

Biblical Separation – 4

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We have been looking at the topic of separation. We have seen what Biblical separation is, and how it applies to sin, the world and unbelievers. Today we want to look at separation in the area of false teaching.

Let's begin by looking at...

The importance of instruction

God's relationship with His people, even in the Old Testament was one which involved instruction. God did not leave relating to Him up to everyone's personal whim and opinion. Instead, He codified everything into a written law. Soon, He added to that by inspiring people like Samuel, David, Solomon and the Psalm writers to write more of Scripture. Then the rest of the Old Testament was written by prophets or godly scribes. After 400 years, God spoke again, inspiring apostles or associates of apostles to write the New Testament. Why did God do it this way? Because God is a true and Holy God, who is a Person. He is not simply an idea, like a black and white outline which we can each subjectively colour in according to our likes and dislikes. He is a full-colour, absolutely complete, living God. There are things about Him which we must know. We must know how He is not. We must know what pleases Him, what displeases Him. We must know how to be reconciled to Him. These are not things that we are authorised to make up or create. But in fact, that is exactly the definition of false teaching. False teaching is when man, or Satan for that matter, distorts, perverts or otherwise changes what God has said to be true.

So, you can see the absolutely vital place of instruction – of the Bible being taught as it is. When Paul writes to Timothy, he instructs the young pastor to make sure he keeps his teaching correct:

Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine. (1Ti 4:13)
“Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.” (v16)
Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you. (2Ti 1:13-14)
“I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfil your ministry. (2Ti 4:1-5)
“Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine. (1Ti 5:17)

Doctrine, which is simply teaching, is vitally important to preserve the true way of knowing and loving God. If the Gospel and the Bible are obscured in their teaching, people will not be saved because Romans 10 tells us faith comes by hearing of the Word of God. If the word of God is obscured, people will not grow into Christian

maturity, and as such, with unsatisfied Christian lives, they will not glorify God as they should. When Satan attacks the teaching, He attacks the critical link between God and man. He attacks the very message of God to man, on how to know God. So, correct doctrine is important to God. God calls His Son “TheWord”, so we know communicating correctly is in the heart of God.

But we are looking at the topic of false teaching. Having established how important true doctrine is, we can now see, by contrast, how dangerous false teaching is. It’s dangerous for two reasons: it’s insidious and it’s destructive.

The insidiousness of false teaching

We first see God warning against false teaching way back in the Old Testament. Listen to these strong words in Deuteronomy 13:9:

"If your brother, the son of your mother, or your son or your daughter or the wife you embrace or your friend who is as your own soul entices you secretly, saying, 'Let us go and serve other gods,' which neither you nor your fathers have known, some of the gods of the peoples who are around you, whether near you or far off from you, from the one end of the earth to the other, you shall not yield to him or listen to him, nor shall your eye pity him, nor shall you spare him, nor shall you conceal him. But you shall kill him. Your hand shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people." (Deu 13:6-9)

Why was God so firm on false teaching? Because He knows false teaching usually starts from within, and spreads subtly. It comes from friendly, charming, persuasive faces, but before long, the deadliness of its message is turning people away from the truth. That is why Jesus said to His disciples:

"Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." (Mat 16:6)

They came to understand he was comparing the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees to yeast. A small amount spread through the whole lump – infecting all of it.

False teaching nearly always begins in the church. That is why it is so insidious. John wrote of false teachers:

"They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us." (1Jo 2:19)

False teachers arise from within the church. Paul, when saying goodbye to the pastors of the church at Ephesus said the following remarkable words:

"I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. (Act 20:29-30)

"From among your own selves" men will arise to draw disciples after themselves.

That's amazing! False teachers are waiting in the wings, for a chance to jump on stage and draw people after them.

Once false teaching is allowed a foot in the door, soon it is in the house, boots and all. And the reason false teaching so often spreads is because we value friendships above God. We value the praise of man above the word of God. False teaching is not stamped out because we love remaining on good terms with everyone, and can't stand the thought of more controversy in the church. But if we are to continue the heritage of the true, fundamental church – then we must be willing to separate from false teaching.

Now what does that mean? We have seen what it means to separate from sin, we have seen what it means to separate from the world and from unbelievers, and we have seen that each case demands a different form of separation. How do we separate from false teaching? Well, the first action to take is...

Refuse Pointless Controversy.

Much false teaching is the result of pushing unrevealed mysteries to non-Biblical conclusions. Many things about the nature of the God-Man, about the Trinity, about God's Sovereignty must be taken on faith. But man, with his little screwdriver called logic, insists on tinkering with every mystery to take it apart and to try and lay out a nice, fully understandable technical drawing of every Biblical mystery. In contrast to the pride which insists on claiming to understand every mystery, we find God commanding pastors to avoid controversies that cannot be resolved.

"As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith." (1Ti 1:3-4)

"But avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless." (Tit 3:9)

"Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness;" (1Ti 4:7)

"Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels." (2Ti 2:23)

"Remind them of these things, and charge them before God not to quarrel about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers. Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth. But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness" (2Ti 2:14-16)

How I wish I could explain to some Christians that the particular debate they think is life and death falls squarely in the category of foolish controversies and quarrels over words. Notice, Paul tells you how to identify pointless controversies: they promote speculations rather than stewardship; they are unprofitable and worthless; they ruin the hearers instead of improving them; they lead people into more ungodliness and they breed quarrels. I'm amused and amazed by how some Christians flatteringly call the quarrels they have with others 'lively discussions'. It's not a lively discussion, or like some call it, 'healthy debate'. Call it what the Bible does – foolish quarrels over words.

The Bible calls on us, and especially those in spiritual leadership to steer clear of pointless controversy. Debating over insignificant minutia, debating over the secret things of the Lord – this is not separating from false doctrine. We are to keep a good perspective on what is important – to love God with all our heart soul and mind, by knowing Him through Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit.

So we prevent false doctrine by cutting off the legs of Pointless Controversy, which when fed, often turns into false teachings.

The second action we must take to separate from false teaching is to...

Identify False Teaching and Teachers

Like when we looked at separation from sin and the world, we need to understand what we are to separate from. False teaching, in the broadest sense, is anything contrary to Scripture. But we must be careful because two believers can differ on an issue of minor importance, and they would be wrong to separate from each other. We have to understand, there are degrees of importance when it comes to doctrine. Jesus taught this when rebuking the Pharisees:

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others." (Mat 23:23)

Jesus makes it plain – they were majoring on the minors and minoring on the majors. The false teaching that is dangerous is the kind that attacks, or that can cause damage to the fundamentals of the faith. The fundamentals are the doctrines which you cannot deny and still be saved. Things like: the Trinity, the nature of Jesus Christ, his virgin birth, His substitutionary death, his bodily resurrection, His physical return, the nature of the Holy Spirit, the inerrant inspiration of the Word of God, salvation by grace through faith alone. When you deny one of these, you deny the faith itself.

However, there are other doctrines, which are not fundamentals, but a critical to the life and practice of the church, which when changed are serious enough to regard as false teachings. So, it is clear we need to know the Word of God to guard against false teachings. If we don't, we will not be able to tell when a wolf is present in the pulpit.

Now, we can identify false teachers by the fact that they pervert Scripture, but interestingly, the Bible usually identifies false teachers by their behaviour:

"If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain. (1Ti 6:3-5)

But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed. And in

their greed they will exploit you with false words. Their condemnation from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep. (2Pe 2:1-3)

It's interesting, in light of the popularity of the prosperity, health and wealth gospel that the Bible specifically says that false teachers exploit the people and imagine that godliness is a means of gain. The whole book of Jude is given to identify false teachers.

“These are grumblers, malcontents, following their own sinful desires; they are loud-mouthed boasters, showing favoritism to gain advantage.” (Jud 1:16)

False teachers are proud, given to sensuality and immorality; they speak brashly and boastfully; they deny Christ; they seek a following; they use religion to get rich; they live and act in a way which brings shame upon the body of Christ. Very importantly – false teachers cause division. See, people say things today like, ‘doctrine divides, love unites’. Well, the truth is doctrine does divide – not the doctrine itself, but the false teachers who deny it. False teachers are always described as factious, divisive, causing splits in the church to draw people away after themselves. Contending for the faith is not divisive, false doctrine is divisive.

So we are to use the Bible to identify false teachers. Do they deny or corrupt the fundamentals of the faith? Do they teach doctrines which would take something away from one or more of the fundamentals? Then they are a false teacher, and what they teach is false teaching. Do they live and act like the Bible describes false teachers—greedy for money, fleecing the sheep, adulterous, loud and boastful, drawing people after themselves, caught in their own sinful lifestyles? Then they are false teachers and what they teach is false teaching.

What are we to do? Identify false teachers and false teaching:

Romans 16:17: “Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned...”

‘Mark’ there means to take note, to watch out for, to take note of who is teaching false doctrine. But having identified false teaching and the one teaching it, what are we then supposed to do about it? Well, the difficulty lies in the fact that in a global village, where we are increasingly interconnected through the Internet, TV and other media, false teachers are now a problem, not only in the church, but outside of it as well. We need an approach for our local churches, and for the Body of Christ at large. So in the case of false teaching in the church, I believe the procedure is as follows:

Warn False Teachers

A false teacher is firstly to be warned. Titus 3:10 says we are to warn someone once then twice. This speaks of the church discipline process. Someone teaching false doctrine is to be approached. We are to find out if they indeed believe false doctrine, or have simply miscommunicated. If they are indeed teaching false doctrine they must be warned to stop. But notice how Paul told Timothy to do this warning:

“And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps

grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.” (2Ti 2:24-26)

But if the person does not repent and embrace the truth again, then we come to the next phase:

Discipline False Teachers

Church discipline is to be exercised.

*Titus 3:10 says: “As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him,
(Tit 3:10)*

Romans 16:17 says: “Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them. (Rom 16:17)

This is when someone who is persistently teaching false doctrine in the local church is to be put out of the church. If they are a true believer, they will desire the fellowship again, and will repent and return. If they do not, then their doctrine, their lifestyle, and their lack of repentance indicts them as false teachers. Church discipline then again purifies the church.

If false teachers come to our door, we are not to buy their literature, or endorse their false doctrine. We must evangelise them. 2 John 1:10-11:

“If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works.”

That’s separation from false doctrine.

Now, the other scenario is when false teaching is coming from outside the church, perhaps through a prominent TV personality, book writer, or some other apparently Christian speaker. What do we do there? Again, make sure they are truly teaching false doctrine. Don’t go on hearsay – check their teaching for yourself. Make sure it clearly teaches a denial of the fundamentals. Then we should warn. In this case we must warn the people of our church against the false teacher. There certainly is a place for that. Paul named people like Alexander and Hymenaeus, John named people like Diotrophes. Good shepherds warn their people against false teachers. They tell them to be careful of drinking at poisoned wells. Should we then warn those public figures the way we would warn someone in our church? Well, not in the same way. We cannot exercise church discipline on them, since they are not in our local churches. I think writing to such people asking them to repent of false doctrine will have very little fruit. If they are not being stopped by their local church (and of course, many of them are unbiblical, acting outside of a local church) then I do not think letters from people will really do much. I think the key here is to avoid them and their teaching. We withdraw our attention from them, for they teach falsehoods.

In contrast, Jude tells us we must *“earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.”* So we must teach the truth, fight the falsehoods, and tell our people to turn their ears away from false teaching.

False teaching and practise in a denomination can even cause a Bible-believing church to separate from that denomination. If they have warned and warned of false doctrine, and the cries have gone unheeded, then ecclesiastical separation is Biblical. People cry: 'We're dividing even more'. No, we're actually just making the real situation clear by not associating with false doctrine. Paul suggested this when he wrote... *"for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized."* (1Co 11:19)

There is definitely a time, as history has showed again and again, when Bible-believers must separate from false doctrine which has spread in a church association or denomination. To co-operate with those who spread false doctrine is to throw your lot in with those who oppose God. Charles Spurgeon's battles with the Baptist Union are a historical example of this.

As the prophet said to compromising Jereboam: *"Should you help the wicked and love those who hate the LORD?"* There is a time to withdraw fellowship, when false teaching has spread to the point where our salt and light influence will be ignored and instead will begin to contaminate us.

Now, what do we do if the false teaching comes from the leadership in our church? Well, the same thing. Those leaders ought to be asked personally if what they are teaching is Scriptural. If they are teaching false doctrine, I Timothy 5 says they ought to be disciplined as well. If however, they are in control of church discipline, as is sadly often the case, then believers ought to leave and find a church where the truth is still taught.

So we separate from false teaching by identifying it, warning those who do it and those who listen to them, and we withdraw fellowship from them if they continue. But, like we have said, separation is not only negative. We separate from, and cleave to. In this case, we cleave to the Word of God. False teachers will increase, but we fly with great appetite to the plain word of God.

"While evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work."
(2Ti 3:13-17)
