

# Secondary Separation - When to Stand Apart from Biblical Error

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It is clearly a vital duty of Christians to stand apart from false teachers who deny the fundamentals of the faith. 'Do not be mixed up with them,' says the apostle Paul (see *2 Corinthians 6.14*), 'Do not associate.' Full Bible references follow the article. This duty has become known as the doctrine of separation.

However, there are Bible-believing ministers and congregations who belong to apostate denominations, where people who reject the true Gospel constitute the overwhelming majority, as in the Church of England, or the Baptist Union.

Sometimes evangelical ministers and clergy in these denominations can function in a rather 'independent' way, but more usually they cooperate with their denominational leaders and colleagues who deny the fundamentals of the faith. In so doing, they ignore and repudiate the clear duty of biblical separation. They recognise and work with those whom the Lord called 'wolves in sheep's clothing'.

## Is Secondary Separation Right?

The question arises – how should evangelicals who obey God's call to stand apart treat fellow-evangelicals who refuse to do so? Should they maintain full fellowship, or stand apart from those who disobey? The latter is called secondary separation.

In the past, independent churches, Strict Baptist churches and Brethren assemblies in Britain have practically all held that secondary separation, often with great regret, is also our duty, but nowadays we hear pastors of such churches saying they do not believe in secondary separation. Some call it 'hyper-separation' and make it sound harsh and loveless. We have even heard it called 'the sin of schism'.

It should not be forgotten that the duty of separation, whether primary or secondary, is laid upon us in the Bible by the infinite kindness of God. Far from being loveless, it is a Gospel-preserving and a church-protecting duty. It is designed for our blessing and power. It is to keep us from a thousand snares and heartaches.

## Separation with Discretion

One of the reasons why some pastors recoil from secondary separation is they are seemingly unaware that it is to be applied with discretion, in the spirit of *1 Corinthians 16.14* – 'Let all your things be done with charity.' (Paul says this immediately after exhorting to stand firmly for the faith.)

If a minister in an apostate denomination is knowingly, wilfully and actively cooperating with false teachers we should have no fellowship with him, but if such a man is grieved by his non-evangelical colleagues, remonstrating with them, witnessing to them, and declining cooperation with them, then we must respect him, and be charitable. Perhaps he has never considered his position. We should certainly recognise him as a brother, fellowship with him privately, pray for him and persuade him to leave that denomination if we can.

However, we would be unable to share a platform with him, or ask him to preach for us, because that would endorse his apostate denomination and confuse God's people. But we would not withdraw ourselves from him to the extent that we would from a wilfully disobedient evangelical minister who cooperates with his denominational false teachers.

The KJV rendering of *Jude 22* also expresses charity in reproof – ‘And of some have compassion, making a difference,’ or (in this case) distinguishing between levels of involvement with error.

Years ago there were many in apostate denominations who were ‘rebels within’. They stood very definitely for the Truth and opposed false teaching. There are few like this today, but where we find them we admire them, and fellowship warmly with them, even though we think their position illogical.

### **Dr Lloyd-Jones on Separation**

In recent times the claim has been made that secondary separation is extremism. This writer has been named as going much further than Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899-1981), the famous minister of Westminster Chapel, who made a call to evangelicals to leave apostate denominations. It is claimed that Dr Lloyd-Jones opposed secondary separation, saying, ‘If I am convinced that a man is my brother I am going to bear with him. I am not going to divide from him...We are born again by the same Spirit into the same family...I do not separate from my brother’ (*Unity in Truth* pp 120-121).

Dr Lloyd-Jones, however, was not speaking about secondary separation in that quotation, but about unity between evangelicals who had left apostate denominations. His dream and hope was that all British evangelicals would separate from error and join together in a new denomination. Not all were enthusiastic, some saying to him, ‘We are Baptists, and we could not join with paedo-baptists,’ while others said, ‘We are Calvinists and could not join with Arminians.’ Dr Lloyd-Jones was appealing to these and said that he would not separate from his brother and nor should they. He was not talking about separating from evangelicals who cooperate with non-evangelicals in their denominations, for he advocated such separation. He was appealing for unity among those who had separated. He felt they should set aside their convictions on baptism and the doctrines of grace, and so on, for the sake of unity.

### **Dr Lloyd-Jones and Billy Graham**

To prove the point we remember the way in which Dr Lloyd-Jones refused to work with Billy Graham, and this is a significant example of secondary separation. In 1963 the evangelist asked Dr Lloyd-Jones to chair the first World Congress on Evangelism (eventually held in Berlin in 1966; predecessor to Lausanne). Dr Lloyd-Jones told Billy Graham that if he would stop having liberals and Roman Catholics on his platform and drop the invitation system he would support and chair the Congress.

Billy Graham would not change his views, and Dr Lloyd-Jones declined to endorse or commend or work with him. No doubt the meeting between them was courteously conducted (it lasted three hours) but the outcome was a firm application of secondary separation.

Dr Lloyd-Jones adopted the same attitude to Billy Graham’s London crusades. He took the view, and stated it publicly, that to have visible unity with those who are opposed to essential matters of salvation was sinful. (He also believed the invitation system was a source of mass-delusion and harm to churches.)

Despite Billy Graham’s high standing with most British evangelicals, the enthusiastic support he received from the secular media, the fact that his name was a household word, and despite the significant place in world evangelicalism that he was offering to Dr Lloyd-Jones, the latter stood by his biblical principle, and declined all the overtures. He would not commend or work with Dr Billy Graham. This is true loyalty to God’s Word, and protectiveness of one’s congregation.

For what it’s worth, as far as the present writer is aware he goes no further in his view of secondary separation than Dr Lloyd-Jones (although he does not share the great man’s latter day enthusiasm for a new evangelical denomination).

## Spurgeon on Secondary Separation

In a famous sermon, C H Spurgeon expressed the very same position in these words: ‘That I might not stultify my testimony I have cut myself clear of those who err from the faith, and even from those who associate with them’ (Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit 1888, No. 2047). Dr Lloyd-Jones was of the same mind, but both exercised tender discretion.

We sometimes hear it said that there is no text in the Bible that requires secondary separation, but we find this assertion astonishing. For one thing, the many texts that command primary separation are emphatic, insistent, obligatory, and imperative, showing how great a wrong it is to reject them. They are categorical and absolute. They are compulsory and not merely permissive. Disobedience certainly puts a believer into the category of one who ‘walks disorderly’ and not in line with the instructions of the apostles. For such the word of *2 Thessalonians 3.14* is clear: ‘And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed.’

For another thing, the solemn words of *Revelation 18.4* express a deep and prophetic principle – ‘Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins...’

In *2 John 11* we learn that the one who even expresses a blessing to a false teacher is a participant in his evil deeds. God assigns guilt to the non-separator, and we must not brush that aside.

In the end, those who mistakenly remain in apostate denominations contribute to (whether they aim to or not) the victory of the Lord’s enemies. We see this in the historic decline of once great evangelical denominations.

In this article we have called it a great wrong to disobey the separation texts. Dr Lloyd-Jones called it a sin. These scriptures certainly require that we stand apart from those who recognise and assist false teachers.

Some are anxious about secondary separation because they believe we have a duty to promote interchurch unity in line with the Saviour’s high-priestly prayer of John 17. This question will be answered in a tail-piece to this article, but first we must consider another important ground of separation.

## Separation from Worldly Evangelicals

The biblical duty to stand apart from certain fellow-evangelicals applies not only to false teachers and those who help them but also to evangelicals who promote sinful, worldly and harmful conduct. This category of separation includes those who commit serious offences, such as immorality and the other disfellowshipping sins referred to in 1 Corinthians 5.9, 11 and 13 and elsewhere. Even secular professional and sporting associations exclude those who bring their cause into disrepute.

Worldly and harmful conduct certainly includes cursing and swearing, gross disrespect to Christ or to Scripture, and deliberate sexual innuendo or verbal pornography. There are preachers today claiming to be sound evangelicals, who bring the testimony into disrepute by such behaviour, and we cannot possibly endorse them. It is truly astonishing that some evangelicals do commend them. They may claim to be reformed in doctrine, but in fact they deny by their conduct a fundamental of the faith, effectively saying that God is not holy after all. He does not mind boozing, swearing, coarseness and worldly exhibitionism! Indeed, he delights in watching his people indulge. This is the ‘confessional statement’ of their lives.

Then there is the enormous problem of other forms of wilful worldliness. Who can tell what harm worldliness is doing in the churches of Christ?

## Separation from Rap and Rock

Who would have imagined twenty years ago that rap, with all its debased cultural associations, would be used in worship and applauded by reformed churches? Incalculable harm is done, reverence forfeited, the message distorted by the culture, and the young deprived of any distinction between the church and the world.

Sinful things first permeate and then dominate the dumbed-down, world-conforming worship of today, often because pastors thought that to distance themselves from these things would be lacking love. Consequently the flock is soon maimed, holiness is stunted and love for Christ gives way to mere self-indulgence and entertainment.

The new and massive invasion of worldliness began in a small way in the 1960s, but the scale of today was not attained until the 1990s, long after the ministries of Dr Lloyd-Jones, E J Poole-Connor, and other notables who included protective warnings in their ministries. They did not warn of today's extreme worldliness because it had not yet arisen. In fact, nothing quite like it has been seen in the entire history of the Christian church. Younger people today have no idea how much church culture has become conformed to that of a carnal world.

It is never schism to expose error, to discipline obvious sin, or to stand apart from deeply injurious influences.

## The Medium is the Message

Right now there are some preachers who possess fine presentational skills and winning personalities, and say they want to see souls saved, but who have mistakenly attached to the Gospel the menace of heavy rock, rap and other sin-stained methods. It is wrong to say that their belief in the Gospel, and their desire to win souls, is all that should concern us.

The phrase coined in 1964 by philosopher Marshall McLuhan is true – ‘the medium is the message’. He meant that the manner of communication deeply influences and shapes the hearer's perception of the message. The preacher speaks of God's holiness and man's sin, of Christ's atoning death, and of repentance and faith, but the sinner observes the culture, the scantily dressed performers, and the music style borrowed from worldly people who designed it to proclaim immorality and indulgence. Consequently he perceives the message to say – ‘you may continue to enjoy the sinful aspects of the world, and yet Christ still will get you to Heaven.’ Thus the Gospel is distorted and compromised. (In fact, the degree of manipulation employed to get a response to the Gospel is far more distorting to the message than that of the invitation system that Dr Lloyd-Jones refused to work with.)

## Gospel Harm Texts

Serious Gospel harm makes it necessary for us to ‘stand apart’ from this brand of worldly, harmful evangelism, no matter how great the human appeal of its culturally-compromised preachers.

Referring to the ministry of himself and his fellow-workers, Paul speaks of ‘giving no offence in any thing, that the ministry be not blamed’ (*2 Corinthians 6.3*). In other words, we put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no one will stumble because of us, nor our ministry be blamed. Nothing must be allowed to discredit the Gospel, distort it, negate it, or bring it into disrepute.

The passage goes on to show how Gospel labourers are approved and authenticated by such virtues as patience and pureness, and by the Word of Truth and the power of God. The harnessing of worldliness is biblically condemned, not advocated.

The Lord Jesus Christ did not teach that the Gospel could be commended by overt worldliness, let alone cursing and sexual innuendo. On the contrary he said, ‘Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven’ (*Matthew 5.16*).

Paul said he would suffer anything rather than ‘hinder the gospel of Christ’ (*1 Corinthians 9.12*). We are to be ‘blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world; holding forth the word of life’ (*Philippians 2.15-16*).

The deliberate imitation and adoption of music and clothing associated with sin and godlessness constitutes an alarming misrepresentation of the Gospel and we should not cooperate with it.

Paul repeatedly gives exhortations to godliness ‘that the name of God and his doctrine be not blasphemed’ (eg: *1 Timothy 6.1*). Titus is told to live a life that is ‘a pattern of good works’ with ‘sound speech, that cannot be condemned’ (*Titus 2.1-11*). It is by distinctive good works that the Gospel is authenticated (*1 Peter 2.12*), not by conformity to the lifestyles of a sinful world. No matter how soundly the Gospel is proclaimed, or how earnest the proclaimer, the ‘medium’ may distort the message, making it a license to sin, not a deliverance from sin.

We see the error in the results secured by many who employ the new worldly-conformed methods. Anyone may watch the internet clips of major young people’s conferences where immorally clad youngsters behave just as the world does in ‘Christian rock’ praise sessions. The Gospel preached did not bring them out of the world.

We also hear of the colossal fall-away rates in churches that go in for these things. We are reliably told of packed student congregations where hardly any continue to walk with the Lord after graduation. We are informed by concerned workers in a well-known contemporary-method mega church how few people really know salvation and live lives committed to holiness and service.

## **Separation from Satan’s Strategy**

When Satan inspired Evangelicals and Catholics Together in the late 1990s in the USA, large numbers of evangelical churches rejected the proposals. Satan discovered that to try to join Bible believers with Catholics on a doctrinal basis was a step too far and too fast. His next campaign against churches appears to have been the accelerated promotion of contemporary worship and worldly lifestyles, first in a moderate way, but driving the movement ever harder and faster. Perhaps Satan saw that once Catholics and evangelicals all worshipped the same way, then they would no longer see any difference between themselves. Who knows where matters will end? Who knows what harm has already been done?

If only we would listen to the directions of God, in his protective, preserving kindness, to stand apart from worldly and harmful things. Secondary separation means standing apart even from Bible believers when they do things that maim and harm the Gospel and the churches.

As we have mentioned already, we stand apart with discretion. If a minister or church is employing contemporary material only to a small extent, we would far rather appeal and persuade, than break fellowship.

If, however, the drums are in with the full manifestation of worldliness, we cannot work together. *James 4.4* hangs over the situation – ‘Whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.’ *2 Thessalonians 3.14-15* must be honoured – ‘And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.’ Certainly we admonish the erring worker as a brother, but the key words remain – ‘have no company with him’.

The solemn warning of Paul in *1 Corinthians 3.17* that no one must harm churches, should caution us all: ‘If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are.’

May I say to pastors, elders and deacons – we have a choice. We either show unreserved kindness, protection and solidarity toward the offender, or we show it to the Gospel and our congregations. We either commend one or the other. Which will we embrace? No pastor or church officer can be truly loyal to the Word and protective to the flock of God without the practice of biblical secondary separation, applied with all the sensitive discretion of charity.

### **Is there a Duty of Inter-Church Unity?**

Some pastors are hesitant about secondary separation because they have been persuaded that they have a pressing biblical obligation to express evangelical unity between churches. They have understood the prayer of Christ, ‘that they all may be one’, to refer to the desirability of a formal earthly association. But in the New Testament the Lord does not require humanly organised earthly unity. There is no sign of such a thing in the pattern-church of the New Testament.

The unity for which Christ prayed was a spiritual phenomenon, and his prayer was fully answered from the moment he prayed it. Christ prayed that his people would be united in himself, he being the hub of the wheel, and his people the spokes, which though they may never meet, would be united in likeness to Christ, in fundamental doctrine, in their way of thinking, in their longing for holiness, in their service for their Lord, in their love for him, and in their waiting for his return.

He prayed that his own blood bought people, though unknown to each other, some in far-flung, poor Himalayan villages, others in hostile North Korea, or Somalia, or in the free world, would share a common dependence upon him, and have the same testimony to the world.

We express this spiritual unity whenever we can in many non-associational ways. If opportunity arises we are delighted to meet each other, or to send relief to those in distress, whether Calvinists or Arminians, Baptists or Presbyterians. Unity is not a matter of belonging to an earthly society, the only such unit in the New Testament being the local or particular congregation.

Spurgeon once said that every congregation is a Gospel ship, free to sail alongside any other like-minded Gospel ship to give needed assistance, but not required to festoon the oceans with connecting ropes joining them all together.

We have no biblical instruction to form an earthly organisation. Whenever such things have been attempted, they have done good for a time, but have then become corrupted, and a channel for infecting churches with all kinds of error. This is the story of the mainline historic denominations.

We see it unfolding today in UK groups of sound churches where the leaderships now actively promote extreme contemporary worship and ways, gradually transforming the character of the member churches.

Inter-church fellowships seem to attract to their leaderships, in time, a fatal sprinkling of people who seek influence to further their own agenda for the churches. The divine genius of the Bible does not actually call for such associations, and there is therefore no obligation on churches to seek affiliation to them. The Word does not require them, the Gospel does not need them, and love, fellowship and helpfulness toward others may be expressed far better without them.

## **Texts for Biblical Separation**

The obligatory, insistent, imperative nature of the commands shown below, tells us how great a wrong it is to reject them, and why the principle of *2 Thessalonians 3.6* and *14* must take its course toward those who do.

*2 Corinthians 6.14-18*

*Galatians 1.8-9*

*Ephesians 5.11*

*Romans 16.17*

*2 John 6-11*

*2 Thessalonians 3.6 and 14*

*Titus 3.10*

*1 Timothy 1.18-20, 5.22, 6.3-5*

*2 Timothy 2.16-21*

*2 Timothy 3.5*

*2 Chronicles 19.2*

*Revelation 18.4*

## **References to separation from worldliness and harmful practices:–**

*James 4.4*

*1 John 2.15*

*Galatians 1.4*

*John 17.13-16*

*Romans 12.2*

*Ephesians 5.8*