

AN
HISTORICAL
AND
BIBLICAL STUDY
OF
ECCLESIASTICAL
SEPARATION

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by

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BASIS OF ECCLESIASTICAL SEPARATION

INTRODUCTION: Is the separatist movement merely a result of the fleshly maneuverings of carnal and divisive believers, or does it have a Biblical foundation?

What do we mean by separatism? An ecclesiastical separatist holds, upon the basis of Biblical teaching, that local churches should remain pure in doctrine and practice and should not contaminate their purity by fraternal or organizational association with churches, organizations, or individuals who do not hold sound doctrine or with true believers who condone or practice fellowship with those who are unsound.

I. The Holiness of God

—The Ground of Biblical Separation

A. The Character of God's Holiness

1. God hates sin (Psalm 45:7).
"Thou hatest wickedness."
2. God cannot commit sin (Job 34:10)
"Far be it from God that He should do wickedness; and from the Almighty, that He should commit iniquity."
3. God is without sin (Deut. 32:4).
"A God of truth and without iniquity; just and right is He."
4. God abhors sin in His creatures (Hab. 1:13).
"Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity" (or, "You cannot tolerate wrong")

B. The Consequences of God's Holiness

1. God desires His people to be holy (1 Pet. 1:16).
"Be ye holy for I am holy."
2. God desires His people to be actively opposed to unholiness (Amos 5:14-15; Psalm 119:104).
"Hate the evil and love the good."
"I hate every false way."

II. The Principle of Separation as Seen in the Old Testament

The principle of holiness and its preservation transcends the dispensations. Principle of holiness found throughout Scripture.

A. In The Mosaic Law

"Ye shall therefore be holy, for I am holy." (Lev. 11:45)
Also Leviticus 20:26.

B. In Joshua and Judges

Joshua 23 (entire chapter has emphasis on separation)
"Come not among these nations...neither make mention of the names of their gods." Judges 2:1-23 and 3:1-7 In both chapters the awful power of apostasy is seen.

C. In the Times of the Kings

(1 Kings 11:1-11) "And Solomon did evil in the sight of the Lord...and the Lord was angry

with Solomon.” (vs. 6, 9)

D. In the Times of Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther (Neh. 13:23-29)

E. In the Messages of the Prophets

Jeremiah 16:10-13; Ezekiel 23 (chapter on spiritual adultery)

“But you have borne the tabernacle of your Moloch and Chiun your images, the star of your god, which you made to yourselves. Therefore will I cause you to go into captivity” (Amos 5:21-27).

The Old Testament is uncompromisingly against religious inclusivism.

III. The Teaching of the New Testament on Separation

A. Christ’s Condemnation of Israel’s Apostasy

Matthew 12:38-50; Matthew 23

“Even so you also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within you are full of hypocrisy and iniquity”

B. The Example of the Early Believers

“But when divers were hardened and believed not, but spake evil of that way before the multitude, he departed from them, and separated the disciples...” (Acts 19:9). They witnessed to them but did not worship with them.

C. Testimony of the Epistles

1. Romans 16:17-18

2. 2 Corinthians 6:14-18

3. Ephesians 5:11

Question: Is Liberalism, which denies Christ’s deity and other key doctrines, a “work of darkness”?

4. 2 Timothy 2:16-21

5. 2 Timothy 3:1-5

6. 2 John 10-11

IV. The Problem of So-Called “Secondary Separation”

Should we separate from evangelicals who fraternize with apostates, with compromisers, or with those who tolerate compromise?

This is one of the most difficult areas since it involves emotions, personal relationships, and people who believe in general the same things we do.

A. Scriptural Considerations

1. Matthew 18:15-17

Not just trivial matters. Word “trespass” is one of the words used for “sin.”

2. 1 Corinthians 5:1-11

Because of the immorality of the man mentioned the church was to withdraw fellowship from him.

3. 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15

Passage not limited to simply “lazy brethren.” Covers believers who do not obey the word of God as given through the apostles (vs. 6,14).

4. Titus 3:9-11 —An heretic is a believer who sets up his own doctrine or practice contrary to apostolic instruction and becomes divisive.

B. Biblical Questions to Ask

1. Am I honoring God by my fellowship?

“Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, of whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.” (1 Cor.

10:31)

2. Am I aiding or encouraging someone to continue a walk of disobedience to God?

“But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed.” (Gal. 2:11)

3. Will my cooperation with a person or organization give the impression that I am condoning their lackadaisical attitude toward apostasy and compromise?

“The fear of the Lord is to hate evil: pride, and arrogancy, and the evil way, and the froward mouth, do I hate.” (Prov.8:13)

4. Will continued fellowship and cooperation with a given person or group have a weakening effect upon my testimony?

(1 Cor. 15:33) “Evil communications corrupt good manners,” or another rendering: “Bad company corrupts good character.”

5. Will others under my leadership and influence be tempted to further compromises or be confused or weakened in their stand because of my actions?

“Be an example of the believers.” (1 Tim. 4:12)

6. What long-range effects will my actions have upon myself or those around me?

“And he [Nadab] did evil in the sight of the Lord, and walked in the way of his father, and in his sin wherewith he made Israel to sin.” (1 Kings 15:26)

“Never sacrifice the permanent on the altar of the immediate.” (*Bob Jones, Sr.*)

EARLY HISTORIC BACKGROUND OF THE SEPARATIST MOVEMENT

Introduction: The controversy over separatism is not new. Was a large conflict over the proper nature of the Church in the fourth and fifth centuries.

I. Early Church Movements

A. Montanists

After middle of 2nd century man named Montanus proclaimed himself a prophet. Emphasis among followers upon a pure church, the immediate power of the Holy Spirit, and the second coming of Christ. Was a protest against the growing formalism and worldliness in the official Church. Tertullian a chief representative. Church for believers only. Practiced church discipline.

B. Novatians

Novatian was a bishop of early church during the Decian persecutions (249-250 A.D.). Roman Empire killed thousands of believers. Many believers, in order to save their lives, denied the Lord. The Novatians said they should not be restored to church fellowship. They formed a separatist movement which lasted for centuries and emphasized church purity. They emphasized also a godly life and regenerate church membership.

II. Donatism vs. The Catholic Church

A. The Controversy

During the second and third centuries there were a series of persecutions of the Church by the Roman government. Government authorities and enemies of the Church demanded the surrender of copies of the Scriptures by believers, reasoning no doubt that without the copies of the Bible the movement would weaken and die. They were called “*traditores*” (surrenderers). After the persecutions, many felt these should be reinstated in places of church leadership. The opposition to this was led by a bishop named Donatus the Great. Movement known as Donatism centered in North Africa and was very strong there.

B. The Outstanding Issues

The controversy centered around the questions: what constituted a New Testament church?

1. The Fact and Extent of Apostasy in the Established Church
2. The Goal of Doctrinal and Moral Purity for the Visible Church

Should a church be composed of believers only?

Should there be stricter requirements for church membership?

3. The Necessity of Ministers Being Pure in Life

Worldliness and carelessness had crept into the ministry. Validity of the sacraments depended upon the holiness of the administrator.

4. The State Should not Control the Church

NOTE: The above-stated views brought such conflict that the Donatists became a separate Church as over against the old Catholic Church.

C. The Attack upon Donatism

1. Chief spokesman for Catholic Church - Augustine, Bishop of Hippo in North Africa.
2. Defended Catholic Church as the true Church. His arguments laid foundation for later arguments of Catholic apologists.
3. Arguments from Apostolic tradition, church practice and custom.

Did not argue primarily from the Scriptures. He emphasized unity in love. Argued for the validity of persecuting persons who opposed the Catholic Church.

NOTE: Issues in this controversy resurface throughout Church history. Separatists today are still accused of holding the “Donatist view” of the Church. Donatists weak in view of salvation. Were still sacramentalists.

NON-CATHOLIC MOVEMENTS IN THE MIDDLE AGES AND REFORMATION PERIOD

I. Anti-Catholic Movements in Middle Ages

A. Albigenses

Also called the Cathars (pure ones). Believed to have originated in northern Italy and southern France. Existed around 11th century. Possibly named after town of Albi in southern France.

B. Bogomils

Centered in Bulgaria. First mentioned around middle of 10th century. Exact beginnings not clear.

C. Paulicians

May have originated as early as 7th century. Strong in Armenia, Syria, Mesopotamia. Considered heretical by Eastern Orthodox Church. Still have one of their ancient writings, *The Key of Truth*.

D. Petrobusians

Sprang from teachings of Peter of Bruys (1104-1125 A.D.), a Frenchman who was burned as a heretic. Knowledge of him comes mainly from writings of his chief opponent, Peter the Venerable of Cluny.

E. Bohemian Brethren

Beginnings in teachings of Archbishop Rokcana of Prague. Peter Chelcicky main leader (died about 1487). Was influenced by writings of John Wycliffe.

F. Waldensians

Generally traced to teas of a merchant of Lyons (France--about 1170-1215.) Advocated giving up worldly things and following and preaching Christ. Followers known as “Poor Men.” Used

laymen as preachers.

G. Lollards and Hussites

Because of ministry of John Wycliffe in England, from about 1370 A. D., some began to reject Catholic teaching. Wycliffe's followers called "Lollards" (origin of word unknown). Bible translated into English. Council of Constance condemned Wycliffe as an heretic (1415).

II. Problems in Evaluation of These Movements

A. Difficulties Encountered

1. Lack of accurate information
2. Most available literature written by their enemies
3. Most of their own literature destroyed
4. Differences in degree of orthodoxy among them
5. An era of great spiritual darkness—remarkable that these people had any spiritual light.
6. Most of them entangled to some degree with Roman Catholic errors

B. Position Evaluated

1. Opposed the Roman Church
2. Believed in regenerate local churches
3. Gave a prominent place to the Scriptures
4. Rejected many Catholic superstitions (such as the Mass, mariolatry, purgatory)
5. Had an emphasis on personal godliness

Abiding lesson: Those who take a stand for truth will pay a great price.

III. The Rise of the Anabaptists

A. Their Roots

Grew out a renewal of Bible study which characterized the Reformation period (beginning in early 1500's). Many of leaders were Swiss and had been influenced by the Swiss Reformer, Ulrich Zwingli.

Name "anabaptist" means "rebaptizer." They would not receive the baptism of Rome as legitimate.

B. Their Distinctive

1. Word of God Final Authority
Not the Pope nor church councils or traditions
2. Baptism Only for the Born-again
3. A local church composed only of believers
4. Church discipline to be exercised
5. Personal godliness required of believers
6. The Roman Church Apostate
Separation from Roman Church imperative

C. Their Opponents

All the Reformers (Luther, Calvin, etc.) opposed the Anabaptists. Reformers believed:

1. Visible churches could be composed of believers and unbelievers.
2. Visible church entered by infant baptism.
3. Visible church should be defended by the civil powers (government).
4. Anabaptists believed:
5. In the "fall of the Church" (that is, the professing Church had fallen into apostasy)
7. In separation of church and state

THE PURITANS AND THE SEPARATIST PRINCIPLE

The debate between the two branches of Puritanism over the matter of separation from the Church of England was a forerunner of the debates in later years.

I. The Rise of Puritanism

Movement began during reign of Elizabeth I in England (1533-1603). Aim was to purify the Church of England.

II. Some Characteristics of Puritanism

- A. Emphasis upon Scripture and Its Authority
- B. Opposition to Roman Catholicism, Its Doctrines and Manner of Worship
- C. Emphasis Upon Personal Godliness

III. The Controversy Over Separatism

A. The “Stay-In” Reformers

Argued that should reform the Church of England from within and not separate from her.

B. The “Come-Out” Separatists

Felt Church of England was involved in idolatry and true believers should not support it.

Supported concepts of—(1) complete separation from Anglican Church; (2) independence of each congregation, (3) Regenerate church membership.

Note: their position eventually led many of them to become Baptists.

THE CONTROVERSY BETWEEN MODERNISM AND FUNDAMENTALISM

What was originally known as “Modernism” we now call “Liberalism.” “Fundamentalists” were (and are) those who oppose Liberalism.

I. The Roots of Religious Liberalism

The threads of thought that came together to form religious Liberalism had their origins in Europe, primarily in England, France, and Germany.

A. The Pre-eminence of Human Reason

All the Church’s beliefs must be reasonable.

B. Religion a Natural Development, Not a Supernatural Revelation

C. Emphasis upon the Innate Ability of Man

Man not viewed as a helpless, lost sinner

D. The Essence of Religion Is the Inner Consciousness of God.

Religion is basically a feeling of dependency upon God.

E. Theology Is Continually Changing and Developing.

Theory of evolution applied to theology

F. Bible is not a Supernaturally Inspired Book—Not Authoritative

II. Modern Unitarianism

A. Its Beginnings in England—first actual congregation then started in 1774.

B. Its Rise in America

One author, in describing its beginning, said it arose with a mood of compromise. “They were willing to make concessions for the sake of the peace of the churches” (Samuel Elliot, *Heralds of a Liberal Faith*, Intro. vol. I.). The same author states that “a very large majority of the churches that ultimately found themselves in Unitarian fellowship crossed the boundary

without knowing it” (Elliot, intro.). Henry Ware a Unitarian, was appointed professor of theology at Harvard in 1805 and this precipitated a battle.

III. The “Downgrade Controversy” In England

A. The Issues

Term “downgrade” referred to the doctrinal slide which many felt was being seen in English churches and particularly in Baptist churches.

B. The Position of Charles Spurgeon

1. His Ministry

Pastor of Metropolitan Tabernacle, London prolific author Editor of *Sword and Trowel*

2. His Warnings

In March and April of 1887, Spurgeon warned that Liberalism had entered the Baptist Union.

a. Crux of the matter— In August 1887 Spurgeon asked:

“It now becomes a serious question how far those who abide by the faith once delivered to the saints should fraternize with those who have turned aside to another gospel. Christian love has its claims and divisions are to be shunned as grievous evils; but how far are we justified in being in confederacy with those who are departing from the truth” (Ian Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon*, p. 167).

C. The Position of the Baptist Union

—Refused to clarify doctrinal issues

D. The Withdrawal of Spurgeon

In October 1887 Spurgeon withdrew from the Union

E. Lesson to be Learned

1. Failure to Clarify Doctrinal Issues Bodes Trouble

2. The Spirit of Accommodation Leads to compromise on Vital Doctrinal Convictions

3. False Denominational Loyalty Can Undermine Loyalty to Christ.

4. False Teachers Can Operate Within Groups That Have Orthodox Doctrinal Statements

5. Lack of Spiritual Discernment Can Result in Catastrophe

6. Separation Often Brings Abuse from Those Who Claim to Be Evangelical—Spurgeon was attacked by noted preachers such as Joseph Parker and John Clifford

IV. The Exodus from the Mainline Denominations

A. The Conflicts Among Presbyterians

1. Historical stand of Presbyterians was very orthodox

2. Liberalism began to come in

3. Document signed in 1923 called “Auburn Affirmation” which said it was wrong to require ministerial candidates to sign a doctrinal statement affirming fundamental doctrines.

4. G.Gresham Machen and others formed Westminster Seminary in protest to Liberalism at Princeton.

B. The Conflicts Among Baptists

1. In the North

a. Northern Baptist Convention divided over doctrine

b. In 1909 Wealthy St. Baptist in Grand Rapids withdrew from convention over Liberalism

c. Baptist Bible Union—took a more outspoken position against Liberalism

d. Conservative Baptist movement arose. They allowed churches to remain in the Northern Baptist Convention and still be a part of their movement.

e. Baptist Bible Union—eventually became General Association of Regular Baptist

Churches. They required every fellowshipping church to be completely out of the Convention.

2. In the South
Principal leader for separatists from the Southern Baptist Convention was J. Frank Norris, pastor of First Baptist, Ft. Worth, TX. Founded a school and a missionary agency. Also led in founding the World Fundamental Missionary Baptist Fellowship. Later conflicts resulted in many of the leaders departing and founding the Baptist Bible Fellowship.
- C. The Conflicts Among Congregationalists
 1. Separation of Congregational churches
William McCarrell founded Cicero Bible Church, Cicero, IL.
 2. Organization of the Independent Fundamental Churches of America (IFCA)
- D. Fundamental Inter-denominationalism
 1. Bible Conference movement
 2. City-wide evangelistic campaigns
 3. Radio broadcasts
 4. Missionary agencies
 5. Publications
- E. Competitors to the National Council of Churches
 1. National Association of Evangelicals Organized in 1942
Were not a separatist organization. Affiliates not required to separate from their respective denominations. Heavy proportion of the NAE is Arminian, holiness, Pentecostal and charismatic. (*Leading organizational voice for the New Evangelicalism*)
 2. American Council of Christian Churches
Organized just shortly before NAE in Sept. 1941. Carl McIntire the major figure and first president. Robert Ketcham served as President 1944-47. Required complete separation from apostate groups as necessary for membership.

THE NEW EVANGELICALISM

I. The Rise of The New Evangelical School of Thought

(Note observation that it began with a "mood")

- A. Founding of Fuller Theological Seminary (1947)
- B. *Christian Life* articles (1956)
"Is Evangelical Theology Changing?"
- C. *Christianity Today* Begun (1956)
- D. Writings of New Evangelical Authors
Samples:
Edward Carnell, *The Case for Orthodoxy*
Bernard Ramm, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture*
- E. Influence of National Association of Evangelicals

II. Tendencies Observable in The Early Stages

- A. Toleration of Wide Diversity of Viewpoints
- B. Friendliness toward or Acceptance of Evolutionary Theories
- C. Espousal or Toleration of Questionable Views of Biblical Inspiration
- D. Openness Toward the Ecumenical Movement
- E. Emphasis upon the Social Implications of the Gospel

- F. Practice of Ecumenical Evangelism
- G. Emphasis upon Unity Rather than Purity of the Church
- H. Strong Criticism of Fundamentalists and Separatists
- I. Pleas for More Political Involvement by Evangelicals
- J. Unbiblical Views on the Place of Women
- K. Rejection of Biblical Doctrine of Separation

III. Ecumenical Evangelism and Billy Graham

- A. Early Beginnings
 - Youth for Christ - Northwestern Schools - evangelism
- B. His Changing Position
 - Turning point - 1954 - New York Crusade
 - Publication of *Cooperative Evangelism*, a defense of Graham's approach by Robert Fern
- C. Arguments Supporting Graham
 1. Ought not to criticize if he is winning souls
 2. Will obtain a wider hearing for the gospel if he involves Liberals in his crusades
 3. We are not to judge God's servants
 4. Jesus and Paul sponsored by Liberals
 5. To oppose evangelism is unloving
 6. An evangelist is to win the lost not warn of apostasy
- C. The Tragic Results
 1. Filled the pews of Liberal churches
 2. Caused great confusion among the people of God
 3. Undermined the ministry of Fundamental pastors
 4. Laid the groundwork for the current, full-blown departure from Biblical principles

IV. The Further Development of New Evangelicalism

- A. The General Mind-set of New Evangelicalism
 1. Unity is Paramount
 2. Doctrine is less important than fellowship
 3. It is important that people feel good
 4. Abandon "prophetic" preaching for "affirmative" preaching
 5. Give people what they like and want
 6. Tear down "denominational distinctions"
 7. Shun controversy and simply be "positive"
- B. Resultant Problems in the Church
 1. Believers who are more interested in personal fulfillment than in loyalty to the Word of God
 2. Growing spirit of "looseness" within the churches
 3. Growing acceptance of the idea that the "peripheral" doctrines (baptism, eternal security, etc.) are not that important
 4. Biblically illiterate churches
 5. Acceptance of Contemporary Christian Music (CCM)
 6. Viewing spiritual ministry as entertainment
 7. Adopting a pragmatic outlook—whatever works is good

V. The Dangers of Sliding Into New Evangelicalism

A. Educational Institutions

Bible colleges, seminaries, and Christian liberal arts colleges

B. Churches

Some formerly strong Fundamental churches have already departed from Fundamentalism

C. For Mission Agencies: pressures to “broaden the base”

VI. Conclusion

The necessity of defending against the encroachments of the new evangelicalism:

A. Strong Biblical teaching

B. Proper emphasis on Biblical doctrine

C. Information to people about what is going on

D. Willingness to stand and take abuse for so doing

E. Careful attention to church history and its lessons

F. Rejection of concept that perceived results allow for unbiblical compromises

THE CURRENT ECCLESIASTICAL SCENE

I. In Evangelism

Billy Graham near end of his ministry. Son, Franklin, taking over, Luis Palau espouses same views. Large city-wide campaigns dying out.

II. In Interdenominational Efforts

Most notable currently is Promise Keepers. Is built upon same governing principle as Billy Graham adopted years ago.

III. In Publishing

Many books out promoting evangelical ecumenism and related themes. Examples: *The Body* by Charles Colson and *In Search of Unity* by Edward Dobson.

Some good books opposing this ecumenism. Examples: *The Coming Evangelical Crisis* edited by John Armstrong. *Made in America* by Michael Horton.

IV. In Church Growth

The so-called “church growth movement” has spread like wildfire. Young pastors anxious to enlarge their churches, have gravitated to the teachings of this movement whose basic principle is to find out what worldly people desire in a church and then shape the church to suit them.

V. In Music

The current new evangelical movement has soared on the wings of contemporary Christian music (CCM). This music with its rock-and roll style brought from the world, has united people from many various denominational backgrounds. It has caused a major problem to pastors seeking to hold the line for God. Helpful books on the subject: *Face the Music* by Leonard Seidel, *The Battle for Christian Music* by Tim Fisher.

VI. In Theology

- A. Popularity of Charismatic Theology
- B. “Evangelical” Inclusivism
See Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy*
- C. Denial of Eternal Hell
John Sanders, *No Other Name*
- D. Progressive Dispensationalism
An attack on traditional dispensationalism by Craig Blaising, Darrell Bock, and others.

IMPLEMENTING SEPARATIST CONVICTIONS

It is one thing to possess separatist convictions. It is another to seek to implement them in one’s daily life and ministry.

I. Some General Considerations

- A. Some Issues Are Complex.
Not everything is immediately “crystal clear.” Not always “pat” answers readily available.
- B. There Are Differences of Personality.
Some are “scrappers.” Some are likely to stand properly but may take longer to arrive at their decision.
- C. There Are Differences of Context.
We all see things out of the context of our background.

II. Practical Areas in Which Separatist Convictions Must Be Implemented

- A. Personal Relationships
Question: with whom should I have personal fellowship?
- B. Cooperation with Other Churches
Some questions to ask:
 - 1. Is the church cooperating with apostates?
 - 2. Is the church struggling to sever itself from an apostate group?
 - 3. Are the doctrines of the church compatible with those held by your church?
 - 4. Will cooperation damage the clear testimony of your church in the community?
- C. Cooperation with Interdenominational Groups
Some problems:
 - 1. Broad doctrinal stance
 - 2. Generally weak on ecclesiastical separation
 - 3. Can wean people’s loyalties from their own local church
 - 4. Are not Baptist and hence not interested in promotion of Baptist convictions
- D. Choice of Outside Speakers—whom should we have speak in our church?
 - 1. Where else does this person speak? Does he go to new evangelical and compromising churches, schools, and other gatherings?
 - 2. Is he an outspoken separatist and a friend of separatists?
- C. Selection of Missionaries to Support
Questions to ask:
 - 1. What is the doctrinal position of the missionary agency under which he serves? What is

- the missionary's personal doctrinal position?
- 2. Does the agency practice Biblical separation on its fields?
- 3. Are the positions of the agency and the missionary essentially the same as those of your local church?
- D. The Choice of Colleges and Seminaries to Recommend
 - Where do the institutions stand on separation?
 - Do they practice what they preach?

III. Some Scriptural Guidelines for Separatists

- A. Our Position Must Be Based On Scripture Not Personal Emotion.
- B. We Must Seek to Be Consistent.
 - Cannot change our position because of personal friendship or for other reasons
- C. We Must Make Allowance for Human Inconsistency.
 - Most separatists will occasionally make a mistake in judgment. Men must be measured by their normal, long-term actions.
- D. We Must Speak the Truth in Love.
- E. We Should Seek to be Factual and Truthful.
- F. We Should Strive for Biblical Balance.

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