

Separation from an Unsound Church viewed in the light of Scripture

By Rev James S. Sinclair

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WE think it is now befitting to look at the subject of separation from an unsound Church in the light of Scripture, and with, as may be expected, special reference to our recent separation from the Free Church. One would have thought it was hardly necessary at this time of day to bring before the public the testimony of Scripture on this subject, for it is not such a long time since the Disruption of 1843 took place, when, and for a number of years after, ministers and others diligently instructed the people in the grounds of their separation from Church and State. It would appear, however, that people's memories are very slow in religious matters, and that many have well-nigh forgotten 1843. At least, it is only in this way that we can understand the shout of scorn and censure that greeted the Disruption of 1893, as contrasted with the shout of acclamation and praise that filled the air at the Disruption of 1843. So strong has been the disapproval in various quarters of the recent disruption, that the impression has been left on many minds that separation from almost any Church whatsoever is a very unscriptural and uncalled-for proceeding. Arguments have been taken from the Bible to prove the action of our humble body in leaving the Free Church to be nothing short of schism, and this has strengthened the above impression in the minds of some to a more than ordinary degree. We find, however, by a due study of the Scriptures as a whole, that the step we were enabled to take was a thoroughly Scriptural one, and that it is a principle, which permeates the Scriptures throughout that there should exist a clear line of separation between such as would follow the Lord faithfully according to His Word, and others who live in actual opposition to the express commands of that Word. Of course, this separation does not necessarily extend to the duties of every-day life. But the above principle clearly indicates that it is unscriptural, and, therefore, sinful, for the followers of Christ to have fellowship with those who are not His followers, or those who are unfaithful to his Word in any way that would compromise divine truth. Although it would be quite allowable to confine ourselves wholly to the New Testament in dealing with this subject, yet we have the impression that the Old Testament sheds considerable light upon it, and, therefore, we begin in this article with the latter. They are the same general principles of religion that operate in the Old as in the New Testament

Church, for it is one Church under two dispensations, although the out-ward forms of religious observance differ under each dispensation.

I.—let us look first at the testimony of the Old Testament.

1. In doing so, we shall take first a series of historical events that shed light upon the subject.

(1) Let us begin under this head with the call of Abraham. The Lord graciously purposed to raise up in the earth a separate nation for Himself, and with this end in view he called Abraham to go out from his own people and country, and to dwell in a strange land. The Lord called him alone and blessed him. This event was the beginning of a new era in the history of the Church of God. Abraham became the father of the faithful, and received exceeding great and precious promises not only for himself, but for believers in every subsequent age. The call of Abraham is typical of the spiritual call of believers. They are called upon to renounce the world, and to become a peculiar and separate people unto the Lord. This call also points out the position the real visible Church should occupy in the world -- a position of separation from sin and idolatry of every kind, and a consecrated attachment to Christ and His truth. In so far as this is realised does the Church conform to the standard of the Word of God.

(2) The case of Lot, on the other hand, as contrasted with that of Abraham, affords a powerful warning against the fellowship of the Church with men of carnal principles in morals or religion. Lot went to Sodom because the worldly prospects were good. What did he gain by this step? Nothing but the most serious loss, and that not only temporally but spiritually. Though his righteous soul was vexed with the filthy conversation of the wicked, we are not told that he was the means of converting one of them from the evil of his ways. Far otherwise; he lost his wife and family, and that we fear, for ever. Some of his family chose to remain in Sodom, and were destroyed with the inhabitants. His wife by looking back perished in the very act of fleeing from the burning city. His two daughters, who accompanied him to Zoar, proved themselves to be Sodomites in spirit and practice, and their descendants, the Moabites, were an accursed race. If we weigh aright this heart rending narrative, we shall feel it to be a solemn warning to the Church of God to keep itself free from carnal entanglements and compromises of every kind, and to maintain fellowship with such only as abide by the truth.

(3) The deliverance of the children of Israel out of Egypt is also an event that sheds much light upon the present subject. According to arguments used now-a-days, the divine plan should have been to have left the Israelites in Egypt in order to be the means of bringing the Egyptians to the knowledge of the true God. But this was not the way adopted by infinite wisdom. God said unto Pharaoh, " Let my people go that they may serve me," and when all entreaties with the King of Egypt failed, the Lord took them by a mighty hand out of the society and bondage of the Egyptians. "Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples, and they are written for our admonition upon whom the ends of the world are come."-- (1 Cor. x.11) These things show to us that the Church of God requires to be freed from the bondage of men unfaithful to truth and righteousness, in order that she may be able to serve the Lord. When such men multiply in any Church so as to have the mastery over those who would be faithful to Christ, and so as to destroy that body's testimony for Christ, it is time the faithful should go forth out of this bondage. But someone may say, "The narrative of the deliverance of the Israelites applies only to the Church's separation from the world, but doesn't apply to one part of the Church separating from another." We say that it applies to both. When men depart from the Faith, we are not justified in recognising them as the true representatives of the Church of Christ, and, therefore, we are under the same obligation to have no fellowship with them, as if they were a part of the openly profane world. But another may argue, "You that call yourselves Free Presbyterians have separated from men who hold the very same principles as you do, and whose views of doctrine and worship are also in accordance with the Word of God. How do you justify that step?" We answer that we separated from these men not because they were unsound, but because they clung to those who were. They chose to abide by the fellowship of men who had denied the faith, and in separating from the latter we, as a natural consequence, were compelled to separate from the former.

(4) We next call attention to the case of Achan, which is fraught with lessons for the Church in every age. It points out the unspeakable danger of cherishing in the professing Church what is contrary to the Word of God, and the necessity of separation from every form of iniquity. The Lord had forbidden the Israelites to touch any of the spoils of Jericho. But Achan coveted these spoils, and took "a goodly Babylonish garment, and two hundred shekels of silver, and a wedge of gold of fifty shekels weight," and hid them in his tent. All this he did, neither with the knowledge or approval of Israel. But what was the result?

The Lord did not go out with the armies of Israel, and they fled before their enemies. When Joshua saw this he appealed unto God as to what it meant. The Lord then told him that Israel had sinned and trespassed the covenant, and taken the accursed thing, so that they were accursed. "Neither," said He "will I be any more with you, except ye destroy the accursed from among you." We all know the narrative. Joshua cast lots, and the lot upon Achan, and Israel destroyed Achan with his family and possessions in the valley of Achor. Then the Lord restored His favour to Israel. What is the application of this incident to the churches of modern times? Many of these bodies have men within their pale who, like Achan, have broken covenant with God by violating their vows, and otherwise disobeying the Word of God. These men are not hidden like Achan, they are well known. How have the churches acted? Instead of casting out such, they have given them the very highest honours in their power. They have, so to speak, told Joshua and the elders of Israel to stand aside, and set up Achan and his family to rule in their place. Achan is now-a-days praised for the courage of his convictions and the liberality of opinions, while Joshua and the elders are derided for the narrowness of their ideas, and the undue strictness of their adherence to the letter of the Word. But if the Lord declared that He would not be with Israel any more if they did not destroy one hidden Achan, what will be His testimony in regard to modern professing churches which have numbers of Achans occupying the highest places of influence, and teaching others to imbibe their opinions and follow their example? If the Lord is not with such religious bodies it is time for the true Israel to separate from them.

(5) Lastly, the position of Israel as a nation and a church under the old economy clearly proves that the Church of God in all ages should have no fellowship with idolaters, whatever form that idolatry may assume. No doubt the Church then, so far as worship was concerned, was fixed to a certain locality ; but that does not affect the principle which we are emphasising. It was a distinct and separate institution from all heathen institutions, and it was in proportion that it maintained the purity and spirituality of its worship that it flourished and fulfilled the end for which it existed. The fact that in times of declension and corruption the faithful were still under obligation to worship in the temple at Jerusalem, does not justify worshippers in dwelling in any corrupt temple under the new economy. The above obligation reveals a part of the bondage of the old dispensation, wherein the complete worship of God was confined to Jerusalem. But now confinement to any fixed locality is done

away with, and men are under obligation to worship only where the truth of God is maintained in its purity.

Having already occupied so much space, we shall require to continue the subject in next number.

IN last number we referred our readers to the testimony of the Old Testament on the subject of separation from an unsound church, and quoted a series of events from that part of the Word of God that shed light upon this subject. We adduced in succession the call of Abraham, the case of Lot and Sodom, the deliverance of Israel out of Egypt, Achan in the camp, and Israel's separate position as a nation and church, as historical facts that give directions to all who desire to follow the Lord fully in His truth and cause.

II. Let us observe, secondly, *special passages* in the Old Testament that point out the path of duty in this matter.

(1) The first passage to which we direct attention is 2 Chron.xix.2—“And Jehu the son of Hanani the seer went out to meet him, and said to king Jehoshaphat, Shouldest thou help the ungodly, and love them that hate the Lord? Therefore is wrath upon thee from before the Lord.” These words were addressed to Jehoshaphat after he returned from Rarnoth-gilead. He had joined affinity with Ahab, and had gone out with him against the Syrians. The Syrians were the enemies of both Israel and Judah, yet the Lord was displeased with Jehoshaphat king of Judah for assisting Ahab king of Israel, even when he was arrayed against the common enemy. Ahab was a wicked king, the patron of idolatrous worship, and the persecutor of the true prophets of God. It was not meet, therefore, that the good Jehoshaphat should, on any account, have fellowship with him, and therefore he incurred the righteous anger of the Lord by what he did. Strange to say, Jehoshaphat did not leave his religion behind him even when he went out as Ahab's helper, and yet this did not take away his guilt. We find that Jehoshaphat was not satisfied with Ahab's 400 prophets, and asked if there was any other prophet of the Lord to be found. Ahab said, “There is yet one man, by whom we may enquire of the Lord; but I hate him, for he never prophesied good unto me but always evil; the same is Micaiah the son of Imla.” And Jehoshaphat, entering a mild protest against Ahab's angry words said, “Let not the king say so.” Micaiah was brought, and again prophesied evil. Ahab bitterly rejected the prophet's testimony. Jehoshaphat heard it in silence, and went up with Ahab to battle. Ahab was killed, and Jehoshaphat returned to find by the mouth of another

prophet that he had incurred even a greater judgment, the anger of the Lord. The words of Jehu embody a principle which runs through the Word of God, that it is not the duty of those who fear the Lord to help those who hate Him, but rather to maintain a consistent testimony against them. Of course, due care must be taken to act upon this principle in a Scriptural way. Ahab not merely lacked the root principle of true religion, but was an open enemy to God. We may not be called upon to separate from men whose doctrine, life, and conversation are consistent with the Gospel, though they do not appear in our private judgment to have much or any spiritual life in them. But when men publicly rise up against fundamental truths of the Word of God they show themselves enemies to the Lord and subverters of His cause, and we are, therefore, bound to have no fellowship with them. When religious bodies protect and honour men of this stamp and adopt their views, in spite of appeals and protests to the contrary, it is our duty to separate from these bodies in order to maintain the truth.

(2) Another passage is to be found in Psalm xxvi. 4-5. "I have not sat with vain persons, neither will I go in with dissemblers. I have hated the congregation of evil doers; and will not sit with the wicked." Now, we are not to understand by this that the psalmist would not come into contact with vain persons in any circumstances whatsoever. He must needs then have gone out of the world. But the passage plainly points out that he would not associate with such persons and make them his companions, counsellors, and brethren. The following illustration has been sometimes used wherewith to make the Free Presbyterian cause appear ridiculous and contemptible in the eyes of men. A house is attacked by robbers, and the children instead of abiding by their aged and helpless parents make for the door and leave them to the mercy of the intruders. How unchristian and unfaithful a course this is! The illustration entirely misses the mark. What would one think of children who remained in the house, received the robbers as brethren, gave them everything in it, allowed them to usurp the parental place of authority, and submitted to see their parents thrust into a corner, there to live or die, at the mercy of those robbers? That is the exact state of the case with those who remain in the Free Church. But would it not have been a nobler part for the children to have left the house and taken the parents with them rather than to have placed the whole family in the hands of robbers? Who are the real parents in the case? Just those who adhere to the original standards of the Free Church. The Free Presbyterians, therefore, whatever their sins and shortcomings, acted the

more faithful and Christian part in not leaving the people to the mercy of men who were robbing the Church of its best treasures, yea, of its very life, but rather left the house with its temporal belongings and took their parents with them in order to save the family from death. The psalmist, under the teaching of the Holy Ghost, would not sit with men and call them brethren, whom he regarded not merely in their private but, in their public and ecclesiastical capacity as evil doers, robbers of the Church of God.

Other passages from the Old Testament might be quoted, but these will suffice. They show that it is a highly Scriptural duty for the true Church to maintain a position in the world separate from those who are opposed to the cause of God.

Objections.- (1) It may be objected to what has been stated on this subject that in Old Testament times we have such cases as Joseph in Pharaoh's house, Obadiah in Ahab's, and Daniel and the other Jews princes in Babylon. Let it be observed, however, that these eminent men occupied civil not ecclesiastical offices in their several stations, so that their religion was not .compromised thereby. Besides, their recorded deeds prove that they were faithful to the Lord in a more than ordinary measure, notwithstanding the temptations of their environment.

(2) An objection may be also raised from the fact that Israel was bound even in backsliding times to worship where the ark of the Lord rested. But where does the ark rest now under the new dispensation? Certainly, not in one fixed locality, but wherever the truth as it is in Jesus is maintained and declared in its purity. The confinement to a fixed locality for divine worship was evidently a part of the bondage of the former dispensation. It was very specially felt to be so in periods of declensions, for in the time of Eli's wicked sons, we are told that the people abhorred the sacrifice. There was then a disposition among the pious in Israel to refrain from coming to Shiloh, a disposition that did not spring from sin but from holiness, and it was only the peculiar divine arrangements for that dispensation that would have prevented an entire renunciation of the place of sacrifice.

(3) The last objection we shall now consider is that sometimes drawn from the words: "I will also leave in the midst of thee an afflicted and poor people, and they shall trust in the name of the Lord."-- (Zeph. iii. 12.) The words "in the midst of thee," are emphasised by objectors as if in any body, however corrupt, the Lord promises to leave " an afflicted and poor people," and that,

therefore, it is our duty to remain in such bodies. Now, we are not prepared to say, but the Lord, in His mysterious providence, may leave some of His people even in such a corrupt body as the Church of Rome, but would any reasonable person on that account join that body, or were our Reformers wrong in leaving it because Martin Boos and a few good people remained in it? Far from it. But the passage before us is not applicable to such cases as these. It contains a promise to Judah which represents the true Church, that it is not merely the Lord's providential but His gracious purpose to leave in the midst thereof a people who shall trust in His name. No body that does not bear the marks of the true Church can consistently lay claim to this promise. The Lord may leave particular so-called Churches, that have departed from the faith, wholly destitute, so that it is vain for men to make use of this promise to defend their own unfaithfulness in staying in corrupt bodies such as the Free Church.