



Ecclesiastical Separation and Its Associational Applications

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Preface

Biblical unity is a gift of God flowing from the Cross to sinful humanity as He brings people into relationship with Himself by the sovereign grace of God found in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:13–18; John 17:6). Fellowship among believers is rooted in the truth of the gospel of Christ (Ephesians 4:3–6) as they participate within the life of individual local churches. Unity is expressed as believers agree regarding the truth of the gospel of Christ (1 Timothy 1:3–5; 6:1–5; 2 John 1, 2, 9, 10). This fellowship functions at the level of individuals, individuals within a local church, and local churches with other local churches. The outworking of this fellowship may vary in these unique relationships. However, belief in the truth of God brings the resulting joy of fellowship with God and other believers (1 John 1:1–7).

Fellowship with God and with His children (both within a church and a church association) brings us to greater love for God and for one another. Further, fellowship with God—in our churches and among our churches—brings the joy of common pursuits guided by God's truth.

The Doctrine of Ecclesiastical Separation

Ecclesiastical separation is the decision by a local church or by an association of local churches not to engage in cooperative ministry endeavors at an organizational level that are deemed as inconsistent in doctrinal position.

Ecclesiastical separation is rooted in the holiness of God and the truth of His Word. God commands holiness for every believer and for every local church because He is holy (1 Peter 1:14–16; 2:5, 9). The standard for ecclesiastical holiness, therefore, arises from God's own character and from His standards that He has established in His Word. God cannot endorse evil, nor can He look favorably upon wickedness (Habakkuk 1:13). This divine sanctity compels local churches to strive for moral, doctrinal, and ministry purity (1 John 1:5, 6).

Ecclesiastical separation is also rooted in a love for the truth, because the basis of unity is agreement about the truth of the Scriptures (Ephesians 4:11–16; Amos 3:3; John 17:17). The extent of fellowship depends upon the level of agreement about truth.

Christ desires that every believer should one day stand in His presence holy and blameless (Ephesians 5:27; 1 Thessalonians 3:13; 5:23). Individual believers and churches must, therefore, be vigilant to turn from sin and to hold to what is true and pure (Romans 12:9). The goal of holiness in the church requires both separation from sin and error and also complete consecration unto God because the church belongs to Christ and to Him alone (2 Corinthians 7:1). Therefore, ecclesiastical separation involves both parting from evil and drawing near unto God (James 4:7–11).

Ecclesiastical separation glorifies God by showing forth His holiness in local churches, in church associations, and in pure and proper cooperative ministry endeavors. Ecclesiastical separation enhances the task of perpetuating truth. It also enables a fuller maturing of church members and a greater unity among believers because they are committed to the same faith. Ecclesiastical separation enhances doctrinal precision and ministry candor as the truth is spoken in love and without compromise (Ephesians 4:13–16). It acknowledges that God is working through many cooperative ministries, but it encourages the commitment of human and financial resources to those ministries that are compatible in doctrinal position.

Believers who want to bring holiness to its goal should have no ministry participation with unbelievers (2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1). This does not mean that believers are to have no contact with unbelievers, for then believers would have to leave this world (1 Corinthians 5:9, 10; John 17:15, 16). Instead, Christians and churches must not fellowship with those who reject the truth of God's Word because these kinds of ministry associations jeopardize the truth and the purity of the local church.

Ecclesiastical separation also involves separating from false teachers and from their false teachings. The Bible foresees that there will be those who will depart from the faith (1 Timothy 4:1) and who will bring destructive heresies into the church (2 Peter 2:1). Paul charged the leaders of the Ephesian church to be on guard for themselves and for the church because some false teachers would enter into the church from the outside and other false teachers would arise from within the church (Acts 20:29, 30). Paul admonished Timothy to turn away from those who have a form of godliness but deny its power (2 Timothy 3:5). John even forbade Christians from housing false teachers lest believers in this way become partakers in their evil deeds (2 John 9–11). The local church must not cooperate with people who pervert apostolic doctrine. Instead, the local church must identify and reject deceitful teachings.

Ecclesiastical separation also involves separating from disobedient believers, churches, or church associations that continue in sin or error (Matthew 18:15–17; 1 Corinthians 5:1–13; 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15; 2 Timothy 2:16–19; Revelation 2:5, 16). When believers persist in moral or doctrinal deviations, their violations of Biblical standards weaken the testimonies of churches and disrupt church ministries. Separation of this type might involve obedient believers purging disobedient believers from the membership of a church (1 Corinthians 5:3–8,) and, by extension, this separation may include associations of churches purging themselves of churches that persist in sin or error. When purging fails, it may require the withdrawal of believers from a church or the withdrawal of a church from an association of churches that persists in sin or error.

Ecclesiastical separation entails a careful wariness (2 Timothy 4:14, 15), a watchful eye, and a purposeful avoidance (Romans 16:17–19). But separation from believers also necessitates an obedience to the truth that is coupled with a sincere and fervent love for the brethren (1 Peter 1:22). Fellow believers should not be treated as enemies, but they should be admonished with the ultimate goal of repentance and restoration (2 Corinthians 1:6–8; 2 Thessalonians 3:15). Christians should always evidence a heart of compassion, an attitude of humility, gentleness with patience, a Christlike forgiveness, and love that perfectly ties all these virtues together (Colossians 3:12–14). Obedient believers may need to give several warnings to factious brothers before rejecting them because the extra time and effort not only allows for repentance and restoration but because if the sinning brother ultimately rejects the repeated admonitions, he thereby condemns himself (Titus 3:9–11). Unity must never be preserved at the cost of compromising the truth, and brotherly love must always abound within the sphere of knowledge and discernment (Philippians 1:9, 10). Separatists should manifest humility because it is often difficult to practice separation consistently. The nature

of false teaching is such that it is seldom obvious, and it is sometimes difficult to determine what exactly should be a test of fellowship and when exactly is the best time to practice separation. Acknowledging the difficulty of practicing ecclesiastical separation in no way diminishes the necessity for this kind of separation. It merely highlights the need for forbearance and latitude among separatist brethren.

The Associational Applications of the Doctrine of Ecclesiastical Separation

The Council of Eighteen expresses appreciation for the separatist heritage of the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches. We are grateful for the many men and women who have honorably championed the truth and who have lovingly separated from false teaching and from disobedience. At the National Conferences of 1983 and 1990 the messengers approved the identical resolution concerning Biblical separation. This resolution conveyed the position of the Association concerning ecclesiastical separation, and we commend the resolution to the Messengers and to the churches as a document indicative of the Association's separatist heritage. The Association has long encouraged the churches to be careful in their cooperative efforts. Churches should exercise discernment in the selection of speakers, in the adoption of discipleship curricula, in the endorsement of educational and missionary and compassion agencies, and in involvements with ministerial associations, evangelistic campaigns, social or bioethical organizations, religious conventions, associations, and fellowships.

We readily acknowledge that the local church is autonomous (2 Corinthians 8:1–5; 19, 23), being ultimately accountable only to Christ since He is the Head of the Church (Ephesians 1:22, 23; Colossians 1:18). Decisions concerning ecclesiastical separation are first and foremost the decisions of local churches. We recognize that churches are free to decide for themselves, and we also value a voluntary interdependence of churches within the Association and a willingness to work together for the good of the Fellowship (2 Corinthians 8:1–6; 1 Thessalonians 1:7–10). When churches or organizations move beyond the parameters established by the churches of the Association, the Association is not obligated to continue associating with the disagreeing churches or organizations.

We realize that sometimes the closest of men reach an impasse regarding the value of relationships (e.g., Paul and Barnabas, Acts 15:36–41). These impasses are real, but we must endeavor to seek reconciliation whenever possible (Ephesians 4:3; 2 Timothy 4:11).

We affirm the Biblical basis for ecclesiastical separation and the need for its proper application throughout the Association. We also desire that God will continue to bless the Association as the churches cooperate together in fulfilling the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18–20). ■