

THE BIBLICAL DOCTRINE OF SEPARATION

Separation is a Biblical Doctrine. It is derived from that part of Scripture which instructs us concerning the difference between good and evil, right and wrong, truth and error.

The practice of Separation is the means by which this difference is demonstrated. Acknowledging a difference is insufficient; it must be shown through some tangible means. Such difference is to be maintained by the people of God as they live in contrast to an unregenerate world. It is also to be maintained among the people of God to prevent the infiltration of error (II Corinthians 6:17; Leviticus 10:10-11).

Separation has been practiced by God's people in every era of human history: by the nation of Israel, by First Century Christians, by Reformers in the 1500's, and by Believers in the early part of the Twentieth Century. It is not a new doctrine and it has perpetual relevance to every generation and to every culture.

Today, however, it is being questioned as a legitimate practice. There are those who seek to convince the people of God that loving toleration of error is more Christ-like than separating from it. Hence, in a time when it is politically incorrect to be against anything, it is becoming increasingly difficult to convince Christians to be distinctive in this world.

It is time the people of God reaffirm that Separation is a Biblical Doctrine and be instructed in its particulars. The alternative is the road to apostasy: having a form of godliness but denying the power thereof - playing church, but lacking the dynamic of genuine faith which includes obedience.

Chapter 1

THE DIVINE ROOTS TO THE DOCTRINE OF SEPARATION

If separation is a Biblical Doctrine, then it originated in the heart of God, the author of Holy Scripture. To be true, it must also be part of God's instruction to those who believe in Him. If He instructs His followers to be separated, then it must be something He practices Himself.

In fact, God is the one who set the precedent for separation. Long before Scripture ever began to be recorded, God separated Himself from doctrinal error and the angelic creatures who insisted upon believing it. He demonstrated consistency in the way He treated mankind, who also changed their beliefs, resulting in their rebellious actions. Throughout the Word of God, our Divine Parent has instructed us concerning the expediency of separating from all those who have rejected the truth and pursued an imaginary alternative set of beliefs.

I. WHY DID GOD SEPARATE HIMSELF FROM SATAN?

As a citizen of heaven, Satan became guilty of perpetrating a serious doctrinal error. He misinterpreted the nature of God, supposing that it was achievable by a lesser creature such as himself (Isaiah 14:13-14). He convinced about one third of the angels that this was possible, bringing about the first theological division in the history of creation (Revelation 12:4).

If doctrinal differences are not grounds for separation, why then did God not attempt to agree with Satan on the essentials? Why did God not set an example of conciliation and love above division?

By separating Satan from Himself, our Heavenly Father established a Divine principle for all His creatures to follow. He did it Himself to demonstrate what is the right thing to do under such circumstances. This supreme example, set by the One whose image believers are to reflect, defined separation as a matter of great importance.

II. WHY DID GOD SEPARATE ADAM AND EVE FROM THE GARDEN OF EDEN?

Adam and Eve met a similar fate as Satan. They enjoyed a beautiful habitation called the Garden of Eden which must have seemed like Heaven on earth. However, they eventually found themselves separated from this place of peace and harmony by the decree of God.

Also like Satan, Adam and Eve's consequences were rooted in their adopting doctrinal error. The human race did not fall into disfavor with God by a mere act of disobedience. Their act of disobedience was a result of a false doctrine they were persuaded to believe. Influenced by the Diabolical one himself, our human parents came to believe that God did not have to be obeyed and that they could assume some form of deification themselves. Only after they believed these things did they eat of the forbidden tree.

Here was God's opportunity to show mankind that a little difference in belief should not hinder fellowship. Why did God not invite Adam and Eve to discuss the things which they still agreed upon? Why did He insist upon being so harsh and remove the first man and woman from their beautiful Garden?

God acted consistently with the way He had treated Satan by demonstrating that doctrinal error has consequences. His compassionate heart, however, would not allow humanity to be sealed into such a condition (Genesis 3:22-24). Unlike His treatment of the

fallen angels, the God of Grace and Mercy provided mankind with a means of redemption. He separated sinful man from fellowship with Himself but promised it could be renewed when man recanted his error and unequivocally agreed that God is right about everything. A human being could prove this faith by accepting God's plan for redemption, but there was no room for compromise (Genesis 4).

III. WHY DID GOD INSIST THAT ISRAEL BE SEPARATED FROM OTHER NATIONS?

When God eventually chose a specific family on earth, through which to express His glory to the world, He gave them some instructions in this matter of separation. The children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were not to inter-marry with people of other families or nations, and strangers who dwelt among them were to be distinguished from true Israelites. This was not rooted in an ethnic bias but in theological conviction (Deuteronomy 7:1-4; Exodus 29:33).

Under modern standards, though, this makes God sound discriminatory and politically incorrect, because it is certainly not a policy of inclusivism or loving tolerance of differences. Present day "enlightened" theologians would certainly have accused God of being a right wing fundamentalist, bigoted and hateful, had they been positioned in ancient times as they are today.

The essential element of faith, however, is believing that God is right about everything. Rather than questioning the wisdom of God (which is an act of doctrinal error), one must believe that God's directives are pure and unquestionably justified.

Consequently, when God says His people should separate themselves from those who believe false doctrines, it is a profoundly wise directive to be obeyed without hesitation or reservation. It is precisely what He did Himself in His relationship with Satan; and He consistently has given this instruction to His followers ever since.

IV. WHY DOES GOD WANT THE CHURCH TO BE EXCLUSIVE RATHER THAN INCLUSIVE?

It is no surprise that the New Testament instruction to the Church includes the same principle of separation.

...Ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.

II Corinthians 6:16-18

God insists that His people are to be an exclusive group. In the same context as the Scripture above, He says the Church is to exclude fellowship with unrighteousness, communion with darkness, concord with Belial, participation with infidels and agreement with idols.

For the same reason that the Israelites were not to inter-marry with people who followed false religions, members of the Body of Christ are not to inter-mingle with the perpetrators of religious beliefs which contradict Scripture. The reason is that such contact exposes the believer of truth to the influence of error which is the first step towards the collapse of faith in God. For the strong in faith who might engage the error in battle, contact may be a plausible activity under the right circumstances. But for the weak in faith who are still learning the intricacies of truth, such contact could be irreversibly destructive.

The application of separation thus understood, suggests a serious danger in true believers cooperating with adherents to false religions for any cause, including social activism. To be specific, marching arm in arm with believers of error in a protest against abortion, or rallying with the same in a movement to motivate men to responsible action, exposes the children of God to a confusion regarding truth. The cause may be just. But cooperation with error even for just causes is a compromise of God's directive to be exclusive.

Conclusion

It is important to understand that separating from others stems more from what one believes than from how one behaves, because a person only behaves according to what he believes. Satan rebelled against God because he believed God was vulnerable. Adam and Eve disobeyed because they believed God's Word was questionable. People act immorally because they have imagined vain beliefs about the human condition, about man's origin and destiny, or about man's accountability to God.

It is also important to understand that separating from others is not an option. As God demonstrated it in His own conduct, He has commanded it for those who wish to reflect His image.

The matter of separating from others is not questioned by all of God's Children, but many struggle with how far to go in carrying it out. Some agree that Christians ought to be separated from the world, but not from worldly practices which are being brought into the church in immense proportions. Some agree that Christians ought to be separated from unbelievers, but not from anyone who uses the name of Christ, regardless of how they use it. Some, on the other hand insist that Christians not only are to be separated from the world and from unbelievers, but also from many who use the name of Christ in compromising ways. Still others insist that Christians ought to be separated from other Christians who are right about many things, but wrong about many others.

It appears to be a dilemma, but only to those who fail to understand the true nature of God. God does not compromise on any issue. God never includes a single error in His fellowship. He is pure, holy, righteous, true and infinitely exclusive of their opposites - and His expectation of those who believe in Him is for the same.

The bottom line is that a person who desires to please God can never be too exclusive in adhering to sound doctrine. Fellowship is not an option for those who believe the Word of God with those who clearly reject it.

Chapter 2

SHOULD SOME CHRISTIANS BE SEPARATED FROM OTHER CHRISTIANS?

The word “separation” strikes a curious note in the Church of our modern world. For a very long time the Church divided itself into smaller and smaller groups called denominations and independent churches. In our time, however, the tide has turned. Instead of remaining divided, various segments of Christianity are moving toward closer association. It began when liberal churches were swept together in the ecumenical movement; but in more recent years, the rushing tide has reached into evangelical circles. Instead of frantically trying to define how they are different, large numbers of Christians are diligently searching for how they are the same.

Certainly, the reunification of the Church would solve a very perplexing problem: diversity within the Church, which is a confusing puzzle to the world looking on. Under the label “Christianity” there are so many different doctrinal beliefs and convictions concerning behavior, that it makes people outside the Church hesitant to join something so diverse within itself. They are forced to wonder if all parts of Christianity can be equally valid, even though they contradict each other. And, if they are not, how does an outsider determine which version of Christianity is the true one, when the Church’s own members cannot agree?

Ecumenists seek to address this problem by sorting through all existing dogmas and opinions, hoping to find common ground among Christians. The suggestion of this process is that the things Christians differ on are not essential to the definition of true Christianity. Supposedly, only those things upon which all Christians agree are essential to the faith and sufficient to define the Church for the world at large. But, because of the wide range of differences that exist, the common ground ends up being an extremely small piece of spiritual real estate. It is difficult to believe that something so small is sufficient to convince a skeptical world that Christendom’s substantial diversity does not matter. Besides, such a watered down, common ground version of Christianity cannot possibly be what God intended for the institution that would be the “pillar and ground of the truth” (I Timothy 4:15).

The question we must address is whether we can afford to ignore any Scripture that is profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness for the sake of unity. If God is right and the whole Bible fits into these categories, what man has the authority to decide that some truth may be sacrificed in order that disagreeing Christians may cooperate? The choice is clear -- do we associate with everyone who calls himself a Christian because of a humanized ecumenical philosophy, or do we separate from some according to divine instruction in the Bible?

Biblical Christianity prescribes both a proper association with adherents to a “like precious faith” and a proper separation from Christians who contradict their identity with the truth. Holy Scripture is clear in its instructions on how to maintain this balance in the Christian life.

I. THE TRUE BASIS OF SEPARATION

For a Christian to know whether to associate with one person or to separate from another, it is essential for him to understand the principles upon which such choices may be made wisely. If he does not, he will have difficulty recognizing what endangers his purity. The

classic illustration for this point is that the United States Bureau of Printing and Engraving trains its employees to identify flaws in the newly printed dollar bills by exposing them in training sessions to perfect bills only! Once they are indoctrinated with a perfect standard, they have no difficulty identifying what is acceptable and what is not.

So what is the basis upon which a Christian associates with or separates from certain individuals or organizations? It is a Biblically correct relationship with Jesus Christ -- which is not as general a statement as it may seem. If the real Christ is in us and His real Spirit is expressing Himself through us, the outward characteristics of our Christianity, such as theology, behavior, appearance, etc., will conform from within to the values of Christ as defined by Scripture. **Christ will not contradict Himself.** Therefore, He will produce the same theology and the same behavior and the same life values in everyone who belongs to him. Thus, all those who have the real Christ will outwardly look very much like each other. Associations will be obvious because of the striking similarity. Separations will be easy because of the obvious differences.

The flaw in the evangelical ecumenism being promoted today is that it uses an erroneous basis for getting together. Christian unity, they say, is not based upon the striking similarity of all those who belong to Jesus Christ, but upon the ability of those who use His name to lay aside their differences. This raises a serious question - from where do the differences come? They certainly do not come from Jesus Christ, because He would never lead two different people to believe contradictory things about himself or anything else. For at least one of any two contradictory beliefs, there must always be a source other than Christ. And if a "Christian" is being molded by a source other than Christ, one must be concerned about the effect this un-Christ influence will have on Christ's true followers (Biblical Christians) if they join hands.

The Bible cautions the disciples of Christ against associations with those who claim to follow the Lord but whose doctrine and behavior give evidence they really do not (I Corinthians 5:7-11; Romans 16:17; Galatians 1:7-9; Philippians 3:14-21; Colossians 2:4-8; II Thessalonians 3:6,14; II Peter 2:1-2; II John 10; Revelation 2:14,20). It also instructs that both the error and the people who proclaim it are clearly identified so that less discerning believers may guard against associating with potentially harmful influences. Paul said "mark them" (Romans 16:17) and "note that man" (II Thessalonians 3:14). Talking in generalities about those from whom believers ought to be separated is not always sufficient. Sometimes it is necessary to be very specific.

II. THE PERSONAL ASPECT OF SEPARATION

The Scriptures talk about the togetherness of the people who make up the body of Christ. Ephesians 4:14-16 says it this way: "That we...may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: from whom the whole body **fitly joined together** and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love." In other places, the Bible uses words like fellowship, unity, assembling together, and oneness of mind to emphasize the importance of the integration of believers. How sweet is the fellowship of the Saints! Or is it?

The people who make up the Church of Jesus Christ are definitely not fitly joined together. Nor has there ever really been a time in which this has been the case. Since the Church at Corinth in the first century, there have been divisions and schisms among those who claim to be God's people. How could it be that the group which is intended to be so much together could have so many lines of separation within it? Does the Bible really support such fragmentation? Or, has the doctrine of separation erroneously led to the departmentalization of all those who are truly part of the body of Christ?

The Bible does indeed instruct Christians to separate from other Christians along two

lines: (1) those who claim identity with Jesus Christ but fail to confirm that identity with purity in their behavior, and (2) those who claim identity with Jesus Christ but fail to confirm that identity with purity in what they believe.

1. Separating from Disorderly Believers.

God's Word is very clear regarding a believer's withdrawal of fellowship from disorderly brethren. One category of this type is found in I Corinthians 5:11 where several behavioral problems are said to dictate separation: including fornication, covetousness, idolatry, railing, drunkenness, and extortion. Another category of this type is found in II Thessalonians 3:6-15 where the disorderly brethren may not be committing heinous sins but they are failing to conform to Biblical instruction on responsible Christian behavior. These also are to be shunned.

The purpose of such withdrawal is to impress the guilty person with the error of his ways and to direct him to re-evaluate his participation in such activities. Ultimately the separating believer is to seek an opportunity to offer forgiveness and comfort, confirming that the withdrawal of fellowship was based on love and not on snobbish piety (II Corinthians 2:6-8). This suggests that any association with disorderly Christians should be confined to exhortation and restoration ministries and not include recreation or fellowship.

The moral dimension of Scripture requires that God's children not touch the unclean thing (II Corinthians 6:17). Before we are saved we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6). However, when we are born again by faith in Jesus Christ, we are made clean and our scarlet sinfulness is made white as snow (Isaiah 1:16-18). Being clothed with the cleanliness of God's righteousness (II Corinthians 5:21), we are automatically separated from the filth of a world saturated with ungodliness (II Corinthians 6:14-16). It is our duty to honor our association with Jesus Christ by refraining even from an appearance of touching unclean things (I Thessalonians 5:22).

Unfortunately, some Christians have the potential of bearing an immoral influence when they are guilty of unrestricted indulgence in the works of the flesh. It is, therefore, not safe to spend a lot of time with people like this, lest we be enticed by them to touch the unclean things which have spoiled their testimonies (I Corinthians 15:33).

2. Separating From Doctrinally Impure Believers

Separating from professing believers who are doctrinally impure is a much more intense situation. They may appear to be very moral people and upstanding members of the Christian community. Yet, fellowship and cooperative ministry between these people and Biblical Christians offers a serious threat to the integrity of the Church.

The reason for separating along doctrinal lines involves a policy of protectionism. As Paul admonished the Corinthians, "I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtlety, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ" (II Corinthians 11:3). Fellowship with those who fail the test of sound doctrine threatens the purity of those who pass. Separation is necessary in order to prevent the leaven of false doctrine from corrupting their minds.

Laying aside doctrinal differences is not really a proof that we love one another anyway. Instead, it is a destructive force that eats away at the truth. Fellowship and cooperative ministry among those who disagree doctrinally waters down the value of the inerrancy of Scripture. A willingness to compromise what one believes communicates a lack of complete confidence in the words holy men of God wrote as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. Are they true or not? If they are, they must be non-negotiable.

The purpose of doctrinal separation is to challenge people to question the validity of what they believe. Ultimately, we hope for an opportunity to exhort and convince (II Timothy 2:24-26; Titus 1:9). Wisdom, of course, must be used in distinguishing between the opportunities to correct false doctrine and the danger it poses in a context of fellowship and cooperation. The only reason a Biblical Christian should have contact with adherents to false doctrine is to exhort, teach and rescue. All other contact risks the purity of what a Biblical Christian has obtained in Christ.

Isolation from believers of false doctrine may be a necessary step. II John declares that such should not be received into one's home, or into a local congregation. Romans 16:17 states that those who hold to contrary doctrine should be avoided. II Peter 2:1-3 proclaims that the failure to clean a house doctrinally can be destructive to the Body of Christ because of the contrary influence false teachers can have. These are all very definite statements about total avoidance of contact with those who promote unbiblical doctrine. They eliminate any and all forms of cooperation for the purpose of ministry or fellowship among those who do not agree doctrinally, regardless of how good the ecumenists make it sound.

Conclusion

The current fragmented state of the church is discouraging. Compacting is not happening. The joints are not supplying what is needed. There is ineffectual working in every part and the body at large is not being increased unto the edifying of itself in love.

There is a real solution, however -- accept the **full volume** of Holy Scripture as the exhaustive definition of true Christianity, full of doctrines to believe and guidelines for living: all of which is essential and none of which can be laid aside (II Timothy 3:16-17). Believe that true Christianity is thorough, substantive and authoritative; and, that it brings its adherents together, unified in their distinction from everything inside and outside the Church which does not agree.

Separation for the Biblical Christian will be a logical outworking of his spiritual wisdom. He will understand its necessity to protect the weak, but he will constantly seek opportunity to admonish and correct the errant. He will know when and how to dine with sinners without damaging his identity and when it would be better to stay away. He will be able to discern when to associate with disobedient brethren, so that he may teach them the way more perfectly, and when to withdraw, demonstrating to them the error of their ways.

His associations will also stem from a mature understanding of Biblical truth. They will be confined to those who are strikingly similar to himself and to those whose doctrine and living standards provide a compatibility that is natural and not forced by compromise.

It is unfortunate that separation is as much a necessity in the Christian life as association, but real unity in the Body of Christ can only be secured by an unedited agreement in Biblical truth. The lesser process of agreeing on the essentials and elevating "love" above truth actually destroys the integrity of the Church rather than enhancing it. God Himself says it best in His own rhetorical question, "Can two walk together, except they be agreed?" (Amos 3:3).