

Faith Pulpit

View on Ecclesiastical Separation

FBBC&TS has long been associated with the separatist movement. It has stood against religious apostasy, and sought to maintain a Biblical position in the area of ecclesiastical relationships. Its institutional Statement of Belief states: “We believe that progressive sanctification involves separation not only from ungodly living but also from ungodly teaching; that though we love all men and seek their salvation, there are areas in which we cannot have fellowship with unbelievers; that, in areas of ecclesiastical fellowship, it may be necessary to separate even from our brethren in Christ, if they in turn maintain fellowship with unbelievers” (FBBC College Catalog, 1992–1995, p. 15).

Although the fundamentalist-modernist controversy of the early part of the century is past, the present theological trends prevalent in much of evangelical Christianity make the issue of ecclesiastical separation just as relevant today. The old modernism may have died out, but newer forms of theological liberalism have risen up to take its place – all committed to the premise that the historical, scientific, and other factual content in the Bible should be viewed as containing error. And even within so-called Bible-believing circles there are those who agree with this liberal concept of a Bible with errors in it. Thus, one is faced today with mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic denial of the Bible’s factual accuracy and those with evangelical backgrounds and credentials agreeing with them—yet continuing to teach at well-known evangelical schools. Other Bible-believing leaders and institutions, while not condoning this major departure from historic Christianity, act as if it did not exist or is no big deal. What is the Scriptural authority for ecclesiastical separation?

I. The Admonitions Concerning Separation

Paul addresses the issue of organized religious cooperation as it relates to unbelievers and as it relates to believers. First, note what he says about unbelievers.

A. The believer is not to be yoked with unbelieving apostates

1. Separation from unbelievers is commanded in 2 Corinthians 6:11–7:1. “. . . Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers... Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord....” The context of the passage, as well as the tenor of the Epistle indicates that the unbelievers in question were corrupters of the Word (2:17), critics of Paul (10:10), preachers of another gospel (11:4), and ministers of Satan (11:13–15). Paul later warned Timothy of apostates who would come “. . . having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away” (2 Tim. 3:1–5). The passage is as relevant today as it was the day it was written.
2. Reception of false teachers is forbidden in 2 John 9–11. “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.” Association with those who deny the basic doctrines of Christ is forbidden.
3. Rebuke of apostates is commanded in Titus 1:9–13. The man of God should not only hold the truth, he should also refute error. The “unruly and vain talkers and deceivers” who “subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not” are to be rebuked “sharply.” Paul warns us to expose and refute false teachers ... preach the word;... reprove, rebuke, exhort with all ... doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth . . . But watch thou in all things...” (2 Timothy 4:2–5). Those who pervert the gospel are under God’s curse (Galatians 1:6–9). Certainly this means that discerning Christians should not be a part of denominational fellowships or other religious organizations which condone or tolerate unbelieving apostates in them.

B. No fellowship with disobedient brethren

While some would allow that one ought to separate from unbelievers, they nevertheless claim that one believer should never break fellowship with another believer. But the Bible is clear that there are conditions under which a believer is not to fellowship with another believer.

1. Immoral believers are to be disciplined. Church discipline includes separation from other believers. First Corinthians 5 is devoted to this matter. The church was to “deliver [the man guilty of fornication] to Satan ... Purge out therefore the old leaven ... I wrote unto you ... not to company with fornicators: ... if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat ... Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person.” Sometimes a believer must break fellowship with another believer.
2. Disorderly believers are to be avoided. “Now we command you ... that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us” (2 Thess. 3:6). The disorderliness is in the area of practical application of truth which had been taught. Paul once rebuked Peter for behavior which was inconsistent with his doctrine (Galatians 2:11–13). Inconsistent, unscriptural behavior is subject to reproof and if not corrected, the believer is to withdraw or separate himself from those who refuse to be corrected.
3. Disobedient believers are to be avoided. “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. Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother” (2 Thess. 3:14, 15). Disobedience here includes both doctrinal and practical matters. It includes the written as well as the oral teachings of Paul (2:15; 3:6).
4. Divisive brethren are to be avoided. Paul wrote: “Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them” (Romans 16:17). Erroneous doctrine is divisive. Avoid those whose erroneous teachings cause

divisions. Since the Scripture does teach that one should separate from unbelievers, then those who do not do so are disobedient to that teaching, and they should be avoided.

What does this all mean? It means that the Biblical church will not be a part of any association or ecumenical campaign which includes cooperation with liberals. Does not this mean that a local church should not fellowship with other evangelical churches which cooperate with liberals.

II. The Aim of Separation

Since the separatist position is understandably unpopular with those who refuse to take such a stand, they often ask, “Would it not be better to emphasize love and work for good among these people, and in so doing, convince them of the truth?” We reject this reasoning because of the goals of ecclesiastical separation: Consider three goals of Biblical separation.

A. Reverence toward Scripture

One does not “do evil, that good may come” (Romans 3:8). One should never disobey the word of God, regardless of the “good” which may result from disobedience, even if it includes evangelism. “To obey is better than sacrifice” (1 Samuel 15:22). True reverence for God’s word is expressed by obedience to it.

B. Restraint of sin

“Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear” (1 Timothy 5:20). When Ananias and Sapphira were disciplined by God, “. . . great fear came upon all the church...” (Acts 5:11). As it is sometimes necessary to remove cancerous tissue from the body to retard its spread, so it is sometimes necessary to separate from false teachings lest the contamination spread.

C. Restoration of sinners

False teachers are to be sharply rebuked “... that they may be sound in the faith” (Titus 1:13). The brother overtaken in a fault is to be restored (Galatians 6:1). A disciplined brother who repents is to be forgiven, comforted, and loved (2 Cor. 2:5–11).

III. The Attitude of the Separatist

Separatists have sometimes justly been criticized for a negative, harsh, unloving attitude. It is possible and desirable to hold the truth in love. Ecclesiastical separation is based on submission to the Word of God. Obedience to God, however, is not a cause for pride, nor for a holier-than-thou attitude. As one exercises separation, he should be solicitous toward self “lest [he] also be tempted” (Galatians 6:1). When a believer gives attention to obeying one area of God’s word, one must guard against being tempted by Satan to be disobedient in another area. While separation from a disobedient brother is

commanded, sympathy toward those who are confused is commendable: “Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother” (2 Thess. 3:15). Still, one must be stern toward those who are disobedient. One who earnestly contends for the faith (Jude 3) may sometimes have to name false teachers (1 Tim. 1:19, 20), shun them (2 Tim. 2:16–18), and reject the unresponsive (Titus 3:10).

Since the Bible speaks so clearly about the separation issue, it is dismaying to see so much confused thinking and disobedient response to this subject. By standing apart from error, compromise, and those who are identified with them, we desire to stand for, defend, and live out our lives both individually and institutionally the clear and consistent teaching of the Word of God.

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