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Practical Separation

The Bible commands Christians to separate even from those who give evidence of having been born again, yet who refuse to follow the teachings of the Apostles in matters of practice and Christian living. Yes, there is a time when we are to separate even from our own brethren (1 Co. 5:11; 2 Th. 3:6; 1 Ti. 6:5; Mt. 18:15-18).

In all of these passages the writer is speaking of a separation from true brethren. This type of separation refers primarily to discipline within one particular local church, but the principle goes far beyond this. Not only are we bound to keep the letter of the Word of God, but also its spirit, its principles.

Take 2 Th. 3:6 for an example. Immediately after giving the command to separate from a disorderly brother, the Apostle Paul gives an illustration of such. He mentions some who were walking "disorderly, working not at all, but are busybodies" (2 Th. 3:11-12). In v. 14, he repeats the command to separate from such. Is this command to be limited only to those who are disobedient in the matter of employment? It would not be reasonable to limit the passage in such a way.

The Holy Spirit is giving a principle regarding fellowship and separation. We are to separate from any brother who walks disorderly and who refuses to repent of his disobedience. The matter of employment is one example. The command would apply to our relationship with a brother who is persistently disobedient to any apostolic teaching. Would God tell us to separate from a brother who is disobedient in the matter of employment but not require that we separate from a brother who is disobedient in the matter of baptism, or in following the N.T. pattern for church government, or any number of other commands which are at least as important as whether or not one is employed? We believe these commands to separate from unrepentant, disorderly brethren are principles which cover disobedience to all apostolic instruction.

The Bible makes a distinction between conscious, willful rebellion toward Scripture and the imperfection of striving to obey yet falling short because of the old Adamic nature. It is one thing for a Christian to fail, yet to be continually aiming for the mark of perfect obedience to all of God's commands. It is quite another matter for a Christian to set his heart against obeying some portion of God's Word. Herein lies the distinction we are to look for among Christians. The one who has set his heart in a conscious, willful way to ignore or disobey some plain teaching of the Scriptures is to be avoided, separated from.

This would apply to groups as well as to individual Christians. There are Christian denominations and organizations which have determined that they will not rebuke sin, that they will not separate from evil and false teaching, that they will not earnestly contend for the faith, that they will not be concerned for certain portions of apostolic instruction. God has told us what to do toward such rebellion. We are to separate from those involved in it. To fellowship with those who have determined not to obey God's Word in certain matters is to sin against God.

How do we practice biblical separation?

I. Be discerning (I Th. 5:21). Biblical separation begins with spiritual and doctrinal discernment. I cannot separate from that which is false if I do not know truth from error! See also I Col. 1:9; 3:16; Ph. 1:9; He. 5:12-14. This is where separation begins. Each child of God is to study the Scriptures intently and prayerfully that he might know sound doctrine. He is to exercise CAREFUL discernment that he might know truth from error, good from evil, fidelity from compromise.

2. Maintain an earnest proclamation and defense of the faith (Jude 3).

Jude exhorts his readers to contend for the faith, not because he loved contention, but because it is necessary to preserve the faith from corruption. He indicates that he would rather write concerning the common salvation but it had become necessary to take up the sword. Here is a picture of the well-balanced Christian: he loves to proclaim the gospel, but when necessary he will take up the sword in defense of the gospel.

Jude did not say, as some say today who wish to avoid the reproach of a liberal ecclesiasticism, that all one has to do is to preach the gospel, or the Word of God is its own defense. The real Christian has to contend for the faith in these times. Jude would have had scant sympathy for that type of ministerial self-righteousness which often says, "I preach the Gospel and let these issues alone." This convinces some people that he is not a "wicked" separatist, but it also convinces a compromising ecclesiasticism that they have nothing to fear from this ex-Gidionite, who has a number of reasons for not serving in Gideon's army.

The prophets contended for the faith within the structure of religious Israel, often to their own death. John the Baptist contended for the faith, incurred the enmity of the religious leadership and was beheaded for denouncing sin by name in high places. Jesus contended for the faith, that the Messianic hope and promise was fulfilled in Himself and was murdered. Stephen contended for the faith that Christianity was the fulfillment of the Old Testament faith and was stoned to death. The evangelical inclusivists of our day, though, seem to be alive and doing fairly well! [Inclusivist' refers to those who promote ecumenical union and disregard doctrinal and moral purity.]

The greatest weapon against theological corruption and the moral rot of society would be a vigorous, decisive contention for the faith by every evangelical. The indecisive

contention for the faith so common with evangelical inclusiveness, a contention which does not press for a real decision, is not an adequate substitution for separation. Real, vigorous, decisive contention for the faith within the liberal denominations has been reduced to a polite, pious murmur which they love to call 'witnessing.' THE NEW TESTAMENT NOT ONLY CALLS FOR WITNESSING TO THE FAITH, BUT CALLS FOR CONTENTION FOR THE FAITH"

3. Mark those who err (Rom. 16:17). Not only are we to know the truth and to be discerning, not only are we to aggressively contend for the truth, but we are to identify false teachers and apostate Christian groups by name. In this way we protect ourselves and others. This was Paul's custom. Consider the following examples: 1 Ti. 1:19-20; 2 Ti. 2:16-18; 4:14-15. In these passages the Apostle warned Timothy of several false teachers and disobedient men, and he identified these men by name. This was also the custom of the Lord Jesus Christ (Lk. 20:45-47; 12:1; Re. 2:6, 15, 20). Following the example of the Lord Jesus Christ and of His Apostles, we must identify and label those who are false, apostate, or disobedient. To fail to do so is rebellion to the Bible's command. It is also the mark of an unfaithful, careless shepherd. A good shepherd protects the sheep from danger.

4. Avoid fellowship. Once we have discerned false doctrine or practice, what then? God's command at this point is very clear--separation. The following expressions are used in the N.T. to describe separation: "Avoid" (Ro. 16:17). "Shun" (2 Ti. 2:16). "Turn away from" (2 Ti. 3:5). "Purge oneself from" (2 Ti. 2:21). "Come out from among" (2 Co. 6:17; Re. 18:4). "Have no fellowship or communion with" (2 Co. 6:14). "Receive them not into your house neither bid them Godspeed" (2 Jn. 10). One does not need a Ph.D. to understand the meaning of these exhortations. God is telling His people to stay away from those who teach or practice false things!

5. Avoid yoking together in ministry, organization, etc. (2 Co. 6:14-18) This command does not allow a Christian to be in the same denomination, Christian organization, fellowship, or church with those who are committed to unbelief.

6. Avoid their doctrine (2 Ti. 2:14-18). In this passage Christians are warned to avoid the Words of the false teachers. Let us not be deceived. False teachings have been very successful. Christendom is permeated with false doctrine. Wherein comes this success? The Bible reveals to us that there is a supernatural power behind false teaching. That power is Satan (2 Co. 11:13-15; 1 Ti. 4:1). It is for this reason that Christians are warned not to become involved in any way with false doctrine. Rather we are taught to "shun" it, for "they will increase unto more ungodliness. And their word will eat as doth a canker."

This means the Christian is not to attend a church in which false doctrine is being proclaimed. We are not to attend Bible studies, or meetings, or prayer groups in which false doctrine is involved. When those involved with false doctrine ask permission to sit with us to "explain their beliefs more clearly," we must wisely refuse. The only exception is an occasion in which we ourselves teach the one who is

in bondage to the false belief. And this is only when that one is willing to listen with an open heart and not argue and resist the truth. See 2 Ti. 2:23-26. Apart from our own ministry to try to help the deceived, we must avoid all false instruction.

7. Rebuke them openly, publicly, and plainly (Mt. 23:13-33; Ac. 13:8-10). God's Word commands us to rebuke false teachers openly, publicly, and plainly, and the faithful servant of God will do just that. Christians who dislike biblical separation often protest that we cannot help the erring person if we separate. This is not true. One reason for separating is to help those who err see the seriousness of their error, to make a clear distinction between true and false doctrine. Many excuse their refusal to obey biblical separation by saying they are ministering to the false and disobedient. This is wrong. The Bible warns that a little evil leavens the whole body (1 Co. 5:6; Ga. 5:9). The ecumenical is confused. He apparently thinks a little good leavens the whole body!

8. Try to convince them of the truth (2 Ti. 2:24-26). We are to try to help those who are involved in false doctrine, but we are to do this from a separated position. It is our separation which shows them that we do indeed believe false doctrine to be evil. It impresses them that we take the Word of God seriously. And though we must refuse to have close fellowship with those involved in false doctrine, and though we must not allow them to be members in our churches and organizations, we are to try to teach them the truth if they will listen.

Notice in 2 Ti. 2:26 that the false teacher's root problem is revealed. They are in "the snare of the devil." False doctrine is not a problem of ignorance; it is a spiritual problem. Only a great miracle can rescue a person out of the grasp of false doctrine once he has fallen prey to it.

9. Maintain a spiritual demeanor (Jam. 3:13-18). Last, but not least, we see that the ministry of discernment, judgment, contention for the truth, and separation from error are to be carried out in a spiritual manner.

Wrong separations

One thing which has confused many people regarding the practice of separation is the fact that many divisions among Christians have no biblical basis. It is definitely not God's will that his people be divided over human traditions, or personality conflicts, or other man-made or sin-made barriers. Sad to say, though, this has often occurred. Speaking of those who are truly born again and who love and obey the Scriptures, God's Word says: "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity" (Ps. 133:1). While we seek to obey God in the matter of separation for the purpose of maintaining doctrinal and moral purity, let us not be guilty of causing unnecessary divisions among God's people.

1. Divisions based on personalities of men rather than truth (1 Co. 1:12). Many, many of the divisions within Christianity have been caused by the human tendency to exalt one man above another. The Word of God condemns such divisions.

2. Divisions in matters of Christian liberty (Ro. 14:1-5). If the N.T. gives no clear word on a particular matter, Christians have liberty to follow their own preference. Two examples given in Romans 14 are in the areas of diet and holy days. In such things God has given Christians freedom of individual preference. It has often been the case, though, that Christians have separated on the basis of personal preferences, refusing to allow liberty in such matters. There is no liberty to ignore or slight clear apostolic teaching, but beyond this we have no right to make our own personal preferences and ideas a basis of division. It has been well stated that the church has judicial powers, but it has no lawmaking powers. Let's be careful not to take away freedoms God has given.

3. Divisions because of human conflicts (Phi. 4:2). Countless divisions among Christians are caused not by concern for doctrinal fidelity, but by self-centered human squabbles and confusion. There have always been Euodias and Syntyches among the brethren, and it is not surprising, considering the fact that God's people still have the old Adamic nature which is self-centered and rebellious. There have always been leaders of churches, organizations, and movements divided from others simply because they cannot get along spiritually with some of God's people.

4. Divisions based on man-made names and terminologies. Another type of division among Christians which lacks a proper biblical basis is division based on names and terminologies which have been devised by men. Often there is nothing wrong with the name or terminology itself. It is devised in an attempt to identify a certain teaching or trait. The problem lies in exalting that name to a place of dogma and infallibility and then making it a basis for separation. Man-made terms are not sufficient basis for separation. Bible terms can be defined in an absolute, dogmatic way, for the very fact that they are contained in the pages of the unchanging Word of God. Man-made terms, such as fundamental or evangelical, cannot be so defined. They can often be used with profit, but they cannot be made a permanent, absolute basis of fellowship.

Why practice separation?

Contrary to popular opinion, the practice of biblical separation brings great blessing. It is not a practice motivated simply by a love for contention. It is not separation just for the sake of avoiding people we don't like, or fighting just for the sake of fighting. Let us consider the reasons given in the Bible for this practice:

1. Separation is obedience to God (Rom. 16:17; Jude 3; 2 Ti. 4:2). God does not ask His people to separate if they feel inclined toward such a practice. God simply **COMMANDS** separation! To be discerning of truth and error and to avoid all error is obedience.

2. Separation is spiritual. "Therefore I esteem all thy precepts concerning all things to be right; and I hate every false way" (Ps. 119:128). In this verse we see the attitude of the godly Psalmist toward the Word of God and toward every false doctrine and practice. This is the attitude of all truly spiritual people.

3. Separation is fidelity to truth and God. "O Timothy, keep that which is committed to thy trust, avoiding profane and vain babbling, and oppositions of science falsely so called" (1 Ti. 6:20). See also 1 Ti. 6:14-15; 2 Ti. 1:13; 2:2; 2 Pe. 3:1-2. Paul exhorted Timothy that sound apostolic doctrine was a solemn trust from God, which he was to be faithful to and which he was to contend for and separate over. This is the solemn trust every Christian has received from God, and especially Christian leaders such as Timothy was. A trust is something placed into a person's hands for safekeeping.

The dictionary tells us that one who betrays a trust is a "traitor." A traitor commits what is called "treason." The definition of this frightening word is "betrayal of allegiance or of obedience toward one's sovereign." Those who fail to contend earnestly for the whole counsel of God and who fail to mark, avoid, and rebuke those who are disobedient to this counsel are traitors to the God and truth they profess to serve. They have betrayed His trust. They are treasonous men. Is God not our Sovereign? Have we not vowed allegiance to Him and to His Word? How sobering this should be to those who have adopted the new-evangelical philosophy with its careless "live and let live" attitude toward Bible doctrine.

4. Separation is honoring to Christ (He. 13:12,13). This passage teaches that since the Lord Jesus Christ was crucified outside of the apostate religion of that day, and since He remains apart from such, we are to honor Him by doing the same.

5. Separation is love for Christ (Jn. 14:23,24).

6. Separation is pleasing to Jesus Christ (Re. 2:2,6,14-16).

Here we see Christ's attitude toward those who practice discernment and separation and toward those who do not. He commended the church at Ephesus for practicing this ministry; He rebuked the church at Pergamos for not doing so.

7. Separation is the way of protection (2 Ti. 2:16). First, separation protects me (1 Co. 15:33). Second, separation protects the weaker ones who are with me (Rom. 16:17,18). We must separate from those who do not obey the Word of God for the benefit of those under our watch care who are less mature and discerning than we are. Third, separation protects a church or group from complete leavening (Ga. 5:9; 1 Co. 5:6,7).

Yes, some acknowledge, "I realize there are those who teach and practice false things, but let us remain in fellowship with them so we can help them see the truth. If we abandon this organization [or denomination, or church], what will become of it? It is better to associate than separate." How common this thinking is! Yet Paul's wisdom totally disproves this philosophy. A little false teaching, or a little unrepentant sin, becomes a leaven to permeate the entire church, organization, or denomination. History proves the truth of this, as if the Word of God had to be proven! Church after church,

group after group, denomination after denomination, organization after organization have weakened, then been entirely destroyed by the leaven of error and sin.

8. Separation is a qualification for Christian ministry, and one way to be fully prepared for such ministry. "Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers" (Tit. 1:9). See also 1 Ti. 4:1,6; 2 Ti. 2:21,22. In these passages we learn that contention for the faith and separation from error is not only a good thing, but it is actually a divine qualification for the ministry. It is also the means whereby the man of God prepares himself for God's service (2 Ti. 2:21-22). How contrary this is to popular thinking in Christendom today! According to popular thinking, the man who is dogmatic over doctrinal matters, who fights for doctrinal purity, and who separates from those who refuse to obey the truth--is a carnal trouble-maker. Contrariwise, according to 1 Ti. 4:6, such practice is a mark of a good minister of Jesus Christ!

9. Separation is essential for full reward (2 Jn. 8-11). Here we find a close connection between separation from apostasy and rewards for service. It is possible to lose the full reward God desires to give His servants, and one way to do so, according to this passage, is to fail to avoid those who teach false things.

10. Separation is love for men (Col. 1:28). Paul's love for men moved him to preach to them the whole counsel of God and to attempt to prepare them to be whole and entire, lacking nothing, ready for Christ's return.

11. Separation goes hand in hand with the message of salvation (Jude 3). Many say they will concern themselves with preaching the Gospel and not be concerned for doctrinal matters, separation, and such things. This idea does not come from the Bible! Jude tells us that the ministry of earnestly contending for the faith is closely connected with the ministry of preaching salvation. The two cannot be separated.

12. Separation is the way of blessing and fruitfulness (Ps. 1:1-3). Separation is put forth in the very first Psalm as the way of blessing and fruitfulness. The teaching of separation is woven into the very fiber of the Scriptures from beginning to end. It is simply inexcusable for a Christian leader to fail to know, understand, and practice separation.

13. Separation is wisdom (Pr. 14:15; 22:3). To exercise doctrinal discernment, and to avoid error is a mark of wisdom. The prudent Christian tests everything by the Word of God. He considers the principles and direction of Christian movements and hides himself from those which are headed toward non-biblical direction. Only a fool boards a ship which is sailing toward destruction, even if the ship itself is seaworthy. Wise Christians who see the sad end of the ecumenical and charismatic movements, for example, refuse to set foot on board ship from the beginning!

14. Separation is the way of delight (Pr. 24:24,25). Don't fear man and his threats; don't follow popular philosophy. Obey God's Word, Christian. Fight apostasy, error, and

compromise. Separate from those involved in these things. God promises to bless you for it just as he did Phinehas of old (Num. 25:5-13).