

2015/1: Ecumenism And Separation (2 Cor. 6:14-18)

by BS Poh

We believe in biblical separation - from sins, wrong teachings, and worldliness. We do not agree with the modern ecumenical movement. We do not agree with separatism that displays a harsh, censorious, and combative spirit.

1.1 What is ecumenism?

- (i) Ecumenism, or oecumenism, comes from the Greek word “oikoumene”, which means “the whole inhabited world”.
- Ecumenism in the past sought to unite Christians around the truth, over against errors. The ecumenical councils of the first three centuries consisted of gatherings of church leaders to discuss and condemn heresies, and issued statements on true teaching. The Council of Nicaea, in AD 325, produced that Nicene Creed which gives the biblical teaching on the Trinity.
- (ii) The modern ecumenical movement seeks to unite, or show unity among, Christians and churches separated by doctrine, practice, and history, at the expense of truth. It began in the late 19th century, when liberalism spread worldwide.
- One ecumenical organization is the World Evangelical Alliance, formed in 1846. Another is the World Council of Churches which was formed after the second world war in 1948. Its members include Protestant and Orthodox denominations.
 - Ecumenical-minded people often appeal to Eph. 4:3 and John 17:21 as the biblical basis for unity, but overlooks serious errors of doctrine and practice in those involved.

1.2 What is biblical separation?

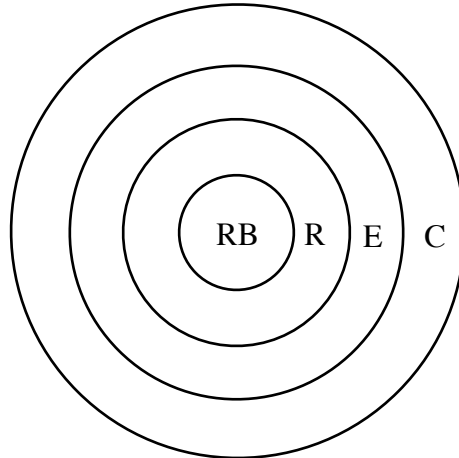
- (i) The Bible commands God’s people to be separate from sins (1 Pet. 1:14-16; 2 Thess. 3:6, 11, 14-15), wrong teachings (2 John 9-11; Rom. 16:17-18; Gal. 1:9), and worldliness (2 Cor. 6:14-17; 1 John 2:16).
- Separation must be applied at the personal level as well as at the church level. Separation does not mean no contact with the unconverted. Otherwise, how are they going to hear the gospel and know the truth (Rom 10:17; Matt. 5:13, 14)? It applies to those professing to be Christians, and are adamant in their errors.
- (ii) Our church has no fellowship with the Roman Catholic Church because of its many serious errors, including teaching salvation by works. We also do not have fellowship with charismatic churches such as the Assemblies of God and other churches obviously infected by charismatic doctrine and practice, e.g. healing, tongue-speaking, entertainment-style of worship, etc.
- On the personal level, we have friends who go to such churches, but we do not hide our disagreement with their churches and seek to win them to the truth.

1.3 True Christian unity.

(i) John 17:21 is about the inherent unity of those who are “in Christ”. This unity is seen in the world when believers are integrated into the life of a local church, as required by the Bible’s teaching (Matt. 28:18-20; Heb. 10:24-25).

- The key passage for how Christian unity is to be expressed is Eph. 4:1-16. True Christian unity cannot be created by man, and is not meant to be expressed in structural organizations (3). Instead, it is governed by correct doctrine (4-6), practice (1), and spirit (2).

(ii) Truth - in doctrine, practice & spirit - determine the degree of fellowship we may have with other churches. This may be expressed by the concentric circles below:



C: Christian - Trinity, Bible God’s word, Salvation in Christ (grace, justification).

E: Evangelical - C + Bible the sole authority.

R: Reformed - E + Five Pts + Confessions + Reformation valued.

RB: Reformed Baptist - R + 1689 Confession + autonomy + baptism

(iii) Like-minded churches may associate together for mutual good and for advancing the gospel. Often, fellowship between otherwise like-minded churches (in doctrine & practice) is hampered by a bad spirit in the leaders, e.g. a sense of rivalry, pride, individualism, etc. (cf. Rom. 12:16). A local church should not be a member of an ecumenical organization. Also, the local church must guard against the infiltration of individuals who intend to do harm.

- As a general rule, a Christian must separate from a church or or an organization that is ecumenical or that tolerates fundamental errors, although there might be rare occasions when a preacher has the opportunity to proclaim the truth to a mix gathering. Separation is also needed towards individuals who are adamant in practising and propagating errors.

- A Christian must have a charitable attitude towards other believers who have limited opportunity to be exposed to good teaching. Seek to do them good by weaning them away from errors such as tongue-speaking, partying, etc. Differences on non-fundamentals of the faith, e.g. the mode of baptism, the Bible version used, head-coverings for women, etc., should not be a hindrance to fellowship.

Conclusion

Practising a biblical separation that fosters true Christian unity requires wisdom and courage from God. It will be good to focus upon advancing the gospel, seeking the glory of God and doing good to man, without compromising on the truth.

Notes:

1. The Tragedy of Compromise, by Earnest D. Pickering, is relevant to this subject.
2. The Forgotten Spurgeon, by Iain Murray, contains important lessons in making a stand for the truth.

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