

Biblical Separation

By Malcolm H. Watts

These are darkening days of apostasy for many churches. There can be no hiding of the fact. Due to the widespread reception and penetration of modernistic beliefs about the Bible, a great many Christians have lost their vision of what is scriptural truth and are tragically faltering in their fidelity to it. The consequence is a manifested tolerance which is really nothing less than compromise. Advantage has been taken of this weakness in the churches. The promoters of church unity have been busy persuading the traditionally evangelical churches to look more favourably at doctrines and practices previously considered false and corrupt. Many churches, not really knowing what they believe any longer, have been

influenced by this whole ecumenical movement, and now find themselves mixed up with those who are very far removed from biblical Christianity. In consequence, the Christian scene today is quite depressing.

David Samuel, General Secretary of the Protestant Reformation Society, wrote some time ago of 'the growing confusion and uncertainty about where we stand'. In fact, the situation became so critical some years back that even the charismatic Michael Harper expressed concern. In the Ashe Lecture he admitted that he was alarmed at the way 'foundational beliefs' were being removed. This was the surest way, he said, 'to demolish Christianity'. He saw the danger of this already happening in the Protestant churches, and he said he

found himself pointing to the Roman Catholic Church because - to use his exact words - 'almost alone among the Churches it stands firmly for the fundamentals of the faith'. That a definite crisis exists is all too clear. When Dr. James Packer left this country for Canada, he too spoke rather pessimistically about the present state of things; but although far from consistent himself he certainly put his finger on the root cause, as well as the ultimate solution, when he said concerning the Church of which he is a member: 'I shall not be happy about the Church of England until the Bible has been recovered.'

What should an individual Christian, or a Christian church, do in such days as these? The question has been answered for us. God, through Holy Scripture, has left us in no doubt about the only course of action open to us. It is our duty to make clear testimony to our Faith by separating from all fellowships and affiliations compromised with serious error.

To teach His people that they were always to be separate from sin, error, and corruption, God made clear from the beginning that 'darkness' and 'light' were to have separate spheres: 'God divided (Hebrew - 'separated': the first occurrence of the word in the Bible) the light from the darkness' (Genesis 1:4). To these words Paul seems to allude when warning orthodox Christian believers against

certain connections: 'Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them' (Ephesians 5:11; cf. 2 Corinthians 6:14). The divine account of creation also reveals that, on the second day, a firmament was made dividing what was beneath from what was above (Genesis 1: 6-8). The spiritual eye will see the same truth being taught here. According to the New Testament, there are those who mind 'earthly things' and there are those whose home is very evidently 'in heaven' (Philippians 3:18-20; cf. 1 Corinthians 15:48), but since the former are to be regarded by the latter as 'enemies' (Phil 3:18), no fellowship can be contemplated with them. The reader may care to pursue the study in Genesis 1. Here there is only space to draw attention to one other detail.

In the Beginning

The separation principle receives special emphasis on account of the fact that God made certain fixed bounds beyond which cross-fertility would not be possible, and it is several times repeated that God created everything 'after its kind' (Genesis 1:11,12,21,24,25). Our Lord Jesus Christ taught that men too were of different kinds. He said that some were like vines and some were like fig trees, while others were like thorns and thistles (Matthew 7:15-20). Of a certain kind He told His disciples to 'beware', hinting, at the same time, that to company with them ('false prophets') would be to run the risk of

being spiritually harmed (v. 15).

'Clean' and 'Unclean'

Further teaching on this vital but much neglected theme was given in the distinction which was made, later on, between 'clean' and 'unclean' creatures. Noah, having been told that the animals were to be taken into the ark by pairs (Genesis 6:19), was then given more specific instructions and was told how many pairs of each kind were to be admitted: 'Of every clean beast thou shalt take to thee by sevens, the male and his female: and of beasts that are not clean by two, the male and the female' (Gen 7:2). The distinction became important, for only the 'clean' were to be eaten (Leviticus 11; Deuteronomy 14).

It is not permissible to think that because these laws are obsolete they therefore are absolutely irrelevant for today because 'all scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable... (2 Timothy 3:16). God has more to say to us here on this question of separation. The key to open up the meaning for us is the fact that, in the Bible, animals often represent men (e.g. Matthew 10:16; 25:33; Acts 20:29): the 'clean', such as 'sheep', representing the godly (John 21:15,16), while the 'unclean', such as 'foxes', 'swine' and 'dogs', representing the ungodly (Luke 13:32; 2 Peter 2:12; Revelation 22:15). God's ancient Law, as we have observed, forbade the

eating of 'unclean' animals (Leviticus 11:46,47). Since 'eating', in Scripture, denotes communion (e.g. John 6:53), the command not to eat should be understood as meaning that there are those with whom we are not to fellowship (Ezekiel 44:7, 23 and 2 Corinthians 6:17).

That this is the way to understand these Old Testament passages is made clear by the remarkable vision which Peter had at Joppa, recorded for us in Acts 10 and 11. He saw 'a certain vessel descending unto him... wherein were all manner of fourfooted beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air' (Acts 10:11,12): a picture of the Christian Church made up of all kinds of persons. A voice from heaven told Peter to 'eat' (Acts 10:13), which meant, as Thomas Scott, the commentator, rightly perceived, 'that he should henceforth associate with converts to Christ, from among the Gentiles'. Peter protested at the command. 'Not so, Lord,' he said, 'for I have never eaten anything which is common or unclean' (Acts 10:14). But the reply came, 'What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common' (Acts 10:15). In other words, he was not to hesitate about visiting the 'unclean' Gentiles, because God was about to do a wonderful work among them through the gospel: He was about to remove their sin and to receive believers (by grace) among them as His people.

The basic principles of interpretation laid

down earlier are correct. However, according to the New Testament, it is not the non-Jew who is to be regarded as 'unclean', for God, in His wonderful grace, is gathering together both Jews and Gentiles into His church. We ought rather to apply these things to those who have departed from the Faith, and who show thereby that they belong to the apostate church, called in the Bible 'mystery, Babylon the great' (Revelation 17:5). That false church is described as 'a cage of every unclean and hateful bird' (Rev 18:2), and God has made very clear to us our duty in the light of these things: 'Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues' (Rev 18:4).

Unlawful Yokes

In the ceremonial laws given by Moses more is to be learnt about the Bible doctrine of separation. There is one passage deserving of special attention - Deuteronomy 22: 9-11. Here God is teaching His people that there is to be no union of dissimilar things and no unnatural mixtures. In referring to these laws we must bear in mind that they have a higher application which may not be at first apparent. Thus Paul, commenting on one such law of Moses, says, 'Saith he it altogether for our sakes? For our sakes, no doubt, this is written' (1 Corinthians 9:10). That being so, what does this portion of the Word of God actually say, and what does it teach us today? We note

a threefold message:

(1) The people of God were not to mix up their seeds when sowing: 'Thou shalt not sow thy vineyard with divers seeds (Deuteronomy 22:9). So far as spiritual things are concerned, the point is surely that 'the good seed' of truth (Matthew 13:24; Luke 8:11) must never be mixed up with error. The apostle was able to say, 'We are not as many, which corrupt the word of God' (2 Corinthians 2:17). Christians should not remain in a situation where both sound and false doctrine is being preached.

(2) God's people were not to allow the ox and ass to work together in the tilling of the land: 'Thou shalt not plow with an ox and an ass together' (Deuteronomy 22:10). The faithful minister who labours in the Word and in doctrine is in Scripture more than once likened to an ox (1 Corinthians 9:9-11; 1 Timothy 5:17-18). The clear meaning here is that Bible-believing ministers are not to be in association with those who deny the fundamentals of the Faith. The only infallible interpreter of the Bible is the Bible itself, and, according to this divine commentary, the verse is to be understood as teaching that very truth. 'Be not unequally yoked with unbelievers' (2 Corinthians 6:14). It is not the desire or function of the writer of this article to sit in judgment on others, but he must say that he finds it difficult to see how true evangelical ministers are able to

justify remaining in positions where they are inevitably connected with those who no longer believe basic Christian doctrines.

(3) God's people were not to wear anything made of mixed materials: 'Thou shalt not wear a garment of divers sorts, as of woollen and linen together' (Deuteronomy 22:11). Our Lord may well have had such a passage in mind when He said that any attempt to combine the rites and doctrines of Pharisaism with pure Christianity would be a serious mistake. 'No man putteth a piece of new cloth unto an old garment,' He said, 'for that which is put in to fill it up taketh from the garment, and the rent is made worse' (Matthew 9:16). Our Saviour's exposition of the old law makes it peculiarly relevant. Great attempts are being made today to bring together groups fundamentally different from each other, even Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. God is averse to such unhallowed combinations. The ecumenical efforts of these days can only lead to further division. That is exactly what is happening. For our part we refuse to be involved with such organizations as the World Council of Churches, believing that it is trying to do the very thing which God forbids.

All these things were written that vital distinctions might be kept in view, and that all improper alliances might be avoided.

God's people were warned, in fact, against all connections which might prove a snare to them. Repeatedly in the Old Testament we come across such divine commands as: 'Thou shalt make no covenant with them' (Exodus 23:32; 34:12,15; Deuteronomy 7:2; Judges 2:2). Of course, this had reference to the heathens within the land of Canaan, but it seems that the underlying principle extended beyond that. Much later when Jehoshaphat, a godly king in Judah, 'joined affinity' with the idolatrous king Ahab of Israel (2 Chronicles 18:1), he was sternly rebuked for a friendship and association highly offensive to God: 'And Jehu the son of Hanani the seer went out to meet him, and said to king Jehoshaphat, Shouldest thou help the ungodly, and love them that hate the Lord? Therefore is wrath upon thee from before the Lord' (2 Chronicles 19:2).

The Question of Separation

The question of separation God obviously considers very important. Sufficient has been gleaned from His Word to show that Bible-believing Christians are not to affiliate in any way with those who seriously deviate from the truth as it is revealed in Holy Scripture. But it may be that some are in a position already which is causing them concern; for example, any who may be in doctrinally-mixed churches and denominations. For them it would not be a matter of staying 'separate' but of

actually 'separating'. Certainly that is never to be done lightly. Calvin was absolutely right in saying that 'we are not on account of every minute difference to abandon a church'. What then are the main biblical grounds for separation? We believe them to be as follows:

(1) when fundamentals of the Faith are questioned or abandoned, and soul-destroying error is condoned with no attempt is made to drive it out: '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 ... from such withdraw thyself' (1 Timothy 6:3, 5; cf. Titus 3:10).

(2) when the worship of God is corrupted so that it is no longer as He has commanded in His Word, and when no steps are taken to put the matter right: 'What agreement hath the temple of God with idols? (2 Corinthians 6:16; cf. 2 Thessalonians 3:6 - the word 'tradition' is elsewhere used for rules relating to public worship, and is translated 'ordinance', 1 Corinthians 11:2).

(3) when ungodliness and unrighteousness is manifest in the church and when it is allowed to continue because of failure to administer biblical discipline: 'Men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy ... having a form of godliness, but

denying the power thereof: from such turn away' (2 Timothy 3:2-5; cf. Rom 16:17 - 'offences' could be translated 'scandals'). In other words separation from a church is called for by the Word when it loses the basic distinguishing marks of a true Christian church.

Upon these principles godly men have acted through the long centuries. The great reformers all found it necessary, in the end, to separate from the corrupted Church of Rome. Martin Luther, after describing the papacy as 'the kingdom of Babylon', said, 'We have administered unto Babylon and she is not cured; let us abandon her'. It did not take John Calvin long to arrive at the same conclusion and to pursue a similar course. As a fairly young man he saw that a complete break with Rome was inevitable. 'The building,' he said, 'is too rotten to be patched up. It must be torn down and in its stead a new one must be built.' Of exactly the same mind was that fighter for truth, John Knox. To one of Rome's cantankerous friars he cried, 'If you choose to belong to this church, I cannot help it; for my part I will be of no church but that which has Christ for its pastor, hears His voice, and will not hearken to the voice of a stranger.' The Protestant Church owes its very existence to the stand for separation made by these and multitudes of other men.

Today, however, we sadly witness within Protestantism itself an unprecedented

falling away from the ancient standards of the Faith. On the one hand we earnestly seek fellowship with all who firmly and faithfully adhere to the historic Christian Faith. On the other hand, we must obey the call of God to separate from, and to remain separate from, all who forsake the Word of God, until they return to the Faith for which all true Protestants are to contend earnestly, 'the faith which was once delivered unto the saints' (Jude v. 3).