

The Doctrine and Application of Biblical Separation

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Ignorance of what the Bible says about separation and an inability to consistently apply those truths is a significant challenge today. The following is an effort to set forth the *doctrine* and *application* of biblical separation to hopefully help alleviate such ignorance.

1. Biblical Separation – What the Bible Teaches About Separation

1) Christians' Relationship with Apostates and Unbelievers in Spiritual Endeavor

The Bible gives clear teaching concerning the relationship Christians should have with unbelievers in spiritual endeavors.

a. 2 John 7–11

The proper response of true Christians to false teachers is refusal to give admittance and offer no aid—not even to give a greeting. Doing so provides aid, encouragement, and approval to those who would in reality destroy the church.

b. 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1

Believers should not form a compromising liaison, a spiritual alliance, or harness themselves with unbelievers in spiritual union (6:14). Paul gives a 5-fold comparison (6:15–16) illustrating why such alliances should not be made—they have nothing in common spiritually. When the church separates itself from all entangling alliances with unbelief, it identifies and aligns itself with a holy God who is separate from all that is evil, resulting in the blessing of fellowship (6:17–18). Such separation is based upon and motivated by such promises and is essential to perfecting holiness (7:1). *Note that the Christian and church should conduct itself in holiness for holiness.*

c. Romans 16:17–19

The Christian church is to be actively on the look out for apostates (“keep your eye on”). They are identified by their *conduct* (“those who cause dissensions and hindrances”) and their *teaching* (“contrary to the teaching which you have learned”). The action is clearly set forth: “turn away from them.” Their character (v. 18a “such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites”) and method (v. 18b “by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting”) are pointed out. Paul’s desire for the church is their purity, reflecting and emulating the holiness of God: “be wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil” (16:19). *Note the character that each Christian and church should seek to uphold and emulate: holiness.*

2) Christians Relationship to Disobedient Christians

Again, the Bible provides clear teaching about what our response and relationship should be toward those who disobey the Bible’s teaching concerning separation. The key text here is 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14–15.

- a. Believers were to “keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us” (3:6). “Unruly” is “out of order” and the standard is apostolic teaching. Despite attempts to limit “keep away” only to those who are lazy and idle, this does not handle the text accurately. For example:

- (1) Those who refuse to accept “keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life” as a general principle applicable to other issues are inconsistent. Would such people be consistent, then, in their application of the general principle of 3:13?
 - (2) From a logical standpoint, which is the greater offense, being lazy or giving aid, encouragement, and approval to apostates (2 John 9–11)?
- b. It is entirely accurate to apply 3:6 to believers who refuse to separate from heretics, liberals, and apostates. Separation from such is part of apostolic teaching; we *must* separate from those who do not lead a life according to apostolic teaching. We *must* separate from believers who don’t separate from false teachers.
 - c. Note 3:14–15—this refers to those who refuse to obey apostolic instruction given in the NT. Paul specifically says “in this letter.” *Believers must separate from believers who fraternize with apostates* (3:6). That is apostolic instruction given “in this letter.” Therefore, 3:14 says that *there must be separation from those who refuse to practice 3:6!* Yet we must “not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.”

“God’s means of preserving the truth of the gospel and of all His word has been that of separation. Otherwise a gradualism sets in that eventually will leave a person or institution with no pure doctrine left to preserve, much less any vitality with which to maintain and defend it” (McCune, *Promise Unfulfilled*, p. 154).

2. Practical Principles for Biblically Consistent Separatists

There is a vast gulf between *having* right beliefs and convictions and *knowing what to do* when different problems and situations arise. We thus need some practical principles to help us apply the biblical truths of separation.

I have learned and culled these principles from godly men who have taught them to and modeled them before me. Though sadly many reject learning these things from others, it is entirely and thoroughly biblical (Phil 3:17; 4:9; 2 Tim 2:2; 3:10–11). I am especially indebted to Pastor John Ashbrook (*Axioms of Separation*), Dr. Ernest Pickering (*Biblical Separation*, pp. 217–36), and Dr. Rolland McCune (*Promise Unfulfilled*, pp. 153–54).

1) You Cannot Fellowship with those Who Teach False Doctrine and Refuse Correction.

This is set forth in 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1; Rom 16:17; Titus 3:10–11; and 2 John 7–11.

2) You Cannot Fellowship with Professing Believers who are Immoral.

- a. This is clearly set forth in 1 Corinthians 5:9–13.
- b. Fellowshiping/cooperating with such makes you a participant in their sin (1 Cor 15:33; 1 Tim 5:2). Regardless of what others may do, you must maintain purity. Don’t contaminate your testimony by publicly endorsing false teaching or immoral behavior.

3) False Doctrine and Living Must be Corrected and Reproved.

- a. Those who promote false teaching and ungodly living want to appear respectable (2 Tim 3:5). They are wolves in sheep’s clothing (Acts 20:29–30).
- b. The church has a responsibility to expose, not associate or participate with such (Eph 5:11; 2 Cor 6:14).
- c. The church also has a responsibility to strive to correct such individuals (2 Tim 2:25–26; Titus 1:9–13; Jude 23)
- d. Despite the faux peace-loving “don’t be negative” spirit of this age, we must obey Scripture and strive to correct and reprove those in error for their good, the church’s protection, and God’s glory.

4) Remove Unbelief if You Can.

- a. This is rooted in the holiness of God and the church's objective of replicating that attribute in the purity of its membership (Matt 18:17; 1 Cor 5:5–7, 13)
- b. Your testimony must be kept pure, your doctrines uncorrupted, and your associations unquestionable.

5) You Cannot Fellowship with Disobedient Christians.

- a. This is addressed previously and is set forth in Matthew 18:15–17; 1 Corinthians 5:11; and 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14.
- b. Practically, this means you should not affiliate with any person or organization that does not practice biblical separation. If an individual or group is silent on separation, that should cause a red flag to go up in your mind.

The following practical principles will help determine your fellowship with other Christians and Christian groups.

6) Investigate the Issue.

- a. Learn and understand the beliefs, testimony and reputation of the individual or group; what they think and say about current issues and leaders; and their attitude toward the biblical doctrine of separation.
- b. Evaluate what the real objective is that you are considering working together on.

7) Evaluate Your Identification.

- a. You are identified with those whom you fellowship with. You *are* making a link and an association. Separation must therefore consider identification.
- b. What will happen to your testimony, reputation, and image with this identification? Is this consistent with what you believe and who you are?
- c. What effect will the proposed fellowship/union have on yourself and your church? Too often today, pastors act as individuals in ways they would not in their church. Wherever a pastor goes and whatever a pastor does, he does so as a pastor of a church, thereby involving and identifying his church. You cannot distance yourself from your church.
- d. While some debate this “association” factor, there is definitely a *corruption by association* that should be feared (1 Cor 15:33, “Bad company corrupts good morals”).

8) Consider the Matter of Promotion.

- a. You promote whom you fellowship with.
- b. If you fellowship with someone who is disobedient either in doctrine or in practice, you give influence to their compromise and end up promoting those very things. You become an accessory to the promotion of their agendas (cf. Jehoshaphat in 2 Chron 19:2 who “helped the wicked and loved those who hate the Lord”).
- c. When you publicly link arms with Bible deniers or compromisers, you end up *at the very least* giving tacit approval and *at most* actual promotion of their beliefs and practices in the eyes of others (1 Tim 5:22, do not “share responsibility for the sins of others”).

9) Understand the Level of Participation.

a. *Personal Level*

- (1) All Christians have certain things in common—regeneration, indwelling Spirit, love for Scripture and church, etc.
- (2) Christian fellowship can be enjoyed at the “coffee-cup” or “Thanksgiving dinner” level regardless of differing views of salvation, eschatology, etc.

b. *Local Church Level*

- (1) Conditions and requirements for church membership are (or at least should be) significantly greater than the personal level.
- (2) Within the church there will be different standards for various positions and ministries (teachers, pastors, deacons, etc.)

c. *Organizational Level*

This is not *above* the local church, just a different level. There are many different kinds of organizations that one must determine whether to participate and identify with, such as colleges, mission boards, and church/individual associations and networks.

10) Remember that Your Practice Provides an Example Others Will Follow.

- a. Peter led Barnabas astray by his unbiblical actions (Gal 2:13).
- b. Your leadership and influence could confuse your brethren, tempt them to compromise, or weaken their testimony. You are to be an example to other believers (1 Tim 4:12). Continually ask, “What is my responsibility toward others?”

11) Don’t Give the Impression that Separation is Unimportant.

- a. A lackadaisical attitude toward apostates and disobedient brethren gives the impression that their unbelief or disobedience isn’t really that big of a deal (cf. Prov 8:13, “the fear of the Lord is to hate evil”). This is like saying holiness is unimportant.
- b. Related to this—don’t just *assume* the individual or group is on the same page/going the same direction. While that might be the case, assuming can often lead to embarrassment or problems.

12) Consider Where the Proposed Cooperation Will Lead.

- a. Give careful consideration to the issues involved, study applicable biblical principles, pray for wisdom, and do your best to answer, “Will this *help* us go in the right direction?”
- b. There is nothing wrong with being cautious. In fact, you *should* take your time and investigate, evaluate, consult, and consider. If you’re in doubt, don’t join.
- c. This does not mean that you must always be suspicious. Everything looks suspicious when you’re suspicious.

13) Be Patient and Considerate with Your Separatist Brethren.

- a. Not everything is as black and white as we would like. Some issues take time to think and sort through.
- b. Some separatists have great discernment, while others take more time.
- c. Personality differences also come in here. Some are by nature unafraid to confront a situation, whereas others are more reticent. Be careful that you don’t carelessly label someone either too caustic or a compromiser.
- d. Base your position on Scripture, not personal opinion.
- e. Be humble and teachable.
- f. Strive for consistency, but allow for inconsistency. Allow for honest differences.