

Rending and Mending

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I've been grieving: a friend of mine killed himself this year. Grief at an untimely death creates some surprising, unexpected physical reactions. In his book, *A Grief Observed*, C. S. Lewis noted that he kept on swallowing. That happens to me, too. Grief seems to stretch the muscles in my throat until they ache. I crave dry, crunchy foods because they scratch the back of my throat. Somehow that alleviates some of the tension gathered there. There are times when I recognize how so many strands of my life are interwoven with the gaps left by the loss. In the spaces people we have lost once inhabited, one senses a void. Someone's absence becomes an entity itself, like a rip in a garment. Some of the threads of our earlier life are broken now, some frayed, and others stretched tight and thin, as if the strands might snap.

Rending Garments

The ancients in the Bible displayed grief with a very physical act: rending their garments. Rending a tunic to symbolize the grief of losing someone seems appropriate because the separation of threads and seams physically illustrates the loss of connections caused by death. Those who've died have been torn from us. Death divides us from those we have lost like the strands of fabric pulling apart. In the rending of clothes, we have a symbol of people getting divided. In an added meaning, the rent garment also becomes a visible cue that the wearer is grieving, like wearing black to a funeral. Torn clothes proclaim sorrow and loss, as if tears (*riiiiip*) were tears (*boohoo*).

The word "rent" appears 66 times (!) in the King James translation, often, but not always, in the context of grief. A rent garment also symbolizes separations within the kingdom of Israel. When King Saul tears Samuel's clothes, the torn clothing is used as a metaphor for the kingdom

being torn from Saul.¹ And later, a new garment torn into twelve strips symbolizes the kingdom of Israel's division when a prophet tells Jeroboam that he will become king. Later still, Jeroboam's story recounts the altar being "rent" as a sign from God that he would lose the kingdom. The division within a kingdom separates people, just like a death separates people, like threads stretched apart in a torn garment. It is this similarity and symbolic association between rending a garment, death, and division that I'm pondering in this discussion.

Let's work through the act of rending a garment. One grasps a handful of fabric in each hand, clenches it tightly, wrinkling up bits of cloth within the fingers, and begins to pull in opposite directions, hand away from hand, fist away from fist. The warp and woof of the fabric deform, stretching in wavy striations between the hands, the spaces between each individual strand of thread becoming smaller in some sections and wider in others until somewhere in the space between the fists we hear a tiny *pop* as the first thread with the greatest force on it releases.

Threads are made of tiny filaments that are all intertwined in a unidirectional mass of fibers held together by friction. Each fiber is only a few centimeters long, but bunches of fibers, all overlapping together, create a very strong thread. To break one thread, one must either overcome the friction holding all the fibers together so that individual fibers slide along one another and let go, or we pull so hard that the fibers themselves break. Rending a garment probably involves a combination of both of these failure modes and it makes a crackling, oddly gratifying, ripping sound. Rending a garment requires that hundreds of threads, consisting of tens of thousands of fibers, get stretched, strained, and finally snapped. The resultant edges of fabric are often fuzzy, weak, and easily frayed, not at all like the strong threads that they had been moments before. The garment is never the same and the opening makes it fit worse and less fit to purpose, not to mention that it looks shabby.

Rending Kingdoms

If a rent garment is symbolizing a kingdom divided, it's almost too perfect. I will admit that any analogy can be taken too far, but this one lends itself to stretching. A kingdom consists of many citizens, interwoven together in a useful fabric: the fabric of society. When a kingdom is divided, the citizens are torn apart from one another and they get frayed in the process.

¹ 1Samuel 15:27-28, 1Kings 11:30, 1Kings 13:1-5

Any kind of society or even a smaller social group, like a fellowship of believers, is like a fabric garment woven and sewn together. Each individual thread is like one member of the group. You can't stretch and strain one of them without affecting the others. Any tear in the garment leaves a noticeable gap.

In the Bible, the gap in a fellowship is called a "schisma" and it isn't a good thing. In fact, it is something to mourn. Sadly, the history of believers throughout the ages is one of repeated schisms. Decades ago, I had the privilege of taking a class on the history of Christianity. The professor said that he had a tough time convincing the faculty that the class was a good idea. They rejected his proposal several times until he resubmitted the exact same syllabus with the exact same readings but with a new title, "The History of Heresy." They gave him his class! And why not? Christian history is essentially two millennia of schisms: Jew vs. Greek, Orthodox vs. Catholic, Catholic vs. Protestant, etc. Our own fellowship has not escaped the division predisposition. I struggle with it all the time.

Derision of Division

Scriptures proclaim a charge to avoid divisions:

And I call upon you, brethren, through the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that the same thing ye may all say, and there may not be divisions among you, and ye may be perfected in the same mind, and in the same judgment. (1Cor 1:10)

In fact, divisions are called "carnal":

For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men? For while one saith, I am of Paul; and another, I am of Apollos; are ye not carnal? (1Cor 3:3-4)

Carnal things always draw humanity's attentions, even believers. Turning away from carnal things isn't easy because the spirit may be willing, but the flesh is weak. Perhaps we shouldn't be too hard on the last two thousand years of conflict-driven disagreements that gave us our current bazillion denominations. We are all susceptible to being divisive, aren't we?

Paul advises to turn away from people causing divisions and stumbling blocks:

And I call upon you, brethren, to mark those who the divisions and the stumbling-blocks, contrary to the teaching that ye did learn, are causing, and turn ye away from them; for such

our Lord Jesus Christ do not serve, but their own belly; and through the good word and fair speech they deceive the hearts of the harmless. (Rom 16:17-18)

For first of all, when ye come together in the church, I hear that there be divisions [schisma] among you; and I partly believe it.² For there must be also heresies³ among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you. (1Cor 11:18-19)

When we encounter *schisma*, we are told to “turn away” from the people causing them. We turn away from divisive people because they are serving their “own belly.” Schisms also show who is “approved.”

Perhaps even more damning, Galatians names sects alongside horrible works of the flesh like adultery, idolatry, and murder:

And manifest also are the works of the flesh, which are: adultery, whoredom, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, strifes, emulations, wraths, rivalries, dissensions, sects, envyings, murders, drunkennesses, revellings, and such like, of which I tell you before, as I also said before, that those doing such things the reign of God shall not inherit. (Gal 5:19-21)

Divisiveness is a fleshly urge. Divisiveness is when we want to tell others to “take a hike” or to say, “I’m outta here” as we slam the door behind us. But it doesn’t always need to be accompanied by anger. Sometimes it’s quite level-headed and peaceful. There are a hundred thousand different reasons to be divisive and we can invent new reasons every day. To make matters worse, we live in such a fragmented world that divisiveness is even celebrated as a virtue.

Potential Benefits of Division

To be fair, it is not hard to envision some benefits to divisions:

Self-examination. One of the main effects of divisiveness is that it forces us to examine ourselves and our reasoning about the matter instigating the divisiveness, whether it be doctrinal, logical, ethical, spiritual, mystical, behavioral, or whatever-al. We must think hard about whether we are being a good disciple. If we see something amiss in our understanding or behavior, positive self-corrections ought to ensue.

² Is using “partly” a pun?

³ Literally a disunion or a sect

Identity Formation. The formation of a new group through division provides the opportunity to frame a new identity that contains new distinctions and innovations that may have been lacking in the original group. The new identity will need a new name, a new charter, a new slogan, new procedures, etc. This is certainly a healthy, creative endeavor and it feels like growth. This promotes bonding in a shared identity and offers many opportunities to serve and support one another. Members of the new group find that the shared struggle provides a foundation for trust and friendship that can even make former adversaries into bosom buddies.

Self-protection. Another attitude that appears during divisions is self-protection. People don't often explain their divisiveness this way, usually offering some academic reason, but many divisions originate from a simple desire to exit a debate. Fatigue, dismay, and sadness at the conflict drive a wedge between people who begin to see one another so distrustfully that they simply can't be in the same room together. Even speaking to one another is just too stressful. They separate out of the desire to protect themselves or to protect others who feel overwhelmed by the conflict.

Revival. Once a division has solidified and the new community has regrouped, they usually feel a renewed sense of community that comes from being free of the conflict that begat them. A feeling of freshness incites a pioneering spirit that nurtures creativity, innovation, and feelings of relief. New ideas add more variety to positive events that inspire and uplift previously depressed members. People feel invigorated.

Leadership opportunities. Being in a new group may provide positive leadership opportunities for former wallflowers who now have more chances to lead because there are fewer people to do the work.

Division's Downsides

Notwithstanding these potential positives, I contend that the most common effects of divisiveness are hurtful and counterproductive. The gap in a divided social group is too glaring and sore. Members may be afraid and frayed after a division, like a garment is weakened by a tear.

Self-justification. Divisiveness may be driven by someone being offended that their leadership or role has been slighted. The urge to proclaim, "I'm the expert! People should listen to me! I have the answers!" fuels divisiveness. Offenses lead to prideful thoughts: "I am in the

right! How dare they accuse me of being mistaken!” If divisiveness makes us conclude that we are righteous, that’s probably on the wrong track.⁴

Isolation. The possibility exists that members of a previously divided group think that division is a good response to conflict. Dividing can get habitual. What happens when you split so often that you get down to an ecclesia of one? Even if it never goes that far, isolationist tendencies in a group may lead to a homogenization of thought. The group becomes an echo chamber, thereby hindering growth and intellectual discourse. Diversity is a strength that can be lost with sectarian solutions because the groups become self-selected. Birds of a feather flocking together is not always a good thing.

Confusion. Having multiple sects makes it harder for outsiders to understand the sometimes (oftentimes?) esoteric distinctions between groups.

Embarrassment. Divided groups have members who are dismayed by the split (on all fronts) and ashamed and/or embarrassed to explain the divisions to new friends.

Fatigue. Contrary to revival, conflicts resolved by division create smaller groups. Members have fewer people to turn to for support. They need to wear many hats and they have fewer chances to specialize in needed skillsets thereby leading to higher burnout rates. Smaller groups are easily fatigued. Efforts to spread the Gospel are diffused, making less impressive events and with fewer resources.

Aversion to Discussion. A history of division can give leaders an aversion to listening to new ideas because they are fatigued by the thought of any conflict (cough, this is me). Smaller groups may lack a critical mass to deflect “vain and senseless controversies.”⁵

Emergence of Gatekeepers. Divisions may also provide more chances for bad leaders to emerge or stay in power and, if they do, to have more influence over individuals because their group is now smaller. They become gatekeepers. Experiencing repeated success as a gatekeeper is destructive for the attitudes of the gatekeepers themselves. They can become habitually judgmental because power corrupts. It goes to their head and they get increasingly inclined to choose division as a solution to problems, even sometimes inventing strange and obscure issues in order to push one more division, like a power addict trying to get one more hit.

⁴ Luke 18:10-14

⁵ 2Timothy 2:23

Alienating Others. Gatekeepers may feel justified at stifling dissent by ostracizing opponents. Any time power over others is introduced in social situations, there is a distinct risk of leaders developing an overblown sense of themselves and their own wisdom. This overblown self-appreciation can create a temptation to disempower outcasts by downgrading their membership status or restricting their movements. This causes outcasts to feel alienated, which leads to despair, which leads to hopelessness. Hopelessness can lead to substance abuse, or in extreme situations, self-harm, and even suicide.

Lack of Forgiveness. Divisions as solutions to conflicts have a practical finality that other resolutions don't have. Rather than causing everyone to work through a conflict to form a new relationship or find a new resolution, the division freezes a disagreement in time, such that forgiveness isn't needed anymore because the affected parties don't even interact with one another anymore. This is especially salient if a division is caused by a trespass, rather than some doctrinal disagreement. We are instructed to restore sinners in a spirit of gentleness. This applies to people caught in any trespass:

Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Look to yourself, lest you too be tempted. (Gal 6:1)

Divisiveness does not promote gentleness because it is destructive and final, like tearing a garment into pieces.

Not good. At creation, God omits calling Day 2 “good.” Some suggest that Day 2's division between the heavens above and the earth beneath was not good because it was a separation, a division. Cain was separated from his family and others. The peoples of the earth were divided into groups by God through the multiplication of languages. Joseph is treacherously separated from his family. Although these stories may have happy endings, the division itself lends an undercurrent of failure to the story.

Handling Divisiveness

How do we handle all the divisiveness?

Not Weeding Tares. Jesus told the parable of the wheat and the tares⁶ when the master says to let the tares grow with the wheat lest their removal cause harm to the wheat, because

⁶ Matthew 13:24-30

rooting out the enemy's work is too destructive to the surrounding plants. Jesus does not seem to like tearing things apart and openly prayed about it on our behalf:

That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one. (John 17:21-22)

Not Rending. In an interesting Bible echo, a point is made of Jesus' robe being seamless and not torn by the Romans at the foot of the cross. This untorn robe has an instructive symbolic echo in the high priest's garment which had features designed to prevent it from being torn.⁷ Sadly, these features were not fool-proof because the high priest at Jesus' trial succeeded in rending his garment, thereby marking himself for a tragic separation someday, too.

(Also relevant to the crucifixion and rending fabric, the veil in the Temple was rent from top to bottom at the moment of Jesus' death on the cross. This was the end of a separation between the most Holy place and the outer area, so that's an exception to rending fabric symbolizing division of a kingdom. In that case, the rending was actually mending a division between God and us.)

Turning Away. How should we handle divisiveness, in ourselves and others? "Turn away" from schismatic people because divisions are carnal,⁸ *and simultaneously*, leave the "tares" in place because weeding them out is destructive. Can we divide from those who are divisive without being divisive ourselves? How should we interpret the meaning of "avoid" or "turn away"? It means "to deviate" or "shun" according to the concordance. Perhaps it means to just ignore them?

Building Harmony. Likewise, the meaning of being of "one mind" has something to do with "accordance" and "harmony." Perhaps this means that we should seek common ground, rather than being in perfect agreement on all things.

I'm not much of a musician, but I believe that harmonies are built from different notes that blend together. What if we downplayed disagreements while simultaneously emphasizing agreements? Rather than debating disagreements, what if we spent our energy in describing the things that we do agree on. Isn't this the strategy in the early church when they sent a stunningly

⁷ Exodus 28:32, Mark 14:63, Matthew 27:51

⁸ Romans 16:17

brief letter to the newly-converted, and newly troubled, Gentiles?⁹ They told them a few simple things to avoid and that was it. No disparagements, just encouragement.

What if rather than spending years writing articles about how mistaken others are about something, we spent years writing letters about what they are correct about? What if believers asked themselves where they learned their methods of disputation and debate? Historically, we might find that the sources of our disputation methods originated with Greek and other pagan philosophers. Is that the best model to resolve disagreements or is it a prescription for polarization? What if we followed a different method of argumentation wherein finding common ground is the rule, rather than the exception. What if we described how our different positions blended, overlapped, and complemented one another? *The History of Heresy* might have become *The History of Harmony*.

The Antidote. The antidote to that feeling of divisiveness is to remember that love is more important than the purity of thought – or even behavior – in our groups. Love is even more important and powerful than knowledge and faith.

If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but don't have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my goods to feed the poor, and if I give my body to be burned, but don't have love, it profits me nothing.

Love is patient and is kind. Love doesn't envy. Love doesn't brag, is not proud, doesn't behave itself inappropriately, doesn't seek its own way, is not provoked;¹⁰ doesn't rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. Love never fails. (1Cor 13:2-8)

Mending, not Rending

Divisions offer resolutions that circumvent love, forgiveness, and humility. Divisiveness feeds carnal propensities toward pride, power, and self-justification. I contend that the *strongest* advocates for maintaining divisions are the most likely to be suffering spiritual stagnation. Those who only reluctantly endure division are more likely to be able to find a potential for growth.

⁹ Acts 15:22-29

¹⁰ “keeps no record of wrongs,” NIV

This makes sense because when we are *weak*, we are strong; God gives grace to the *humble*; the *poor* in spirit possess the kingdom; the *meek* inherit the earth. The weak, meek, humble, and poor in spirit don't promote or maintain divisions. They are too busy working:

And going on from thence, he saw other two brethren, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in a ship with Zebedee their father, mending their nets; and he called them.
(Matt 4:21)

Shouldn't we be mending our nets instead of rooting out tares, rending our garments, or dividing our fellowships into smaller and smaller groups? Jesus told us to become fishers, not weeders.

We need to fight the forces of fragmentation. We need to make it a habit to emphasize agreements and value harmony. We should never nurture divisiveness or go out of our way to maintain divisions. Rather, reconciliation should always be the goal in a dispute, offense, or conflict. Exerting yourself to maintain existing divisions runs the risk of turning you into an alienating gatekeeper who tears his own garments in condemnation instead of mourning.

Harmonize.

Turn away from schisms. Turn away from thinking more highly of yourself than you ought to think. Turn away from divisiveness. Seek out alternative perspectives. Promote agreements. Find common ground. Value humility. Bear all things. Believe all things. Hope all things. Endure all things.

Rend your hearts, not your garments. And mend your nets.