

The Forgotten Doctrine of Separation

By Dr. David J. Rodabaugh

One of the most important doctrines in the Word of God is the doctrine of separation. It is also one of the most controversial.

This key doctrine is once again being shunned by leaders who call themselves fundamentalists.

Some years ago, this doctrine was one of the basic differences between those called "fundamentalists" and those called "neo-evangelicals"

For example, in his book, The New Evangelicals (1963, Zondervan), Ronald Nash listed what he called "extreme separation" as one of the four basic tenets of fundamentalism.

This issue was foremost in the refusal by some believers to support the Billy Graham crusades. In fact, an entire book, Cooperative Evangelism (1958), was written by Robert O. Ferm as a defense of Billy Graham's crusade techniques.

In the foreword to this book, Stephen Paine wrote, "The willingness of Billy Graham to seek the cooperation of liberal churches draws against him the persistent and unreserved opposition of separatists".

While we disagree totally with Robert Ferm's position, we confess that he states it clearly. On page 13, he says that the great question is, "With whom shall we evangelize," He further claims that the issue is that of cooperation.

On page 19, Robert Ferm lists four basic criticisms of Billy Graham:

1. Billy Graham accepts sponsorship of liberals, etc..
2. This confuses young converts.
3. New converts may be counseled by those from liberal churches.
4. New converts may be referred to liberal churches.

Separation More Than Just Evangelism.

The issues of separation and cooperation affect more than just evangelism.

They are the very basis of the organization of the local church.

The scripture clearly teaches that there must not be unnecessary splits in the Body of Christ. To start a new church over personalities or side issues is totally contrary to the Word of God. It is not to be tolerated.

Let us look carefully at the Word of God on this issue. As we do, we should ask if there is a different basis for cooperation in evangelism than there is in Bible teaching. If there isn't, then we must be careful to apply the same principles to both situations.

Some years ago at a Pastors' conference, a 'grace' pastor was thrilled because some six churches in his town had held evangelistic services together. They had a 'grace' man as the preacher the first year. Unfortunately, I asked the question, "What are you going to do next year when it is the ..., church's turn to supply the preacher?" There was silence. You see the ... church taught that you have to be baptized to be saved.

The subject is basic -- and ignored. Today, some groups who were clear and fundamentalist on the issue 15 years ago are shunning it today.

Church history, like the history of Israel, is often a record of doctrinal and practical compromise. It is rarely a record of faithfulness to the Word of God.

Separation Defined.

A simple short definition of the doctrine is that separation is separation from whatever is contrary to the mind of God unto God himself. This definition is so broad that it virtually includes every facet of the Christian life. Certainly no one can quarrel with such a definition. The quarrels begin when we start to look at just what implications there are from this.

Separation and Personal Holiness.

In its broadest definition, separation certainly includes any call to leave sin and live for the Lord. We should often reflect on Ro 12:1, 2 where we are commanded to present our bodies a living sacrifice, holy acceptable unto God.

Paul further states, "And be not conformed to this world but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove (test) what is that good, acceptable, and perfect, will of God."

There is certainly both a negative and a positive aspect to personal holiness. We are not to be conformed to this world (age) and we are to be transformed. In 2 Tim 2:19 we read, "And, Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity"

The call to forsake sinning extends even to our words. In Eph 5:2-5 the commands to forsake fornication, uncleanness and covetousness are extended to include the forsaking of filthiness, foolish talking and jesting There are many who seem almost boastful of their outward lives but their speech betrays a most unholy life.

In addition, the call to personal holiness calls for the saint to (Eph 5:11), "... have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them." The believer is in no way to be identified with sin.

In addition, holiness has its call to dedication to the Lord. It is not..enough to refrain from sinning -- we must live for the Lord as well.

In Phil 3:10, we read, "That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his suffering, being made conformable to his death"

What an important concept -- we can experience his power in holy living by being conformable to his death. There can be nothing of self in that. There can be no insistence in our way in that. There can only be simple subjection to the revealed will of a sovereign God. The reader should also read Phlp 2:5-8.

As we have seen, there is both a positive and a negative aspect to personal holiness. To have one without the other is to live an unholy life.

Separation and Fellowship

Like so many doctrines, careful understanding begins with careful definition. In this case, it will also be helpful to define the opposite doctrine.

It really is not so surprising that to define an idea, you need the definition of the contrary notion.

In this case, the opposite notion is that of fellowship. To talk of those from whom you must separate is simply the other side of the issue of with whom you must fellowship.

The word fellowship is about as misunderstood as is the word separation. There are two meanings commonly associated with fellowships

1. a social get together.
2. visiting with someone else about spiritual matters.

Neither of these uses fits the meaning of the word fellowship when we find it in the scriptures. The word 'fellowship' is a translation of two Greek words--

koinwnia and **metoch**. Each of these words has the thought of

“fellowship, communion, sharing in common.”

It is instructive to note that the related nouns **koinwnos** and **metocos** are used in Luke 5 in a synonomous fashion. In Lk 5:7, the word **metocos** is used of men who were in a business (that of fishing) partnership. They are called partners. In verse 10, we find that these men were called partners again only this time the Greek word is **koinwnos**. Hence, these two words denote partners.

Thus the meaning behind the words for fellowship is partnership. In particular, a business partnership. This is a far cry from a social or a time of informal conversation.

Now, separation is the opposite of partnership (fellowship).

Given a particular person, I must either fellowship with him or I must separate from him. There is no other option. If I can't fellowship, then I must separate.

The same thing can be said about an organization. Given a particular organization, I must either fellowship with it or I must separate from it. There is no other option.

Every believer fellowships with some and separates from the others. Unfortunately, these attachments and separations are usually based on emotions and personal considerations rather than on the Word of God.

Separation from the Unsaved Commanded.

"Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful." (Ps 1:1)

Yes, happy is that man that does not place himself in the company of sinners. He is the one that puts a distance in some way between himself and the world. He is the one who is separate from the world.

The obedient believer is one who is not in fellowship with those who are outside of Christ. This does not mean that he has no contact with the unsaved. Indeed, we are commanded repeatedly to witness to the saved. We have been (1 Th. 2:4) put in trust with the gospel. We are to take to the unsaved the message that commands them to be reconciled to God (2 Cor 5:18-20) At no time should the believer take the position that he is not to contact the unbeliever.

But, the believer is definitely not to become involved with the unsaved. We are taught that (1 Cor 15:33), "evil communications corrupt good manners." The King James in this verse is not quite the way we would say it. It literally means that, "bad associations corrupt good customs," We are commanded to be in contact with the unsaved, but we are forbidden to form associations with the unsaved.

My dear Christian friend, if one of your best friends is an unbeliever then you are in serious danger -- that close friend of yours is nothing but trouble for you in your Christian life.

In 2 Cor 6:17-7:1 (NIV), we read, "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers, For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God, As God has said: 'I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people. Therefore, come out from them and be separate, says the Lord, Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty' Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God."

There you have a clear statement of the principle. Any involvement with an unsaved person that includes a 'yoke' that can bind the spiritual life is forbidden. This certainly includes marriage but may include other associations as well.

Note the basis for all of this is the fact that we are the temple of the living God. As much as we do not like to face up to it, it is the teaching of the Word of God that the unsaved are certainly not temples of God. Indeed, they are the children of the devil! While we are to be kind to them and witness to them we must always be on our guard for they are of the evil one.

Separation from Certain Believers Commanded

The Bible not only commands separation from spiritual yokes with the unsaved: it also commands separation from certain of the saved.

This aspect of the doctrine causes much controversy. Yet, to be faithful to the Word of God, we must teach this as well.

We will list several passages that deal with this subject and then deal separately with its two main subtopics.

To begin with, note 2 Th 3.6 (NIV) where we read, "In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us." Later in verses 14 and 15 we read, "If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother."

Again, in Ro 16:17-19 (NIV), we are commanded, "I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people. Everyone has heard about your obedience, so I am full of joy over you', but I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil."

Yes, contrary to popular teaching, the faithful believer is obligated to separate from certain believers.

It is important, however, that the basis of this separation be based on the Word of God. Too often, it seems that Christians leave churches and associations over emotional issues and personalities. This is terribly wrong. Such behavior is not proper and is condemned in the Bible, We will examine the

Biblical basis for separation under the headings of "doctrine" and "moral".

Moral Basis for Separation

Nearly every professing believer admits that there are moral causes for separation from other Christians. The scriptures list several,

Note first what is ordered in 1 Cor 5:9-11 (NIV), "I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people -- not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat."

Clearly, then, all manner of immorality is grounds for separation. Such a person is to be kicked out of the assembly until he repents of his terrible sin.

Today, many think it a manifestation of grace that their church tolerates and embraces immoral people. This is clearly not the case. The church is to have a testimony of purity. Anyone whose public testimony is otherwise is to be barred from the fellowship. There are other passages that teach much the same thing.

There is another category that should be mentioned here because it might very well be a problem in our society. This is the sin of idleness. In 2 Th 3:6 (quoted above), the apostle says to separate from the idle brother. The local assembly is to help those of its number who are in need. But, this does not include the willfully idle. Such behavior is not to be tolerated.

Doctrinal Basis for Separation

No doubt, this subject is the one that makes most believers feel uneasy.

Yet, look at the passage from Romans 16 quoted above. Paul there commands (Ro 16:17) "... watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them."

Such a verse really speaks for itself Those who teach false doctrine are to be avoided.

Another place where Paul emphasizes that men must be faithful to that which Paul taught is in 1 Tim 3:9. In this passage the apostle is giving the requirements for what most translations call "deacons". Now, "deacon" is a transliteration not a translation. That is, it is a Greek word spelled with English (Latin) letters. The word means "servant". It is the lowest place in the local assembly.

If you search Paul's letters, you will not find any place where there is such a thing as a "church member". The closest thing to a "church member" is that of "deacon". We know from Ro 16:1 that there were female deacons or deaconesses. Clearly, then, the deacon is not the exalted office a number of conservative churches make it. For, a woman can't have authority over a man in the local church.

Yet, though the "deacon" is not an exalted person in the local assembly, we find that he must be clear and committed in his doctrine. Note that in 1 Tim 3:9 we are told that one of the requirements is (KJV), "Holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience."

This is the literal meaning of the Greek. The RSV has essentially the same meaning. What Paul is referring to here is the mystery of the book of Ephesians. Understanding this mystery requires first that a person know something of the sovereign will of God and the right division of the Word of God. In short, to hold the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience requires that a person be committed to certain doctrines that some would like to call minor issues.

Clearly, we must separate over those doctrines which God calls important -- whether or not men think them important. And it is just as clear that men -- even some whom others think devout and sincere -- will think that we have split over minor issues.

But, how can we be sure that we have chosen the right issues? To begin with, there is an inspired list of such doctrines for the present dispensation. In Eph 4.1-6 the apostle Paul states (NIV), "As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge

you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit -- just as you were called to one hope when you were called -- one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all,"

The believer is urged to keep the unity of the Spirit which is based on seven doctrinal areas. Notice that there is no concept here of making a unity that does not already exist. Rather, there is the idea of guarding the unity that does exist.

Therefore, the doctrinal basis for unity (and by contrast, that for separation) is that based on Eph 4:4-6. Any doctrinal basis that is smaller than this leads to compromise for it compromises some doctrine which God calls major. Any doctrinal basis that is larger than this requires clear justification from other portions of scriptures

For a doctrine to be included in your doctrinal basis -- creed -- it is not enough that it be correct. There must be clear evidence from the word of God that God wants it in a creed.

My dear Christian friend, it is imperative that you have your concept of doctrinal unity based clearly on the Word of God. List those doctrines over which you would separate. It is not enough that you would include or exclude them from some formal statement.

My own personal experience tells me that there is a great deal of hypocrisy in this area. Several organizations of which I was a member had the doctrine of "total depravity" in their doctrinal statements but refused to enforce it. Indeed, scarcely a minister in each of these organizations believed this cardinal doctrine. Yet, some of these would definitely split over issues not in the creed.

There are two important requirements for a creed, (Some use the expression "doctrinal statement".) First, to be honest, it must truly reflect the basis for unity and separation in the group. Second, it must include precisely those doctrines which the Bible states are foundational.

Our own doctrinal statement is an attempt to be faithful to the second goal.
God grant that we be faithful to the first.

(The interested reader may write for a free copy of our doctrinal statement.)

Concluding Remarks

We conclude by stating again the importance of this doctrine of separation. It is essential that this doctrine be understood before starting a church or even before starting a Bible class. It is essential that it be grasped when you decide what church/Bible class to attend. It governs how close you can be to various organizations or people. In short, it is the basis of all close personal relationships for the believer. God grant that we show godly care in this area of our lives.