

THE POSITIVE TRUTH OF SEPARATION

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The doctrine of separation is often viewed in a most negative light, leading to inevitable groans whenever it is raised. The doctrine is never mentioned from many pulpits and if so, only to be criticised and denounced. Such attitudes in the pulpit will affect the whole church. This article is designed to counteract such imbalance and give the doctrine of separation, the respect it so richly deserves.

1) REASONS WHY THE DOCTRINE OF SEPARATION IS VIEWED SO NEGATIVELY:

If we can trace the effect back to the cause...then we might be able to tackle the problem head on.

A/ It is often viewed as relating only to ecclesiastical matters. If so, then only half the truth is on display. Separation is much more than applying 2 Corinthians 6:14-18 ("Come out from among them...") to Christians still in membership of the WCC or other ecumenical bodies. The doctrine of separation applies to the Christian in every sphere of life. A man could be totally outside the ecumenical movement giving it no support whether bodily, morally or financially and yet not be a separatist in the fullest sense of the word. The Bible uses the very graphic similitude of whoredom to denote not only the Church of Rome and her satellites (Revelation 17:5) but also for those who befriend the world (James 4:4) i.e. worldly Christians. Separation is a vital means to as well as a result of personal holiness. We do a grave injustice to the separation texts to limit them to church matters.

B/ Sometimes it is the "one string on the preacher's harp." Partly because of the reason given above i.e. it is linked exclusively to ecclesiastical situations. Even if limited to church matters, separation is vitally important. A man who saddles himself with apostates and modernists cannot expect the blessing of God and it is right that he be urged to forsake that which has forsaken God (See accompanying article on the apostasy of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland as an example) We need to determine how much attention is to be given to exposing error. One message may suffice or it may need a few. But, vital as it is to protect the sheep in the fold, the Shepherd needs also to feed them. The sins of the apostates do not feed the sheep. They need to feed on the beauties of Christ who is "altogether lovely" By all means we are to be watchmen on the towers of Zion...but we need to spend time feeding the people by preaching the "whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27) No NT church can be built or survive on controversy alone.

C/ It is often confused with the practice of isolationism: Two verses in the NT use similar words, but speak of two entirely different types of people.

[1] "Come out from among them and be ye separate..." (2 Corinthians 6:14)

[2] "These be they who separate themselves..." (Jude 19)

Those referred to in Corinthians are commanded by God to separate. They await the blessing of God. Those in Jude (to finish the quote) are "sensual, having not the Spirit" and come under condemnation. Those in Jude are not Bible separatists but isolationists. They have moved into an "ourselves alone" faction. Such believe that their sect alone have a monopoly of the truth and usually take the opinion that if the Apostle Paul came to their home town he would not dream of worshipping anywhere else. Since the true separatist can fellowship with all who love the Lord Jesus in sincerity and truth, he is not an isolationist.

D/ It is often advocated or practised from wrong motives: Instead of being to "the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31) sometimes it is strenuously advocated for sectarian or party reasons. Like those in Jude 19, although a man may sail under the banner of separation and quote 2 Corinthians 6:14 etc., he may in fact be a schismatic. It is to be regretted that some embrace sound principles but do so with unsound and unworthy motives. Paul spoke of those in Philippians 1:15 who "preached Christ" (worthy deed) but did so with "envy and strife" (unworthy motive) and whilst Paul rejoiced any way that Christ was preached, yet no one would argue that the situation was ideal and worthy of imitation. But bad adherents do not make a bad cause. David's cause was pure even though he some of those around him were "wicked men and men of Belial" (1 Samuel 30:22-23) It can be also said that some urge separation at the wrong time. The first rocking of the boat - inevitable in an institution full of humans - is not the time to jump. There are battles that can be fought and won - although there does need to be a fight!

E/ The time when this doctrine comes to the fore is not conducive to popularity. It is usually not made much - at least in the ecclesiastical sense- when the church is in revival or when its Theological Halls, pulpits at home and abroad are sound. It is not even made much of when unsound doctrine or practice comes to light and it is known that offenders will be dealt with in such a way as to protect the purity of the Church as well as seek their restoration. It comes to light when error is tolerated or justified and when the church divides into two or more camps. Those who want to see Satan's attack dealt with quickly and firmly and those who, for different reasons, would sit back and thus allow error to become deep seated. To have some speak of separation is a symptom of faults in the church in the church - not a cause. It shows that the unity has been broken - that the yoke has become unequal and that friction has replaced harmony. These are not happy times in the church and the doctrine of separation, by its very nature, is associated with them.

F/ Its opponents have engaged in a campaign of vilification against it. Separatists are often said to be per se "unloving" even though love "rejoices not in iniquity but in the truth." (1 Corinthians 13:6) We are often accused of being destructive and portrayed as being out of touch with the spirit of the age which is calling for "toleration and unity" This vilification is amply illustrated by the words of the apostate Ahab who met Elijah with the words "Art thou he that troubleth Israel?" (1 Kings 18:17) as if Elijah's holy principles: his faith in the sacred scriptures and worship of Jehovah as the one true and living God as opposed to the all inclusive Baal worship was the cause of Israel's troubles. If you would sit neutral on the matter, judge the characters of the apostates who deride and vilify the separatists. It is the ancient tactic of criminals to cry aloud against the "crimes" of others and so divert attention away from themselves. Remember that many of those who go to any length to blacken and disparage the separatist position, swore solemnly to uphold their church's confession of faith and defend it when it is attacked. See what actions they take against the Bible deniers. They reserve their harsh words for those whose crime is only faithfulness to God.

2) THE POSITIVE SIDE OF SEPARATION EXPOUNDED:

The great texts exhorting separation use words like "avoid" (Romans 16:17-18) "reprove" (Ephesians 5:11) "no fellowship" (Ephesians 5:11) "be not unequally yoked with" (2 Corinthians 6:14) "come out from" (2 Corinthians 6:17) "reject" (Titus 3:10) "withdraw" (2 Thessalonians 3:6) "rebuke" (Titus 1:13) "turn away from" (2 Timothy 3:5) "admonish" (2 Thessalonians 3:15) etc., Although these are negative words, yet they are no more negative when Christ cleansed the temple (Matthew 21:12-13) or lashed the Pharisees and scribes (Matthew 23:1-33) Every negative has a positive. "Thou shalt not kill" implies "Thou shalt preserve life." Likewise, "Thou shalt not commit adultery" implies "Thou shalt maintain chastity." So too with separation. We are being asked to

separate from that which is depressingly negative and two negatives in the English language make a positive. Lets explore the positive a little further:

A/ In our separation, as commanded by Scripture, we are obeying God: And "to obey is better than sacrifice" (1 Samuel 15:22) It was not us who decreed this "negative doctrine" It is not our brainchild, but rather it was decreed and practised by God. We observe that God did not dialogue with Satan to find "common ground" after Satan's rebellion. Rather, as noted in Luke 10:18, we observe Satan's speedy exit. Those who would compromise the honour of the God whom they profess to love, should not revile those who also profess to love Him who said: "Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you" (John 15:14) and "Why call ye me, Lord, Lord and do not the things I say?" (Luke 6:46) In separating from the unclean thing, we are but obeying God which is the most positive thing we can do.

B/ the Bible also uses most positive language concerning this doctrine: "Is there not a cause?" asked David in 1 Samuel 17:29 who refused to allow the uncircumcised Philistine to defy the armies of the Living God. These words are most positive. They call us out of apathy, carelessness and fear and they call us to rally round a principle. This rallying call of David turned the hitherto defeatist fortunes of the cause of God in Israel. We are reminded of Paul's words: "Watch ye, stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong." (1 Corinthians 16:13) They are a call to positive action. How often in the NT we are aroused by the holy apostles summoning us to war. As above, we are to "stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free..." [a most positive statement if ever there was one. especially when contrasted with what is to follow:] "...and be not entangled again in the yoke of bondage." (Galatians 5:1) We are also called to "stand fast and hold the traditions which ye have taught" (2 Thessalonians 2:15) We are to "hold fast" the form of sound words (2 Timothy 1:13) We are to "hold fast" the confidence and rejoicing of the hope firm to the end" (Hebrews 3:6) "Hold fast" our profession (Hebrews 4:6) "Hold fast" that which is good (1 Thessalonians 5:21) We are to "strive together" for the faith of the gospel (Philippians 1:27) [Another most positive statement] We are to "contend for the faith once delivered" (Jude 3) and so on. When a man sits in a presbytery or church council with modernists and other Christ deniers, far from being a most positive character, he is said to have "suffered that woman Jezebel which calleth herself a prophetess to teach and seduce my servants..." (Revelation 2:20) Only clean cut separation enables us to be faithful to God.

C/ Our separation is "unto Jesus without the camp" (Hebrews 13:13) This alone is where Jesus is found. This is where He wants us to be. The price is high. It entails "bearing His reproach" although compared with Calvary, no cost can be considered too high to pay. But notice that it is indeed unto Him. It is relatively easy to make it outside the camp but if it is not distinctly unto Christ, then it is of little purpose. A.W. Pink commenting on this verse wrote: "Christ Himself must be the grand object before the heart, and then the baubles of the world will not possess much attraction to us. If he is not, then, although we may become aesthetes, there will be no contentment, still less joy: our case would be like that of many of the Israelites who had "gone forth" from Egypt, yet continued to lust after its flesh pots." I think it was Luther who commented that the first person the blind man in John 9 met after he was excommunicated from the temple was Christ Himself. Christ is not in the camp of apostasy. It is true that He taught in their synagogues and temple. He called the latter "my Father's house" (John 2:46) but soon He was say: "Behold your house is left unto you desolate" (Matthew 23:38) and having scathed the clergy, we read these most significant words: "And Jesus went out and departed from the temple." (Matthew 24:1) We need to remember that "outside the camp" has as much to do with the world as with the "World Council of Churches"

D/ Separation always leads to greater blessings: Mention has already been made of the blind man in John 9. Obedience always leads to blessing. "Them that honour me" says God, "I will honour." (1 Samuel 2:30) Separation from those churches where apostasy is tolerated if not actually encouraged will lead to purity of worship: God must be worshipped in spirit and in truth (John 4:24) Hymnbooks that have been tampered with to ensure that all references to the atoning blood of Christ are removed can hardly be said to help us worship God in truth. Churches where the "glory hath departed" - dead, lifeless, morgue like places - can hardly be said to have the presence of the Spirit. Because a church vibrates with loud music and huge crowds attend etc., are not necessarily spiritual churches. Or at least, the resident spirit need not necessary be the Spirit of God. A separatist church will lead to greater liberty in the preaching of the gospel. A good example of this lies in the situation in 19th Century Scotland where the chilling influence of "moderatism" deadened the National Church and was instrumental in preventing the gospel preaching remnant from passing over parochial boundaries to preach Christ. Although till under the one roof, the church was divided. Entire parishes were fed on a diet of "cold morality" which ignored, if not contradicted the gospel of grace. But when action was taken in 1843 - separation under the leadership of Chalmers - the gospel once more sounded forth. No fear gripped the evangelical wing - no intimidation from those whose sympathies lay towards liberalism and apostasy.

Separation is a characteristic of revival. When the Reformation movement separated from the Church of Rome - not staying in to fight - but getting out completely (Luther valiantly burning the Papal Bull) it saw revival sweep entire nations. After Henry Cooke actively and aggressively fought against the Arians within the Irish Presbyterian Camp and saw them thrust out from their position in the church (they resigned and got out) only then did the Irish Presbyterian Church see revival. In the great 1859 Revival which swept Ulster, it is estimated that some 60% of the 100,000 converts that year joined the Presbyterian Church. The cost of separation might be high, but the yield is higher still and God will prove Himself to be "no man's debtor" These then are most positive proofs.

3) HOW THESE POSITIVE TRUTHS ARE TO BE PROMOTED:

A/ We should actively propagate the positive side of the Separation issue: The evil propaganda machine of the apostates and weak evangelicals has churned out its misrepresentations far too long. By all legitimate means e.g. the pulpit, the printing press, the world wide web, word of mouth, private letters etc., we must continually keep this matter before the people.

B/ By keeping to the main issues and not being side tracked on lesser matters: There are secondary issues on which it is best that we "agree to differ" but such a course is not open to us if men who deny the fundamentals of the faith have the ability to sway presbyteries and church councils etc., A fight is then called for and where the error is deep seated - separation is the order of the day, best summed up in the words: "Get out!"

C/ Show clearly the link between separation and survival: It is not alarmist or crying 'Wolf!' If the canker is not cut out or the bad apple removed, then the whole will be destroyed. Apostasy does not die especially if it infiltrates the Theological Hall of any denomination.

D/ Show the negative tags belong to the liberals and modernists: When Elijah met with Ahab's slur (mentioned earlier) the man of God answered: "I have not troubled Israel but thou and thy father's house in that ye have

forsaken the commandment of the Lord." (1 Kings 18:17-18) Read Christ's words in Matthew 23 and the words of Jude and 2 Peter 2 to learn what language is appropriate in this context.

E/ Always keep Ephesians 4:3 in mind: "Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." We are not war mongers entering into controversy for the sake of it. This verse does not mean unity with Rome or unity with modernists. The Spirit of God does not contradict the Book of God which encourages us to fight God's battles.

F/ Likewise keep Hebrews 13:1 ever in front of us: "Let brotherly love continue." Remember that we can go about a good cause a bad way. 1 Corinthians 13 is well worth studying. It is not love to leave the sheep of Christ in the control of hireling shepherds. Love will endeavour to free those sheep by the most effective and quickest means necessary.

G/ Be totally consistent. If we would take upon ourselves the commandment of God to fight apostates...let us also be consistent and keep those commandments which urge us unto personal holiness. Both Daniel and Stephen were great contenders for the faith. Their personal holiness was exemplary: Daniel 6:5/Acts 6:15 Inconsistency is a terrible indictment to be leveled at us - especially if such a charge can be proven to be true.