

This book is long overdue. I wholeheartedly recommend it—as an encouragement to recovering sectarians and an exhortation to those who will likely disagree. Anderson exposes his heart as he chronicles his journey from rigid separatism to a more balanced interpretation and application of biblical separation. Happily, there are many—myself included—that have taken the same journey. I have never considered myself to be a radical sectarian, but in the providence of God, I was born, raised, educated, and involved in ministering within extreme fundamentalist environments. Ironically and thankfully, it was in those places that I became thoroughly convinced of Calvinism and covenant/reformed theology. Consequently, I was suspect to some in fundamentalism and a token novelty to others. I serve now in a wider, yet conservative, evangelical environment without a guilty conscience and still believe in biblical separation. This book is not about my journey, but I so resonated with its message. In reading this book, you may find yourself either agreeing with Anderson or perhaps beginning a similar journey for yourself.

Michael Barrett, Senior Research Professor, Biblical Studies, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan

This book is outstanding! Chris has written a deeply thoughtful and spiritually helpful work to help us regain the apostles' passion for biblical unity for our churches and for our times. The purity of the gospel at times demands the difficult and painful work of Spirit-directed, Bible-shaped, and truth-centered separation. But that necessary work is easily diverted from the boundaries that govern it in the New Testament. Chris speaks to this clearly, charitably, honestly, transparently, and personally. While not everyone will agree with everything in this book, everyone needs to read this book. Growing in grace demands at times the uncomfortable discipline of letting others speak carefully and transparently in urging us to think deeply from the Scriptures about a topic like this one. Chris has done so in ways that are both engaging and deeply profitable for his readers.

Sam Horn, Lead Pastor, Palmetto Baptist Church in Powdersville, South Carolina

Chris Anderson provides us with a book on schism that he was best suited to write. As he points out, he has made mistakes that he has had to repent of, and he now wants to spare us similar woes. This is a practical, balanced, and Scripture-saturated book, which speaks to all of us because of our innate tendency towards schism. May God help us to read it with humility so that we may contribute to a wholesome unity among his people.

Conrad Mbewe, Pastor, Kabwata Baptist Church, and Founding Chancellor, African Christian University in Lusaka, Zambia

Chris Anderson offers a helpful overview and critique of modern fundamentalist separatism that is engaging, readable, and thoroughly biblical. This book is written with grace and clarity—easily accessible to the layman, and thought-provoking and instructive to the gospel minister. It is a winsome call for discernment in uniting around core gospel truths while graciously agreeing to disagree on peripheral issues out of love for Christ, the church, and the advance of God’s mission to the ends of the earth.

Phil Hunt, Pastor, Kitwe Church, and President, Central Africa Baptist University in Kitwe, Zambia

This book by Chris Anderson explores the cause and effect of the many sad divisions that have ravaged the church in recent years. In so doing, he allows readers to ponder how this broader conflict is affecting their own spirit within the local ministry context. In a time when American evangelicalism is splintering in unprecedented ways, Chris issues a passionate call that stems from his own fundamentalist background: American Christians should realize that current strife largely stems from a failure to prioritize the gospel. This book is a must-read for professional clergy and laypersons alike who want to understand the grave consequences of schism and renew a gospel-inspired commitment to live in the unity of Christ.

Andrew Bunnell, President, Biblical Ministries Worldwide

Through an honest accounting of his own journey, Chris Anderson holds up a mirror for all of us as we pursue both the integrity and the unity of the gospel. Read this book with a Berean’s eye toward what the Scriptures say is so.

Tim Keese, Founder, Frontline Missions International

Few things are clearer in Jesus’ instructions to the New Testament church than the idea that God wants His followers to be tightly unified around the mission of the gospel. I am thankful that my friend Chris Anderson has written against the destructive spirit of schism and sectarianism that has long divided devoted biblicists and orthodox believers. This book will challenge you with biblical perspective and godly discernment. More importantly, it will set you free and draw you back into fellowship and mission with loving friendships and influences you didn’t know you were missing!

Cary Schmidt, Pastor, Emmanuel Baptist Church in Newington, Connecticut

I love my fundamentalist heritage. I believe the Bible has specific teaching—often ignored—about when and how to separate from other professing Christians. And yet I also believe that fundamentalism at its historical heart was a movement toward the unity of Bible-believing people under the threat of liberalism. I think I honor

fundamentalism most when I do careful theological triage with the goal of having as much unity as possible with other believers. In this book, Chris Anderson sincerely honors his own fundamentalist heritage while bringing its culture and emphases into the light of Scripture. He is a trustworthy and loving help to us in writing this book. Like an old-time preacher, he steps on some toes. He shows us that fundamentalism still has something to give to the church, but also has something to receive from the rest of the church. Fundamentalists are not the paragon of doctrinal purity and holy praxis that we've sometimes told ourselves we were.

Mark Ward, Editor, Crossway



CHRIS ANDERSON

The
SCANDAL
of
SCHISM

A JOURNEY FROM
SINFUL DIVISION TO
BIBLICAL FIDELITY

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The Scandal of Schism: A Journey from Sinful Division to Biblical Fidelity

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THE SCANDAL OF SCHISM

A JOURNEY FROM SINFUL DIVISION TO BIBLICAL FIDELITY

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Schism /'s(k)i-zəm/

noun

“a split or division between strongly opposed sections or parties, caused by differences in opinion or belief”

“I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions [*skismata*] among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.”

—*1 Corinthians 1:10*

“That there may be no division [*skisma*] in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.”

—*1 Corinthians 12:25*

“The word schism comes from the Greek ‘to rend.’... The true nature of schism is this: an uncharitable, unjust, rash, violent breaking from union with the church or the members of it.”

—*Jeremiah Burroughs*¹

1 Jeremiah Burroughs, *Irenicum to the Lovers of Truth and Peace* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1997), 248-49. It is not my intent to precisely equate the English word *schism* and the Greek word *skismata*, each of which has its own distinct semantic domain. However, both generally describe an undesirable breach in what should be whole.

P R E F A C E

AN EXPLANATION, AN
OVERVIEW, AND
AN APPEAL

*“The way of a fool is right in his own eyes,
but a wise man listens to advice.”*

—Proverbs 12:15

I'd like to take up the pattern of esteemed writers like Bunyan and Shakespeare by appealing to my “gentle readers.” My prayer is that this book will be a help to Christ's church and to fellow Christians—not a lightning rod or a stumbling block. To that end, let me offer a brief explanation, overview, and appeal.

An Explanation

This book has been in process for several years, and it has survived multiple revisions. I mention this simply to note that I have not written it rashly. I'm not angry. I'm remorseful for the times when I have brought unnecessary division to Christ's church. The failures I highlight in these pages are primarily my own. But I'm also profoundly hopeful that the church can do better. With that goal in mind, I have endeavored to write with charity. That said, despite my efforts to produce more light than heat in these pages, I do say some things that are *hard*. If some of my words are perceived to be wounds, please take them as the faithful wounds of a friend (Proverbs 27:6).

Several early reviewers urged me to identify the intended audience for this book, which will very likely affect the way it's interpreted. I'm writing to those in or from a Christian fundamentalist setting, urging you to retain

the best elements of that movement while jettisoning unbiblical extremes. I'm writing to confessional and conservative evangelicals who are rightly defending the faith and making biblical fidelity a test of fellowship, but who at times evidence the exacting spirit and excesses of imbalanced fundamentalists on secondary issues. And I'm writing to the broader evangelical who may be unaware of what fundamentalism was or is, appealing to you to consider the many times that the Bible urges principled division as well as principled unity.

An Overview

Part 1 of this book describes the past, both the history of Christian fundamentalism in the last hundred years and a biographical history of my experience within fundamentalism for the last fifty years—some good and some bad. Much of this section is anecdotal. But while the experiences are my own, I believe they are shared by and may be a help to many others who have labored in this same part of the vineyard.

Part 2 gets more intentionally exegetical, searching out the many biblical commands to separate, primarily from false teachers but also from perpetually unrepentant Christians. The section concludes with a reminder of Jesus' passion for unity within His church—a burden which has been shared within fundamentalism, at its best, historically.

Part 3 argues against excessive, unbiblical separation with an exegetical foothold in 2 John, 3 John, Galatians 2, 1 Corinthians, and the Psalms—including a chapter on the too-controversial topic of Christian music.

Part 4 casts a vision for principled unity in the twenty-first century, addressing the centrality of the local church, the need for deference on secondary issues, and the tragic racial division that lingers in Christ's church. The book culminates with a vision for a renewed unity that rallies to biblical orthodoxy and Great-Commission ministry.

An Appeal

I encourage readers from various backgrounds to read with an open mind and a tender heart, rather than just seeking to find fault with what I have written. The argument of the book unfolds rather deliberately, so please withhold judgment until you've heard me out. You obviously shouldn't accept what I propose with naïve credulity. But I invite you to follow

the example of the Bereans, who “received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so” (Acts 17:11). Examine the Scriptures, then, and examine yourselves, as I have. The Bible condemns those who assume that they are without fault (Proverbs 12:15; 16:2; 21:2), and it commends those who are willing to inspect and improve themselves (Proverbs 9:9; 12:1; 19:20). I ask you to be open to the possibility that you may have some blind spots, in the spirit of Psalm 139:23-24.

Search me, O God, and know my heart!
Try me and know my thoughts!
And see if there be any grievous way in me,
And lead me in the way everlasting!

Grace to you.

Chris Anderson
Grayson, Georgia
2024

INTRODUCTION

FRIENDLY FIRE

“But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.”

—Galatians 5:15

The Bible commands Christians to unite around the truth. And the Bible commands Christians to break unity for the sake of the truth. Both unity and separation can be a matter of obedience to Scripture—or of disobedience. Christians, churches, and Christian organizations must carefully determine when they *must* cooperate with other believers, when they *might*, and when they *mustn't*. It's complicated. Thankfully, Scripture has a lot to say about unity, separation, and schism.

I'm writing this book for three primary reasons. First, I've lived the life of a schismatic, and I want to share how God has graciously been working on me about my sincere but sinful narrowmindedness. In the last fifteen years I've become passionate about the “big-tent” collaboration that can be achieved when believers rally around doctrinal orthodoxy with a missional mindset.² As a pastor and a missionary executive, I'm writing to call fellow Christians away from infighting and back to disciple-making.

Second, I've been burdened by the division that is becoming all too common among conservative evangelicals. We are becoming more and more fractured—over COVID, or Donald Trump, or perceived “wokeness,” or an endless stream of issues that scream for our attention. I'm weary of

2 I realize that the phrase “big tent” is potentially problematic because it is often used to describe political or ministerial expediency which downplays important differences among a constituency to accomplish pragmatic ends. My use of the term throughout this book always includes qualifiers like “doctrinal orthodoxy.” I like the imagery the phrase conveys, but the outside border of the “tent” is defined by clear and robust doctrinal positions which necessarily place those who disagree outside of the tent. Mine is a call for those who are doctrinally aligned to labor together—not for a deemphasis of biblical truth.

church splits. I'm weary of turf wars among like-minded ministries. I'm weary of ministry partnerships that fracture over degrees of Calvinism, the timing of the rapture, or opinions about a well-known author. I'm weary on behalf of pastors who are constantly criticized over issues where Scripture allows latitude. I'm weary of missionary teams that break up or leave the field because fellow Christians can't get along.

Third and most importantly, my heart still beats for the preciousness of the gospel of Jesus Christ. If we separate less than Scripture requires, we harm the cause of the gospel. And if we separate more than Scripture requires, we likewise harm the cause of the gospel.

Ironically, the brothers and sisters in my sphere of influence tend to agree on the fundamentals—the big rocks like the inerrancy of Scripture, the exclusivity of the Christian gospel, and the Bible's command not to cooperate with false teachers. But the small rocks—the little foxes, to change analogies and borrow from Song of Solomon 2:15—are spoiling the orthodox vineyard. Every time I see a faithful brother criticized, censured, or canceled by fellow conservative evangelicals, I want to scream, "I've lived in hyper-separatist isolation. You don't want to go there!"

I spent several years of my ministry practicing and promoting a schismatic spirit. My desire was to obey the Scriptures. But I was suspicious of other believers. When a ministry grew, I assumed they must be compromising. When God used someone, I looked for a loose thread to pull. It was an ecclesiastical McCarthyism—a virtual witch hunt. Looking back, I'm ashamed for taking up the role of "the accuser of the brethren"—an office that belongs to Satan (Revelation 12:10, KJV). But I was sincere. I fancied myself a Jude who was "contending for the faith that was once delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). But more often than not, I was an unwitting Diotrephes, elevating myself by blacklisting others (3 John 9-10). It was a rude awakening when I studied the villain of 3 John and realized, "That's me!" By God's grace, I determined to change—to make decisions of fellowship and collaboration on the basis of biblical fidelity, not my preferences or the fear of man. And it's been such a liberating experience!

One of the Bible's most frequent pictures of the church is an army. Yes, the church is also a body, a building, and a bride. But we are an army, and we are in a spiritual battle. We "fight the good fight of faith" (1 Timothy 6:12). We "share in suffering as [good soldiers] of Jesus Christ" (2 Timothy 2:3).

We strive to please our Commander (2 Timothy 2:4). And when the faith is attacked, we go to war for it (Jude 3). While the New Testament repeatedly commands love and unity as distinctive qualities of Christ's church, it knows nothing of a peace-at-any-price appeasement that tolerates heresy and unrepentant sin. Faithful Christians must be willing to fight for the faith. I believe that. I practice that.

But I do have a word of caution for those who are fighting for the faith—especially among fundamentalists and conservative evangelicals, where I'm seeing more and more unnecessary infighting, strife, and canceling. *Be careful. Love the faith, not the fight. Measure twice and cut once.*

While all war casualties are tragic, losing soldiers to friendly fire is especially demoralizing. Sometimes artillery is misdirected and launched against friendlies. Other times, brothers in arms are misidentified as enemies, as when Stonewall Jackson was killed by his own soldiers. Worst of all is a rogue soldier who savagely turns on his brothers in an act of cowardice and terrorism. It's grievous. Soldiers expect danger from their enemies, not their allies.

In his classic book on Christian love, Puritan Hugh Binning laments the church's infernal infighting:

Our common station is to war under Christ's banner against sin and Satan. Why, then, do we leave our station, forget our callings, and neglect that employment which concerns us all; and fall at odds with our fellow-soldiers, and bite and devour one another? Doth not this give advantage to our common enemies? While we consume the edge of our zeal and strength of our spirits one upon another, they must needs be blunted and weakened towards our deadly enemies.³

I am certain that Christians waste too much spiritual ammunition on other Christians. Schism is a serious problem. We're already opposed by the world, the devil, and our own sinful flesh. Western society is becoming more and more antagonistic to the gospel. And billions of people—that's *billions*, with a 'B'—have yet to hear of our Savior. Do we really have the luxury of neglecting those needs while we nitpick at our fellow soldiers about tertiary issues?

3 Hugh Binning, *A Treatise on Christian Love* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), 40.

This isn't a new problem, of course. Psalm 133 describes "how good and blessed it is when brothers dwell in unity"—which conversely assumes that it's *bad* and *unpleasant* when brothers are at each other's throats. David mourned friendly fire in his own life: "For it is not an enemy who taunts me—then I could bear it; it is not an adversary who deals insolently with me—then I could hide from him. But it is you, a man, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend" (Psalm 55:12-13). Tragically, the same David turned on *his* own friend and ally, setting up the murder of Uriah when he should have been taking the fight to the Ammonites (2 Samuel 11). It all reminds me of Martin Luther's wry comment in the 1953 black-and-white biopic: "The Lord deliver me from my enemies—and from my friends."

Let me illustrate my vexation over schismatic Christianity with an illustration from World War II. Imagine that you're a young American in the 1940s. Imagine hearing that, after years of neutrality, your country is finally entering the war in response to Pearl Harbor. Suppose you enlist, or maybe you're drafted. Now picture yourself being hastily trained, then transported over the Atlantic along with hundreds of thousands of other soldiers. Finally, picture risking your life to wage war—on the British. Not the Nazis. Not Japan. *The British*. Over tea, or the meaning of the term "football," or residual hard feelings over the Revolutionary War. Ridiculous, right? Fighting the British would have been unconscionable when the Nazis were decimating Europe.

Of course, there are significant differences between Yankees and Brits. But the two nations were World War II allies, not enemies. So, it is with Bible-believing Christians.⁴ Can we continue to fight each other over theological minutiae while the world is being ravaged by atheism, pluralism, and idolatry? Are we not in danger, as Galatians 5:15 warns, of "devouring one another"?

Let's take another run at that illustration to show another schismatic mindset. This time, imagine if America were to send soldiers to Europe to invade Germany—in 2024! We could argue that the Germans were our

4 Puritan Jeremiah Burroughs makes use of a similar analogy: "Soldiers who march against a common enemy, all under the same captain, who follow the same colors in their ensign and wear them upon their hats or arms, may win the day, though they are not all clothed alike, though they differ in things of less significance." Burroughs, 146. He later adds, "We have enough to do to contend with the wicked of the world, with the malice of Satan; let us not contend one with another." *Ibid.*, 429.

enemies in World War I and World War II. True enough. But we would be ignoring nearly a century of history during which Germany has rejected both fascism and communism and has become one of America's most valued allies. Times have changed. Germany has changed.

Similarly, there are battles that were fought by Christians in the past that are no longer necessary. Alliances have changed. Theological "maps" have changed. Labels that were useful a generation or two or three ago are now imprecise. Rather than cutting off institutions and denominations based on their former errors, we need to determine what they believe, teach, and practice *today*. If they love and preach and defend the gospel, we should save our ammunition.

Based on what I've said so far, you might think this book is advocating spiritual pacifism within the church. But it's not that. There *are* times when defending the faith is essential, when the fight is necessary, when sacrificing unity for the sake of purity is the only right answer. As Jude 3 tells us, while fellowship around the gospel is *preferable*, defending the faith is sometimes *necessary*. We dare not cower when we are called to contend.

But whom are we to fight? And when? And how can we avoid friendly fire?

I believe with my entire being that the Bible and church history can help us. And I believe the topic demands our attention and may necessitate our repentance. There may be times when this book has you shaking your head instead of nodding along. I may very well be charged with schism as I warn against schism. But it's worth it to me. There's too much at stake to settle for the status quo. I invite you, then, to join me for a biblical, practical, and sometimes autobiographical perusal of separation and schism, all for the glory of God.

◀ PART 1 ▶

MEMOIRS OF A
RECOVERING
SCHISMATIC

“With whom is the Christian soldier meant to fight? Not with other Christians. Wretched indeed is that man’s idea of religion who fancies that it consists in perpetual controversy! He who is never satisfied unless he is engaged in some strife between church and church, chapel and chapel, sect and sect, faction and faction, part and party, knows nothing as yet he ought to know.... The cause of sin is never so much helped as when Christians waste their strength in quarrelling with one another and spend their time in petty squabbles.”

—*J. C. Ryle*⁵

5 J. C. Ryle, *Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties, and Roots* (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 1999), 51.

CHAPTER 1

THE LAY OF THE LAND

“Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.”

—Jude 3

Many who read this book will have very little understanding of terms like *fundamentalism*, *liberalism*, and *new evangelicalism*. I certainly didn’t know these words when I began to prepare for pastoral ministry. I’d never heard of biblical separation, and the idea that Christians would spend so much time and energy in dustups with other believers bewildered me. I was just a *Christian*. Isn’t that enough?

Of course, the answer is *yes*. Kind of. The key to your spiritual growth is your relationship with Christ, your nourishment on the Scriptures, your active participation in a Bible-teaching church, and your submission to the indwelling Holy Spirit. You don’t need a church history lesson to follow Christ.

And yet, the recent history of Christianity in the West does affect you. The issues that caused divisions in the twentieth century are still in play today, even if the primary personalities have changed.

Suppose you move to a new location and you’re looking for a good church. Let’s say you’re a Presbyterian. As you stake out a new church home, you see multiple Presbyterian assemblies in your area, each affiliated with a larger organization. How do you choose? Well, you need to understand the difference between the Presbyterian Church USA (PCUSA), the Presbyte-