
Schism in the writings of Lloyd-Jones

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This article attempts to summarize the main teaching and challenge of Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones on the important subject of schism.

The 5th February 1961 – One of his sermons based on Ephesians 6:10-13 dealt with the subject of schism. He maintained that churches eager to adhere believingly to Scripture faced a major problem: “How are we to draw the line between allowing heresy and apostasy on the one hand, and being guilty of schism on the other?”¹ Lloyd-Jones was clear concerning the answer and this can be expressed in the following way:

1. Only Christians who are agreed on fundamental doctrines can be guilty of schism.
2. Schism involves the division of Christians concerning non-essential or secondary matters.
3. New Testament commands concerning unity and warnings about schism are addressed only to Christians, those who enjoy Gospel unity.
4. Evangelicals have not taken these commands and warnings seriously enough and ecumenism has exposed this inconsistency.
5. The New Testament requires a unity of churches, not merely individuals or movements; Evangelicals need to express their claim to unity in a meaningful way at church level.

June 1963 – A major address based on Haggai 1 and given to the Westminster Fraternal touched again on the present situation, the evangelical commitment to movements and the failure of this strategy. He then addressed key questions, namely, the nature and marks of the Church before discussing “the true nature of schism”.² He does not discuss the latter subject in detail as his intention was “simply raising it as an issue”.³ Here are the main points:

1. The Protestant Reformers were not guilty of schism when they left the Church of Rome for they separated themselves from apostasy.
2. 1 Corinthians “is the *locus classicus* with regard to this matter”. Schism is “division in the true visible Church about matters that are not sufficient to justify division and separation”, e.g. personalities, learning, observance of days and meats, variations in spiritual gifts. The “sin of schism occurs when *such people* allow themselves to be divided from one another for inadequate causes and reasons”.⁴
3. “The trouble has been always that men have tended to approach schism in terms of the existing state of the churches instead of taking it right back to the New Testament conception of the Church and asking: Are we dividing that? We have allowed the opposition to govern our thinking on this question of schism, and...put ourselves into a false position. What I should ask myself is this... Am I guilty of dividing the truly spiritual New Testament Church?”⁵

June 1965 – Westminster Fellowship address from Psalm 74. “Two years ago”, Lloyd-Jones declared, “I tried to make a statement. I appealed for unity, a unity at the church level...I was convinced two years ago that many were not convinced of schism and so should be given the opportunity to be convicted...”⁶ He asks: “Is there any hope

of evangelical unity?...My conclusion is that there is no hope at all at the church level...because there is no agreement among Evangelicals...”⁷

18th October 1966 – NAE address in which Lloyd-Jones discusses schism after considering the nature of the Church. His view of the sin of schism is unchanged: “It is division among people who are agreed about the essentials and the centralities, but who separate over secondary and less important matters...that is the only definition of schism which can claim to be Biblical...the only people...who are guilty of the sin of schism are Evangelicals”⁸

July 1967 – Westminster Fellowship address majoring on the unity to be sought on the part of those opposed to ecumenism. Here Lloyd-Jones warned of a danger because while Ecumenists go for minimum and ambiguous doctrinal content, Evangelicals “tend to become too precise...the opposite extreme...”⁹ Major essential doctrines for him included the sole authority of Scripture in faith and practice, the Trinity, the devil and evil powers, the plan of redemption, the person and work of Christ, man in sin, regeneration by the Holy Spirit, justification by faith alone, sanctification. The non-essentials (“not so important as to divide us”) included election, views on baptism, church policy, assurance, prophecy and gifts. “We must not break fellowship”,¹⁰ he warned.

13th November 1968 – An address by Lloyd-Jones to the BEC on *What is the Church?*¹¹ The uniqueness, spirituality and unity of the true Church “makes schism a terrible sin. It is not merely that you disagree with others: it is that you are dividing Christ, you are dividing a body, you are dividing a family. And so the apostle brings out his mighty powers of ridicule in 1 Corinthians 12...For brethren who are agreed about the essentials of the Gospel, and who are sharing the same life, to be divided by history, tradition, or any consideration, is the sin of schism, and it is a terrible sin”.¹²

4th November 1970 – The Doctor’s theme at this BEC conference was *Wrong divisions and True Unity*¹³ and he distinguished between separation and schism. Again, he turned to 1 Corinthians and showed how the Corinthian Christians had a defective understanding of the Church and failed “to draw the line properly between” essentials and those matters which are “important but not essential”.¹⁴ He describes the Corinthians as “standing and dividing on carnal matters”,¹⁵ “intellectualism”¹⁶ and “false spirituality”.¹⁷ Lloyd-Jones is adamant that the essentials “on which we must stand”¹⁸ include the Scriptures,¹⁹ the Fall,²⁰ God’s plan of redemption²¹ and the Person of the Lord.²² On these doctrines we must stand “unflinchingly... even unto death, but be very careful about anything else you stand on, lest you become guilty of the sin of schism and offend a dear brother for whom Christ died. If you think he is mistaken, patiently, quietly, prayerfully, try to instruct him and to help him. And as you value your own conscience and always try to obey it, remember that he has got a conscience also and you must not cause him to offend it. Let us love one another. Let us bear with one another but hold the centralities, the first things, boldly, courageously and unflinchingly, together”.²³

References

¹ *Westminster Record*, June 1963, p 85

² The whole address is included in Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Knowing the Times*, pp. 164-197, Banner of Truth, 1989

³ *Idem*, p. 186

- ⁴ Idem, p. 187
⁵ Idem, p. 189
⁶ Iain Murray, *D Martyn Lloyd-Jones: The Fight of Faith*, Banner of Truth, 1990, p. 502
⁷ Idem, p. 503
⁸ *Knowing the Times*, p. 253
⁹ Op. cit., p. 545
¹⁰ *The Fight of Faith*, p. 547
¹¹ The whole address is available in *Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones: Unity in Truth*, ed. Hywel R Jones, Evangelical Press, 1991, pp. 45-65
¹² Idem, pp. 59-60
¹³ The address is found on pp. 102-122
¹⁴ Idem, p. 105
¹⁵ Idem, p. 106
¹⁶ Idem, p. 107
¹⁷ Idem, p. 108
¹⁸ Idem, p. 110
¹⁹ Idem, pp. 110-113
²⁰ Idem, pp. 113-115
²¹ Idem, pp. 115-117
²² Idem, pp. 117-120
²³ Idem, p. 122

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I have been in the ministry and trying to preach now for getting on for forty-four years. I have seen strange things in the life of the churches, but I have never known such confusion as prevails at the present time. Of course, those of us who belong to this Evangelical Council are not a bit surprised that there is confusion among people who are not evangelical. They cannot but be confused. Indeed they are not evangelical because they are confused. So that does not surprise us. But, even in that realm, the confusion is more and more confounded than I have ever known it.

But what should be of particular concern to us is that we have to confess, if we are honest, that there is some confusion amongst us. This is serious...

This is important because the greatest need in the world tonight is for a united evangelical message. It is the only hope for mankind. It is the only hope for the world and, in general, it is the only hope for the church. The people are confused, utterly confused. All their famous 'nostrums' fail to give them healing. All the prophecies of the false prophets have been falsified. They are all just disillusioned. That is the real meaning of this calamitous drug-taking and alcoholism. I believe the world is waiting for an authoritative statement. And it can only have it from those who take a scriptural view of the way of salvation—that is from evangelicals. That is why it is so urgently and vitally important that there should be no confusion amongst us but that we should speak with a united and a certain voice concerning these vital matters.

DM Lloyd-Jones, Wrong Divisions and True Unity, in Unity in Truth
