

Where the Rubber Meets the Road: A Grid for the Application of Ecclesiastical Separation

Dr. David M. Doran

President, Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary

Introduction:

1. The Great Commission mandate is larger than any one local assembly...
2. It is clear from the NT that not all cooperation is acceptable...
3. The line between separation and isolation seems to be getting blurred...

I. Biblical Foundations

- A. Separation from those who deny the fundamental doctrines, 2 Cor 6:14-7:1, 2 John 9-11.
- B. Separation from those who disobey God's commands about separation, Rom 16:17-18, 2 Ths 3:6-15.

Why does disobedience regarding separation rank "higher" than other kinds of disobedience?

1. It is not necessarily a matter of ranking it "higher" than other issues as much as it is arena of application and clarity of issue.
 - a. The arena of application is inter-church and, therefore, is a matter of voluntary cooperation. Given the inherent danger of compromise for the purpose of cooperation, the local church is right to have "high" standards for making decisions about its ecclesiastical relationships.
 - b. The matter of separation from unbelievers is very clear in Scripture, whereas many other areas leave room for brotherly disagreement about interpretation and application.
2. The heavy emphasis on the defending the faith and guarding the deposit that has been entrusted to us establishes a biblical mindset that is very alert to the potential of doctrinal deviation and apostasy.
 - a. We are clearly warned about the doctrinal decay that would come, its source, and how it would advance (1 Tim 4:1-2; 2 Tim 4:3-4; 2 Cor 11:13-15).
 - b. We are clearly instructed about the importance of the local church's responsibility for and the pastor's role in maintaining sound doctrine (Acts 20:28-32; 1 Tim 3:15; 1 Tim 4:6,16; 6:20; ; 2 Tim 1:13-14; 4:15; 2 Pet 3:17).

- This leaves three categories of people: (1) those who are in error on essential doctrines; (2) those who hold the truth and oppose error; and (3) those who hold the truth and cooperate with those who are in error on essential doctrines.

- This places two questions before us? (1) can we have fellowship with those who deny the truth of Scripture? and (2) can we have fellowship with those who refuse to obey God's commands regarding separation? I believe the answer to both of those is "No."

According to 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15, we have a threefold responsibility: (1) watch out for those who go contrary to the Word ("take special note of that person", cf. Rom 16:17 "keep your eye on those"); (2) warn them not to do this ("admonish him"); and (3) withdraw fellowship from them ("do not associate with him", cf. Rom 16:17 "turn away from them").

II. Practical Applications

A. Foundational Issues

1. We must recognize the different levels of fellowship and interaction:
 - a. Personal level—
 - b. Educational and/or recreational—
 - c. Professional or commercial—
 - d. Ecclesiastical—
2. We must recognize the possible types of responses:
 - a. Separation vs. Association
 - b. Resistance vs. Recommendation
3. We must consider the variables in the issues at stake
 - a. Is it a matter of orthodox doctrine?
 - b. Is it a matter of your doctrinal distinctives?
 - c. Is it a matter of philosophical direction?
 - d. Is it a matter of immediate significance to our church?

B. Functional Questions

1. At what level is this relationship?
2. What variables are involved?
 - a. Are they fundamental in doctrine? If no, then it is a dead issue. If yes, then...
 - b. Are they separatist in commitment and practice (i.e., they call themselves that and actually implement it)? If no, then the relationship is stalled. If yes, then...
 - c. Are they compatible with our theological distinctives?
 - d. Are they consistent with our philosophical direction?
 - e. Is this a matter of immediate significance to our church?
3. What type of response is appropriate?
 - a. If it is a matter of separatist fundamentalism, then...
 - b. If it is a matter of theological distinctives, then...
 - c. If it is a matter of philosophical direction, then...
 - d. If it is a matter of immediate significance, then...

III. Points to Ponder

- A. Are all disagreements of equal weight and significance?
- B. What about when we agree on the principles, but disagree on the applications?
- C. How much room should we allow for differing convictions on separation issues?
- D. Is there a difference between aberrations and patterns?
- E. Are we in need of new definitions and boundaries?