguards, have unwittingly allowed certain groupings to linger on at stages one and two for decades or even centuries! Yet when total breakdown does eventually take place, it can be all the worse for having been pent-up for so long. The reformation was perhaps a case in point.

Moreover, it should be pointed out that such a progression in stages is not always inevitable. As will be seen in a later article practical means do exist which can halt or delay the downward spiral. In fact, the last thing this present article should be encouraging is a fatalistic attitude which assumes that all Church splits are inevitable!

Yet, what has been gained from this model is the realisation that CHURCH SPLITS CAN BE VIEWED VERY MUCH IN TERMS OF A PROGRESSIVE BREAKDOWN IN COMMUNICATION. To reduce the risk of division happening it is therefore necessary to find ways of preserving both effective vertical and horizontal communication within a group. Implied is the need for all involved participants to develop in both the spiritual and social areas of their lives. Indeed, it is assumed that growth within one area is likely to help growth within the other. Absent is any rigid spiritual social division!

So when it comes to preventing Church splits good communication is the key. This is a fact that both Church leaders and members alike would be wise to take account of. When while trying to resolve any breakdown in spiritual or social communication one question remains "What constitutes the underlying factors leading to such a breakdown in the first place?"

Summary

- 1)** There are many types of Church splits – all of them resulting in a high degree of cost in human terms i.e. anger, bitterness, depression and various health problems.

- 2)** A '*Church split*' can be defined as that division which divides a given group of Christians into two or more contending factions, who are then able to engage in hostile action toward one another.
 - 3)** Church splits can be viewed as a progressive breakdown in communication, often consisting of certain stages.
 - 3.1** Firstly, a vertical breakdown in communication between a given group and God.
 - 3.2** Secondly, a horizontal breakdown in communication amongst the members and leaders of a given group.
 - 3.3** Thirdly, open division and conflict.

- 4)** Variations in the above scheme must be allowed for, in that: -
 - 4.1** The time-scale in each of the stages in 3.1-3.3 could vary from weeks through to centuries!
 - 4.2** A progression from one stage to another may NOT be inevitable

- 5)** Preventing Church splits involves maintaining effective vertical and horizontal communication.