

“An Inside Look at Ecclesiastical Separation”

by

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Ecclesiastical separation usually takes place on the organizational level where religious groups operate and interact. It is to be distinguished from personal separation which has to do with the individual believer and his personal relationship to the world. The “world” in the biblical sense here refers to the organized system that is in opposition to God and His will. It is the transient though ever-present arrangement of things, the make-up of the “now,” whose “god” is the devil, and that has nothing in common with the abiding things of God (**1 John 2:15-17; 2 Cor 4:4**). The world has its own amusements, fads, people, habits, practices, philosophies, goals, and life styles. From these things biblical Christians will separate themselves.

Ecclesiastical separation is the refusal to join or collaborate with an organization that deviates from the standards of Scripture. It normally involves such things as local churches, other ecclesiastical institutions or bodies, and religious or quasi-religious endeavors of all kinds. Biblical Christians are separatists also in this area. In the evangelical world there has been serious compromise in both the personal and ecclesiastical areas.

Modern ecclesiastical separation for Bible-believers came to the forefront during the great Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy in North America of the 1920s through the 1940s. For Fundamentalists the 1920s was a period of controversy and battle with liberals and other assorted infidels, particularly among the Northern Presbyterians and in the old Northern Baptist Convention. The 1930s and 1940s represented a period of cohesion and building during which time Fundamentalists formed institutions and associations of various kinds around strong leaders. Groups were formed such as the Independent Fundamental Churches of America (1930, William McCarrell), the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches (1932, R.T. Ketcham, O.W. VanOsdel, et al.), the Fellowship of Brethren Churches (1939, Alva J. McClain), the American Council of Christian Churches (1941, Carl McIntire), and the Conservation Baptist movement (1943, led principally by R.V. Clearwaters et al.), to name a few. The benchmark of Fundamentalism during the 1920s to the early 1940s was ecclesiastical separation despite the inconsistencies of a few.

Things began to change in the early 1940s when notes of dissatisfaction with Fundamentalism began to be heard, one of which had to do with ecclesiastical separation. These notes came from within the ranks of professing Fundamentalism itself. One of the chief characteristics of the National Association of Evangelicals, formed in 1942, was a non-separatist stance, in distinction from two Fundamentalist, separatist organizations already in existence (the American Council of Christian Churches and the World’s Christian Fundamentals Association). The New Evangelicalism which arose stressed an anti-separatist attitude as seen in its emphasis on the infiltration of liberal denominations, the Billy Graham type of ecumenical evangelism, and inclusivism of many kinds. The New Evangelicalism eventually repudiated all notions of

separatism, and one New Evangelical went so far as to declare that apostasy is impossible to define (Vernon Grounds, “I feel we have no sure biblical criteria which permit us to pronounce the sentence of apostasy”¹) Another strongly implied that apostasy is impossible to detect (Carl F. H. Henry, “The problem of the separatist is that of being certain when a church has become apostate”²).

Today the doctrine of ecclesiastical separation is being further eroded again by those within the ranks professing Fundamentalism. Now there are calls for collaboration with Roman Catholics, Jews, Seventh Day Adventists, and others in the interests of restoring the Judeo-Christian ethic to society, of opposing abortion on demand, and of other socio-economic-political issues. Some of these professing Fundamentalists feel that love unites and doctrine divides, and apologies are being made to the Body of Christ for past separatism with a pledge to preach a positive message of Christ’s love.

What does the Bible say about ecclesiastical separation? It may surprise some to know that the Bible has much to say about the subject. Others know full well what the Scriptures teach but have devised numerous techniques and arguments to side step the issue and give respectability to their disobedience.

I. THE DOCTRINE

Biblical ecclesiastical separation means the refusal to collaborate with or the withdrawal of fellowship from those who walk contrary to the Word of God. There are at least two elements that make the doctrine.

First, the Bible is clear that Fundamental, Bible-believers can have no fellowship with those who are unbelievers, apostates, or Bible-deniers. This would include the liberals (or modernists as they are sometimes called), neo-orthodox, cultists, and false prophets of any stripe. Jesus said, **“Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing...” (Matt. 7:15)**. Paul said, **“...mark them which cause division and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them” (Rom 16:17)**. Elsewhere he noted, **“Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers” (2 Cor 6:14)**, which is a principle that prohibits intimate associations with all the enemies of God and those of darkness,³ which has the inseparable positive injunction to **“Come out from among them and be ye separate” (2 Cor 6:17)**. Again he counseled concerning those who do not hold to godly doctrine, **“from such withdraw thyself” (1 Tim 6:5)**. The apostle John stipulated plainly, **“If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine [the biblical doctrine of the person of Christ], receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: For he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds” (2 John 10-11)**.

¹ “Christianity and Apostasy,” Seminary Study Series (Published by the Denver Conservative Baptist Theological Seminary, Denver, CO, n.d.) p. 8.

² *Eternity* (March, 1956), p. 19.

³ Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (reprinted, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., n.d.), p. 166.

These verses make it impossible for a Bible believing church to have part in a city-wide evangelistic crusade where liberals and others are invited also to participate; or to be a member of a denomination that has doctrinal unbelief in the seminaries, or among the pastors, or that supports causes that do not hold to the fundamentals of the Word of God. These texts preclude participation in the National Council of Churches, the World Council of Churches, the Baptist World Alliance or similar aspects of the conciliar movement today. Nor can any church or individual Christian even give financial support in any way to these groups. It would be a joint-participation in their wickedness. The Bible is clear about that.

Second, the Bible teaches separation from Christians who are doctrinally careless or who are content to walk with those who deny the faith. Paul taught separation from **“every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us” (2 Thess 3:6)**. Verse 14 is especially clear: **“And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed.”** The principle transcends the local situation at Thessalonica which probably involved church discipline for a Christian who refused to be gainfully employed. The person separated from was definitely a “brother” and the reason for the withdrawal was his deflection from the doctrine which the apostle had brought to the church. True, such an one was not to be counted as an enemy, but fidelity to God and His revelation forced the issue, and no amount of love or brotherhood could ignore it.

Paul explicitly named two Christian leaders who had deviated in doctrine and conscience and who were consequently **“delivered unto Satan” (1 Tim 1:18-20)**. This means excision from the local assembly as a minimum understanding, but there was an implicit warning for all other pastors as well. In **1 Timothy 5:22** Paul states, **“Lay hands suddenly on no man, neither be partaker of other men’s sins; keep thyself pure.”** Commonly understood as referring to ordination, there is also the principle that recognition of someone as a genuine Christian leader must be preceded by cautious and wise investigation. Otherwise one becomes a partaker of his sins. The injunction to “keep thyself pure” has strong overtones of ecclesiastical separation.

Pedantic exegesis may wish to restrict these examples, principles, and implications to the first century, but modern Christian pastors and leaders cannot be absolved of their obligations of biblical separatism that easily.

There is a teaching in some circles of professing Fundamentalism that separation is never to be from other Christians, only from the unsaved. Nothing could be further from Paul’s theology here. But because of this, some feel comfortable fellowshiping with a pastor or a church that is evangelical but belongs to a denomination whose schools are infiltrated with doctrinal infidelity (such as the Southern Baptist Convention), or perhaps is involved in some way with the National Council of Churches. Other pastors and Christian workers who profess to be Fundamentalist will not separate from New Evangelicals or from those who compromise on the doctrine of separation itself simply because these compromisers are “Brethren.” Sometimes a smoke screen of “second degree separation” is created, or third degree, or fourth, and so on.

But this is totally and willfully to ignore the plain doctrine of separation and the principles thereof. Separation does not really admit of degrees: It is directed to the other person because of

his deviations from Scripture in whatever ways he may express them. If he runs with the wrong crowd, separation at this point is from **him** and not from the crowd he runs with. The reason for separating may involve someone's unbiblical associations, but in reality this is no more "secondary" than his unbiblical practice in another area that may be construed as "primary."

Sometimes a pastor's fellowship or a church association will allow within its ranks certain New Evangelicals, or inclusivists, or those who fellowship with New Evangelicals, or those who engage in entangling unbiblical alliances of various sorts, or whose approved schools have compromised their standards of music, personal deportment, Baptist theology, and so on. The fellowship or association itself may have a strong Fundamental statement of faith, but in its practice it overlooks or refuses to deal with its problems. If after the passing of time it is apparent that the organization cannot or will not get its house in order, then a Bible-believing, separatist church has no recourse but to withdraw, praying either that the organization will finally come to its doctrinal senses or that others will take a similar stand against the compromise and will also withdraw as a testimony to the truth of ecclesiastical separation and to the original position of the organization's founders.

II. THE BASIS

The biblical doctrine of separation is grounded firmly in the very character of God. It is not the result of a mere fiat of a deity who says that this is simply the way it shall be because he said so. Separatism is an expression of God's holiness.⁴ It is a constitutional thing with Him. God could demand no other behavior in this regard and still be consistent with Himself.

Holiness in the Word of God basically means apartness or distinction from that which is common or profane. To sanctify means simply to set apart from common use, to consecrate. The holiness of God is His apartness in two realms. First is His holiness of majestic transcendence, His basic separation from all that is created and finite. In this sense, God is the One "**high and lifted up**" (Isa 6:1); the "**high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy**" (Isa 57:15); and He that "**sitteth between the cherubims,**" who is "**high above all people,**" whose name is to be praised "**for it is holy**" (Ps. 99:1-3). This Creator/creature distinction is basic to man's relationship with God, and it is of the very essence of sin to destroy it by elevating some aspect of creation over the Creator (**Rom 1:25**).

Second, and more to the point, is God's apartness from all that is unclean and sinful, His holiness of moral purity. In theology God's holiness in this sense is defined as His self-affirming purity wherein His being and will eternally conform to each other. God's moral purity is not passive or static, such as pure marble, but is dynamic and active, the energy of will; not merely the absence of sin or uncleanness, but the self-affirmation of Being. Thus God has a constitutional reaction against anything that contradicts His holiness or that is unlike Himself in this area. Sin, and only that, excites God's holy wrath, His judicial anger and revulsion. Therefore God demands that all people, and especially believers, be like Him in character and conduct (**Matt 5:48; Rom 12:1; Eph 1:4; 5:27; 1 John 2:1**).

⁴ Ernest Pickering, *Biblical Separation* (Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist Press, 1979), p. 163.

Biblical separation, then, is not a foggy notion concocted by some Fundamentalist malcontents or misfits. It was not pragmatically devised during the heat of controversy. It is of God's very nature to be separatistic as defined earlier, and the demands of separatism made upon His people are first of all endemic with the God who called them to be like Him. This does not preclude contact with unbelievers anymore than God's holiness prevents Him from living and interacting with His creatures. But it does preclude making common cause with those who are disobedient; it does prevent one from recognizing them as men of God though they be men of the cloth; it does prohibit unequal yokes (**2 Cor 6:14**) and incompatible unions (**Amos 3:3**).

III. OLD TESTAMENT ILLUSTRATIONS

The Old Testament does not directly assert truth distinctive to the New Testament church. This does not mean that there is no truth in the Old Testament for the church, for all Scripture is God-breathed and therefore all is profitability (**2 Tim 3:16**). Some of that profitability for the church can be found in principles and illustrations that illuminate truth about God and His ways with men.

The Bible makes a fundamental, theological distinction between Israel and the church. The nation Israel was a political/racial entity uniquely related to God in what is called a theocracy. The nature, purposes, and destiny of Israel are distinct from those of the church. The church is not a theocratic kingdom as was Israel (**Exod 19:6**). The church has no political/religious alignment with God theocratically as did Israel. There is no racial preference in the body of Christ as there was in Israel (**Gal 3:28**). Nevertheless, there is a great deal of similarity between Israel and the church,⁵ enough so that what happened to Israel can serve as an example to believers today (**1 Cor 10:6, 11**).

Israel was an elect nation chosen by God out of His sovereign grace and loving good pleasure; the people had nothing whatever with which to commend themselves to God in this matter (**Deut 4:37; 7:68**). As such, Israel was His "peculiar people" or His own special treasured possession (**Exod 19:5; Deut 7:6; Ps. 135:4**). They were a "holy nation" (**Exod 19:6**) or set apart and separated from the other nations as especially belonging to God. They were to be different and thus to exhibit to the other peoples their God-ordained distinctiveness.

As a reminder of Israel's separatistic position, God set up some prohibitions regarding a few ordinary things in life; proscriptions which dealt with their occupation, clothing, worship, and diet. **Deuteronomy 22:2-12** states that Israel could not sow mixed seed in their vineyards, plow with an ox and a donkey yokes together in their fields, nor wear wool and linen blend garments on their bodies. Why did they have these "divinely-ordained division"?⁶ No doubt for the same reason that God gave strict rubrics about what animals Israel could and could not eat or offer in

⁵ Charles L. Feinberg, *Millennialism: The Two Major Views* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), p. 230.

⁶ The title of a sermon on this text by W.B. Riley in October, 1943 at the first Conservative Baptist regional meeting in Chicago. See Richard V. Clearwaters, *The Great Conservative Baptist Compromise* (Minneapolis: Central Seminary Press, n.d.), pp. 68-76.

sacrifice; i.e., the “clean” and “unclean” (**Lev 11; Deut 14**). This reason seems to be given in **Leviticus 20:24-26**. God had separated Israel from other people (v. 24). Israel then was to make these distinctions in the animals because God Himself had separated the clean from the unclean (v. 25). Therefore, Israel was to be holy (separate) for God was holy, and He had severed them from the other peoples as His special possession (v. 26). These laws, then, “symbolized God’s choice of Israel. **They served as constant reminders of God’s electing grace.**”⁷ **Separatism was a way of life**, not just a matter of food, seed, animals, and garments. Their relationship to God and the other nations was depicted in these graphic visual aids. What probably provoked scorn and ridicule from others was a badge of honor for them. The principle of separation was woven by God into their social structure, into the very warp and woof of everyday life.

The principle of separation was behind other relationships and alliances prohibited by God. Good King Jehoshaphat, for example, seemed exercised over the division between Judah and the northern kingdom of Samaria, so he took steps to close the breach. No doubt he rationalized that Judah and Israel were “brethren” and ought to be displaying a united front before the world. God warned him that such common cause would be disastrous because in these compromises he would **“help the ungodly, and love them that hate the Lord” (2 Chron 19:2)**. (Note how undiscerning and misplaced his “love” was!) Nevertheless, he entered into a series of alliances: He allied with Ahab against the Arameans at Ramoth-gilead (**1 Kings 22; 2 Chron 18**); he gave his son Jehoram in marriage to Athaliah, the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel (**2 Kings 8:18**); he was allied with godless Joram against the Moabites (**2 Kings 3:7ff.**); and he had a commercial shipping fleet in joint with Ahaziah which God literally sank (**2 Chron 20:35-37**).

The epitaph on Jehoshaphat’s tomb reads, **“He made peace with the king of Israel” (1 Kings 22:44)**. Imbued with the anti-separatist, “loving” principles of the New Evangelicalism which came long after him, his policy of inclusivism and entanglement with the northern kingdom undid all his good after he was dead. This was a legacy he doubtlessly never intended to leave.

Yes, it is possible to “love” the wrong people in the wrong way (**2 Chron 19:2**) because biblical love is to be informed, discerning, and discriminating (**Phil 1:9-10**). Love in itself tends to be capricious and easily misdirected. It needs to be governed by the Word of God. One could wish that the professing Fundamentalists who have newly discovered how to love and who are letting down the bars of ecclesiastical separation would comprehend what true, biblical love is all about. They would surely be disposed then to show more love to their separatist, Fundamentalist brethren.

IV. THE PRACTICE

Having noted the New Testament teaching of ecclesiastical separation for the church, illustrated by God’s people Israel in the Old Testament, it is now appropriate that guidelines and principles be presented to enable believers more knowledgeably to implement the doctrine in today’s world. Several considerations are in order.

⁷ Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, ed. R.K. Harrison (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1979), p. 183.

First, separation begins with adequate **investigation** of the other party involved. This means becoming informed about the other party's beliefs, testimony or image that is projected, comments made about other men, and attitudes toward various issues and movements including separatist Fundamentalism itself. For example, where does he stand on some of the other points of doctrine beyond the "five fundamentals," such as the Baptist distinctives? This investigation should make one knowledgeable about the other party's ties, associations, influence; what he promotes or condones. What is his reputation? For what is he really known? One should also discern the real intent behind the proposed fellowship or organizational endeavor. Such an investigation will take time and effort but it will prevent embarrassment later, or worse, an unbiblical entanglement.

Second, separation considers the matter of one's **identification**. What will happen to the Fundamentalist's testimony and image as a result of the association or alliance? What will the proposed union do to the separatist church or individual spiritually? How will it affect his character and ability to do the will of God? While some may debate whether or not there is a legitimate "condemnation by association," there is certainly a genuine "corruption by association? That takes place in wrong alliances. **First Corinthians 15:33** says (somewhat paraphrased), "**Bad company corrupts good character.**"

Third, separation takes into consideration the matter of **promotion**. When professing Fundamentalists recognize or have some kind of common cause with those whose alliances or positions are unscriptural, or at least questionable, they lend their influence to the cause of compromise. Fundamentalists must be on guard lest they end up promoting an organization or group against which they would otherwise take a stand. Thus Jehoshaphat "helped the ungodly" by loving those that hated the Lord (**2 Chron 19:2**). When professing Fundamentalist preachers, churches, and organizations publicly link arms with Roman Catholics, Jews, and Mormons on a common moral or political issue, they give the appearance of tacit approval of the unbiblical doctrines and practices of those groups. They end up promoting them directly or indirectly, which would not be done under any other circumstances.

Fourth, separation considers the question of **levels**. There is a personal level of Christian fellowship; the "coffee cup" level. All genuine Christians have certain things in common: The new birth, the indwelling Holy Spirit, a conviction that the Bible is from God and is true, a kinship for the Lord's house and His people, and the like. The doctrinal requirements for this level are rather minimal.

Another level would be the local church. Conditions and requirements for church membership significantly exceed the coffee cup level. Even within the membership, a local church may establish leadership standards for those who serve in public (e.g., ushers), and even higher requirements for Sunday school teachers and deacons.

Still another level would be the cooperative level where different requirements pertain than in other levels. (This level is not necessarily higher than the local church.) On this level there may be gradations of cooperation. The considerations for a city-wide evangelistic crusade may differ from those of a Christian college accrediting association. Would pretribulationism be a necessary criterion for an intercollegiate soccer game, or a no-divorce-under-any-circumstances

rubric for participation in a violin concert? A theological society may have a simple doctrinal statement affirming the verbal inerrancy of the Bible whereas a mission agency or an association of churches would want detailed doctrinal requirements for participation. The previous factors of consideration (investigation, identification, and promotion) would also apply when trying to evaluate an endeavor's level for the purposes of cooperation or separation. Doctrinal statements alone do not guarantee the soundness of an organization's reputation and influence.

All of the above considerations require thoughtful and careful application. Pragmatic arguments such as "souls are being won," or "we can turn America back to God," or "we can reach more people," and the like do not justify unbiblical, heterogeneous associations. If results are the criterion, Moses was quite successful when he struck the rock instead of speaking to it (**Num 20:7-13**); water came out in abundance. But Moses (and Aaron) paid dearly for this disobedience.

God's means of preserving the truth of the Gospel and of all the Word of God has been that of separation. Otherwise a gradualism sets in that eventually will leave the church with no pure doctrine left to preserve, much less any vitality with which to preserve and defend it. The current unrest within some elements of professing Fundamentalism over the doctrine of separation does not bode well for the future. It would appear from the history of the 1940s and 1950s, when a similar dissatisfaction with separatism was being expressed, that the present unrest has a manifest destiny; i.e., yet another brand of evangelicalism with which historic, biblical Fundamentalism cannot unite.