

Separation Versus Cooperation
Some Thoughts on the Limits of Cooperation with
Other Christians & with the World
Steven J. Cole, May, 1987

One of the difficult issues for every Christian to work through theologically and implement practically is the degree of separation from professing Christians and from the world. All Bible-believing Christians would acknowledge that Christians are called to be *in* the world, but not *of* the world, even as our Lord was (John 17:14-17). He Himself had that perfect blend of grace and truth which enabled Him to be the friend of sinners without becoming stained by their sin. And He has called us to be like Him. We are to be known by our love for our fellow Christians (John 13:35); yet we are to come out and be separate from evil persons and activities, perfecting holiness in the fear of God (2 Cor. 6:14-7:1). We want to be known by what we witness *for*, not by what we witness against, and yet we must witness against certain things in order to witness for the Lord.

Historically, Christians have struggled to maintain this balance. Some, in their desire to reach out to the world, have become so much like the world that they have been swallowed up by it. Their accommodation has resulted in a diluted testimony and in great harm to themselves and to the church of Christ. Others, in their desire to maintain their holiness, have isolated themselves from the world. This often has resulted in a loss of witness to the world, misunderstanding among believers, and in spiritual pride among those who separate themselves from others.

Being sinful and fallible, we are always in danger of the peril of the pendulum. We need God's balance and we need at all times to seek Him in His Word for guidance on these difficult matters. And we must be careful not to judge the motives of brothers who disagree with us on where to draw the line of separation, realizing that we all must answer to the Lord. We are all growing in our sensitivity to the Lord and in our understanding of these matters. We must grant our brothers the freedom to be where they are at in the growth process, while seeking to stimulate one another to further maturity. I discuss these matters in this spirit. This paper represents my thinking at this time, not necessarily where I will be in ten years. I offer the following points for consideration:

1. Accommodation is a greater danger than isolation.

Accommodation with the world is a very subtle danger which believers are warned about repeatedly in the Bible. (See, for example, Eph. 5:3-12; 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1; 2 John 8-11; and many OT passages.) On the other hand, I can think of only one (although there may be more) warning against being too isolated: 1 Cor. 5:9-13. Ironically, it is directed to the carnal Corinthians, who were anything but holy.

Since our enemy, the devil, is very cunning and deceptive, we can assume that he will lead us into unholy alliances gradually and without our awareness of the danger whenever he can. He will get us to use ungodly means to accomplish godly ends. Saul spared the best of Amalek to sacrifice to the Lord--a noble end, but an ungodly means (1 Sam. 15:1-23). Jehoshaphat joined with godless Ahab to recapture Ramoth-Gilead (a noble end, since it was one of Israel's cities of refuge) and almost got killed (2 Chron. 18, 19:1-4). Jehoshaphat was a godly man with a big heart who probably had right motives. Most likely he sincerely wanted to see the northern and southern kingdoms reunited. But his unholy alliance with Ahab resulted in the wicked Athaliah (Ahab's daughter) seizing the throne and almost annihilating the Davidic line (the line of Christ) from Judah. Much of this happened after Jehoshaphat's time, so he didn't know the damage he caused.

But this underscores all the more the danger of wrong alliances with the world. We often don't see the evil results in our lifetime, but there is great spiritual devastation in following generations. This has been demonstrated repeatedly in church history with regard to doctrinal compromise. For example, giving up inerrancy in the first generation leads to full-scale denial of the authority of the Bible in succeeding generations, as Harold Lindsell argued in *The Battle for the Bible*, and Francis Schaeffer in some of his writings.

Our Lord warned us, "Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves" (Matt. 7:15). Obviously, deception and subtlety are involved in the methods of such false

prophets. Paul warned of "false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Therefore it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness" (2 Cor. 11:14-15). Of course, the end times will be marked by widespread spiritual deception, in which even the elect are in danger of being fooled (Matt. 24:24; 2 Thess. 2:9-11).

For these reasons, I would rather err on the side of being too isolated from dubious alliances than on the side of being too friendly with the enemies of God. Of course I would rather not err at all. But what I am saying is, I favor a conservative approach when there is room for doubt.

2. Christians need walls of separation, both individually and as a church.

Walls keep out harmful intruders and allow those inside to go on with their work without fear. Yes, walls divide; but as long as we live in a fallen world under the dominion of the prince of darkness, we must erect walls. But where do we draw the line of separation?

Among professing believers, we must accept all whom Christ has accepted, both personally and as a church (for membership and/or fellowship). *Life* in Christ, *not light* in Christ, is the measure of acceptance. This is our broadest principle. If a person is truly saved by grace through faith (we determine this by verbal testimony coupled with works which demonstrate saving faith), then we must accept him as a brother, unless there is reason for church discipline (1 Cor. 5:1-13; 2 Thess. 3:6-15; Titus 3:10; 2 John 7-11; 3 John 9-10; Jude 22-23).

It is helpful to distinguish between those who are actively promoting error and those who are naively ignorant of sound teaching. The former must be confronted and perhaps separated from; the latter can be accepted and instructed. Teachability is the key here.

I would not be comfortable working with those who are actively promoting error, such as liberal pastors. I am not opposed to sitting down and discussing theology with them, if I sense an openness on their part. But I am strongly opposed to doing anything to connect our church publicly with any church which is weak or in error on major doctrines and practices of the faith. When Jehoshaphat joined with Ahab, he said, "I am as you are, and my people as your people, and we will be with you in battle" (2 Chron. 18:3). When a leader commits himself to another leader publicly, it necessarily commits his people. Undiscerning people under his leadership will assume that there is no difference between "us" and "them."

For this reason, I cannot participate in the community ecumenical Easter service when it includes the Catholic Church and a liberal Presbyterian church. I am not "one" with them, even though the pastors of those congregations may be truly born again men. To join with them would be to use an evil means to reach a good goal (to win some to Christ). I do feel free to speak to any group which will listen to the gospel, as long as there are no other strings attached and it does not wrongly involve our church.

I can work cooperatively (joint evangelistic projects, community Easter services, etc.) with any who affirm the fundamentals of the faith, even if we do not agree on less important matters (baptism, prophecy, etc.). By the fundamentals of the faith I mean foundational Christian doctrines which every true believer who has been properly instructed would affirm. This would include the trinitarian nature of God; the person and work of Christ, including His deity, virgin birth, substitutionary atonement, bodily resurrection, ascension, and second coming; human depravity; salvation by grace through faith alone; the future judgment of all living and dead; and, the full inspiration and authority of the Bible.

A man may be truly saved and yet greatly deceived on some important (though not fundamental) doctrinal or practical issues which would hinder my working with him in cooperative ventures. I would be uncomfortable being identified publicly with the practices of the "health and wealth" fringe of the Pentecostal movement, for example. I would not want to work with someone who had no regard for biblical principles for carrying out the Lord's work. For example, I would find it difficult to work closely with a "promoter" type who wanted to utilize worldly principles of marketing, but had no regard for the seeking the mind of the Lord. Under no circumstances would I cooperate in spiritual work with those who are not regenerate, no matter how much they propose to help (see Ezra 4:1-3).

On the matter of cooperation with other churches, I always want to ask, "Why do we want to work together?" Is it for community image? Is it for the greater good of both churches? Is it to pool resources for a project that would be too expensive or require too much manpower for either church to do individually? It often isn't accomplishing our goals as a church to spread ourselves too thinly by a lot of joint church ventures. It is easy to lose our focus and be distracted from that to which God has called us. Nehemiah was wise in keeping his focus on building the wall and not being distracted into "ecumenical" meetings. He said, "I am doing a great work and I cannot come down" (see Neh. 6:3).

3. Individual walls of separation may be different than the church wall.

As we grow in personal holiness and knowledge of God and His Word, our boundaries of separation will probably change. For someone from a "fighting fundy" background, the boundaries may widen. For most others, the boundaries will constrict as we grow in our understanding of the schemes of the devil and the offence of the cross. We must give one another the personal freedom to hold such matters of conscience at varying levels, allowing for differences without casting judgment on motives.

But the church must take a more conservative position than some individual members may take. For example, we must grant freedom to individual members to drink beer or wine in moderation, if they feel free before the Lord to do so and if they are sensitive to the weaker brother. But in my opinion, it would be wrong for the church to provide beer or wine at a social function. To do so would be to make an endorsement which would offend the conscience of some. The same would be true of other doubtful areas (dancing, movies, etc.). Thus I have no objection to members of our youth group going to a secular movie (or renting a home video) if they can do so in good conscience before the Lord. I am bothered by our church youth group doing so as a church-endorsed activity, because it imposes that activity on some who may not be comfortable participating.

I am not advocating legalistic adherence to lists of forbidden activities, nor am I promoting the rule of the most narrow-minded. I am saying that our clear goal must be holiness before God and we must not allow any doubtful activities to hinder that goal.

Conclusion

I am greatly concerned that the 20th century American church is in danger of blending in with the world, of being both in and of the world. We're not in danger of erring on the side of holiness. We are in danger of compromising doctrinally and practically in this day of watered-down grace.

The fine distinction is often made that God hates sin but loves the sinner. And yet His Word says, "You hate all who do iniquity. You destroy those who speak falsehood; the Lord abhors the man of bloodshed and deceit" (Ps. 5:5-6; see also Ps. 11:5). Apparently, we also are to hate not only evil (Ps. 97:10), but some evil people, who are enemies of God (Ps. 15:4; 139:21-22). The greatest enemies of the gospel are not usually those who are immoral or godless, but rather those who are religious, but deny the necessity of the cross. The Lord's prophet rebuked Jehoshaphat because he helped the wicked and loved those who hated the Lord (ie., Ahab, who had a form of religion [see 2 Chron. 18]). By doing this he brought the Lord's wrath on himself, even though he was in other ways a godly man (2 Chron. 19:2-3).

In order not to fall into the same error, I believe I must separate myself from any who deny the centrality of the cross of Christ, "through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Gal. 6:14). At the same time, with David I must be quick, after acknowledging my hatred of those who are God's enemies, to pray, "Search me, O God, and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way" (Ps. 139:23-24). I must guard against any self-righteousness. I must love fervently all who love the Lord. And I must preach Christ from a loving heart to those who are lost.