

BIBLICAL ECCLESIASTICAL SEPARATION¹

INTRODUCTION: Today the subject of biblical separation is rarely mentioned or preached on in churches, mission boards, or denominations. Nor is it taught except in the most cursory way in most Christian colleges, seminaries, and universities. That is extremely unfortunate. The question of whether to fellowship with or separate from another individual, church, denomination, organisation, college, mission board, group, or movement is of utmost importance in order to maintain the purity of the church. It is a never ending responsibility that must be performed in every period of church history. It is also a prominent and central theme running throughout both the Old and New Testaments. Practicing biblical separation is not easy, and it must be done in a humble, godly spirit. But it must constantly occur if any organization or group of believers is to retain its purity and fidelity to God and His Word. The following notes consist deliberately and primarily of quotes from a variety of highly respected pastors, Bible teachers, Christian leaders, and conservative Christian organizations. In conjunction with the Scriptures they so often quote, these notes and quotes are intended to give clear guidance to believers in these strange times in which we live.

“SO... WHAT’S THE BIG DEAL? WHY DO WE NEED TO SEPARATE FROM PEOPLE ANYWAY?”

“Separation...is to the whole ministry of the Word of God and the service of Jesus Christ what sanitation and sterilization are to surgery. When you go into surgery you are not at all prejudiced against the practice of surgeons, and others that enter that room, to scrub and scrub and scrub! You want every germ destroyed. If there is any possible chance of an infection you may be the victim of it, and you are well satisfied for sanitation at its ultimate and absolute to mark those who minister to you. But, as a matter of fact, no matter how long the surgeon scrubs, it will do you no good until he finally takes hold of the scalpel and the other instruments to perform the surgery. Unless he ministers to you in the other spheres of medical attention, the sanitation is valueless to you. Cleanliness is only the necessary condition and atmosphere in which the real ministry of the surgeon takes place. It is not an end in itself, but it is an essential condition to the rightful end.

“If we make Biblical separation an end in itself, or major upon it to the neglect or exclusion of other great Biblical doctrines, we have failed those to whom we minister, as the surgeon would fail who sterilizes but never operates. But, on the other hand, let us never forget that we also fail if we do not preach and practice this doctrine of separation, as the surgeon will fail, no matter how skillfully he operates, if he neglects proper sanitation in the operating room. We must be clean in order to carry out the total ministry of the Word. This is illustrated in the Old Testament priests. They were to wash at the brazen laver before they performed the balance of their ministry. May the Lord help us to realize that these great doctrinal truths which are precious to our hearts are polluted by unclean atmospheres and unclean relationships. The Spirit of God, Who would bring spiritual health to our hearts, is grieved if we allow uncleanness, defilement and contamination to mark us and our ministry.”²

DEFINITION: **“BIBLICAL SEPARATION (is) the separation of the Church in all of its relationships, associations, and affiliations, from unbelief, so that its identity as the Body of Christ may be maintained and its integrity as true witness for the Lord Jesus Christ may be kept pure. It is the Biblical principle established by God for the preservation of His people and propagation of the true Gospel by which men are reconciled to God and added to His true Church.”³**

“This doctrine of separation is a crucial one, and it is a Biblical one. If it is neglected both in its preaching and in its implementation, I know of no way that we can preserve the purity and the power of our churches.”⁴

“To stand in the position that we do requires a complete conviction that this Bible is the Word of God. We can analyze Biblical separation briefly in this threefold analysis:

- a. **“First, we believe that this Book is the absolute and eternal Word of God. It is truth. It does not merely contain truth—it is truth. It sits in judgment upon us. We do not sit in judgment upon it.**
- b. **“Second, the very presence of truth presupposes the possibility of error. If there is something that is right, absolutely and unchangeably, then that which opposes it is wrong.**
- c. **“In the third place, separation, essentially, is simply the distinguishing, the judging and the separating between truth and error. It is performed upon the authority of the Book.”⁵**

¹ Compiled by Rev. Mike Edwards, P.O. Box 127, St. Vincent, West Indies, April, 2008 (revised 9/2011).

² Dr. Paul R. Jackson, *“The Position, Attitudes and Objectives of Biblical Separation.”* Schaumburg, IL: The General Association of Regular Baptist Churches, Literature Item #12, n.d., pp. 2-3. (Official GARBC publication).

³ Campus Bible Fellowship, *“Terms You Need to Know.”* Cleveland, OH: Baptist Mid-Missions, n.d., p. 1.

⁴ Jackson, op cit., p.3.

⁵ Jackson, pp. 6-7.

SOME CAUTIONS REGARDING SEPARATION:

1. *“Sometimes we make assertions which we cannot support. We may believe them to be true, and yet they prove to be erroneous—(we do well to document the things which we say). But so do our critics do well to document the things which they say! ... We need to avoid extremes. We need to be right—right when we oppose anything, right when we sponsor anything!”*⁶
2. *“There is a great danger of extremism in the area of our manner, our approach, our spirit...A bitter spirit can very readily develop. We can become hypercritical in a sense that is utterly unchristian.”*⁷

PROPER ATTITUDES THAT WE SHOULD MANIFEST:

1. *“The first is that of devotion to God and to His Word. You and I can support this doctrine of separation upon a wrong philosophy. That is to say, we can be marked by a wrong attitude. 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.’ God spare us from that sort of foolishness. If you and I are not contending for this position because it is God’s truth, and for God’s honor, then let us abandon the thing. If our attitude is not right, then let us correct our attitude because there are people on the wrong side of this issue who want us to abandon the truth because our attitude is wrong! That is a foolish solution! We must maintain the position which we have outlined, but with it we must maintain, by the grace of God, a right attitude.”*⁸
2. *“Our attitude must be one of true humility. Galatians 6:1 says, ‘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.’ If we are not approaching this problem on that basis, then our attitude is wrong. If we are simply going out to fight, if we are in the business of swinging fists and clubs, then God forgive us for the attitude that we manifest and give us the right attitude to defend the right position.”*⁹
3. *“Third, our attitude should not only be one of humility regarding self, but of compassion toward our brethren that are still confused. It is easy to get haughty and contemptuous toward people that occupy a different position, and perhaps many times we have done so in the heat of our controversy. But it is possible for us to maintain both a Biblical position and attitude.”*¹⁰
4. *“An attitude is not complete on this subject until it is marked by sternness and rebuke to false leadership. Note the approach of the Lord Jesus. He was never sharp to the multitude. He looked upon them and He wept for them, and He had compassion upon them as sheep without a shepherd. But He was sharp with the Pharisees, scribes and Sadducees, who were false leaders. Note such portions as Matthew 23:27: ‘Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites...whitened sepulchers... full of dead men’s bones!’ He was not talking about people in some remote area. He was talking about the people who sat in front of Him! But after all, it was not to the crowd that He was talking, but to the leadership. In Matthew 15:14, He talks about them being blind leaders of the blind. They were false. They deserved rebuke—the sternest rebuke—because they needed to be either corrected or punished. So you and I ought to realize the difference when dealing with people who are misled and people who are misleading. There needs to be the sternest of rebuke to those who are in places of false leadership. We should not be vindictive, but it is not a time to extend fellowship to men who mislead the churches of Jesus Christ! We are to rebuke and exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.”*¹¹ (cf. Titus 2:15, etc.)

IS IT RIGHT TO SEPARATE FROM BRETHREN?

Personally, I do not believe there is any such thing as "Secondary" separation. There is simply biblical separation! You do not find the term "Secondary Separation" in the Bible. By using the term "secondary" (as many well-known pastors and leaders opposed to taking a clear stand against compromise have done over the past few decades), the insinuation is given

⁶ Jackson, p.4.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Jackson, p. 11.

⁹ Jackson, pp. 11-12.

¹⁰ Jackson, p. 12.

¹¹ Jackson, p. 12.

that this position is new, less important, &/or contrived. It is not! I would be hesitant to be so strong on this if I was alone in my thinking. But I am not. There are a host of highly respected pastors and Bible teachers who agree. They include: Dr. Peter Masters who is the pastor of Spurgeon's Tabernacle in London, England; the late Bryce Augsburger who was a stalwart GARBC leader and clearly addressed this in the Baptist Bulletin in June, 1982; the late Dr. Ernest Pickering who even published a book for Regular Baptist Press titled "Biblical Separation"; Rev. John Ashbrook respected leader in the Ohio Bible Fellowship, as well as Charles Haddon Spurgeon! All of those men are in complete agreement that there is no such thing as "secondary" separation. They maintain (& I agree) that the term is usually just an excuse to avoid separating from brethren who are working with people who do not stand where we stand doctrinally, and who are thus walking disorderly (II Thess. 2:15). I could also quote from some of the finest men of the past in the GARBC such as Dr. Robert Ketcham, Dr. W. Wilbur Welch, Dr. Joseph Stowell Jr., Dr. David Nettleton, Dr. Paul Jackson, etc. -all of whom made extremely strong statements on this subject. I wish to include some of those statements here, in order to show that the historic position of conservatives was opposed to this idea, and that these men repudiated the concept of "secondary separation." Consider the following statements regarding this subject:

"One can almost hear someone arguing, 'We'll all be together in Heaven' (yes but in a perfect and sinless state); or 'We must consider the good done by disobedient brethren' (the end does not justify the means); or 'We don't believe in secondary separation' (as though the very mention of this should end all arguments). 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. Separation from apostasy is scripturally valid. Separation from believers who consort with apostasy is scripturally valid. This ought not to be called secondary separation but separation. Either we are fundamentalists or we are not. We are either separatists or we are not, and fundamental separatists separate from brethren who do not walk orderly."¹²

"That I might not stultify (limit, or, stifle) my testimony I have cut myself clear of those who err from the faith, and even from those who associate with them." (i.e. Spurgeon practiced what is today called "secondary separation.")¹³

"It is God's commandment that we separate from our brothers when they walk in disobedience. Now I know that many men who 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! I present a few portions of Scripture."¹⁴ (Jackson then proceeds to present and briefly exegete the following passages: I Cor. 5:7 cf. II Cor. 2:5-7; II Thess. 3:6, 14; Mt. 18:15-17; I Tim. 1:18-20; I Tim. 6:3-6; II Tim. 2:16-18; Rom. 16:17; Amos 3:3; & Titus 3:10)

***"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."**¹⁵*

"These and other Scriptures (previously listed) constitute a mandate not subject to option, modification, or compromise on the part of the believer. 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) organic 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 2 Thessalonians 3:6; 2 Chronicles 19:2)."¹⁶

"From the beginning, we have held that clean-cut, total, and absolute separation from apostasy is the only logical and Biblical stand. We have always held out a brotherly hand and maintained a sympathetic and understanding heart toward those honestly seeking to implement that position. We have maintained that there could be no fellowship and cooperation with those content to stay in the camp of the apostates."¹⁷

"(Regarding I Tim. 1:18-20) Note that Paul the Apostle did not hesitate to put his finger individually upon the men 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

¹² Bryce B. Augsburger, "Do Fundamentalists No Longer Need to Fear the Dark Shadow of Modernism?" The Baptist Bulletin, June, 1982, p. 15.

¹³ C.H. Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, 1888, No. 2047 –cited by Dr. Peter Masters, "Stand for the Truth," Sword & Trowel, Metropolitan Tabernacle: London, England, 1983, 1996-rev. ed., p. 20.

¹⁴ Jackson, p. 9.

¹⁵ Joseph Stowell Jr., "Where We Stand Today," The Gospel Witness, January 23, 1975, p. 13 – cited in "Should We Ever Separate from Christian Brethren?" by Dr. Ernest Pickering, Decatur, AL: Baptist World Mission, n.d. The late Dr. Stowell was for many years the National Representative for the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches, as well as the Vice-President of ABWE. He is the father of Joseph Stowell III, who has served as president of Moody Bible Institute and recently became the president of Cornerstone University. Sadly and ironically, were the elder Dr. Stowell still alive today and followed his own words quoted here, he would be unable to work together professionally with his own son in public ministry.

¹⁶ Dr. Robert T. Ketcham, "The Position of the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches on Separation." Schaumburg, IL: The General Association of Regular Baptist Churches, Literature Item #6, n.d., p. 2, underlining added.

¹⁷ Ketcham, p. 4.

thieves, I would do well to name them, thereby vindicating every honest man in the group. It does not do any good to say that there are many unbelievers abroad. Who are they? I want to know where to go to church where the Word is preached in truth! There should not be bitterness here, but there should be clarity. Paul did not hesitate to say in substance, 'The men about whom I am speaking are Hymenaeus and Alexander.' This is not an unusual circumstance in the Word of God."¹⁸

"Some have said that they cannot accept any idea of secondary separation because it would lead to a third and fourth stage. They say they would be obliged to separate from evangelicals who fail to separate from evangelicals who fail to separate from non-evangelicals. And so it would go on. But this is a foolish reason for neglecting the command of Scripture. We do not usually set aside a command of Scripture because we are afraid of taking matters to an extreme. Those who scorn secondary separation only show that they are reluctant to separate at all."¹⁹

"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 is revealed through Paul. The separation enjoined could be regarded as second degree." (i.e. but is nonetheless to be practiced!)²⁰

(Regarding II Thess. 3)... "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."²¹

"Separation from apostasy is scripturally valid. Separation from believers who consort with apostasy is scripturally valid. It ought not to be termed 'secondary separation.' If it must have a name, why not call it 'consistent separation'? Those who adopt the dodge of 'secondary separation almost always use another argument. They say, 'It is impossible to be consistent.' The unspoken implication is, 'So why try?' After almost twenty-five years as a pastor I will freely admit that it is impossible to be perfectly consistent. I have had speakers I would not have again; supported schools I could not support when I learned their true position; given to missions to which I could no longer give after observing their policies. But, does the difficulty of being consistent deliver us from the responsibility of trying? Perfection has always been an impossible standard for man. Yet the student on his arithmetic test, the musician in the band, and the athlete on the playing field are all aiming at perfection. It is impossible for any human being to be perfect, but this is no reason why we should not prayerfully seek to be consistent."²²

"Mr. (Henry Parsons) Crowell... multimillionaire breakfast cereal king and a lifelong Presbyterian, (who) withdrew from the Presbyterian Church USA... Mr. Crowell feared the battle between modernism and fundamentalism was not being lost because of modernists, but because of those who 'were tolerant toward those who were tolerant toward unbelievers.' We can conceive of no greater statement of our position (in the GARBC) than this one ascribed to Mr. Crowell. Left to themselves, the modernists (liberals) would be a sorry lot. But men who are fundamental and conservative in their personal views and yet see no reason why they cannot retain their relationship to and cooperation with the apostates make up the very class referred to in Mr. Crowell's biography. According to Dr. Day, that which caused Mr. Crowell to doubt ultimate victory was not the modernists nor the conservative who was tolerant of the modernists; but 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."(!)²³

"What about 'Second Degree' Separation? 'But,' the cry will come, 'that is second degree separation!' This is always said with a note of horror which indicates that the bare mention of the term should end all argument. Is this Scriptural terminology? The references given in Matthew, Romans, I Corinthians, I Timothy, and II Thessalonians give definite commands to separate from brethren. Yet, not one of them indicates that this is 'secondary separation.' Rather, the term 'secondary separation' has been coined by those who have sought to develop ground for opposing what the Scriptures teach about separation. I have learned by experience that whenever a man uses the cavil (quibble) of 'secondary separation', you may write him down as an opponent of Scriptural separation in general."²⁴

"On the question of such matters as membership in local ministerial associations and participation in union Thanksgiving services and evangelistic campaigns where modernists and Convention-minded fundamentalists are involved, the Association takes the position of separation... This original and fundamental principle characterized the GARBC in its inception... We are sticking to convictions and policies announced thirty-six years ago."²⁵

¹⁸ Jackson, op cit., pp. 9-10.

¹⁹ Dr. Peter Masters, "Stand for the Truth," (Sword & Trowel/Metropolitan Tabernacle: London, England, 1983, revised 1996, p. 20, underlining added.

²⁰ Dr. Wilbur Welch, "Does Biblical Separation Destroy Christian Unity?" p. 16, cited in Pickering, "Should We Ever Separate from Christian Brethren?" Baptist World Mission, n.d., p. 6.

²¹ Dr. David Nettleton, "Jailed for Secondary Separation," Fundamentalist Journal, Nov. 1984, p. 13, underlining added.

²² Rev. John Ashbrook, "Separation from Brethren," OBF Visitor, Aug-Sept., 1975, p. 4, underlining added.

²³ Ketcham, op cit., p. 5, underlining added.

²⁴ Ashbrook, op cit., p. 4, underlining added.

²⁵ Ketcham.

“There is, however, a phase of separation which needs to be more clearly understood. That phase has to do with our relationship to and attitude toward others who differ. **Just where does the Association stand on the matter of cooperation with individuals, churches, and groups outside its own fellowship?** Scores of times across this continent the question has been asked somewhat as follows: ‘There is a Baptist church in my town which still belongs to the American Baptist Convention. The pastor is a sound, godly man, preaching the gospel and winning souls. How far can I, as a GARBC pastor, and my church, as a GARBC church, cooperate with this man and his church? For instance, would I be violating the principles of the GARBC if I engaged in a two church union evangelistic campaign with him, or encouraged fraternization among our young people?’...

“The answer has always been about as follows: **‘That depends entirely upon the man and his church.** If the man is perfectly content in the old Convention and has no notion of withdrawing; if he realizes there is something, even quite a bit, wrong with the Convention, but believes it is not enough to worry about; if he holds that he can stay in with his membership statistics adding up in Convention totals while he judiciously ‘designates’ church funds to ‘good’ missionaries in the Convention; if he holds that we were unwise in withdrawing from the Convention, and is critical of our present position; if he intends to maintain status quo, then we do not see how you could logically have such church fellowship or cooperation with him, for cooperative efforts would seek to build up and strengthen a Convention church, and weaken your own. Your young people would be inclined, in some cases, to go to their summer camp where they would be under influence and teaching which, in many Convention camps, is anything but true to the Word. This would all militate against your own separated position.

“On the other hand, if this brother is thoroughly aware of the Convention situation, is heartsick concerning it, and is slowly, carefully and wisely releasing information concerning its apostasy to his church; if he is thus seeking to inform his membership with the express purpose that someday, a few months or even a few years later, he and his church will intelligently and forthrightly walk out of the Convention, and it is his full intention to do so, then by all means there not only could be, but should be fellowship and cooperation with that brother and his church. A man like that and a church like that are the very ones the GARBC is out to help.”²⁶

MORE DEFINITIONS & AN OBSERVATION:

“Ecclesiastical Separation: The separation of the Church in all of its relationships, associations, and affiliations, from unbelief, so that its identity as the Body of Christ may be maintained and its integrity as true witness for the Lord Jesus Christ may be kept pure. It is the Biblical principle established by God for the preservation of His people and the propagation of the true Gospel by which men are reconciled to God and added to His true church.”²⁷

“Inclusive Policy: A policy adopted by a nominally fundamentalist denomination, church, school or religious agency by which operating personnel are procured from all different shades of religious belief and by which, in contradistinction to the policy of ecclesiastical separation, the church’s purity is greatly adulterated and the modernist is invited to work with the evangelical, the Roman Catholic with the Protestant, and so on.” (e.g. Chuck Colson & James Dobson, who have had audiences with and have publicly praised and endorsed Pope John Paul II, etc)²⁸

“An ecumenical evangelistic crusade, such as is practiced by Billy Graham and his emulators, is a giant game of Ring around the Rosie. The evangelist starts the circle, joining hands with unbelievers from the councils of churches for the sake of prestige and crowds. Bible believers are invited to join for the sake of money, counselors, and prayer. Satan’s play in that game is to convince the believers that they are only joining hands with the evangelist, who is a believer, and other believers. But, somewhere in the circle is Mr. Modernist with his two hands. **Those who play Ring around the Rosie all play. It is disobeying II John.** The Bible believer would not want to call the modernist a brother, but in such a case, it is also wrong to call him a nephew or a third cousin.”²⁹

CONCLUDING THOUGHT:

As the 21st century has begun unfolding it appears that very few believers—even among those in conservative circles—are practicing biblical separation *or are even faintly concerned about the subject!* That is distressing and disconcerting to say the least. The doctrines of both personal and ecclesiastical separation permeate the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. Their importance in enabling God’s people to avoid doctrinal declension, moral degeneration and ultimate spiritual destruction, is illustrated throughout the biblical record, as well as twenty centuries of church history. We may ignore the doctrine of separation, or chuckle over it and “*pooh-pooh*” it. But we do so to our own peril, and at the risk of offending the very God we loudly claim to love and serve.

²⁶ Ketcham, p. 3.

²⁷ Staff Manual, “*Terms You Need to Know*,” Campus Bible Fellowship, Baptist Mid-Missions: Cleveland, Ohio, 1981, p. 83, underlining added.

²⁸ Ibid, parenthetical comments added.

²⁹ Ashbrook, op cit., p. 4, underlining added.