

# Contemporary Challenges for Biblical Separatism

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## **Introduction:**

1. Here's what I mean by biblical separatism in a nutshell:
  - a. Believers and churches must separate from those who deny essential doctrines of the faith (Jude 3; 2 John 9-11; Rom 16:17);
  - b. Believers and churches must separate from those who compromise the faith by granting Christian recognition and fellowship to those who have denied essential doctrines of the faith (Rom 16:17; Phil 3:17-19; 2 Ths 3:6-15).
  - c. Believers must not: (a) love the world (1 John 2:15-17); (b) live like the world (1 Peter 4:2-4; Eph 2:1-3; 4:17-19; 5:3-14); (c) listen to the world (Rom 12:2; 1 John 4:5-6); and (d) live for this world (Matt 6:24, 33; Col 3:1-4; Phil 3:18-21; Heb 13:14).
2. To understand the contemporary challenges, we must have a basic understanding of the history which has preceded us.
3. I believe that three significant contemporary challenges face separatists at this stage: (a) identifying the disobedient brother; (b) defining compromising fellowship; and (c) factoring "worldliness" into the separation equation.

## **I. Identification of the Disobedient Brother**

### **A. The Present Confusion**

1. Due partly to misunderstanding and misrepresentation of the concept.
2. Due partly because of misuse of the concept.

### **B. Narrowing the Discussion and Question**

1. The issue, in regard to fundamentalism, was a specific kind of disobedience.
2. The proper question always is tied to the realm in which fellowship is proposed.

### **C. Clear Denial and/or Persistent Disobedience**

1. These decisions should be made carefully on the basis of known statements and persistent actions.
2. Misguided pietism should not infect our discernment on these matters.

## II. Defining Fellowship, Particularly Compromising Fellowship

### A. Fellowship

1. The center of Christian fellowship is the gospel, so it must also be the standard for evaluating fellowship.
  - a. On a personal level, this means we cannot grant Christian recognition and fellowship to those who cannot credibly claim to be Christians.
  - b. On an ecclesiastical level, this means that we cannot grant Christian recognition and fellowship to those churches, and ministers/ministries which serve the local church, which cannot credibly claim to be Christian.
2. The local church must guard its members from those who teach false doctrine (whether it originates outside or within the assembly), cf. Acts 20:28-30; 2 John 9-11.
  - a. Desertion from the Gospel, Gal 1:6-9.
  - b. Distortion of the Gospel, Gal 2:11-14.
3. Financial support is viewed within Scripture as partnership in ministry, so the fellowship of the local church is extended through its giving, cf. Phil 4:17; 3 John 8.

### B. Compromising Fellowship?

1. Failing to take into consideration the level and purpose of interaction.
2. Failing to distinguish between fundamental and non-fundamental issues.
3. Failing to recognize changes in the ecclesiastical landscape, i.e., using old labels regardless of whether the contents have changed.
4. Failing to distinguish between *apparent* compromise and *real* compromise (i.e., letting the “avoid all appearance of evil” argument improperly control us).

## III. Responding to Worldliness on the Church Level

### A. The Non-Negotiable Commitment: Anti-Worldliness

1. The rejection of separation at this level was a significant development of the new evangelicalism:

- a. Dorrien, “A generational retreat from the world was being called off” (*The Remaking of Evangelical Theology*, p. 7).
  - b. Marsden: “On this point Henry and Ockenga were zeroing in on what they saw as the major weakness in fundamentalism. The fundamentalist preoccupation with separation both ecclesiastically and in personal mores had cut the group off from any real social impact” (*Reforming Fundamentalism*, p. 80).
2. Anti-worldliness, it should be remembered, is a much deeper than the trio of music, movies, and modesty.
    - a. Believers live differently than lost people on at least two levels: (1) the purpose of life (1 Cor 10:31); and (2) the rule for life (2 Tim 3:16-17; Gal 5:16-18; Eph 4:22-24). The core issues of life, why and how we live, are radically affected by our relationship to God through Jesus Christ.
    - b. What is worldliness? To have a heart and mind shaped by the world’s beliefs and values (1 John 2:15-17; Matt 6:24-33; 13:22) so that we engage in its sinful pleasures (Eph 4:17-19, 22; 1 Peter 4:2-5) and pursue earthly treasures (Matt 6:19-24; Col 3:1-4; 1 John 2:17).

#### B. The Inevitable Conflict: Disagreements about Application

1. Principles are absolute, timeless, and trans-cultural. Applications are relative, time-bound, and culturally-confined.
2. Simply labeling something as *worldly* begs the question.
  - a. We would generally be better served by using more directly biblical terms.
  - b. We must be specific, asking something like, “In what way does this reflect the fallen beliefs, values, and practices of those who refuse to submit to God’s will?”
3. The moment we move into a discussion like this, which calls for discernment to see the connections between Scripture and culture, believers/churches will invariably have differences of viewpoint.

#### C. The Boundaries of Our Fellowship: Conscience and Discipleship

1. The extent of fellowship between churches is voluntary, so decisions regarding fellowship (within biblical boundaries) should be made wisely in light of our mission.
2. Churches should be very careful not to ask believers to act contrary to their consciences, cf. Rom 14:5-9, 23.
3. Churches should seek to act consistently with their own understanding of Christian discipleship, cf. Col 1:28; Rom 14:19.