

Fellowship, Separation & Sectarianism

The Bible commands us to separate from certain things. The problem with much of the Christian church today is that we are striving for an ecumenical unity at all costs – including truth! Yet there can be no unity without the truth of God's Word, (Jn.17:11-17). On the other hand, some separate from the wrong things and for the wrong reasons. Worse than this, some of us take separation to its extreme and separate entirely from the church itself - *sectarianism!*

Separation basically means we are not to be involved with, or not to spiritually fellowship with, someone or something that the Bible warns us of. What does the Bible warn us to separate from?

We are commanded to separate from *false teachers* who cause offence to the true and original *doctrine* handed down from Christ and the apostles, (2Thess.3:6; Rom.16:17 Cp. Phil.3:17,18,19, see also 1Tim.6:3-5). We are commanded not to be unequally yoked with *unbelievers* (2Cor.6:14-17), who are involved in *unrighteous* and *unclean things*. The Greek word for 'unclean' here is '*akathartos*' and is used 24 out of 30 times to mean 'unclean spirits or demons' and sometimes of homosexuality, (Eph.5:6). We are also commanded to separate from *fornicators*, the *covetous*, *idolaters*, *drunkards*, and *extortioners* who claim to be Christians, (1Cor.5:9-14).

We are *not* commanded to separate from Christians unless they be involved with the sins or corrupt doctrine we have outlined above. Separation is not the Biblical answer to every disagreement between brethren! Neither must we cause our Christian brothers and sisters to stumble nor to offend them with a sectarian attitude, (Rom.14:10-13,21).

Essentially we must separate from: 1. *False doctrine* 2. *False teachers*, and 3. *Unclean and unrighteous people or things to do with those who profess Christianity*.

1. The Bible states that we must separate from doctrine that is ***not after the tradition which ye received of us*** (the apostles), (2Thess.3:6) ..or ***...the Words of our Lord Jesus Christ***, (1Tim.6:3) ***...and the words of the epistles***, (2Thess.3:14). In summary, our doctrine must be the body of truth ***once delivered unto the saints***, (Jude 3).

However, we should separate on *serious* doctrinal issues rather than interpretations on minor issues. The apostle John says in 2John 9:11: ***Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ...receive him not...for he that biddeth him God's speed is partaker of his evil deeds***. What is this '*doctrine of Christ*'? Previously in verse 7 John tells us that it is: '*Jesus Christ is come in the flesh*'. This is a reference to the incarnation, deity and resurrection of Christ - no minor issues!

Serious doctrinal issues are surely those *essentials* affecting the *salvation* of souls. These essentials should include the doctrine of God - His nature, His person (the Trinity), His immutability and His attributes; The doctrine of man – his nature, condition (the fall); and the doctrine of salvation, (its means through Christ, the cross, repentance and faith). More specifically the above areas could include:

- Belief in the *death, burial* and *bodily resurrection* of the Lord Jesus Christ.
- The *deity* of Christ - that God became flesh, (1Jn.4:2,3; 1Tim.3:16; Col.1:14-19; Heb.1:1-4).
- The *finished* sacrifice of the cross of Calvary, (Heb.9:25,26; 10:10-18; 1Pet.3:18; Jn.19:30, etc.)
- That we are saved by grace through faith in Christ *alone*, wholly *apart* from works, (Eph.2:8,9; Tit.3:5; Acts16:30,31; Rom.4:5; 2Tim.1:9; Acts 20:21).
- That Christ bore our sins on the cross, (not in hell as the Word-Faith teachers teach), and that His blood sets us free, (1Jn.1:7-9; Heb.9:22; Col.1:14).
- That with acceptance of the grace (unmerited favour) of God we will in obedience, *repent* of our old sinful ways and *follow* Jesus as Lord and Saviour, (Rom.10:9; Acts 2:38-47; 1Cor.12:12-27; Matt.18:15-17).
- To follow Christ is to follow the Bible as the *inerrant* and *infallible* Word of God, (2Tim.3:16,17; 2Pet.1:19-21; Pr.30:5,6), and to *test* all *doctrine* and teaching by it and it alone, (2Tim.3:16; Gal.1:8; Pr.30:5,6).

2. The second area of separation concerns *false teachers*. We are commanded to ***mark*** them. This means to 'consider carefully and take heed'. False teachers are those who ***cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned...*** (Rom.16:17), and are ***the enemies of the cross of Christ***, (Phil.3:18.). They will teach *otherwise* to the Word of God, ie. ***another gospel***, (Gal.1:8,9). Today more than ever this is evident in extra Biblical revelations and teachings.

3. The third area of separation concerns believers (1Cor.5:9-14), and unbelievers (2Cor.6:14-17), who are involved in unclean or unrighteous things. These are listed in the Scriptures above and include anything to do with unclean spirits or demons, as well as homosexuality, fornication and idolatry. However, let us not forget that we are to still to take the Gospel to the lost and minister *to* them, (not *with* them). What would some churches say of Jesus who 'associated' with and ministered *to* the prostitutes and the tax collectors?

In summary we cannot fellowship *with* false doctrine (including false religions), false teachers (and false prophets), or uncleanness and unrighteousness. To apply separation further than this is at best by preference and at worst to ***go beyond the Word of the Lord***...(Nu.22:18).

It is sad to see Christians with sectarian and pharisaical attitudes to other faithful Christians in various church groups or 'denominations'. Our fellowship is '***in the Gospel***', (Phil.1:5). There is still a remnant of *local New Testament autonomous* churches in various 'denominations' who are faithful to the Gospel and are often earnestly contending for the faith once delivered to the saints, (Jude 3). This is despite the fact that many others in the same groups have admittedly apostasised from their original doctrinal purity in the Gospel. However, very often these faithful autonomous churches *see themselves* just as 'independent' as those who would call themselves independent and separate from them! We are not saying here that 'denominations' are the norm, for it is likely that much of 'denominationalism' surely stinks in the nostril of God. There will also be many churches who, under pressure, will need to separate from their group as their 'denomination' moves down the path of apostasy into heresy.

However, Jesus rebuked the sectarian attitude of the disciples, (who ***forbade*** other works of the Spirit), when he said: ***Forbid him not...for he that is not against us is on our part. For whosoever shall give you a cup of water to drink in my name, because ye belong to Christ, verily I say unto you, he shall not lose his reward.*** Jesus then went on to warn of the seriousness of causing unnecessary *offence* against other believers, (Mk.9:39-42).

May we find the balance in Biblical separation. In the essentials let there be *no compromise*! Doctrinal emphasis on the essentials is the wall that stems the tide of apostasy. In the non-essentials let there be *liberty*. In all things let there be love. Let us practice Biblical and only *Biblical* separation.

Terry Arnold