WHAT IS BIBLICAL SEPARATION?

INTRODUCTION:

The most definitive New Testament passage describing Biblical separation is 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1 – "Be ye not unequally yoked together. . . "

Paul's appeal to the Corinthians to withdraw themselves and be separate is given in words originally spoken by God to His people through Isaiah when He called them out of exile. They were to leave in Babylon everything that was unclean, taking only the sacred vessels of the Temple so that they might continue to be a people whom God could receive; i.e. whom He could look upon with favor (SEE Isaiah 52:11) (Lightner, p. 19).

Churches must be pure from that which would tarnish effective, Christ-honoring ministry. Such purity follows a principle illustrated by the Old Testament priests, who cleansed themselves at the brazen laver before performing a ministry that would be acceptable to God.

2 Corinthians 6:17 – "Come out"

A true Bible believer is a "come outer."

"In every age it has been the will of God for His people to come out of the place of unbelief. Israel 'came out' of Egypt (and was not to return). In Revelation 18:4 we read: 'And I heard another voice from heaven, saying, Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues.' It may sound smart and even 'spiritual' to talk about 'infiltrating the major denominations' with a gospel witness or 'staying in to fight the apostate denominational leadership,' but all such action is plan disobedience to God's command to 'come out'." (Tassell, p. 3, March 1985)

Many who seek to counter the Scriptural arguments given to support separation, appeal to Christ's command to "love." In doing so, they imply that separation from people is actually hatred for them. Such an appeal is erroneous because it reveals a misunderstanding of love. Separation is not practiced because of a hatred for people, but rather a hatred for sin. The Biblicist separates based on principle! Not over personality.

The great love passage (1 Corinthians 13) declares that true Biblical love "rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth. Biblical love keeps Christ's commands (Jn. 14:15; cp. 1 Jn. 2:4, 5; 5:2, 3).

Separation, essentially, is simply the distinguishing, the judging, and the separating between truth and error." (Jackson, item 12, p. 7).

We need to carefully distinguish between belief and unbelief, between truth and error, between righteousness and unrighteousness.

No believer can remain neutral about that which is black and white in Scripture!

We need to "hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering" (Heb. 10:23).

We are to "abhor that which is evil" and "cleave to that which is good.

The doctrine of separation is based on the holiness of God (Dt. 32:4; Is. 6:3; cp. 1 Pet. 1:16).

Biblical separation is the practical outworking of sanctification.

The New Testament teaches repeatedly that the believer's present practice (lifestyle) is to match his position before God (Rom. 6:1-14). In other words, believers are to have a manner of life that is characterized by holiness (distinctiveness from the world).

The word "sanctification' is used in the New Testament to describe three phases of the Christian's life. Sanctification is: 1) positional 2) progressive and 3) perfect.

Positional sanctification describes the believer's forensic standing before God (he is saved from the penalty of sin). Progressive sanctification speaks of the believer's present walk as a lifestyle characterized by a maturation into Christ likeness (he is saved from the power of sin). Thirdly, perfect sanctification depicts the believer as being actually glorified in Heaven (someday future, he will be saved from the very presence of sin).

Separation is an eternal and unchanging principle of God.

There is actually no difference between sanctification and separation.

Psalms 1:1
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.

Separation is positive. It is important to note that separation is not merely a negative setting-part from sin but it is positively a setting-apart for God.

There is a balance. For example: Salvation is not a mere turning from sin, but it is also a turning to Christ (1 Thes. 1:9), and sanctification is not only a putting off of the old man, but it is also a putting on of the new (Eph. 4:22-24).

Separation (in the negative sense) is not an end in itself, but is a means to an end. The goal in separation is a positive devotion to Christ and His Word and an active obedience to it. This is what brings glory to God!

I. MORAL SEPARATION

It takes the character of a Daniel to be a separatist in the midst of a society that is adverse to strong convictions. No one who is thinking straight wants to be cut off and alienated from other people. But if you are a separatist, such an outcome will sometimes be unavoidable. However, "it is axiomatic that even if people disagree with your convictions, they admire you for sticking up for them (MacArthur, p. 20)

We must be committed to draw the lines of separation where the Bible draws them.

Keystone of Separation: The authority of Scripture.

It's one thing to compromise on matters of personal preference; it is another thing entirely to compromise a Biblical standard.

Too often separatists forget that the Biblical doctrine of separation is positive and not just negative. Unless one is separation to God, all separation from apostasy will have little value.

Christian Liberty defined: Christian liberty is that freedom that Christians have to make decisions on matters not specifically commanded or forbidden in Scripture.

Whenever separation is violated, purity is lost and the power of God is removed! (EX: Samson).

II. PERSONAL SEPARATION

The psalmist declared: "Ye that love the Lord, hate evil" (Ps. 97:10). "If a gardener truly loves flowers, he must and will hate weeds" (Tassell, p. 3, March 85).

It was God's love for Israel that prompted Him to command the extermination of the polluted, immoral, debauched, disease-stricken Canaanites, lest His chosen nation also be polluted.

Separation from unbelievers does not mean that on a personal level we shun all interaction with them, as John Wesley believed.

The Bible is clear that we must separation from unbelievers. This includes separation from those who propagate any other gospel (Gal. 1:8). This includes liberalism and legalism.

The Bible is also clear that we are to separate from unrepentant brothers who walk in disobedience.

One clear basis for such separation is personal immorality (1 Cor. 5:7, 13). A second basis for separation is continual disobedience to the Word of God (2 Thes. 3:6, 14; cp. Also Mt. 18:15-17; 1 Tim. 1:18-20). And a third basis for separation is false doctrine (1 Tim. 6:3-6; 2 Tim. 2:16-18; Rom. 16:17).

Why separate from unbelievers?

1) Their philosophy is different
2) Their doctrine is different
3) Their practice is different
4) Their destiny is different
5) Their relationship is different

In 1 Timothy 1:18-20, Paul did not hesitate to put his finger individually upon obvious obvious heretics by naming them. There are people who say: "I don't think you have a right to say anything about an individual." But, you see, if I say to a congregation, "There are two thieves in the audience tonight," I cast suspicion upon everyone in the place. If there were two thieves, I would do well to name them, thereby vindicating every honest man in the group. (Jackson, p. 10)

It is unquestionably clear that liberalism (which preaches "another Jesus" and another gospel) and humanism (which exalts and worships man) and paganism (which bows to idols and practices magic) should be separated from.

God gives a complete list of situations in which Christians are to break fellowship with other believers. When do we separate from a brother?

1) If he is living in sin (1 Cor. 5:9-13)
2) If he divides the church (Tit. 3:9-11)
3) If he will not heed warnings and instruction of the church (Mt. 18:15-17; Tit. 3:9-11)
4) If he will not obey God's Word (2 Thes. 3:6, 14-15)

*This includes the idea of separating from a brother who does not follow God's teachings regarding separation.

The extent of separation: 5 key words and 5 key passages: Separate if there is:

--Compromise – Gal. 2:1-5
--Accommodation – Gal. 2:11-14
--Toleration – 1 Cor. 5:1-16
--Association – 1 Cor. 5:9-13
--Cooperation – Phil. 1:15-18 (Hornock, p. 14, Voice, Aug. 1982)

Toleration instead of excommunication (separation) results in infection (1 Cor. 5:6-7) (Talley, p. 22)

The point of contention is over the person, work, and Word of Jesus Christ. Jesus Himself said, "I came not to send peace, but a sword" (Mt. 10:34). One is either for Christ or is against Him.

What about what has been called second-degree separation or third, fourth, or even fifth degree separation? Are God's people to separate from other believers who do not separate? Specific answers to these questions are not given in the Bible. (Lightner, p. 20-21).

This area then is one of Christian liberty. Many details involving separation from fellow Christians are not given, making this area a test of one's spirituality. What must be done in such a case is that each pastor must know God's general principle of separation and decide each case on its own merits.

Just like the father of the prodigal son, we should welcome those who move over into a place of obedience, not with suspicion but with open arms.

Our objective is to restrain sin and to restore the erring and disobedient.

III. ECCLESIASTICAL SEPARATION

Christ praised the church at Ephesus for hating "the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate" (Rev. 2:6). And He reprimanded the church at Pergamos for having members that "hold to the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate" (Rev. 2:15).

Zerubbabel would not compromise and allow his adversaries to build God's Temple with him (Ezra 4:3).

Bible examples of those who did not separate:

1) Lot
2) Israel
3) Solomon
4) Jehosophat said to Ahab, "I am as thou art and my people as thy people; and we will be with thee in the war" (2 Chron. 18:3; cp. 2 Chron. 19:2)

Why ecclesiastical separation?

I. The Principle of Preserving the Truth (2 Tim. 1:13-14)

II. The Principle of Protecting the Flock (Acts 20:28)

III. The Principle of Practicing the Purity of the Church (Tit. 1:9-10)

IV. The Principle of Partaking of Another's Sins (2 Jn. 10, 11)

(Frank Barker, Eternity, April 1980)

All poisons (unbelief, etc.) must be avoided, no matter what food colorings have been used to camouflage its appearance.

F.B. Meyer said: "I will not honor them that don't honor Him and I won't receive honor from those who don't honor Him."

"The term ecclesiastical separation refers to the action of disassociating from a church or a fellowship of churches because of compromise of biblical principles" (Talley, p. 22).

"God, though the Apostle Paul, pronounced a curse on those who proclaimed a false gospel (Gal. 1:9). It would seem to follow then that Christians should not be in fellowship with anyone who stands under the judgment of God" (Lightner, p. 19).

"The longer an error is condoned or tolerated the easier it is to compromise the truth. Somehow a conditioning process goes on. An unhealthy toleration of false doctrine usually leads to accommodation to it. When falsehood is left unchecked, unexposed, or unopposed, it gradually seems less and less objectionable. It looks more and more like merely a weak and watered-down form of truth, though, to be sure, a less desirable option than the truth" (Lightner, p. 16, Bib Sac)

As pastors, we owe it to our Savior and the flock (over which we are overseers) to preserve the truth His Word and the purity of His church by practicing a separation that is Biblical.

"That which is tolerated in moderation in one generation is excused in excess in the next generation."

A pastor's prime concern is the spiritual well-being of the local church body. He needs to take the long look – look down the road and ask where would fellowship with - _____ church lead us?

"Infiltration" is not God's means for winning the world to Himself. As paradoxical as it may seem, separation is!

Example: Distinctiveness of Old Testament Israel
Distinctiveness of New Testament believer
"Salt and Light"

"Error is like leaven, of which we read: 'A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump.' Truth mixed with error is equivalent to all error, except that it is more innocent looking, and therefore more dangerous. God hates such a mixture." (Kent Kelly, citing H.A. Ironside in the "Sword of the Lord," Friday, Sept. 8, 1967).

Because this is an area of Christian liberty, not everyone will draw the lines at the same place. And one pastor must not look down on someone else who does not draw the line exactly where he does.

As Baptist, we believe in the autonomy of the local church. Therefore, a pastor may give advice or counsel to a pastor of another church, but one can never do so in an authoritative capacity. Beware! Because advice can lead to authority, and opinion can be mistaken for truth.

The Scriptural commands to "content earnestly for the faith" (Jude 3) and to "retain the standard of sound words" (2 Tim. 1:13) refer not to a negative refutation of the personal

opinions of others, but to a positive guarding of that body of truth that has been entrusted to believers.

"The early days of the twentieth century saw fundamentalists of all denominational stripes rally together around the cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith (the inspiration of Scripture, the virgin birth and deity of Christ, His substitutionary atonement, His literal resurrection and His second coming). In those days, fundamentalism brought together men of diverse backgrounds, such as J. Gresham Machen, Clarence MacArtney (Presbyterian), J. Frank Norris, William Bell Riley (Baptist), and Bob Jones, Sr. (Methodist). In the early days of fundamentalism, the movement was united by its distinctive belief in the divinity of Christ, the inspiration of the Scriptures, and the necessity of personal conversion, etc." (Dobson & Hindson, p. 13)

We allow latitude in fine points of Bible interpretation (such as marriage and divorce), but not in clearly-revealed standards (such as homosexuality being an abomination – Lev. 18:22).

There will be points of disagreement even among Godly believers. The question is often asked: "Why do Christians fight over the Bible?" An accurate reply: "Because they believe it!"

"If the Bible is important to one's Christian belief, then it matters greatly to him what it says and what it means. If his religious expressions can do without the Bible, one is more likely to accommodate other beliefs regarding doctrinal matters" (Ed Dobson & Hindson, p. 13).

Personal appropriation of "truth alone creates unity." (Martin Lloyd Jones) "He (Lloyd-Jones) further observed that the starting point in considering the question of unity must always be regeneration resulting from belief of the truth. Otherwise, the church develops nothing more than a façade of unity based on an external [Ex: a doctrinal statement] rather than an internal basis of cooperation. He (Lloyd-Jones) warned then: 'The world will not be impressed by a mere coming together in externals while there is central disagreement about the fundamentals of the faith'." (Dobson, p. 13, 14, citing Martin Lloyd Jones' book The Basis of Christian Unity).

Gromacki commenting on 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1 says: "There cannot be separation within unequal associations. Separation is basically positive, after departing from sin and unholy alliances. . . The concept behind 'be separate' is to mark off boundaries beyond which you will not go. These fences of restriction must be based upon obedience to the revealed truth of Scripture." (Gromacki, p. 108, 109)

True believers who are still in ungodly mainline denominations are to be encouraged to "come out." The Bible is clear that churches that have associational or fellowship ties with apostates are to be separated from. But the question that demands answering is: "What about churches that fellowship with other churches who have associational or fellowship ties with churches viewed as being "new evangelical" or "lukewarm," etc.

Regarding second-degree separation: We cannot join hands with those who join hands with unbelievers. If we do, we become part of the chain.

"There is, of course, no such thing as 'second-degree separation.' There is only the separation which the Word of God commands. . ." (Bob Jones, Faith for the Family, Nov. 78).

Single-sided separation: For many fundamentalists, only one side of the doctrine of separation (as vital as it is) has become the touchstone for fellowship. They would say: "If you stand against _____, and against _____, and against _____, I can have fellowship with you." Such a position, while asking "what and who are you opposed to," fails to consider the question, "What do you positively believe and stand for?"

When so-called "believers" or "Bible-believing churches" do not take a stand on that which is clearly revealed in Scripture, they must first of all be exhorted (in a loving spirit) to repent and come to a Biblical position, and secondly, if reconciliation will not be arrived at, they must be separated from.

Conclusion:

Attitude is everything.

Some so-called "fighting fundamentalists" are not men who fight for the faith (as they think they are doing), but are men who fight just for the sake of fighting. They spend their time actively seeking opposition. This is wicked! Maybe they think that it is Biblical to carry over into Christianity some of their former practices while in the military. Or maybe it is simply a matter of having a haughty, nasty, proud attitude, where they want others to know that they are a true-blue, to the point of death, fighting fundamentalist.

A separatist must beware of wrong attitudes in taking his stand. A Pharisaical, holier than thou, or self-superior attitude. "Wherefore, let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12).

How to separate: We must be on guard for bitter spirits, hyper-criticalness, jealousy, envy, etc., for if we have doctrine that matches God's Word 100% and yet do not have the true Biblical attitude of love, "we are nothing" (1 Cor. 13:1-3) and we in fact should be the ones they separate from!

"When we have great convictions, the natural tendency is for us to become rough and vehement. It is equally difficult, on the other hand, to manifest a gracious attitude and yet be strong. The tendency in the manifestation of grace is to compromise and be weak. Only in the Lord Jesus are these two things properly brought together in balance (cp. Christ's example]." (Jackson, p. 5, item #12).

Galatians 6:1
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.

We are not to be cantankerous toward those who differ with us; rather, we are to admonish them (Tit. 3:10), pray for them, and wait upon God to deal with their hearts.

The word "balance" is vitally necessary to a proper understanding of the Biblical teaching on separation. It is human nature (sin nature, that is) to react and take an extreme position, while avoiding God's balanced truths in His Word. While some pastors and ministries swing all the way in one direction and stress the negative aspects of separation (while omitting the positives), others seem to swing in the other direction and stress the positive, while forsaking the negative. Both are needed! Such a position should never be confused with compromise nor called "middle of the road." Such a position corresponds with God's dealings with man in a sinful world.

While it is true that separatist movements today as well as down through the ages have been maligned and misrepresented, some of the criticism has not been unjustified. Just as there have been radicals in times past (such as Thomas Mutzer during the Anabaptist movement) who give separatists a bad name, there are radicals today (Ex: KJV only cults, viewing themselves as the only ones taking a "true" stand on the Word of God) who spread a noxious odor among unbelievers. All unbelievers are, in fact, looking for reasons not to believe. We often ignorantly give them reasons by our unloving attitude.

Unbiblical extremism is most often caused by unbiblical <u>manners</u>, <u>approaches</u> or <u>spirits</u> manifested in our defense of our positions.

Along these lines it must be understood that the same Holy Spirit that enlightens or eyes to sound doctrine (Jn. 16:13), also gives grace to the heart for <u>right attitudes</u> (Gal. 5:22) (cp. Christ had both – "grace and truth" – Jn. 1:17).

Because of the harsh negative extremism on the part of some separatists, many believers (in reaction), have taken a position that avoids the important element of negative separation. And conversely so, the soft positive extremism on the part of other believers has been the catalyst to move other believers to avoid this necessary element.

Our attitude is not to be one of <u>animosity</u> toward those who disagree with us.

"The world (as well as Satan) laughs at our great 'defenders of the faith' who use <u>unethical</u> tactics to crush their brothers." (Van Impe p. 18)

"Prejudice and hatred are never God's will for defenders of the faith" (Van Impe p. 19)

Attitudes in Separation: Acts 8:1, 4; 11:19-30; cp. Barnabas

If we contend for a certain position because we are persuaded it is doctrinally correct, then we dare not move! But if (after being proven Biblically wrong) we still persist in holding on to a certain position because of a proud reluctance to being shown to be wrong, then we are in sin.

Human nature – pride; too proud to change.

Dr. Paul R. Jackson makes this interesting observation: "After we have committed ourselves to something, we do not want to back down because we would lose face. There may be people who do not have any more reason to stand for some of the things for which they stand (on either side of this issue) except that they do not want to lose face. They have committed themselves to a certain position and they will fight until all strength is gone, rather than say, 'I was wrong'." (Jackson, p. 11)

A humble attitude and spirit of love on our part (in our separation from them) may just be what is necessary to break down a wall of pride on their part and they in turn might then come to our position. On the other hand, if we are proven wrong, such an attitude will allow us to admit it.

Passages to exegete dealing with separation:

1 Cor. 10:21
1 Pet. 2:11, 12
2 Thes. 3:6, 14
1 Tim. 1:18-20
Rom. 16:17-20
2 Tim. 2:16-18
1 Tim. 6:3-6
Tit. 3:10
*2 Cor. 6:14-7:1, cp. Is. 52:11
Lev. 19:1, 2
Lev. 20:23-26
Rev. 2:2, 6, 14-16
2 Jn. 8-11
Eph. 5:11
*Acts 20:28-29 ("also of your own selves shall men arise…")
cp. 2 Cor. 11:13-15
2 Tim. 4:2-4
2 Pet. 2:1
1 Jn. 4:1
2 Jn. 7
Jude 4