

Biblical Principles for Separating From Backsliding Churches; Or, Separation and Schism: Distinctions You Need to Know

By Michael Wagner (January, 1999)

During the mid to late 1600s thousands of presbyterians in Scotland were martyred for their commitment to biblical Christianity. They refused to worship in the churches sanctioned by a corrupt civil government, and were hunted down and killed for worshipping according to the Bible in other places such as open fields. Like the Covenanters of our day who are falsely accused of being "schismatics" for not uniting with compromised churches, the Covenanter martyrs of the seventeenth century were also falsely accused of being schismatics. After all, by joining with the official episcopal church of the day they would be able to save their lives and property, though this would have been at the cost of faithfulness to Christ. It was to a large degree because of their so-called "schismatic" behaviour that they were murdered by people who themselves claimed to be Christians.

Anyone committed to biblical presbyterianism would agree, however, that the Covenanters should fulfill their Covenant oath to uphold presbyterianism rather than compromise the truth for pragmatic reasons. These Covenanters sealed their commitment to the truth with their blood. Undoubtedly it was painful for them to have other Christians heap abuse upon them by accusing them of schism while they died for the Faith. Many other false charges were also laid against them.

In order to defend themselves against these false charges, and vindicate biblical Christianity, James Renwick, in cooperation with other Covenanters, wrote a short book entitled *An Informatory Vindication of A Poor, wasted, misrepresented, Remnant of the Suffering, Anti-Popish, Anti-Prelatick, Anti-Erastian, Anti-Sectarian, True Presbyterian Church of Christ in Scotland*. In this book Renwick and the others deal with each of the various false accusations made against them. One chapter, "Head IV," deals specifically with the charge of schism: "Concerning that heavie though false charge, of casting off the Ministry, & Schismatical Separation from the Ministers of the Church of Scotland" (p. 59).

In the first section of this chapter various crucial distinctions are made to clarify the issue of separating from unfaithful churches. Modern Christians will benefit considerably from understanding these distinctions and applying the implications of these distinctions to their own situations. There are eight specific distinctions.

We shall distinguish.

I. Between a Church in her *infancie* & growing up into Reformation; And an *adult* Church, which hath arrived at a higher pitch of Reformation: In the former many things may be tolerated, which may not in the latter; & therefore our Fathers might have born with many things in Ministers, which we cannot, because we have been Reformed from these things, which they were not (p. 60).

Just as Christians today look upon a new convert in a different way than they look upon a mature believer, so also this principle applies to churches corporately. We bear with many weaknesses in new converts because we know they need time to grow in the faith. Mature Christians, on the other hand, are expected to live at a higher degree of sanctification ("Nevertheless, whereto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing," Phil. 3:16). It needs to be realized that this principle applies not only to individuals, but also churches.

II. We distinguish between a Church in a *growing* case, coming forward out of darkness & advancing in Reformation; And a Church *Declining* & going back again: In the former, many things may be born

with, which in the latter are no ways to be yeelded unto; as in the time of the former *Prelacy* many did hear Prelatical men, which now we cannot do, & so in other things (pp. 60-61).

A church growing towards the truth and ridding itself of unscriptural practices and beliefs is one thing; a church falling away from its doctrinal and practical attainments is quite another. Again, as in the previous case, don't we look at growing Christians in a different light than backsliders? Of course we do. And this principle applies to churches as well as individuals.

III. We distinguish between a Church in a Reformed & settled state, & confirmed with the Constitutions of General Assemblies, & the Civil sanction of Acts of Parliament; And a Church in a *broken & disturbed* state: In the former, abuses & disorders can be orderly redressed & removed by Church judicatories, but not so in the latter; Wherefore the most lawfull, expedient, & conduceable mean, for maintaining the attained unto Reformation, is to be followed in the time of such confusions & disturbances, & that is (as we think) abstraction & withdrawing from such disorders in Ministers, which we cannot other ways get rectified (p. 61).

In presbyterian (i.e., truly biblical) theology, there should only be one church for each nation, and this church would be supported by the civil government ("And kings shall be thy nursing fathers. . .," Isa. 49:23). Of course, this church would have to be a biblical presbyterian church. In this case, problems could be dealt with according to proper presbyterian church order. However, in a situation such as today where the church is broken and divided, the principles of church unity that apply in a settled state cannot be acted upon. Recognizing that the church is in a broken and disturbed state in our day is a crucial factor in determining how to deal with ecclesiastical problems as Renwick notes above.

IV. We distinguish between a Reformed Church enjoying her *Privileges & Judicatories*; And a Reformed Church *denuded* of her Privileges & *deprived* of her Judicatories: In the former, people are to address themselves unto Church Judicatories, & not to withdraw from their Ministers (especially for ordinary Scandalls) without making prior application to these; But in the latter, when Ministers are really Scandalous (though not juridically declared so) & duely censurable according to the Word of God, & their own Churches Constitutions, & censures cannot be inflicted through the want of Church Judicatories, & yet they still persist in their offensive courses, people may do what is competent to them, & Testify their sense of the Justness of the censure to be inflicted, by withdrawing from such Ministers, even without the Presbyterial Sentence (pp. 61-62).

Presbyterian theology advocates the use of church courts to rectify problems with ministers involved in scandalous sin. A presbytery would deal with the particular minister to bring about his repentance or depose him, as the case may be. But if the church courts are corrupted and therefore unable to deal with a scandalous minister, there is no option open to Christians except to separate from the minister or to tolerate his sin. Tolerating sin, of course, is forbidden in the Bible, leaving the former option as the only one that can be followed by a faithful believer.

V. We distinguish between the Ministry in the *abstract*, or the Office itself which is Christs institution; And the Ministers in the *concret*, or the persons invested with the Office: So albeit the Ministry can by no means be disowned, without the highest rebellion against God & rejecting of mans salvation; yet such Ministers (that belong to the presbyterial Church of *Scotland*) against whom there are solid & Just exceptions, according to the word of God & the Acts of the general Assemblies striking against them

(persisting in their courses) even unto *Deposition*, may be withdrawn from by people, who would rightly see to the approving of themselves faithful in their station unto God (p. 62).

Clearly Christ has established an office of ministers for the church, and no presbyterian would deny that. The ministry has been established as an office by the Head of the Church and must be supported by every Christian. However, that doesn't mean that particular individuals who have been invested with that office are necessarily always to be approved. Sometimes unrepentant scandalous ministers have to be deposed. However, in a situation where it is clear (according to the Bible and the Westminster Standards) that a minister should be deposed, and he isn't, Christians must separate from him. This does not in anyway involve rejecting the office of minister; instead, it is rejecting the particular individual who has shown himself unfit for office.

VI. We distinguish between a *faithfull*, & a *sinless* Ministry: The former we have ground to expect; but in no case the latter: & for the want of the former qualification, we have ground to withdraw, that is, when they are not faithful, but from none because they are not sinless (p. 62).

Even today faithful Covenanters are accused of arguing that ministers must be sinless in order to be accepted, but this is utterly false. No one is sinless in this life except Christ Himself. Therefore no one can be expected to be sinless. However, it is not unreasonable to expect ministers to be faithful to biblical doctrine and practice! Instead, every Christian should expect his minister to be faithful and reprove him when he is not. Faithfulness is what God requires from ministers, and should also be what every Christian requires from ministers.

VII. As to what we require of unfaithful Ministers before we can joyn with them, we distinguish between Ministers condemning *Doctrinally*, & confessing *privatly* by Conference with offended Brethren, or repenting to them after some more *publick* manner their Defections & offences; And their confessing these *Ecclesiastically* before Church Judicatories, & submitting to their just and equal censures: The former we judge sufficient in the present circumstances; Howbeit we confess that the latter, if afterward they be called unto it, should not be refused & denied, when there shall be any Judicatory to require it (pp. 62-63).

Under normal conditions, a scandalous minister would have to publicly repent before church courts and receive censure for his sinful behaviour. However, when faithful church courts are not available due to the church being in a broken state, it is enough for the minister to repent before the faithful remnant of Christians who are upholding Reformation attainments.

VIII. We distinguish between a Separation *negative*, whether *activly* or *passivly* considered; And a separation *Positive*: A *positive* separation is, when a party not only leaves communion with a Church, whereunto they were formerly Joyned in Christian and Ministerial duties, but also gathers up new distinct Churches, different from the former in Doctrine, worship, Discipline, & Government: A *negative passive* separation is, when the better part of a Church, standing still and refusing to follow & concur with the backsliding part of the same Church, after they have become obstinat in their declinings from former sound principles & practices, holds clossly by & adheres unto what parts of Reformation were graciously attained among them: Separation *Negative & Active* respects the declining part of the Church, who have deserted their faithful brethren, & after brotherly admonition refuse to return, but hold on in their new course. Hence as for us, we absolutely deny a *Positive* Separation from the *Scottish* Covenanted Church, yea also separation *Negative*, if it be considered *Activly*; at the furthest, herein we acknowlegde a Separation *Negative Passivly* considered, in our being left alone (at first in the time of

our greatest straits) & foresaken by the rest: for we are endeavouring to our utmost (with many failings & much weakness) to retain & mentain, according to our Station & capacity, the Covenanted work of Reformation of the Church of *Scotland*, against *Popery*, *Prelacy*, *Erastianisme*, & *Sectarianisme* both more refined & more gross, together with *Schisme* & *Defection*. So we deny and altogether disoune a Separation from communion with this Church, in her Doctrine, worship, discipline & Government, as she was in her best & purest dayes: For we only oppose the transgressions & defections of this Church, & endeavour to Separate from these: while we chuse to stand still, & not go alongst with other in declining and offensive courses, but to follow the footsteps of such faithfull Ministers & Professors, as have gone before us witnessing in their places & stations against both Tyranny & Apostacy, untill defections be condemned & offences removed (pp. 63-64).

Thus separation can take different forms. People can separate from a church in order to set up a distinct church with different doctrine and practices. This is called "positive" separation. People can backslide from biblical attainments in doctrine and practice thus breaking off from the more faithful element of the church body. This is called "negative active" separation. Finally, people who adhere to biblical attainments can end up in a separate church body because those with whom they were previously united drifted away from the attainments leaving the faithful ones alone in the original position. The faithful ones in the original position experienced "negative passive" separation, since their separation from the others resulted from their commitment to the existing biblical Reformation attainments. This is the only lawful form of ecclesiastical separation positively sanctioned by Scripture.

In our own day the Puritan Reformed Church (PRC) has been accused of being a "schismatic" church because it holds to the original Covenanter position of adhering to all the attainments of the Reformation. The charge of schism arises from the PRC's unwillingness to unite with presbyterian groups that have defected, to one degree or another, from Reformation attainments. The contemporary Covenanters of the PRC have followed the "old paths" of the Covenanted Reformation while these other groups have strayed into other doctrines and practices condemned by our Reformed forefathers. It is these other groups that are truly schismatic.

The faithful presbyterians of the seventeenth century, the Covenanters, have set out biblical landmarks as helps for us to uphold and promote the Reformation. We dare not bury, ignore or move these landmarks ("Remove not the ancient landmark, which thy fathers have set," Prov. 22:28), as they agree with Scripture. There is considerable irony in the charge of "schism" being made by those who have moved the ancient landmarks against those who haven't. This occurred in the 1600s during the first Reformation and is occurring again now. Choose you this day: will you follow the path of faithfulness marked out by *Reformation* landmarks and attainments (confessions, covenants, etc.), or modern defections and innovations? Rejecting these biblical attainments will leave *you* in a position of positive or negative active schism from the faithful church.