

Biblical Separation

Peter Ditzel

In 1 Peter 1:15-16, Peter says, "But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy." This is a command for Christians. It is obviously something important for you and for me. But how are we to be holy as God is holy? In this quote from the King James Version of the Bible, the word "conversation" means conduct. In other words, we are to be holy in all that we do. The word "holy" is from the Greek word *hagios*. It refers to an attribute of God. In Isaiah 6:3, we read of angels saying, "HOLY, HOLY, HOLY, is the LORD of hosts"

That which is holy is that which is different from that which is profane or ordinary. Holy things reflect God's holiness, and profane things reflect the world. There is to be no mixing of the two. What is holy is what is separated. In essence, the angels in Isaiah 6:3 were saying, "SEPARATED, SEPARATED, SEPARATED, is the LORD OF HOSTS." God has been called the great Separatist. He is completely separated from anything that is not perfectly holy.

What I am going to address is not internal holiness. That is an important subject, and in some ways it blends into this subject. Internal holiness is God's work in us, done by the sanctification of the Holy Spirit. I have addressed this elsewhere. We cannot be Christians without having internal holiness. But now I am going to tackle external holiness. In other words, I am going to deal with how we show our holiness in how we behave, what we do. The Scripture I quoted from 1 Peter is referring to external holiness.

Holiness was shown in type over and over again in the Old Testament. God's people, Israel, were to be separate from the people around them. Noticed how clearly God states this in Leviticus 20:26: "And ye shall be holy unto me: for I the LORD am holy, and have severed you from other people, that ye should be mine." God severed them from the people around them. They were not to worship the gods of the nations around them, they were not to eat the same food, they were to keep special days, and so on. All of these were shadows of the reality we, as Christians, are to be living now. But what does this mean for us today? How are we to be holy?

Be Ye Separate

One of the things the Old Testament Israelites were not to do was touch something that was unclean. "Unclean" here does not mean something with dirt on it. It means ceremonially unclean. What was ceremonially unclean represented sin and the unholy ways of the ungodly nations. So, God declared certain things, such as an animal that died of itself, unclean for the ancient Jews.

Now, in 2 Corinthians 6:17, Paul orders the New Testament church, "Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you." As I said before, what is holy is separate from what is profane or ordinary. The two cannot mix. Paul is making an allusion to the Old Testament laws of clean and unclean. He is saying that, as Christians, we are not to touch the unclean thing and to be separate. But what is the unclean thing? And how are we to be separate? As I will show you, the unclean thing is the ungodly, unholy world, and doctrinal error. The way to be separate is to stick with Jesus Christ on the narrow path illuminated by the Bible.

Notice how John, tells us, in 1 John 1:5-7, that separation, far from being mere narrow-mindedness, or legalism, is the very way of life for the Christian: "This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin."

John is using the word light to stand for holiness. God is light. He is pure holiness. In Him is no darkness, that is, in Him is no unholiness. He is separate and has no fellowship with anything that is even remotely sinful. If we say that we have fellowship with God, but walk in darkness, or anything that is remotely sinful, we prove that we are liars. Why? Because God has nothing to do with darkness. We cannot have fellowship with Him if we are walking where He is not. We must be separate just as God is separate. Then, only when we are walking in the light just as God is in the light, can we have fellowship with Him and with one another. We cannot have fellowship with those who are in the darkness, only with those who are in the light. And that is the way, and the only way, we can have unity in the church. All of us must be walking in the light, and it is the Bible that gives us that light.

Three Ways to Be Separate

There are three ways that the Bible tells us to be separate.

1) We are to be separate from the ungodly ways of the world. In Romans 12:1-2, Paul says, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God." Notice that these verses, and many of the others that I will mention, not only say what we are to separate from, but what we are to separate to. We are not to take on the image of the world, but we are to be changed so that we are holy like God.

The way of this world is very enticing. But John tells us, "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth forever" (1 John 2:15-17).

And Paul tells us, "the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them" (2 Corinthians 4:4). The people of the world are in darkness because the god of this world, Satan, has blinded them. We are in the world, but we are not to be a part of it.

Remember that in the parable of the sower of the seed, in Matthew 13:22, Jesus said that the seed sown among thorns is "he that heareth the word; and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful." Luke 8:14 describes these same people as those that "are choked with cares and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to perfection." What are these things that can choke us?

If you have ever farmed or gardened, you know that weeds compete with the good plants for light, water, and soil nutrients—all of the things vital to plant life. So, the weeds in the parable stand for those things that can choke spiritual life; those things that compete with the need for God's light (that is, His holiness and truth), the Holy Spirit (which is often likened to water), and the spiritual nutrients gotten

from the Word of God. They can do this by filling people's minds with the darkness of the world (worldly attitudes, worldly emotions, worldly philosophies, and a general non-Christian world view). They can do this by competing for people's time, energy, and resources, so that they spend these on fruitless, worldly pursuits rather than in prayer, Bible study, and doing the good works God would have us do. This leads to spiritual bankruptcy. Those who fall into this Jude describes as "clouds without water, carried about of winds; trees whose fruit withereth, without fruit, twice dead, plucked up by the roots" (verse 12). For God's elect, this final falling away will not happen, but we can still become diseased and weakened by ignoring the call to separation from the ungodly ways of the world.

What are some of the ways that can distract us from our calling and hurt us spiritually? Television, movies, computer games, web surfing, fashion, literature, various philosophies, and music, to name just a few. I am not saying that they are necessarily always wrong in themselves. But to the extent that they can occupy our time and minds and desensitize us to God's standards of righteousness, we should avoid them. And if we are honest, we know that all of these things do this. Contrary to some broad-minded and tolerant people, James, in James 4:4, warns those who would be friends with the world, "Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God." He likens friendship with the world to adultery and says it makes us God's enemy.

But there are those who, apparently thinking they know better than God's warnings in the Bible, instead of separating from the world's ways, bring the world's ways into the church. So now, as just one example, we have Christian rock and other contemporary music taken directly from the world's unholy music. But putting Christian words into such music is like pasting the pages of the Bible onto a pig: it is not going to make it Christian. We must never forget that we are flesh and we are weak. Those who are tolerant of the world's ways will wind up falling. "Wherefore," Paul cautions, "let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall" (1 Corinthians 10:12). Separation from the worldliness that feeds the old man and dulls our conscience is vital.

2) The second way we are to be separate is that we are to be separate from unbelievers. It is very foolish to enter into a marriage or business partnership with someone who is a known unbeliever. 2 Corinthians 6:14-15 admonishes, "Be ye not unequally yoked together with

unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel?"

Of course, we cannot avoid unbelievers altogether, nor are we supposed to. Paul said to the Corinthians, "I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators: Yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of the world. But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such a one no not to eat" (1 Corinthians 5:9-11). We must work, shop, and have business dealings with the people of the world. Also, we are to be a light to the world, and bring the world the only hope it has in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. So, we are not to go out of the world or live a monastic life. We must be in the world, but we are to keep ourselves unspotted from the world and not be of the world, that is, worldly.

3) We are to be separate from disobedient brethren and false and apostate Christianity. In the verse I just quoted, Paul said that we are not to have Christian fellowship with those who say they are Christians, but do not act like it. Some of these are even teachers in the church, but they prove by their false teachings, that they are unbelievers.

We must separate from people and organizations that compromise the Word of God. This means leaving a group that has apostatized and will not repent. I am going to quote 1 Timothy 6, verses 3-5. Notice the course of action recommended at the end: "If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness; He is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings. Perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness: from such withdraw thyself." Yes, we are to withdraw ourselves. Second Timothy 3 is often thought of as describing the last days in general, but, do you know that it is specifically speaking of the condition of the *church* in the last days? "This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce,

despisers of those that are good, traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away." Notice that we are to turn away. Hebrews 13:13 says, "Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach." If we do not separate, then we share blame for the apostasy. John writes, "Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him Godspeed: For he that biddeth him Godspeed is partaker of his evil deeds" (2 John 9-11).

In 2 Corinthians 6, after telling Christians to come out from among them, to separate, and touch not the unclean thing, God says, "And I will receive you. And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty." Paul then goes on in the next chapter to strengthen the necessity of separating from error: "Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and the spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God."

Ephesians 5:11 orders us to "have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them." We are not to separate and then just remain silent. We are to speak out against error. We must not only separate from error-filled groups, but we must warn others who might be dashed against the rocks to spiritual shipwreck.

What are the hallmarks of those who have apostatized? There are many, but some of the more common are compromising with liberal, modern, or post-modern theology; ecumenism; Roman Catholicism; New Evangelicalism; neo-orthodoxy; evolution; New Age teaching; psychology; feminism; homosexuality; contemporary worship; and Christian contemporary music.

A heretic who persists in denying Bible truth is not to be tolerated, he is not to be embraced, he is not to be treated irenically; he is to be rejected. Titus 3:10 says, "A man that is a heretic after the first and second admonition reject." And, when it comes to someone who is preaching a false gospel, Paul pulls no punches: "But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, if any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed" (Galatians 1:8-9).

A Bible believer must not worship with or have ecclesiastical affiliation with apostates. The clear call is to separate. Speaking of Babylon the Great (which had immediate application to Jerusalem and its fall, but can also be applied to false Christianity or even the system of this world), God says, "Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues" (Revelation 18:4). Notice 2 Timothy 2:15-22:

Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. But shun profane and vain babblings: for they will increase unto more ungodliness. And their word will eat as doth a canker: of whom is Hymenaeus and Philetus: Who concerning the truth have erred, saying that the resurrection is past already; and overthrow the faith of some. Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his, And, Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity. But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and of silver, but also of wood and of earth; and some to honor, and some to dishonor. If a man therefore purge himself from these [in other words, separate himself from the vessels of dishonor], he shall be a vessel unto honor, sanctified, and meet for the master's use, and prepared unto every good work. Flee also youthful lusts: but follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart.

And what of those who refuse to separate? By refusing to separate, they too become disobedient and must be separated from. For them, the desire for visible unity, the desire to attend the same church their family has attended for generations, respectability, popularity, friends, success, not wanting to seem different, or the avoidance of appearing to be schismatic or "too negative" is more important than obedience to the Bible. They often try to justify themselves by appealing to love or opportunities to witness. But it is still disobedience, and they are not trusting that God knows better than they do. God says we are not to walk in fellowship with disobedient brethren. We are to separate from them.

Compromised churches, associations, councils, and other organizations may have large numbers and great influence. But when their teaching or practice is unsound, those who believe the Bible must separate.

Amos 3:3 says, "Can two walk together, except they be agreed?" Of course, the answer is clear. They cannot.

By the way, it is not those who believe in biblical separation who cause division. Divisions are caused by those who turn from sound Bible teaching and those who refuse to separate from them. Those who refuse to separate from error often accuse those who do separate with being unloving or mean spirited. But I wonder if they have ever read the gospels and noticed how many times Jesus says woe to the scribes and Pharisees and calls them liars, murderers, hypocrites, and fools. Would they accuse Jesus of being unloving and mean spirited?

Why We Must Separate from Disobedient Brethren

Separation from disobedient brethren is necessary for these reasons:

a) It maintains church purity. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul tells the church not to keep company with anyone who calls himself a brother, but who is living in sin. Those who are against separation say that when we separate, we lose the opportunity to be a good influence on sinners. But, while I have seen good apples spoiled by having one bad apple put in with them, I have never seen a bad apple made good by being put in with good apples. The Bible tells us to separate from, mark, and avoid those who cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine we have received. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 5:6, "Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?"

b) A second reason to separate from disobedient brethren is for their sake. It was only after separation that the sinning brother in 1 Corinthians 5 repented. In 2 Corinthians 2:6 and 7, Paul writes, "Sufficient to such a man is this punishment, which was inflicted of many. So that contrariwise ye ought rather to forgive him, and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow." So, when the man was repentant, they received him back. But the man would not have repented had he not first been separated.

c) A third reason for practicing Biblical separation is to maintain a strong witness to the Word of God and Gospel. To give what should be an obvious example, when we do not separate from unrepentant adulterers, we are saying that adultery is okay. We are giving an impression to the world that is contrary to the teaching of Jesus and the apostles. They said that we are not to commit adultery, that adulterers will not inherit the kingdom of God, and that God will judge

them. Allowing people to openly commit sins or promote doctrines contrary to those of the church dulls the church's witness and renders it less effective.

God Always Separates His People

Now, in case you are still not convinced, I want to point out that God has always separated His people. He separated Noah and his family from the wicked world around them. He called Abram out from Ur of the Chaldees. And He called His people Israel out of Egypt and separated them from the Egyptians with the Red Sea. In the end, the Israelites were on one side and the Egyptians were on the other, and the Egyptians who tried to cross were killed. There was separation. It reminds me of what Abraham says in the parable of Lazarus and the rich man. Speaking from heaven to the rich man in hell, he says, "Between us and you a great gulf has been fixed, so that those who desire to cross over from here to you are not able, nor may those from there cross over to us" (Luke 16:26, *English Majority Text Version*).

Who is the only person beside Himself that Jesus personally told us to remember? "Remember Lot's wife," he said. What happened to Lot's wife? Lot and his family were living in Sodom when God purposed to destroy that wicked city. God sent two angels into the city to separate Lot and his family out from Sodom. But what happened? As they were fleeing the city, the angels warned, "Escape for thy life; look not behind thee, neither stay thou in all the plain; escape to the mountain, lest thou be consumed" (Genesis 19:17). They left Sodom and their entire way of life behind them. They were not to take Sodom's religion with them, they were not to take Sodom's style of worship with them, they were not to take Sodom's fashions with them, they were not to take Sodom's music with them. And to show just how serious God was about this separation, the angels said they were not even to look back at Sodom. They were to escape with their lives alone with their eyes set on where they were going and not on what they had left. They were to flee to the mountain, the higher ground. But Lot's wife "looked back from behind him, and she became a pillar of salt" (Genesis 19:26). We don't know how great her desire was for Sodom but it was enough for her to look back. Just looking back violated the separation God wanted. He killed her on the spot, turning her into a pillar of salt.

Are we yearning for the world in our personal lives, or even trying to bring it into the church? Are we entering into unholy alliances with unbelievers? Are we refusing to separate from disobedient brethren,

even when it means leaving apostate and worldly churches? Remember Lot's wife.

Today, the church does not have a separate territory or physical city on the earth. But we are still, as Peter says, "a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9). The Old Testament, both in the examples I just gave and in the ceremonial laws I mentioned at the beginning, pictured the separation we are to have today. And separation is merely the outward result of the spiritual separation God has made between His elect, saved people and the lost and dying reprobate of the world. Our God is HOLY. He separates His people and commands them to also be holy. We must be obedient and be separated to Him.