

# The Biblical Doctrine of Separation

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*“To identify oneself with truth is to plant oneself in the heart of a storm from which there is no escape for life.”* So wrote Dr. D. M. Panton in a stirring article entitled, *“The Defense of the Truth.”*

Few are anxious to plunge themselves into the teeth of a howling storm, and yet to lift the banner of God’s truth is to bring down upon one’s head all the raging storms of hell. For this reason those who hold strongly, and uncompromisingly to the whole revealed truth of God have ever found themselves a despised company and a pilgrim people. God has continually exhorted His people to walk in purity and holy separation and to keep themselves *“unspotted from the world.”* (James 1:27). It is this doctrine in all its ramifications that we commonly speak of as the *“doctrine of separation.”* What is the Biblical basis of this doctrine?

*“. . . that they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in all things. For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared unto all men, teaching us that denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; Looking for the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ; Who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works. These things speak, and exhort, and rebuke with all authority. Let no man despise thee.”* (Titus 2:10-15)

## The Position of Separation

There are three lines of truth included in a scriptural position of separation -- the separation of believers from religious apostasy, the separation of believers from the world, and the separation of the church and the state. We will look at one of them in the email study.

1. *The Separation of Believers From Religious Apostasy.* There is nothing that God hates more than false religion. The Bible abounds with denunciation of it. In no area were the Old Testament prophets more scathing than in their rebuke of false religion.

The Book of Exodus vividly describes the unyielding nature of God’s opposition to mixed worship. In Exodus 5:1 God’s challenge is lifted, *“Let my people go,”* the demand of God for the complete and immediate separation of His people. No doubt many of the Israelites would have been content to establish an altar to Jehovah God alongside of the heathen altars of Egypt. Then they would have given the Egyptians the impression that the God of the Israelites was no better than their own. But God was and is the true God. Worship to Him must be conducted by a separated people in a separated place. This is a principle found throughout the Word of God.

Obedience to God’s command of separation drove Elijah to walk a lonely pathway and be reviled as a *“troubler of Israel”* because he would not cooperate with the apostate religion of his day. What a price he paid--loneliness, tears, reviling, hatred! Obadiah basked in the favor of Ahab. But who received the *“word of the Lord,”* fearlessly met the prophets of apostasy, led a great spiritual awakening in Israel and brought rain from heaven? Not the court preacher, Obadiah, with this smooth talk and inoffensive message, but the *“troubler of Israel,”* the separated Elijah!

The Bible is also quite plain in its opposition to mixed service, God does not want His people to link themselves in religious service with those who deny His Word. The godly king of Judah, Jehoshaphat, *“joined affinity with Ahab,”* the apostate king of the northern kingdom in order to go to battle against a common enemy. The courageous prophet, Micaiah, whom Ahab hated because he told him the truth, was summoned before the two kings to prophesy concerning the joint venture. Warned by the messenger who fetched him that it would be best if he were cooperative and

agreeable, Micaiah nevertheless spoke the truth as God gave it to him. He forthrightly told Jehoshaphat that it was wrong for him to unite with the apostate Ahab for any reason. The prophet Jehu endorsed Micaiah's viewpoint when he spoke to Jehoshaphat upon his return from the battle and said, "*Shouldst thou help the ungodly and love them that hate the Lord.*" (II Chron. 19:2) The entire passage teaches one great truth--it is never right for the true people of God to cooperate in spiritual endeavors with those who are enemies of God's revealed truth. It is a serious thing to join with those who deny the Word of God in any way. Jehoshaphat did not help Ahab; Ahab ruined Jehoshaphat.

Moving into the New Testament where the basis of Church doctrine is found there is an emphasis upon separation from false doctrine. One modern evangelist has declared that "*when it comes to separation from other Christians, the only Biblical basis is on moral grounds.*" This same man indicts severely all those who have separated from denominations in which apostasy abounds. Is it true that there is no doctrinal, but only moral grounds for separation?

Paul apparently did not think so. He wrote, "*Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them that are causing the divisions and occasions of stumbling, contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and turn away from them.*" (Rom. 1:16, 17) He did not command that they "*turn away,*" because of moral deviations, but rather because of errors, "*contrary to the doctrine*" of the apostolic church. While this portion of Scripture is much maligned by some contemporary writers as affording no basis for separatism, it nevertheless sets forth clearly the doctrine of separation. Modern non-separatists have declared that Paul's remarks here are restricted to the separation of the Corinthians from idolatry and that to apply them to anything else is to wrench the verses from their context. It is evident, however, that no such limitations are required to the application of the principles Paul enunciates. The principle of separation is an eternal and universal one, and it was being applied to the church at Rome. This principle applies to the enemies of God and the children of darkness. We are to befriend the lost and seek to reach them, so Paul is not speaking of a Biblical approach in reaching those who are unsaved.

Then what about II Timothy 3:1-5 where Paul not only condemns the loose living which will characterize the last days, but also underscores the false doctrine which will prevail (a form of godliness) and gives the solution for true believers -- "*turn away*" from both.

John, the apostle of love, writes sharply in his second epistle against those who bring false doctrine into the church of God. "*Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God . . . If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: for he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds.*" (II John 10-11) Observe that it is doctrine, not life, which is the primary cause of separation here. Nor can the phrase "*doctrine of Christ:*" be simply limited to the doctrine of Christ's deity. Westcott declares that the phrase refers to the "*doctrine which Christ brought and which He brought first in His own person and then through His followers.*" (B. F. Westcott, "*The Epistles of John,*" Pg. 219)

Charles Spurgeon, in a clarion call in his day of the "*Down-Grade*" controversy among the British Baptists, declared "*At any rate, cost what is may, to separate ourselves from those who separate themselves from the truth of God, is not alone our liberty, but our duty.*" (R. B. Cook, "*Rev. Charles Spurgeon,*" Pg. 246)

2. *The Separation of Believers from the World:* Often a weak emphasis on doctrinal and ecclesiastical purity produces a weak emphasis on personal separation from the world. The present-day drift of many evangelical churches into formerly shunned paths of worldliness is alarming. One contemporary Christian leader severely criticized the "Fundamentalist" for their insistence upon strict separation from the world. In part he writes, "*. . . the fundamentalist takes an absolute stand against dancing... though David danced before the Lord (II Sam. 6:14), the fundamentalist will*

not. . . The fundamentalist laces religion with so many negative burdens that he often deprives the man of the street the most innocent forms of recreation.” (Edward Carnell, “The Case For Orthodox Theology.” Pg. 124)

While Christians must beware of pure legalism and caustic harshness in dealing with the problem of worldliness, they must also shun the temptation to lower their high standards of Christian conduct in face of the licentiousness of this generation. Scripture is plain: “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. . . For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world.” (John 2:15-16) There is, of course the problem in every age of applying that admonition to the contemporary situation. Many have too circumscribed an idea of “worldliness,” confining it only to certain unwholesome pleasures of the world. While the apostle’s words go far beyond these, they do include these. **We must be separated unto God not just from sin.**

A shallow notion is abroad in evangelical churches that since we are “under grace” particular sins of worldliness should never be mentioned. The plea is often made that these matters should be left to the individual consciences of believers. The failure of many pulpits to particularize sin has brought spiritual drought to hundreds of churches. Paul clearly states that grace is not lawlessness, but that it is in itself a discipline factor. (Rom. 6:1-6) Grace has come into believer’s hearts, “teaching us that denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world.” (Titus 2:12) the world “teaching” refers to “child-training,” including discipline. Grace promotes discipline, standards of godliness, separation from worldly lusts. (Rom. 6:16-18)

3. **The Separation of Church and State:** The early Anabaptists clearly saw that the Church must be “free from the state in order that it might be free unto God.” (Theron Price, “The Anabaptist View of the Church” in “What is the Church?” edited by Duke McCall, Pg. 106) History reveals that the entanglement of church and state prohibits the church from being “free unto God.” the history of state churches is a history of failure, corruption and compromise. The state should give way to the church.

Our early history as a nation proves that wherever a state church was formed (and it was tried in the new colonies a number of times) there was persecution meted out to those who did not accept the doctrines, position or power of the state church. Many were persecuted unto beatings, being placed in the stocks and even death at the hands of religionists who were supporting a state church that would have control over the consciences of the masses. Many a Baptist was persecuted for his stand against such actions. The accounts of history in the book, “This Day In Baptist History,” written by Dr. E. Wayne Thompson and Dr. David L. Cummins are exceedingly interesting. In the foreword they have written the statement, “Because true Baptists have held firmly to Biblical principles, the fires of persecution have raged about them, often obliterating entire communities and vast libraries of records concerning their history and principles.” (Preface, pg. vi)

### The Problems of Separation

Present day separatists face a number of problems that are obvious and ongoing over the past decades as I have witnessed them as a pastor since 1956.

1. **Ecumenicism:** There is a tremendous emphasis at the present time on the unity of the visible church. The Nation and World Council of Churches are obsessed with this theme. We all witness efforts to bring about unity regardless of doctrinal compromise, and those who will not support such efforts are usually considered to be bigoted, proud, negative, and unchristian.

Many denominations are merging in an effort too “heal the breaches,” which they feel shame

Protestantism before the world. There is an ever increasing note of ecumenicity among evangelicals that has grown for decades. They speak of the “*sin of divided Protestantism*” as glibly as their liberal neighbors. Separatists are charged with “*dividing the body of Christ.*”

“*Denominationalism is sinful,*” is often heard or at least there are many who feel that way and there is a move to start many autonomous churches that are unaffiliated with any organization. Then there are many Baptist churches that are removing the word Baptist from its name or possibly totally renaming the church with the idea of a greater acceptance on the part of the unchurched. “*If we all believe why can’t we all get together?*” - is the thought of many. One evangelical observes, “*The apostles went everywhere preaching the gospel, but sectarians go everywhere preaching the Episcopal view of succession, the Lutheran view of the real presence, the Baptist view of immersion, the Methodist view of relativism, the protestant view of speaking in tongues.*” (Carnell, op. cit., pgs. 131)

Such writers forget one thing -- the apostles preached far more than just “*the gospel.*” The gospel is the message of salvation to sinners through Christ’s death. The New Testament witness encompassed far more than this. Paul said that his duty was “*To declare unto you the whole counsel of God.*” (Acts 20:27) This counsel included the entire revelation contained in the Bible. It was not a truncated but a full-orbed message. Those who preach the complete message of God will find, as their forerunners have found in the past centuries -- that there is no recourse but to separate from those who do not. No pleas for a unified church should cause a man to deny or ignore the truth. We are urged to contend for the faith. (Jude 3)

2. ***Pietism:*** An unscriptural pietism has pervaded Christendom. To these pietist sharp conflicts over doctrine are inconsistent with love. Pietism says, “*the mark of true discipleship is love not doctrine.*” Most unfortunately, this type of thinking is exerting considerable influence, not only among liberals (where one would expect to find it), but also among conservatives. Men who for years have stood staunchly against compromise with liberalism and neoorthodoxy are now advocating in the interests of love, a renewed effort to find common ground for unity sake. But what about the question: “*Can two walk together, except they be agreed?*” (Amos 3:3)

Forgotten is the fact that the New Testament emphasizes sound doctrine as well as love. We must consider truth and love. If love reigns then love will gradually accept anything, if truth reigns then what we love is conditioned by truth. Sound doctrine must be held in love, but love without sound doctrine is a body with a skeleton structure, a theological jellyfish. For good reasons Paul warns Timothy :*Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine.*” A study of the Books of I and II Timothy and Titus would reveal many verses where the writer under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit emphasizes doctrine. It is the basis of every aspect of faith and practice. We are urged to walk in sound doctrine, to be nourished up in the sound doctrine of the Word of God.

Biblical separation must never abdicate a strong, Scriptural doctrinal position for the purpose of demonstrating love. The strongest love which one can have for God and man is that love which is rooted in the entire truth of God, and which will not deviate therefrom.

3. ***Intellectualism:*** Someone has correctly observed that while Paul was an intellectual he was opposed to intellectualism. There is a difference between “*wisdom*” and the “*love of wisdom.*” The former is to be desired, the latter is that parading and worshipping of wisdom which the Bible deplors. “*Be careful that nobody spoils your faith, through intellectualism or high-sound nonsense.*” (Col. 2:8; Phillips’s translation.)

Intellectualism has focused its attack upon dispensational premillennialism now for many years. Opposition to and ridicule of this system of truth seems to be the mark of intellectualism in many evangelical circles. Dispensationalist have been charged with producing lamentable divisions within the church.

Dr. George Carlson, in his excellent manuscript published several years ago, states, “*The pronounced view is that Premillennialism is too literal a view of the Bible and is not intellectual at all . . . hence, when the new evangelism intellectualism looks about for ‘scholarship’ to capture the intellectual field ‘per se’ and lays hold on the works of Reformed theologians believing it has found what it needs, it also encounters a polemic against the Premillennialism in which it was nurtured.*” The impact of Reformed amillennial theology upon evangelical circles of late is not to be dismissed lightly. Several conservative publishing houses are amillennial in sympathies and produce a continual stream in opposition to premillennialism.

## The Practice of Separation

The Lord Jesus Christ is our perfect example of a separated walk before God. He was “*separate from sinners.*” (Heb. 7:26) and yet He loved sinners. He is the only perfectly-balanced personality who has ever lived. He was “*full of grace and truth,*” (John 1:14) both equally proportioned. “*Grace is divine love. . . truth is the reality of things adequately set in the light.*” (F. Godet, “Commentary on the Gospel of John,” I, pg. 368-69.) Christ had both grace and truth in perfect relationship.

One of the problems that has plagued the modern evangelical world is the lack of this combination. Christians are often totally lopsided. Some have truth (a good position) but little grace (a poor practice). Others are strong on love, and weak on truth. Christ was full of both. The Scriptures speak of the blend of truth and love.

1. **The Spirit of Grace:** A spirit of grace must be characterized by words of grace. The Scriptures say, “*Let your speech be always with grace, season with salt. . .*” (Col. 4:6) Graciousness of speech must accompany proclamation of the truth. Uncomplimentary personal remarks and unkind attitudes toward those with whom we disagree are not becoming to the child of God. And in such attitudes we have to admit we lack the fruit of the Spirit. (Gal. 5:15-17; 22-23) By such things many have been repulsed who might otherwise have been won to the cause of separation. The unwise use of descriptive adjectives, careless name-calling, a bitter spirit, and personal animosity may deter the truth from having its greatest impact. Such things are not necessary to a virile separation.

**Thoughts of grace flow from a spirit of grace.** Christians seek to bring into “*captivity every thought to be obedience of Christ.*” (II Cor. 10:5) Are our thoughts about others full of grace, or do we constantly suspect their motives and actions? Some who bear the banner of separatism are like two psychiatrists who met in the hospital hall one morning. One said cheerfully, “*Good morning.*” the other nodded walked into his office, stopped, meditated, and finally said, “*Hum, wonder what he meant by that?*” Some minds see in every letter, greeting, or casual fellowship a sinister motive or a doctrinal deviation. Spiritual discernment is one thing; continual suspicion is another.

The Lord Jesus, in His incarnate state, “*increased in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man.*” (Luke 2:52) Jesus Christ was a gentleman. He treated His fellow- men with courtesy even though He often rebuked their sin and error. Separatists should pattern their lives after His life. It is not a mark of compromise or weakness to demonstrate Christian tact and courtesy. Gracious humility and a quiet, teachable spirit will do much to advertise the truth for which we stand.

2. **A Spirit of Truth:** Our Lord was not only full of grace, however, but also full of truth. He did not manifest spineless or purposeless grace. It was grace inseparably linked with truth. It was the ideal of Paul who exhorted the Ephesians to “*speak the truth in love.*” (Eph. 4:15)

**The truth must always be clear.** “*Presenting an issue sharply is by no means a popular business at the present time. Clear-cut definition of terms in religious matters, bold facing of the logical*

*implications of religious views, is by many persons regarded as an impious proceeding.*” (J. Gresham Machen, “*Christianity and Liberalism*”, pg. 1) Servants of God are to be “. . . *nourished in the words of faith and of good doctrine*” (I Tim. 4:6). Our statement of the faith must be clearly expressed. We must be sure we have the facts. How often someone comes blazing into pint with charges of contentions not fully supported by facts but when the facts are at hand, the truth should be given. Innuendoes, personal jibes, and sarcastic ridicule should be avoided.

**A mere statement of truth, however, is not always enough.** Truth must sometimes be defended. The popular idea that “*truth defend itself*” is not supported by the New Testament. Goodspeed, in the introduction to his translation of the New Testament, notes that approximately one-third of the New Testament is taken up with the battle against error. Paul, In II Timothy 2:15-19, boldly defended the truth and named the men who held error (Hymaneous and Alexander).

What better ministry could be had than that of the Old Testament separatist, Nehemiah, whose co-laborers carried both a sword and a trowel, one in one hand, and one in the other. (Neh. 4:16-18). To wield the sword is not enough; we must also build the wall. To build the wall is not enough; we must also wield the sword. We must be separated from sin and occupied with the Word and work of God.

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(The content of this article is based upon a leaflet written by Dr. Earnest Pickering, Th. D., entitled “*The Biblical Doctrine of Separation.*” It was written sometime in the 1950’s, or ‘60’s.

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