

Secondary Ecclesiastical Separation



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The Board of Directors of Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary published in both the college and seminary catalogs a document entitled Historic Position Statement. In it the reader is told, "Since mid-century, the school has taught secondary ecclesiastical separation."

It is the purpose of this article to try to explain what is meant by this term, to examine several biblical passages traditionally used to defend this view, and to provide an example of this practice in a contemporary situation.

An Explanation of Secondary Separation

Paul Enns believes Christians should organizationally separate from apostasy but not from other Christians. He describes those who separate not only from men who deny the Christian faith but also from believers who cooperate with apostates as neo-fundamentalists who are guilty of practicing secondary separation.¹

Paul R. Jackson, National Representative of the GARBC in the 1960s, said, "The position that we hold is set forth in three subdivisions. First, separation is an eternal and unchanging principle of God. . . . Second, God has commanded that we should be separate from unbelievers. . . . Third, it is God's commandment that we separate from our brothers when they walk in disobedience."² It is this third point that makes Jackson's statement a good example of secondary separation.

An Examination of Biblical Passages Used to Support Secondary Separation

1 Corinthians 5:1–13 : “It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father’s wife.² And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you. ³For I verily, as absent in body, but present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that hath so done this deed, ⁴In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁵To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. ⁶Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? ⁷Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us: ⁸Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. ⁹I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators: ¹⁰Yet 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. ¹¹But 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 an one no not to eat. ¹²For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? do not ye judge them that are within? ¹³But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person.”

Note the following facts:

- (1) Paul urges the Corinthian believers to “put away from among [themselves] that wicked person” (verse 13). This putting away includes refusing to keep company with him, not even to eat with him. These phrases are probably references to expulsion from the membership and exclusion from the Lord’s Supper or any church suppers rather than to personal meals, since unbelievers were permitted to attend the church services (see 1 Corinthians 14:24).
- (2) The object of this discipline is one who is “called a brother” (verse 11), and the purpose of the discipline is that his spirit would be saved though his body be destroyed (verse 5).
- (3) Paul bases his exhortation for discipline on the purity of a local church. As obedient believers they are ‘unleavened.’ That is, they must not only be true believers who have been declared righteous and sanctified (see 1 Corinthians 6:11) but also believers who intend to live in a godly manner. Thus, if they were to tolerate this well-known immoral person in their fellowship, the whole membership ultimately would be affected: “a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump” (verse 6). Paul may also refer to the purity of the church in his statement that “Christ our passover is sacrificed for us” (verse 7).
- (4) Paul extends his exhortation for discipline from one particular person (the one guilty of immorality, verse 3), to all church members who are “fornicators” (verse 9), then to all church members who are covetous, extortioners, or idolaters (verse 10), and finally to those members who are railers or drunkards (verse 11). It seems likely that Paul is expressing a principle that should be applied in circumstances involving sins other than simply sexual impurity..

2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 : “⁶Now 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 tradition which he received of us. ⁷For yourselves know how ye ought to follow us: for we behaved not ourselves disorderly among you; ⁸Neither did we eat any man’s bread for nought; but wrought with labour and travail night and day, that we might not be chargeable to any of you: ⁹Not because we have not power, but to make ourselves an ensample unto you to follow us. ¹⁰For even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat. ¹¹For we hear

that there are some which walk among you disorderly, working not at all, but are busybodies. 12Now them that are such we command and exhort by our Lord Jesus Christ, that with quietness they work, and eat their own bread. 13But ye, brethren, be not weary in well doing. 14And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed. 15Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.”

The following truths are noteworthy:

(1) Paul is issuing a command and not merely making a suggestion (verses 6, 10 and 12). This command is reinforced by the authority (“in the name of”) our Lord Jesus Christ (verses 6 and 12).

(2) Walking “disorderly” is not merely loafing, though that is how it manifested itself in this situation, but is something contrary to “the tradition” which was given by Paul both orally and in his epistles (2 Thessalonians 2:15; 3:6, 10, 14). A careful study of both 1 and 2 Thessalonians reveal’s Paul’s emphasis on end-time events, especially Christ’s return. It is reasonable to conclude that some in the Thessalonian church had quit their jobs because they believed Christ’s return would take place very soon. Misunderstood or false doctrine often leads to wrong behavior.

(3) The Thessalonian church was commanded to “withdraw” from the disorderly brother by noting him and no longer having company with him (verses 6 and 14). The goal of such church discipline is that he might become ashamed (verse 14).

(4) The disorderly brother was not to be treated as an enemy but admonished as a brother (verse 15).

An Example of Secondary Separation

Bruce Shelley explains why the Conservative Baptists did not join with the Regular Baptists in the late 1940s. He says, “On the national level no unity appeared because the difference in views of separation persisted. This difference can be summed up by a brief quotation from the constitution of each organization. The GARBC constitution (as amended in May, 1951) states: ‘Any Baptist church in the U.S. which is not in fellowship or cooperation with any national or local convention, association or group which permits the presence of modernists or modernism, and which subscribes to the Constitution and Articles of Faith . . . may . . . be received into the Fellowship.’ But, in sharp contrast, the Conservative Baptist Association of America’s constitution for years declared: ‘The affiliates of the Association shall consist of: 1) Autonomous Baptist churches without regard to other affiliations’” (emphasis Shelly’s).³

Francis Schaeffer, the noted evangelical apologist of the 1970s, commented: “But if first we must speak Christianity with a clear content and an emphasis on truth in contrast to what is not true, equally we must practice truth. . . . We must practice the truth even when it is costly. We must practice it when it involves church affiliation or evangelistic cooperation. There is a difference between having a public discussion with a liberal theologian and inviting him to pray in our program.”⁴

End Notes

1 Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1989), 619.

2 Paul R. Jackson, *The Position, Attitudes, and Objectives of Biblical Separation* (Schaumburg, IL: General Association of Regular Baptist Churches, n.d.), 7–9.

3 Bruce L. Shelley, *A History of Conservative Baptists* (Wheaton, IL: Conservative Baptist Press, 1971, 1981, 3rd ed.), 55,56.

4 Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Church at the End of the 20th Century* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1970), 38.