

THE BIBLE PRESBYTERIAN POSITION ON ECCLESIASTICAL SEPARATION

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For all its almost seventy-year history the Bible Presbyterian Church has been best known nationally and internationally as consistently standing for ecclesiastical separation. The Bible Presbyterian Church has a testimony over the last two thirds of the twentieth century for separation away from those who deny the tenets of the historic Christian faith, and from those groups who, while they may be sound themselves, befriend the deniers of the faith—commonly labeled as “neo-evangelicals.”

Here we are speaking of “ecclesiastical” not “personal” separation. That is, we are dealing with church alliances and support, not with an individual Christian’s personal separation from the things of the world. Ecclesiastical separation consists of a believer or an organized church not joining or helping an apostate church; or, if he or she is in one, they are to come out of it. This also implies that believing churches and organizations will not join, remain in, or assist denominations or groups who are not true to the Christ of the Bible. Jude exhorts us,

Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints” (Jude 3).

Thus, we must not only stay out of the apostate groups ourselves, but Jude declares that we also have a duty to testify (“earnestly contend”) against them. Here too, the Bible Presbyterian Church has not only separated from the ungodly, but it has had a testimony over the years, of giving a militant warning to the Christians to “come out from among them” (2 Cor 6:17).

The Historic Background of the 20th Century Reformation

The Historic Genesis—The Briggs Address

Bible Presbyterian seminary students are usually well familiar with the details of the Briggs Trial. The original Bible Presbyterians were members chiefly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (PCUSA) at the turn of the previous century. On January 20, 1891, Charles A. Briggs was to give an “inaugural address” to the supporters of Union Theological Seminary of New York City, which was then in the PCUSA, and which in fact vied with Princeton Seminary in nearby New Jersey to be the denomination’s premium elite theological institution. Briggs, himself also a minister of the PCUSA, was being elevated to a tenured position as Professor of Biblical Theology.

Instead of the expected inspiring, possibly tedious tome on some lesser point of religion, Briggs gave an address akin to Martin Luther's nailing the Ninety-five Theses on Wittenburg's door—except his was in the opposite direction. He shocked the assembled crowd, by canon shot after canon shot, questioning and challenging the historic Christian faith. He summarily stated that the church and reason were foundations of truth, equal with the Scriptures. He declared that many Old Testament prophecies had not come true, nor could they be fulfilled. He questioned the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, and the one-Isaiah authorship of that book, and spoke of a second chance for salvation, and suggested that sanctification was not complete at the death of a believer!

It was a theological explosion! For the next fifty years it locked that denomination and the entire Christian church, especially in America, in what became known as "The Modernist-Fundamentalist controversy," which lasted until 1941, when the bombing of Pearl Harbor eclipsed it. The Briggs address, and his very willingness to give it at the start of a new professorial position, showed the thinking of Union Theological Seminary, its professors, and its leadership. The seminary was already corrupted! Briggs was subsequently put on ecclesiastical trial before the Presbytery of New York (filled with friends from Union Seminary), which in January 1893 cleared him as "misunderstood." The General Assembly of the PCUSA thereupon reversed the decision of the New York Presbytery, and in June 1893 suspended and defrocked Briggs. Union Seminary promptly declared its independence from the denomination—but yet its theologically liberal faculty members remained in the denomination to help steer it toward a vastly more liberal position.

The Five Fundamentals

By 1910 five items had become the focus and canon of theological controversy. These surfaced when three men were licensed by the New York Presbytery; they stated concerning the virgin birth of Christ, "We do not deny it, but we are not prepared to affirm it as we would certain other doctrines." The five issues became:

1. The inerrancy of the Scriptures;
2. The virgin birth of Christ;
3. The substitutionary atonement (that Christ died as the substitute for believers);
4. The bodily resurrection of Christ;
5. The reality of the miracles of Christ's ministry

These became known as the "Five Fundamentals," and gave rise to the appellation, "Fundamentalists," to those who supported them. The idea was that these are the rock bottom foundational understandings of the Christian faith that are necessary to be held by its church leaders, its ministers. There were and are other important doctrines, such as the deity of Christ, but these did not become the focus of disagreement. Liberals affirmed the deity of Christ; however, many defined the term so as to actually deny its historic and biblical meaning. Nevertheless, it was these five items that became the battlefield.

Then in that same year, 1910, the General Assembly of the PCUSA voted that every minister must “affirm” these five doctrines. This was also to counter a ploy of some, who were saying, “We do not deny, nor affirm them.”

Again in 1916 these five “Fundamentals” were again affirmed by the General Assembly, and then in 1923 this was repeated. Meanwhile the controversy had spread throughout America, and around the world within foreign missions organizations. Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, Episcopalian, and countless other groups and denominations were debating within themselves, in a spreading theological civil war.

The Auburn Affirmation

In 1924, after the 1923 General Assembly had again passed a resolution that belief in the “Five Fundamentals” was essential to being a minister in the PCUSA, Robert Hastings Nichols, Professor at Auburn Seminary, New York, drew up a protest paper that became known as, “The Auburn Affirmation.” It “affirmed” (1) that the General Assembly did not have constitutional authority to bind its ministers to these five points, and (2) that there were other acceptable theories that could be maintained by ministers on each of the five items.

This affirmation was brought before the General Assembly of 1924, and, shockingly, it passed! The fundamentalist majority had waned, with 457 votes yes, 351 no, and 147 abstaining. With the majority having shifted, and the fundamentalists having not cleaned house when they had the majority, the liberal theologians (and those who went along with their denials for the sake of keeping peace in the church) now had the majority. The majority had shifted—that church denomination could no longer, humanly speaking, be salvaged.

Events of the 1930s

1930.—As a reaction to the snatching of Princeton Seminary out of conservative hands by a board reorganization of that school in 1929, Westminster Seminary was founded as a haven to train PCUSA ministerial candidates in the historic biblical Christian faith.

1931.—The Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions (IBPFM) was formed so that conservative Bible believing churches could (1) send out sound-in-the-faith missionaries, and (2) could send their money to a sound missionary board—versus the PCUSA’s denominational board, which was embroiled in a plurality of controversies over what their missionaries did not believe and could not affirm, their missions moving more and more to taking the social gospel and westernization to the foreign field.

1934.—The PCUSA General Assembly, now with a liberal-and-friends majority, issued a mandate to the IBPFM to disband, as violating the peace and unity of the church.

1935.—The board members of the IBPFM were put on ecclesiastical trial by the General Assembly. Prominent among them were Dr. J. Gresham Machen, then of Princeton Seminary, and Dr. Carl McIntire, pastor in Collingswood, NJ, who would emerge in future years as the dynamic leader of the fundamentalist world, and who would serve for many years as the moderator of the new Bible Presbyterian Church (to be formed in 1937). In March, 1935, before standing trial before the Judicial Commission of the PCUSA, Machen declared at the First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburg, Pennsylvania:

My profession of faith is simply that I know nothing of the Christ proclaimed, through the Auburn Affirmation, by the Moderator of that Commission. I know nothing of a Christ who is presented to us in a human book containing errors, but know only a Christ presented in a divine Book, the Bible, which is true from beginning to end. I know nothing of a Christ who possibly was and possibly was not born of a virgin, but only a Christ who was truly conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin Mary. (pamphlet; Philadelphia: IBPFM, n.d.)

1936.—The PCUSA General Assembly affirmed the findings of the Judicial Commission and suspended Machen, McIntire, and the other members of the IBPFM. Thus 43 years after the General Assembly had suspended Briggs for denying essentials of the faith, now those upholding that faith were being suspended!

1936.—The Presbyterian Church of America, from which the Bible Presbyterian Church came, was formed out of the clear realization that the PCUSA can no longer be reformed from within. Dr. McIntire called over the radio for a “20th Century Reformation,” which would call people to separate out of denominations and groups that deny the historic Christian faith and the Christ of the Bible and which would unite “fundamentalists” into a new resurgence of faith, apart from the apostasy.

The Lord took Machen home in January, 1937. Without his unifying hand at Westminster Seminary, disagreements over the direction that seminary was to go, especially with regard to (a) the millennial question and (b) Christian liberty, surfaced. Faith Seminary was thusly formed by Dr. Carl McIntire, Dr. Alan A. MacRae, Dr. Jack Murray, and others who desired a sound school to train up faithful leaders which would be uniquely reformed, premillennial, and which would take the stand of abstinence on the alcohol question. (Recall the crime wave that crossed the USA from 1920 to 1933, the Prohibition Era, between passage of the 18th Amendment and its repeal by the 21st.)

The surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, launching the USA into World War II, eclipsed church struggles, and turned the direction of countless congregations to praying for our soldiers fighting in Europe and in the Pacific. The American Council of Christian Churches (ACCC) was, nevertheless, formed in 1941, and the International Council of Christian Churches (ICCC) in 1948, much under the leadership of Dr. Carl McIntire. These councils were to provide a separatist unity plus to combat the World Council of Churches of Christ (WCCC), also formed in 1948. By 1950 out of the old liberal Federal

Council of Churches (FCC), 1908, an equally liberal National Council of Churches of Christ (NCCC), came into being.

The Bible Presbyterian Stance on Biblical Separation

As we attempt to teach the principles of biblical separation to our congregations and students today, over a century after the Briggs trial, we find that many American churchgoers are totally unaware of theological liberalism, past or present. Others are concerned with personal happiness and life fulfillment. The Bible, however, from end to end, demands that in every generation we also practice ecclesiastical separation, and the penalty for not doing so is the gradual lowering of the cross of Christ and melting into a general religiosity which is neither biblical nor has the power to save (Rom 1:16).

Ecclesiastical Separation Defined

Ecclesiastical Separation is simply that believers are not to join or help an apostate church, or if in one, they are to come out of it. This also implies that faithful churches and organizations will not join nor remain in denominations or groups that are not true to the Christ of the Bible, nor will they assist them. They are to “earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints” (Jude 3).

While the Scriptures encourage unity among believers in Christ, they also declare that there is a distinction, and has been a distinction in every age, between God’s people and those who are not. Thus in the Old Testament there is a difference made between the clean and the unclean, the holy and the unholy, the true Israel and those outside. Likewise the New Testament clearly delineates a line between the true church of Christ and unbelievers. Although the exact membership of the invisible church is known only to God, the earthly visible Church has been given the duty of having a visibly pure testimony by not permitting open heretics, apostates, and those openly living contrary to Scripture to share its fellowship and membership (1 Cor 5:1-13).

In light of this, ecclesiastical separation can be defined as the purposeful action of an individual Christian, a local church, or an entire denomination to seek the purity and holiness of testimony and membership commanded by Scripture, and in pursuing this holiness to not give any visibly apostate person or group approval, fellowship, cooperation, or membership.

This means that we do not take those that are known to be outside of the covenant of Christ into our churches as members or participants, and that we also ourselves depart from and come out of churches and organizations that are apostate, i.e., heretical or unbelieving, or who advocate or participate in that which is contrary to Scriptural teaching. This is done for the purposes of both upholding true righteousness and giving an external testimony to those within and without. Such a testimony of separation is made for these reasons:

- 1) It is biblically commanded (1 Cor 5:1-13; 2 Cor 6:14-7:1; Jude 3; Rev 18:4).
- 2) It is demanded by righteousness.
- 3) It gives a testimony to both those within and without the Church.
- 4) It is part of the biblical instrumentality to call erring ones to repentance.
- 5) It provides a lifeline for those within an erring body to “come out from among them” (2 Cor 6:17).

In the performance of ecclesiastical separation, the question of *secondary separation* has caused much debate. Let it here be said, as part of the definition of separation, that it is often necessary for testimony’s sake for a church body not only to separate from a group which is involved in some type of heresy or evil, but also to distance itself from other parties who, while not holding the heresy or evil itself, nevertheless countenance, support, and fellowship with the erring group. *That is, we separate ourselves from evil doers and their friends.* For example, Samson needed to stay away from not only the Philistines, but also from the friends of the Philistines.

Old Testament Testimony to Ecclesiastical Separation

Scripture makes it clear, going back to the Old Testament, that Moses withdrew his approval and cooperation from the Egyptian government and state church in a courageous testimony (a) against idolatry; (b) to the existence of the true God; and (c) against the slavery system of that government and state church. Thus the writer of Hebrews declares that Moses chose

rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; Esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompense of the reward. By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king: for he endured, as seeing him who is invisible. (Heb 11:24-27)

Likewise, during the period of the Divided Kingdom, when the generally righteous King Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, in 850 B.C. united with wicked King Ahab of Israel, to fight against the wicked King of Syria at Ramoth Gilead, the prophet Jehu declared in a stinging rebuke, “Shouldst thou help the ungodly, and love them that hate the LORD? Therefore is wrath upon thee from before the LORD” (2 Chr 19:2). The point was that God’s people must not unite with the wicked, even in a seemingly good cause.

New Testament Testimony to Ecclesiastical Separation

The Apostle Paul sums it up with the resounding and clear three commands in 2 Corinthians 6:14,17,

- “Be not unequally yoked!” (If you are not already joined, don’t go in.)

- “Come out from among them!” (If you are already in, then come out now.)
- “Touch not the unclean thing!” (Then once you are out, stay completely away.)

Then God adds the beautiful promise for those who will obey, namely, “And I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty” (2 Cor 6:17,18). So however great is the loss suffered by coming out in obedience—be it friendships, career, or finance—God promises to receive us when we obey and to take care of us as our Heavenly Father. There are many more NT passages that teach this, such as Jude 3; Galatians 1:6-9; Revelation 2:6, 14-15; 18:4.

Church History’s Testimony to Ecclesiastical Separation

The history of the historic Christian church over two thousand years is replete with examples of those who “came out from among them,” that is, who left errant ecclesiastical groups at great personal sacrifice to be true to Christ. They practiced biblically commanded ecclesiastical separation, i.e., “with such a one, no not to eat” (1 Cor 5:11). Of these faithful heroes for Christ in church history, who for obedience sake refused to remain in nor to give allegiance to apostate church systems and leaders, we cite the Book of Hebrews, as it did of the Old Testament worthies, and declares that this world was not worthy of them (Hebrews 11:35-38).

Thus Luther in 1517, when he publicly nailed the 95 Theses to the door of the Church at Wittenberg, was practicing ecclesiastical separation. He put a clear line between himself and the open error of a visible church that taught heresy. The church and its Pope Leo X taught that the giving of a contribution to the building fund of St. Peter’s (masked as buying an indulgence) could secure pardon for sin. Luther could have gone along with this error and had a comfortable life, but he chose to obey the scriptural command to, “Come out from among them,” and then in 1521 at the Diet of Worms, before Charles V and the Holy Roman Empire, he declared, “Here I stand, I can do no other; God help me.”

The Billy Graham Issue

It must also be noted that the leaders and ministers of the Bible Presbyterian Church have throughout the last half of the 20th Century uniformly spoken out against the inclusivism seen in the Billy Graham Evangelistic Crusades, which disappointingly often asked known and outspoken liberal apostate ministers to lead in prayer at the rallies. This was especially trying because Rev. Graham comes forth as one who loves God and who loves the Bible. But, however, just as a beautiful David could sin, so also when Rev. Graham errs, we must still be true to God’s Word. In line with this, these meetings also regularly not only failed to warn newly professed converts to begin to attend only biblically sound churches, but in many cases even directed “decision cards” to apostate churches. This issue caused a rift in the evangelical community, and soon Bible Presbyterians, who believed firmly that “the Lord’s work should be done the Lord’s

way,” found themselves forced by the dictates of Scripture and conscience to also testify against those seemingly sound and orthodox churches and groups which did in fact support the Graham rallies, knowing that apostates participated by invitation and often on the platform. This secondary separation issue was again basically saying that, “We cannot support doing the Lord’s work in a disobedient manner, and we cannot fellowship either with those who do this nor with those otherwise sound churches who support or befriend them.

Let us be ever mindful that when the cause is the Lord’s and the issue is clear, let us first pray and testify, and then when necessary, courageously obey the biblical commands for ecclesiastical separation, and “Come out from among them, and be ye separate . . .” (2 Cor 6:17), and let us testify of this scriptural obligation to others.

Thus to every generation comes the cry in the book of Revelation, speaking of God’s people coming out of the end-time Babylon system and it applies today to all who are members of or supporting or encouraging false systems, apostate liberal denominations, or ecclesiastical groups that deny the Lord.

And I heard another voice from heaven, saying, Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues. (Rev 18:4)

Thus ecclesiastical separation, which is truly a biblically commanded separation, has been part of the heritage of the Bible Presbyterian Church.