

Paul.

WHEN IS A PERSON A SEPARATIST? - P.G. Albrecht

In discussing this question, we must keep in mind that there are two kinds of separatists, 1) Those who separate themselves from others in obedience to God's Word, and 2) Those who separate themselves from others without a clear Word of God for doing so, or contrary to God's Word.

Separation in obedience to God's Word comes about when the faithful put away from among themselves the wicked and disobedient, or, if that is impossible, when they withdraw from them.

The doctrine of separation is not based on one or two isolated passages concerning the true meaning of which there may be differences of opinion. The doctrine of separation is taught throughout the Scriptures, in the Old Testament as well as in the New Testament.

The Bible is a divisive Book. It divides those who receive it as God's Word from those who see in it merely the words of pious men, those who accept every word of it as the inspired Word of God from those who accept it only as the words of inspired men.

The gospel is in its very nature a divisive doctrine. It divides those who believe it from those who reject it or receive it only with reservations. We cannot kneel at the Lord's Table with those who deny the Real Presence as though it made no difference whether one believes or rejects this important doctrine. Neither can we appear before the Throne of God in prayer together with those who reject or pervert any part of God's holy Word, or persistently refuse to obey it. Under such conditions we would have to separate ourselves from them even if there were no clear Word of God demanding it. Separation is inherent in such a situation. Not to separate would be dishonest and would result in spiritual deterioration, corruption and death.

There was separation already between Cain, the man of the world, and Abel, the faithful child of God. They did not join in a common sacrifice to God but brought separate sacrifices. Separation became evident in other ways too and was such a barb in Cain's conscience that he rose up against his brother and killed him.

God Himself brought about separation between Cain, the blasphemer, and Seth, the devout believer, when He made Cain a fugitive and a vagabond in the land. When this wall of separation was broken down by their descendants, the consequence was utter corruption because of which God destroyed them all in the flood.

There was separation between Noah and the wicked men of his day. The building of the ark was a constant public pronouncement of separation on the part of Noah. It said to all who saw it: Noah is different from the other people; he believes and obeys the voice of the Lord; he will not walk with those who despise the Word of the Lord and follow the promptings of their sinful heart and flesh.

Upon God's command, Abraham separated himself from his unbelieving relatives. Leaving his father and mother and brothers, he departed from Haran to dwell in the Land of Canaan. In Canaan, he kept himself strictly separate from the heathen Canaanites among whom he had to live.

Samuel separated himself from Saul when Saul again and again refused to obey the voice of the Lord, saying to Saul: "Hath the Lord

as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to harken than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because thou hast rejected the Word of the Lord, He hath also rejected thee". When Saul said: "I have sinned; for I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord, and thy words, because I feared the people and obeyed their voice. Now therefore, I pray thee, pardon my sin and turn again with me that I may worship the Lord", even then Samuel was adamant and said: "I will not return with thee; for thou hast rejected thee". And Samuel came no more to see Saul until the day of his death. 1. Sam. 15, 22-26. 35.

The prophets thundered against every form of syncretism. It was God's intention that Israel should be a separate people to save them from the corrupting influence of the gentiles, and to preserve the gospel promises in their truth and purity. Ye shall be holy unto Me; for I the Lord am holy and have severed you from other people. Lev. 20, 26.

In Babylon, the pious Jews maintained strict separation from the ungodly Babylonians. And when they were permitted to return to their own land they did not allow the Samaritans who claimed that they serve the same God as the Jews to join them in building the temple. They knew that to allow the Samaritans to join them would corrupt both them and their children.

Let no one say that in the Old Testament there was separation only between Jews and gentiles, between the children of the Lord and His outspoken enemies. The Lord was not interested in outward separation between Jews and gentiles. He wanted His people separate from those who corrupted the Truth. A disobedient Jew was worse than a gentile and was to be shunned and rejected no less. A Jew who perverted God's Word was cursed. He who transgressed the sabbath command was stoned. Think of what the Lord had to say about false prophets among His own people. Jer. 13 & 14 & 23. God demanded separation from those who perverted the Truth as well as from those who despised and rejected it, His purpose always being to preserve the pure voice of the gospel.

So much for the Old Testament altho much more could be said. What about the New Testament? Did the coming of the Savior bring a change in, or the abolition of, the doctrine of separation? Does the love of which Jesus and John and Paul speak so eloquently demand a change of mind and attitude toward those who reject or pervert the Word of God or refuse to obey any part of it? Does the love of Christ transcend or put aside "minor doctrinal differences"? Is it enough now to be agreed in the "essentials", the "fundamental doctrines"?

The Savior taught nothing of the kind. He was a very divisive person. So there was a division among the people because of Him. John 7, 43. He caused division wherever He went. There was division over Him when He was born. The shepherds and the Wise Men worshiped Him. Herod tried to kill Him. I need not tell you that there was division over Him to the very end.

John the Baptist separated himself from the religious leaders of his day by preaching in the wilderness instead of in the temple where he would have been identified the priests and scribes and pharisees. When they came to him in the wilderness he refused to have anything to do with them, called them vipers, saying: O gen-

eration of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Mt. 3, 7.

Peter, in his sermon on the day of Pentecose, did not promote unity in the established church of his day but disunity, division, and separation.

Paul was a devout and confirmed separatist. He was ready to withdraw even from Peter when Peter began to vacilate and compromise. Gal. 2, 11-14.

To the Romans, he wrote: Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which you have learned, and avoid them; for they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ. Romans 16, 17f.

To the Galatians, he said: As we said before, so say we now again, if any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed. Gal. 1, 9.

To the Thessalonians, he wrote: Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the traditions which he received of us. If any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him that he may be ashamed. 2. Thess. 3, 6 & 14.

Titus, his own son after the common faith, he commanded: A man that is an heretic, after the first and second admonition, reject, knowing that he that is such is subverted and sinneth, being condemned of himself. Titus 3, 10f.

To the Corinthians, Paul wrote: Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers; for fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? And what communion hath light with darkness? and what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath that believeth with an infidel? and what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God, as God hath said: I will dwell in them and walk in them, and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. Wherefore, come out from among them and be ye separate, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be My sons and daughters. 2. Cor. 6, 14-18. Here Paul is not setting up rules of casuistry but laying down a principle: There must be separation between those who believe and uphold the Truth and those whodeny it, between those who obey the Word of God and those who disobey it.

Even John, the apostle of love, demands separation in no uncertain terms. He says to the faithful: If there come any unto you who bring not this doctrine receive him not into your house neither bid him God speed; for he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds. 2. John 9f.

The Word of God speaks clearly. It demands separation, not only from the ungodly but also from all who reject or pervert of disobey any part of it. To ignore God's Word and to practice fellowship where God clearly forbids it, is willful disobedience. To pervert it, to give it a different meaning than God intended, is to deal deceitfully with it. To all such the Lord says: Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter; woe unto them that are wise in their own eyes and prudent in their own

sight. Isaiah 5, 20f.

So then, a separatist is a person who separates himself from others when the Word of God demands separation, let men say what they will, let the consequences be what they may.

I hope to be a separatist all my life and pray that the same may be true of every one of you.

The term separatist is, however, used also to designate a person who separates himself from others without a clear Word of God for doing so, or contrary to God's Word.

His reason for separating may be a misguided conscience, a better-than-thou attitude on his part, or a lack of love for an erring brother.

God's Word commands us not to reject a brother who has been overtaken in a fault but to restore such an one in a spirit of meekness. Gal. 6, 1. Depending on the nature of his error, we may have to withdraw from him to a degree while admonishing him as a brother. 2. Thess. 3, 14f. It is contrary to love and therefore contrary to the will of God to withdraw completely from an erring brother until every effort has been made to restore him, i.e. until it has become clear that further admonition would be futile.

God does not want us to split over petty personal prejudices and preferences. He does not want us to say: I am of Paul, I am of Apollos, I am of Cephas. 1. Cor. 1, 12.

God wants us to be of one heart and soul like the early Christians in Jerusalem, Acts 4, 32, so perfectly joined together in the same mind and the same judgment that we all speak the same thing.  
1. Cor. 1, 11.

God wants us to be one body even as we are all called in one hope of our calling. Eph. 4, 5.

However, every Scripture passage that can be marshalled against sinful separatism is, at the same time, a mighty argument in favor of the separatism enjoined in God's Word; for since God wants us to be of one heart and one soul, so perfectly joined together in the same mind and the same judgment that we all speak the same thing, one body even as we are called in one hope of our calling, it follows that He wants us to separate ourselves from all those who are not of one heart and one soul with us, who are not so perfectly joined together with us in the same mind and the same judgment that we all speak the same thing. God does not want us to give in a little here and compromise a little there for the sake of union. He does not want union without unity. He wants perfect agreement in the Truth. He wants us to endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit. Eph. 4, 3.

They also are separatists who are not ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh them a reason of the hope that is in them with meekness and fear. 1. Peter 3, 13. We must be ready at all times to confess our faith and to give the scriptural basis for our doctrine and practice, exercising extreme caution to do it in a manner and under conditions approved by God. Who can say how many sins are committed in the name of bearing witness and of preaching the gospel.

There always is danger of falling into the sin of separatism. But the greater danger today is on the other side. Unionism, the fear of having to stand alone, the uncontrollable desire to be in on everything, the craving to belong to a large and influential body, these are the things that are threatening to corrupt us today.

Let us investigate carefully in every case before we call a man a separatist, with the implication that he is going beyond, or contrary, to Scripture in the important matter of separation. If we are careful, we will hardly find much legitimate use for the term.

May God grant us grace and courage to come out from among all those who in any way preach or practice contrary to God's holy Word, and to be separate. Then God will dwell in us and walk in us and will be our God, and we shall be His people.

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