

*Should
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Separate From
Christian
Brethren?*

*By
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SHOULD WE EVER SEPARATE FROM CHRISTIAN BRETHERN?

An Examination of the Issue of So-Called “Secondary Separation”

Ernest D. Pickering, Th.D.

“Why, that is absolutely ridiculous! There’s not a line in the Bible that justifies separation from another Christian brother. We are all one body in Christ and members of one another. The only kind of separation that can be defended at all is separation from apostates—those who deny the faith. All other separation is spurious.” So spoke a young minister with some vehemence. He was decrying the fact that a Christian leader was refusing to participate in a religious activity because there were men on the program who held compromising positions of various sorts. Was the young preacher accurate and correct in his observations?

WHAT IS THE ISSUE?

The issue is simply this. If Christian leaders or organizations are failing to take clear-cut positions on vital matters, opting instead for mediating and conciliatory approaches, should a believer who is seeking to obey God continue to cooperate with such persons or organizations in Christian ministry? Should the inconsistencies related to vital matters be ignored in favor of a demonstration of unity among so-called “evangelicals”? Does there ever come a time when one must refuse to become involved with those who, while genuine believers, are following a course of compromise in matters strategic to the spiritual health of the Body of Christ? Is there a proper time to say to a fellow brother in Christ or to a Christian organization, “What you are doing is not wise, biblical, or right,” and to reinforce that warning by a refusal to support his cause?

Those who have answered this question in the affirmative and defended the concept that there are times when we cannot cooperate with other Christian brethren who are not walking in a manner consistent with scriptural principles have often been called “secondary separationists.” It is a term fraught with emotional overtones. One who holds this position is looked upon by many as an extremist and a troublemaker who unnecessarily is fracturing the Body of Christ, has no love or sympathy, and is arrogant and unbending. In the minds of many, those who refuse to cooperate with other believers are going beyond the parameters of scriptural teaching and are thus becoming “cultlike.”

It should be stated at the outset that separatists who hold this position have seldom, if ever, characterized themselves as “secondary separationists.” This is a term that has been thrust upon them by their opponents. There is much truth in the observation of the late Bryce Augsburger, who wrote:

The Scriptures say nothing about secondary separation. This term was coined by those who seek to develop grounds for opposing Scriptural separation. Whenever a man cries “secondary separation” in all probability he is an opponent of Biblical separation (“Do Fundamentalists No Longer Need to Fear the Dark Shadow of

Modernism?”, *Baptist Bulletin*, June 1982, p. 15).

Dr. Augsburger meant, of course, that the term “secondary separation” is not found in the Bible, but that the major issue with which we deal—the necessity of withdrawing fellowship from some believers—certainly is.

Another leader has written:

There is no such thing as first-degree, second-degree separation, etc. There is only *Scriptural* separation . . . I personally believe the Bible does command separation from those who aid and encourage compromise with infidelity . . . (Bob Jones, Jr., *Scriptural Separation: First and Second Degree?* published by Bob Jones University).

At least five major positions regarding separation are evident.

- 1) Evangelical Christians should remain in organizational fellowship with apostates. This has been, and is, the position of many new evangelical leaders. Their major argument is that if evangelical Christians abandon the historic denominations, filled as they are with apostates who deny the truth, how will they ever be restored to a biblical position, and how will a credible witness for the Gospel ever be maintained within them? (Note the author’s larger book, *Biblical Separation*, which deals at length with the implications of this position.)
- 2) Evangelical Christians *may* remain in organic fellowship and cooperation with apostates in their denominations if their ministries are not hindered thereby. Separation should occur only under extreme duress and where effective ministry has been lost.
- 3) Evangelical Christians ought to separate from apostates but should not separate from compromising believers.
- 4) Evangelical Christians ought to separate from apostates and from some compromising Christians, but should not break fellowship with others who might be compromising in some areas but whose verbal or written ministry is a blessing.
- 5) Evangelical Christians ought to remain free of entangling alliances with all apostates and compromising believers while still loving them and seeking to minister to them so as to bring them to a more scriptural position.

WHAT ARE SOME ILLUSTRATIONS OF SEPARATION FROM OTHER TRUE BELIEVERS?

The impression is given by opponents of those who espouse what is called “secondary separation” that this is a position peculiar to a small segment of “fighting fundamentalists,” and that most sensible, evangelical people do not condone such a position. Perhaps a more careful analysis,

however, needs to be made. The practice of refusing fellowship to other true members of Christ's Body under certain circumstances is more widespread than some might realize. Several illustrations could be cited.

1) Refusal to receive into the membership of a local church someone who has been improperly baptized.

Many churches will not receive a person, even though he is genuinely saved, who has been the recipient of infant baptism. They refuse church fellowship to such until they have been immersed. They do so on the basis of scriptural teaching because all who became members of the first church ever founded were immersed (Acts 2:41-42).

2) Exclusion from a church by an act of discipline.

God specifically tells us that when a true believer continues in sin without repentance, the local church of which he or she is a member is to withdraw fellowship from that believer. "Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person" (1 Cor. 5:13). Such an action constitutes separation from a true believer. It is done, of course, with the intent and hope that the believer will forsake sin and be restored. Apparently this result was achieved in the life of the man in question at Corinth (2 Cor. 2:1-10).

3) Refusal to allow Charismatics to have membership or ministry in a school or church.

Many non-charismatic churches and schools will not allow those espousing charismatic views to become members, be teachers, or hold offices in their organizations. Many Charismatics are fellow-believers, but a line of separation from them is drawn.

4) Refusal to cooperate in ecumenical evangelistic crusades.

Many Bible-believing churches will not become involved in evangelistic crusades such as those conducted by Billy Graham, because such crusades involve alignment with men and churches that do not believe the Word of God. This is a form of "secondary separation." The bulk of the people involved in such efforts would probably be born-again people, yet cooperative fellowship would be refused. The General Association of Regular Baptist Churches, for instance, espouses this form of "secondary separation" when, in its Constitution, it declares that the body is to be "a voice repudiating cooperation with movements which attempt to unite true Bible believers and apostates in evangelistic and other cooperative spiritual efforts" (Constitution of the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches, Article II, Section I). To conform to this position of the Association would require a pastor and church to refuse to fellowship with the "true Bible believers" who cooperate with a movement which included apostates. They would thus be separating from brethren

in Christ.

IS THE PRACTICE OF WITHHOLDING FELLOWSHIP FROM CHRISTIAN BRETHREN SUPPORTED BY ANY SCRIPTURAL PRINCIPLES?

Considerable discussion on the validity of so-called “secondary separation” has been heard among fundamentalists. Some men have declared that the teaching is not found in Scripture but is simply the result of internal bickering among fundamentalist leaders. One fundamentalist leader a few years ago insisted repeatedly that born-again Christians are required to fellowship with all other born-again believers who are living for God. Does the Scripture have any direct teaching, or does it set forth any divine principles that would guide us in maintaining the correct position on this difficult issue? We believe that God’s Word does give us direction. There are some solid reasons supporting the concept of refusing cooperative fellowship to fellow believers who are compromising in vital areas.

The Principle of Withdrawal From Disobedient Brethren. Paul wrote to the Thessalonian church: “Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly and not after the tradition which he received of us 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” (2 Thess. 3:6, 14). In this passage Paul rebukes members of the church who had become “busybodies,” were shirking their daily responsibilities of life, and were leeching off the other church members. They, through their careless lifestyle, were causing confusion in the ranks, walking in a “disorderly” manner. Paul strongly reminded them that as Christians they were to be industrious, work to meet their own needs, and not remain idle and dependent upon others.

Most Bible believers and fundamental separatists would agree that the above capsulizes the truth of the verses. The question is: Is that all that is taught? Does the principle go beyond the specific situation that was evident at Thessalonica, and should it be applied in other situations as well? Opponents of what they term “secondary separation” contend that there is no principle here that governs fellowship and cooperation with other believers. Advocates of a stronger position contend that there is. We believe words penned some years ago are still valid.

The main question among separatists is this: Does this portion of Scripture apply only and exclusively to people who leave their work, sponge off other believers, and live lives of idleness which contribute to spiritual confusion? Certainly this is the context of the passage as it is written. Is it not true, however, that the *principle* clearly seen here applies to other situations? The *principle* is this: When our brethren do things which are wrong—caused by an incomplete knowledge of or deliberate disobedience to some teaching of Scripture—we should not merely continue to fellowship with them as those who have done nothing wrong, but we should warn them, remonstrate with them, and seek to recover them to a Biblical position. It is the principle of maintaining a pure walk that should be stressed. This principle should not be overlooked by an overemphasis on the particular situation in this church to which the principle was applied (Ernest Pickering, *Biblical Separation*, p.

222).

In the past, the journal published by Jerry Falwell has disagreed with any effort to establish the prerogative of separation from other Christian brethren upon the basis of Scripture. John Talley, after citing several passages dealing with separation, declared that such passages deal only with separation from false teachers. "The suggestion is, therefore, that what has been called 'second degree ecclesiastical separation' is not Biblical" ("The Basis for Ecclesiastical Separation," *Fundamentalist Journal*, April 1983, p. 52). He believes (and this is a common view among many) that the "basic tests of faith" should be the virgin birth, the atonement, the deity of Christ, the resurrection of Christ, and the inspiration of Scripture.

However, there are many outstanding Christian leaders who believe that this scriptural passage does exhort us to refuse to cooperate with those who are walking in contradiction to biblical teaching. Bruce Compton, a competent New Testament scholar, deals in some detail with the passage and concludes, "There can be no question that the separation called for in 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15 involves separation from another believer" ("2 Thessalonians 3:6-15 and *Biblical Separation*," *The Sentinel*, published by Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, Fall 1988, p. 1). He discusses the view that the interpretation and application of the passage is contextually limited to the generation to whom it was written and remarks, "Such an interpretation does not do justice to the context." His further observations are helpful:

To walk disorderly is to live in violation of a set code of conduct . . . This code, as identified by the apostle in this verse, is the tradition which he had received from him, the teaching he had communicated to them. The specific teaching or tradition in view, according to verse 11, involved intentional unemployment. However, the commandment in verse six can be more broadly applied. Paul uses the plural "traditions" to refer to the bulk of his communication to them. By application, any conscious violation of a specific command given to them by the apostle would qualify the offender for the same discipline as directed in verse 6. This application is further supported in verse 14. In this verse the apostle enjoins the church to disassociate itself from anyone who disobeys the apostle's word. This "word" includes Paul's instructions about working and eating in the preceding verses. At the same time, the apostle's "word" cannot be limited to these verses. According to verse 14, this "word" is further described as that represented "by this epistle." All that he has written in this epistle, therefore, is included in the "word" (**Op. Cit.**, p. 2).

The point is that when true believers openly disobey God's Word, they should be rebuked by withdrawal.

Robert T. Ketcham saw the issue clearly. After citing several Scripture passages that speak to separation, including 2 Thessalonians 3:6, Ketcham explained:

The General Association of Regular Baptist Churches stands upon these verses in this matter of separation. These Scriptures forbid (1) organic union or cooperation with *unbelievers*, and (2) organized union or cooperation with *believers* who insist

upon and practice such union with unbelievers. The “brother” who will not separate is involved in these Scriptures also (see 1 Thess. 3:6; 2 Chronicles 19:2) (From one of the official literature items setting forth the position of the GARBC entitled, “The Position of the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches on Separation” p. 2).

Ketcham continued in this pamphlet by referring to the convictions on separation held by Henry Parsons Crowell, the Christian founder of the Quaker Oats Company and long-time board member of the Moody Bible Institute, who had his own personal controversy with liberalism within the Presbyterian Church, with which he was identified. Mr. Crowell became concerned not merely about the liberal (apostate) but also about “the conservative fundamentalist who was tolerant of those who were tolerant of modernists . . . Mr. Crowell feared that the battle would be lost unless what some people call ‘secondary separation’ also be made a working principle” (Ketcham, **op. cit.**, p. 5).

In a very incisive discourse on the evils of apostasy and new evangelicalism and the necessity of what is often called “secondary separation,” one wrote:

Let me say this. Most of the people, if not all of them in the New-Evangelical camp, are born-again people. They are our brothers and sisters in Christ. But we believe they are walking disorderly and contrary to the teachings of the Bible in these matters. The Bible says to “withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly” (2 Thess. 3:6). So, we do not cooperate with them” (“Where We Stand Today,” *The Gospel Witness*, Joseph Stowell II, January 23, 1975, p. 13).

Another has commented on the passage in question:

In 2 Thess. 3:6 Paul advises the believers to withdraw themselves “from every brother that walketh disorderly,” and then identifies the “disorderly walk” as that of one who conducted himself in disobedience to the Lord’s Word as it was revealed through Paul. The separation enjoined could be regarded as second degree” (Wilbur Welch, “Does Biblical Separation Destroy Christian Unity?” p. 16).

David Nettleton, the noted separatist leader, was invited to present the stronger view of separation in a periodical which does not hold to that position. Citing 2 Thessalonians 3:6 he commented:

This reference is to a disorderly walk resulting from distorted doctrine. However, before one may interpret this and other similar Scripture, it should be clear that there are occasions when a brother should separate from a brother—and that is called secondary separation. When we are linked in a chain with those who are linked with those who are wrong, we are in a chain where obedient Christians do not belong (“Jailed for Secondary Separation,” *Fundamentalist Journal*, Nov. 1984, p. 13).

Some men whom we have cited are in glory. Some, while making good statements about separation, may not always implement them consistently. Some, yielding to certain pressures, have changed their positions in later years. We cite them, however, to show that there have been a host of men

through the years who have felt that the practice of so-called “secondary separation” had biblical support.

The Principle of Protecting the Purity of the Churches. Holiness is the governing attribute of God. He exercises all of His other powers governed by His holiness. He will not sully His character for any reason. This is a fundamental theological principle that must always be kept in mind. When applied to the doctrine of the local church it simply means that God’s first concern about His churches is that they be holy. Any threat to the maintenance of such holiness must be met with courageous opposition.

In I Corinthians 3:10-17, Paul speaks to the matter of the local church’s foundation and construction. While much popular exposition of this section refers it to the individual believer, it seems clear that the writer has in mind the local body of believers, the church. The plural is used, “ye (plural) are the temple of God” (v. 16). The local church is inhabited by the Holy Spirit and should be viewed as a very sacred institution. “If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy” (v. 17). While those propagating looser views of fellowship may be true believers and well-meaning persons, their tolerance may be potentially harmful to the purity of the churches and should be resisted. When, in the name of Christian love, tendencies are developed that may lead to unholy associations, a church which heretofore has stood true to biblical principles may begin weakening.

The Principle of Responsible Spiritual Leadership. True believers can sometimes teach bad doctrine. Also some brethren who are gifted Bible teachers and speakers do not take a forthright and public stand to issues that are vital. Relatively few believers have the spiritual maturity and discernment to see such problems. God’s command to shepherds is this: “Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Spirit hath made you overseers” (Acts 20:28). The words “take heed” could be better rendered “Guard yourselves and all the flock.” The careful spiritual shepherd cannot allow himself to put his sheep in possible jeopardy by exposing them to men and movements whose positions are questionable.

Spiritual discernment is necessary in order to know with whom to fellowship and with what to cooperate. “But we must display Christian love,” say some, in justifying their ecumenical associations. Christian love, however, is not simply a mindless and emotional exercise. “Separation is a doctrine that is based on discernment, distinction, and doctrinal convictions. Present-day thinking militates against all three of these qualities. It prefers a sentimentality that speaks of love and makes light of truth” (Les Frazier, “Biblical Separation: Preservation in Missions,” *World*, Vol. 2, 1989, published by Baptist International Missions, Incorporated). “And this, I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgement that ye may approve things that are excellent” (Phil. 1:9-10a). Biblical love operates with discernment, throwing out the chaff and accepting only the wheat.

In the conduct of his ministry, Paul made a decision to break fellowship with John Mark (and, as a result, with Barnabas as well, Acts 15:36-41). He evidently felt that Mark was not stable and dependable since he had abandoned the missionary party at an earlier time (Acts 13:13). Paul’s decision was based upon the exercise of his own seasoned judgment and was not mandated by any specific scriptural command. Some decisions in life must be made on this basis, and Paul did not hesitate to do so when it was required. This particular separation had a happy ending in that John

Mark matured and was later commended by the great apostle (2 Tim. 4:11).

The Principle of Avoiding Undesirable Future Complications. Often small compromises increase, trends develop, and momentum toward an unbiblical position builds. Years ago a noted speaker, addressing a large audience on the subject of new evangelicalism, traced its rise. He stated that it began as a “mood” and finally developed into a “movement.” The “mood” with which it began was one of tolerance, broad-mindedness, a desire to have wider fellowships, and a repudiation of “narrower” positions. Bob Jones, Sr., often said, “Never sacrifice the permanent on the altar of the immediate.” David, the great king of Israel, remained in Jerusalem “at the time when kings go forth to battle” (2 Sam. 11:1). At the time when normally kings personally led their troops into conflict, David stayed in the comforts of his palace. It was there that sin overtook him, and his life was stained by adultery. Seemingly small decisions can have large consequences. “A prudent man foreseeth the evil and hideth himself: but the simple pass on, and are punished” (Prov. 22:3). In the name of love and Christian generosity, some become involved in spiritual effort with those who do not take a clear-cut stand, find themselves in embarrassing situations, and then, to save face, become defensive about their involvements, which merely leads them on to further compromise. It is best to refuse unwise associations from the beginning. “The wisdom of the prudent is to understand (give thought to) his way . . .” (Prov. 14:8).

The Principle of Refusing to Encourage Compromise. To feature speakers, for instance, who do not take a proper position with regard to apostasy, new evangelicalism, or compromise sends a message to the constituency with whom we serve. It certainly implies that (1) we see nothing wrong with what they are doing, and/or (2) while we may not agree with the position they are taking, we do not feel it is a sufficiently serious deviation to prohibit our honoring and using them. Paul warns Timothy that it is possible, by the hasty and careless ordination of a man to the ministry, to “be partaker of other men’s sins” (1 Tim. 5:22). The same would be true were one, as the leader of a church or school, to feature as a speaker a man who, while evangelical, is not forthright in his position on ecclesiastical separation. The man may be a “good” man and a very capable speaker, but therein lies a subtle danger. Younger church leaders, pastors or future pastors, and potential missionaries are impacted by the ministry of the man and reason thusly: “This man does not take any vocal and open stand on some issues and yet he is a dynamic preacher and has built a large church. Perhaps the narrow position advocated by some pastors and leaders is a bit too stringent. They are using this man here as a speaker so he must not be too bad. I think I want to be more like him.” While such reasoning is not sound, this writer knows for a fact that it is exactly the train of thought that is pursued by many younger church leaders. Why are they encouraged toward such conclusions? Because their leaders do not give them clear-cut examples to follow. There are many Bible teachers, evangelists, and others who traverse the land and are very gifted communicators. They do not, however, include in their public ministry any clear teaching that warns against the dangers of the new and young evangelicalism and other forms of compromise. One of my friends was speaking with a well-known Bible teacher about this very problem. He asked the man why he never included in his public ministry any mention of the flagrant evangelical compromises of the day. The Bible teacher replied, “Because it closes too many doors. I just preach the positive truth and let the rest of it alone.”

The Principle of Ministering to Erring Brethren. We do have spiritual responsibilities to erring brothers. “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in

the spirit of meekness, considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted” (Gal. 6:1). If a man is not taking a proper stand, we need to address his problem with him. We need to encourage him to strengthen his stand. Rebuke, administered in a proper manner, can be used of God to turn a person around and to redirect them into a more scriptural position. When Peter vacillated on important doctrinal truths, Paul said, “I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed” (Gal. 2:11). Good men, even outstanding Christian leaders, sometimes take weak positions. Paul did not hate Peter, but he did oppose him, and that publicly, because he was compromising. Let this be a lesson to us today. There are times when good men and strong leaders must be opposed because they are leading the people of God in a direction that is not wise and scriptural.

In a very fine address given to a national conference of fundamental Baptists years ago, Paul Jackson warned against entanglements with apostates. Then, citing such passages as 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14; I Corinthians 5:7, 13; and Matthew 18: 15-17, he went on to remark:

Further, in the third place, it is God’s commandment that we separate from our brothers when they walk in disobedience. Now I know that many men who will go along forthrightly and shout amen as far as we have gone will object at this point and say, “I believe in full fellowship with all evangelicals.” Well God does not! . . . We have a responsibility to walk separately from our brethren who insist upon being unbiblical in these areas of their conduct. . . . We need to pray for them and to wait upon God to deal with their hearts, but we do pray that there shall be strength and courage and boldness to stand fast and hold the whole counsel of God (“The Position, Attitudes, and Objectives of Biblical Separation,” Literature Item 12, published by the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches).

Charles Spurgeon, the great pastor, felt it incumbent upon him to withdraw from the Baptist Union of Great Britain because they were not following scriptural principles. In so doing he removed himself from official fellowship with many who were truly born again. For this he was strongly criticized. At that time he declared, “With deep regret we abstain from assembling ourselves with those whom we dearly love and heartily respect, since it would involve us in a confederacy with those with whom we can have no communion in the Lord” (cited in the *Baptist Bulletin*, November 1957, p. 7).

IN WHAT AREAS MUST ONE IMPLEMENT THE DOCTRINE OF SEPARATION?

The teachings of Scripture regarding separation must be implemented in a practical manner or it becomes a meaningless theory to which one gives lip service but which has no practical value in everyday life and ministry. Consider some of the areas of Christian work in which this doctrine must be obeyed.

In Matters Involving Local Church Fellowship. A church that would be true to God must not involve itself in a fellowship of churches or organizations in which it is going to compromise its character. Sometimes churches, because of expediency and in response to the trend of our times, are tempted to join some local body of churches, often on the pretense that they are going to “promote the unity of the Body of Christ” or “show the unsaved world that Christians can get along

with one another.” It sounds kindly and magnanimous, but it is really subversive of a pure testimony for Christ. It sends mixed signals to the community. Whereas on the one hand the church claims to proclaim and practice the truth, on the other hand it is willing to cooperate with other churches that do not do the same.

In Matters Involving Christian Educational Institutions. A local church should consider carefully what educational institutions it recommends to its young people. While no church can (or should) control the individual decisions of each believer, a church does have the responsibility to teach its youth the biblical principles upon which it stands and to encourage them to attend colleges, universities, and seminaries that are consistent with that position. Many Christian colleges claim to be separatist schools, but they do not offer to their students any structured courses in the history and theological basis of separation. As a result, graduates of these institutions come out devoid of any real convictions. The separatist movement today is much weakened because many supposedly fundamental colleges have assumed that students learned all that was necessary to know about the separatist position in their local churches. Hence it was unnecessary to teach them anything further in the college classroom. In some institutions while faculty members may give lip service to the cause of separatism, in their classroom teaching and in their private contacts they tend to undermine a strong position and turn students away from separatist convictions. There are also a considerable number of schools that believe separation only involves removal from direct associations with apostates and does not include refusal to fellowship with disobedient believers. These are usually the ones who condemn what they call “secondary separation” as unbiblical.

Some questions to ask concerning Christian education institutions:

1. Is its leadership outspoken and clear in embracing a biblical position on separation?
2. What kind of speakers address the student body? Are they men who are identified with the separatist cause, or are they “middle-of-the-roaders” who go either direction?
3. Do members of the faculty have a reputation for teaching separatist principles in a cogent manner?
4. What kind of men serve on the board of trustees of the institution? Are they separatists with convictions? (The makeup of a board of trustees has a very important impact upon the position of the school.)
5. Do their graduates give some evidence of being well-taught in separatist principles, or do most of them tend to vacillate?

In Matters Involving Foreign and Home Missions. Every church of Christ should be vitally concerned with the evangelization of the world. Assisting the church in fulfilling this obligation is the mission board, which provides certain services that are difficult for the average local church to provide. Some questions that persons considering service under or support of a mission board should ask are the following:

1. Do the leaders of the mission follow a consistent pattern of separation themselves, or are they involved in questionable associations?
2. Does the mission include in its official documents statements of its position on ecumenism, new evangelicalism, the charismatic movement, and other troublesome issues?
3. Does the mission and its missionaries actually implement the position that is outlined in their official documents?
4. Are the missionaries of the mission knowledgeable regarding the biblical teaching on ecclesiastical separation, and do they whole-heartedly endorse and practice it?
5. Does the mission cooperate at home or on the field with organizations and persons who may not be consistent with their position?
6. Is the board of the mission composed of strong separatists?

In Matters Involving Literature Used in the Church. It is truly amazing how many churches purporting to be separatist in character use Sunday school and other literature that is in contradiction to that position. It is not acceptable that literature used for the training of believers be merely “evangelical” in its content. It needs to be more specific than that. We will never produce men and women of conviction if we do not teach them clearly and systematically the things for which we stand.

In Matters Involving Speakers Utilized. This writer once objected to the president of a professedly separatist college that a man who had been a featured speaker at the school was not a separatist and definitely was not in favor of the separatist position. The answer was, “But he was such a blessing to our students—a very gifted communicator.” This hardly constitutes a sufficient reason for bringing a man to the platform of a separatist school to address impressionable young students. There are numerous Bible speakers and Christian leaders who are good platform personalities but whose overall position on matters vital to the cause of Christ is weak. We do ourselves harm and not good by featuring such persons in our assemblies.

Discerning questions should be asked before a man is invited to speak at a separatist church or school:

1. In his public ministry does the man speak out clearly against not only the apostasy but also against new evangelicalism and the compromise of fellow believers? Many men bring helpful Bible messages, but they do not wish to be identified with any controversies, nor do they wish to positionalize themselves publicly on any “thorny” issue. They lack the fortitude and courage to be honored as featured speakers for separatist bodies.
2. With whom does he regularly associate? If the man appears in conferences

of a compromising nature, why should he also be used at a conference of those who are trying to avoid compromise? Many noted Bible teachers will appear at some separatist institution while their next engagement will be at some new evangelical conference. They are “evangelicals” in a broad sense and do not see any contradiction in such broad associations.

3. With what group or denomination is he affiliated? If a man is a leader, for instance, in the Southern Baptist Convention, which includes many apostates, should he be featured at some separatist college even though he himself is a Bible-believing minister? By his actions is he not denying a fundamental truth, that is, that one should separate from apostates? His position is contrary to the position of the school where he is appearing and no amount of fine preaching will obliterate that fact. He is doing wrong by cooperating with a denomination that permits false teachers in their midst.

Summary Observations. There are some questions one needs to ask in determining where one should go to minister and who one should use to fill his pulpit. Consider these questions for example:

1. How will my actions affect the ministries of other brethren who are trying to take a stand for God in their own local areas? On one occasion a professedly-separatist college sent their choir to perform at a new evangelical church in the midst of an area where some separatist pastors were taking a stand against that church and its compromises. Needless to say, much harm was done.
2. What theological confusion will be conveyed to the public if I (or my church) follow a given course of action? Will the position which I have occupied be blurred in the minds of people by my association with certain persons or groups? Is consistency important?
3. What is the real purpose behind the efforts of some group to enlist my support? Very often people like to include separatists in some organization or cooperative endeavor as a kind of “windowdressing” to prove that their group is truly a separatist body when, in fact, it may not be.
4. What are the general attitudes of the body or person with whom I am considering cooperation? Have they demonstrated a true commitment to the principles that I hold? Are they willing to pay a price to hold them (and there is a price to be paid)?

WHAT ARE SOME OBJECTIONS TO THE PRACTICE OF SEPARATING FROM BRETHREN?

It violates the truth of the “One Body.” A member of the body cannot disown another member.

The fact of the matter is that no one can divide the Body of Christ. It is a spiritual entity formed by the baptizing work of the Holy Spirit and under the control of its sovereign Head, the Lord Jesus Christ. Its actual spiritual unity is indestructible. Its practical, visible unity, of course, is disrupted due to the obedience of some of its members to specific directions from the Head. Because it is misrepresented, Satan tried to convince us that the doctrine of separation is dividing God's people. But hear me now, compromise is dividing God's people! (David Nettleton, "If I Were the Devil," *Baptist Bulletin*, July 1959, p. 21).

A distinction needs to be made between "disowning" and "disfellowshipping." We cannot and ought not cooperate with a member that is disobeying the Head or hurting other members of the Body. When a local church disfellowships (disciplines) a member, it does not, by that action, declare that the member is not a Christian. It is simply indicating by its vote to withdraw fellowship—that the member has violated his or her obligations to the Lord and to the church. Not all members of the Body of Christ are obedient to the rules which govern the operation of that Body. Such members must be rebuked and their activities condemned in the hope that they will repent and submit themselves to the will of their Head.

It reveals a lack of Christian love. Much is made of the fact that separatists lack love. They are caricatured as fractious, troublesome, and unkind persons who are continually "bashing" other people who love the Lord just as much as they do. No doubt some separatists have failed to demonstrate proper love toward others on occasion, but it is certainly unfair to characterize all separatists in this fashion.

In this age when a multitude of evil is excused by appeals to Christian love, one needs to remember that true biblical love has "muscle" and is not "namby-pamby" and "wishy-washy." Christ said, "If ye love me, keep my commandments" (Jn. 14:15). Love and obedience accompany one another. If someone is compromising, I do not aid him by going along with his compromise. If I truly love him, I will obey the Scriptures myself and earnestly seek to get him to do the same. Mel Efaw, a godly and successful pastor and for years a leader in the Independent Fundamental Churches of America, incisively observed:

It seems that the important thing today is not that Christians cooperate with the Lord Jesus Christ and His Word, but that they cooperate with everyone else. The difficulty is that many do not clearly understand what love really is. God's people are being told that to practice separation as the Bible sets it forth is to be unkind and ungracious. Many think it is a mark of love for Christians to cooperate with every one even though they must overlook false teaching ("The Question of Cooperation," published by the IFCA).

To stand for righteousness and truth is not a violation of biblical love. Love must repudiate as well as accept. Love "rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth" (1 Cor. 13:6). To embrace what is right requires that one refuse what is wrong.

It is not taught in the Scriptures. Our discussion has already spoken to this issue, but we mention it here because it is often brought as an argument against separation. Often those who make this statement declare that the concept of separation from a Christian brother is an "invention" of

separatists and not a specific directive from the Lord. Suffice to say that we believe there are biblical statements, examples, and principles that support the practice of separation from Christian brethren under certain circumstances.

It was not practiced by great Christian leaders. Some have argued that to separate from other Christians is not a practice that was followed by many Christian leaders of the past. Various leaders of bygone years such as D. L. Moody, H. A. Ironside, and many others are cited as having had broad fellowship with evangelicals who were in apostate churches or in other kinds of compromising situations. It is urged that if these great men could do it, we also ought to feel free to do the same. Some observations are in order here.

1. These leaders lived in a different age, an age uncomplicated by the pervasive teachings of new evangelicalism and the subtle influences of ecumenical evangelism. They did not face some of the issues that fundamentalists face today.
2. Great Christian leaders of the past were not always wise in what they did. Good and godly men can sometimes make bad judgments. Some might have been more prudent had they not practiced such a broad fellowship.
3. Leaders should not always be followed if they are doing things that are unwise or contradictory to scriptural principles. Because a noted Christian says or does something does not make it right.

Those advocating stricter positions on separation are often mean-tempered, caustic, and pugnacious individuals. As we have already mentioned, *some* separatists may not possess the most winsome personalities nor conduct themselves in an affable and kind manner. Unfortunately, this fact (which is only true of *some* separatists) has often obscured the real issues. Certain young preachers (some of whom may be seeking the “easier” way) have cited this lack of Christian grace as a reason why they are “dumping” the whole separatist position and opting for some broader stance.

It must always be kept in mind that positions ought not to be taken on the basis of whether we are attracted to the personalities of those who hold them. Likewise, biblical positions ought not to be jettisoned because there are obstreperous individuals who defend them. Every movement has its awkward personalities. We must see beyond that to underlying scriptural truth. (One can think of a good many liberals and new evangelicals who are not very “nice” themselves.)

Strict separatists are pastoring dying churches. The perception has been created in some quarters that those who reject a stricter view and are broader in their permitted fellowships are experiencing more divine blessing and are seeing their churches grow, whereas those who are “narrower” in their position are leading works that are declining. One must be very careful at this point. We ought never to equate “success” with “truth.” Because one has a growing church does not mean that one is biblical. There are many ways to “grow” a church, not all of which are related to the preaching of the truth. Neither, however, should we defend our lack of evangelistic zeal and successful community outreach by attributing it to our strong stand for separation. It is a fact that there are

hundreds of churches across America who take a strong and consistent stand on matters of separation but who are vital, growing, and dynamic for God. Biblical separation, properly taught and implemented, will not lack the blessing of the Lord.

To those who obey the command for separation God has promised, “I will be a Father to you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty” (2 Cor. 6:18). There is a divine promise of special relationship and blessing to those who will be faithful.

Separatists are “judgmental.” The complaint is often heard that to practice what some call “secondary separation” is to require judgments to be made which are not warranted by direct commands of Scripture. In other words, there is an element of subjectivism involved.

This, of course, is an objection that could be raised against the application of many biblical truths. The Bible does not speak specifically, for instance, about the evils of using tobacco. Most Christians, however, believe that its use is harmful and contrary to the teachings of Scripture. Biblical *principles* (such as the fact that our bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit) must be applied to this particular question in order to come up with a proper position. The same approach would be necessary in dealing with many matters involving separation. One would have to bring to bear upon the issue of scriptural *principles* and then make a judgment on the basis of that consideration. This approach does not invalidate the conclusions of the separatist.

We ought not to fight among ourselves. Some feel those who are trying to take a strong and consistent stand on the matter of separation are neglecting the truly big task and concentrating on the irrelevant and unnecessary. They say, “We ought not to be ‘sniping’ at our brethren,” or “We ought not to be caught up with ‘internal bickering.’” We should give ourselves to evangelism and to church planting. Such arguments have been heard in various church fellowships. When the battles over the new evangelicalism were waging within the Conservative Baptist movement a number of years ago, the plea was given to cease fighting and “get back” to the business of church planting. Liberals (they prefer to be called “moderates”) within the Southern Baptist Convention have been sounding this note for years. They claim the convention is being torn asunder over irrelevant debates while the world is going to hell and evangelism is being neglected. The concept is pushed that doctrinal debates will recede in importance if we just concentrate on evangelism.

This is an emotional and persuasive appeal and sounds good. “Let’s quit debating the matter of separation and build 200 new churches,” is the cry. Well, no obedient believer is going to oppose the planting of new churches, but there are important questions to be asked. If 200 new churches are started, what will be their position? Where will they stand on critical issues that face us today? Will they perpetuate the confusion already present in many existing churches? What will be their response to the new evangelicalism? Will they have a biblical view of separation? Will their pastors have knowledge and discernment? To just have 200 more churches that are not well-taught and established upon proper principles is not a fitting goal. *We need more churches that are standing in the proper place.* Thus debates among those who are planting those churches may be very essential. The body that is planting them must be in agreement over the kind of churches that should be planted.

Catchy phrases will not solve the problem here. Some have said, “Fundamentalists are the only ones

who shoot their own soldiers.” Others have said, “Fighting with our brethren is not right.” Such phrases tend to cultivate the notion that separatists are bent on destroying as many other Christians as they can, have no sensitivity, and are wild and reckless. Perhaps some are, but that again is not a fair picture of the vast majority of men who stand in this position. The term “fighting” conjures up the images of persons who are of a contentious disposition and who carelessly hurt others. Most separatists are not of this spirit.

We must allow for areas of disagreement. This is a major plea of many who defend the broader concept of fellowship and work. “We cannot be too narrow. We cannot require everyone within our group to see things the same way.” Of course there is an element of truth to that. Within any group there will be differences of opinion over this and that. *The question is: Are the differences vital to the maintenance of the position the body holds?* How far must tolerance extend? It is human tendency to strongly desire the perpetuation of a body to the extent that the limits of tolerance are enlarged further and further with the plea “We must stay together,” or “We can’t let the Devil fragment us.” The protection of an entity (whether it be a church, school, mission, or denomination) becomes paramount rather than loyalty to scriptural principles. We can never escape the duty of deciding which positions and practices are important and which are not. By tolerating positions that are too broad, are contrary to our separatist heritage, and are subversive of our stand, we work against ourselves and promote confusion.

WITH WHAT SPIRIT SHOULD WE TAKE OUR STAND?

God is concerned not only with the truth that we hold but with the spirit with which we hold it. When we stand before the Lord some day, He will examine “the counsels of the hearts” (1 Cor. 4:5). God desires “truth in the inward parts” (Psalm 51:6). Our prayer should be, “Let the words of my mouth, *and the meditation of my heart*, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer” (Ps. 19:14). Our hearts must be pure before the Lord if we would expect His blessing.

We should seek to befriend those who are moving in the right direction. Two questions arise at this point. Should we ever speak in the church of one who has not become a separatist yet? Excellent advice is found in these remarks:

As a fundamentalist who believes in Scriptural separation, I can preach for a man whose church may be in the National Council of Churches, the Southern Baptist Convention, or some other compromising organization or apostate denomination if that man himself takes a strong separatist stand and is seeking to inform his people of the errors, heresy, and apostasy in the organization with which the church is affiliated and provided that man is striving to bring his church out of that organization (Bob Jones, Jr., *Scriptural Separation: First and Second Degree?*).

Another question is, “How far should we go in extending fellowship to the disobedient brother?” Certainly we should not summarily dismiss him without an effort to win him to a stronger position.

An obedient Christian who takes a Scriptural stand should do everything he can to point out the danger and disobedience of failing to take such a stand . . . He should not, however, be overly hasty in withdrawing fellowship from some weaker brethren

who do not take his stand. He should first try to bring them to the Scriptural position on separation We may be able . . . to bring him to a Biblical position on separation so that we do not have to “withdraw” from him (Bob Jones, **op. cit.**).

We should not rejoice in discovering some compromise in a brother. On occasion some brethren seem to view with glee the uncovering of some fault in another Bible-believing servant of God. We ought to weep and not rejoice. “Rejoice not when thine enemy falleth, and let not thine heart be glad when he stumbleth: lest the Lord see it, and it displease him” (Prov. 24:17-18). If this should be our attitude toward our enemies, should it not be even more so toward our brethren? Paul warned his brethren “with tears” (Acts 20:31). Separatists could use a few more tears.

We should not be consumed with finding faults in our brethren. It is possible to major on uncovering “dirt” about the brethren. We certainly ought not to be gullible nor should we be silent when it is required that we should speak. But we ought not to make the main emphasis of our ministry “detective work.” One can develop a suspicious attitude toward everyone, which can militate against helpful interaction and constructive growth. Love “beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things” (1 Cor. 13:7). The thrust of this verse is that we should be optimistic, hopeful, and positive in our relationships toward others, not suspicious and distrustful. If persons show themselves through repeated actions as unworthy of trust, then we are forced to make appropriate judgments.

What kind of people are Biblical separatists? They are men with strong convictions. They are resolute. They have something of Elijah, John, Paul and Jude in their natures. The very traits God uses to make them strong must be controlled or separation can turn to fragmentation (John Ashbrook, *Axioms of Separation*, p. 20).

We should avoid placing incorrect labels on people. Not everyone, for instance, from whom we would be called to separate is an apostate. Nor, on the other hand, would they all be new evangelicals. The term “new evangelical” is sometimes loosely employed to characterize all with whom one disagrees or all who have some practice or method deviant from the fundamentalist norm. This is not an accurate usage of the term and is an example of the techniques that sometimes bring unnecessary derision upon the heads of separatists.

We should be restrained, gentlemanly, and careful in our language. Because one is a fundamentalist and battling for the faith does not give one the right to ignore plain scriptural commands to use speech that is pleasing to God. “Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man” (Col. 4:6). We are to be “speaking the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15). We are to put away “evil speaking” and “malice” (Eph. 4:31). It is true enough that religious debaters of old, such as Martin Luther, employed some rather lusty language in deriding their opponents, but that does not make it right, and it does not give us the license to do the same. No improper words ever escaped the lips of our blessed Lord. Let this be our example.

We should seek to win people to our position and not drive them away by senseless wranglings. Often public debates among fundamentalists are fueled by motives other than a desire to defend the truth. Instead, men are defending their “empires,” seeking to create an image of “success,” and

trying to put down other people in the process. Such antics must sicken the heart of God, and certainly they alienate some who might otherwise be our friends. There are arguments and discussions that are neither necessary nor profitable. We need to develop the ability to distinguish between controversies which are necessary in order to defend the faith or protect the people of God and controversies which are inspired by personal pique or carnal pride. “A brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city: and their contentions are like the bars of a castle” (Prov. 18:19). Considerable discussion is taking place today as to why so many younger men, raised in the separatist tradition, are failing to take a good position and, in some cases, are backing off from the fray. One of the major reasons, it seems to this writer, is the fact that they are disgusted with the lack of discernment on the part of some separatists who cannot distinguish between what is truly crucial to fellowship and what is not crucial. Some have made “mountains out of molehills” and have elevated minor matters to the status of major items of the faith.

We should maintain a balanced and fair view. Because a man is not a separatist does not mean that all he says or writes is worthless. For instance, Harold Lindsell’s books describing the battle over Scripture and defending the inspiration of Scripture are very good books. Most of us would not endorse all of Lindsell’s associations and activities, but this does not mean we cannot benefit from what he has produced that is helpful and true to Scripture. We would not condone W. A. Criswell’s promotion of the Southern Baptist Convention, but who of us has not been blessed by some of his fine expositions of Scripture. The good qualities of a man can be appreciated without condoning his compromises. It is not a sin to declare that someone with whose position we may disagree has preached, written, or performed in some way that is worthy and has been a spiritual blessing. (It does not follow, however, that we are free to use such men on our platforms, to address our churches and conferences.) Even the hireling prophet Balaam spoke some beautiful and helpful prophecies. Our Lord Himself precedes His rebuke of the Ephesian church by commending them for the good things they had done (Rev. 3:24).

We should not hastily reject a brother. All separatists have made mistakes of judgment. Good men who are trying to take a stand for righteousness sometimes become involved in something or with someone that may seem inconsistent with a separatist position. Caution must be exercised in dealing with such a brother. One has rightly stated:

It is easy to separate from a brother because he has a speaker we would not have, supports a mission we would not support or recommends a school we would not recommend . . . I have had speakers, supported missions, and recommended schools that I would not have, support, or recommend today. . . . Be careful not to run up the red flag for every mistake or differing decision. Wait to see if it is a pattern (John Ashbrook, *Axioms of Separation*, p. 21).

We should guard our own lives. The fact that a man is a stalwart of the faith does not provide automatic protection from the sins of the flesh. Those of us who take the scriptural position of separation should be watchful that we do not fall prey to the Devil (Gal. 6:1). Separatists have old natures too. Powerful spokesmen for the cause of separatism have sometimes fallen into gross sin and disgraced their Lord as well as the cause they have represented. Engaged as we are in public debates over biblical questions it is easy to drift away from the Lord in our hearts, become callused and cold, having all the correct positions but without the heart-warmth, tenderness, and devotion that

should be evidenced. Our Lord warned the church at Ephesus that they had straight doctrine but dying love (Rev. 2:24).

CONCLUSION

To maintain a proper stance on biblical separation amidst the tangled ecclesiastical world in which we live is not an easy task. It requires supernatural assistance. We must possess a unique combination of Christian graces, which can only be provided by the indwelling Holy Spirit. The warrior for the faith needs spiritual discernment, wisdom of utterance, graciousness of speech, a courageous spirit, knowledge of the Word of God, and a supreme loyalty to his Lord. All that we need to “fight the good fight” will be supplied by the Great Separatist, the Lord Jesus Christ, Who equips His people for the tasks to which He calls them.

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