

1966 REVISITED: GOING OR STAYING – IS THIS THE QUESTION?

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Note: Following a wide-ranging historical and theological survey, this is the conclusion of a paper first given at the 1987 Church Society Spring Conference, 'The Reasons for Past failure of Evangelical Unity'. For the complete and fully-referenced paper see *The True Unity of the Church* (London: Church Society (1987), 30-49).

Evangelicals are unquestionably divided over the issue of separatism. I once agreed with Dr Lloyd-Jones's view that evangelicals are 'guilty by association' if they remain within the doctrinally-mixed denominations. But mere involvement in such a body is not enough to incur guilt. This is too simplistic for words. [Following Dr Lloyd-Jones's stirring call at the watershed Evangelical Alliance Conference in October 1966,] John Stott was right to challenge this view, as was Julian Charley who put the alternative case beyond doubt. He argued that at no time during Israel's long history did God call the faithful to secede from the corrupt nation. The Apostle Paul did not make a similar call with regard to the Corinthian church, neither did the Apostle John with respect to the degenerate church of Sardis (see *Rev. 3: 1-6*).

Where then does this leave the Reformed churches *vis-à-vis* Rome, and the Free churches *vis-à-vis* the Church of England? As Mr Charley pointed out, our Free church forefathers 'did not secede from the Anglican Church; they were expelled...' The same may be said of the Protestant reformers. They sought to reform the mediaeval church, only to be excommunicated. They did not simply secede. In all these instances, it was a case of involuntary exclusion, not voluntary separation. Although separation was forced upon them, they were reluctantly 'separated'. They were certainly not separatists by intention. Most importantly, they were being thoroughly scriptural.

However, Mr. Charley and others were being utterly naive and insensitive to suggest, as a corollary to his thesis, that Free church evangelicals should contemplate rejoining the Anglican Church. The lines were drawn in 1662. Only by retracting the measures which forced our fore-fathers out could their sons be expected to go back into the Church of England. This very reasonable condition can hardly expect a sympathetic hearing today. [On that eventful day, regarding John Stott's critical reaction to Dr Lloyd-Jones's impassioned preaching, the latter – as a stalwart Puritan Nonconformist – should

have immediately challenged all that is unbiblical in Anglicanism].

Where then does this leave us with respect to the 'guilt by association' doctrine of separatism? To start with, none of us is ever in a 'non-guilt' condition. Simply by starting a new church down the road does not absolve us from sharing in the guilt of the world-wide church. Nehemiah saw this. "Both my father's house and I have sinned" (*Neh. 1: 6*). The answer was not secession, but to fight the corruption, whatever the consequences. In short, non-separatists are not guilty of association with the enemies of the Gospel if they are actively and publicly contending for the faith (*Jude 3*). Guilt only arises from a complacent acquiescence in the *status quo*, an attitude which seems to depend on a mutual truce: 'We'll not trouble the denominational authorities if they don't trouble us'. This is surely 'peace quietly to do our own thing'. Is not this the mark of 'the church indolent and out of breath' rather than 'the Church militant here on earth'?"

Assuming that separatists are being as active in the Gospel as their circumstances permit them, they have no right to accuse inclusivists of a guilty compromise if their brethren are seeking to serve the Lord with an active, holy militancy. But the duty of the non-separatist is clear: he is to make things 'so hot' within his denomination, that either it will be reformed, or he will be forcibly ejected. On these terms, a separated brother may lawfully encourage his non-separated brother, despite their differences, if they are both motivated by a love for Christ and the cause of the Gospel. The question is: do we have a stomach for the fight? Of course, a right response to this challenge will almost certainly lead to persecution. And did not the Apostle Paul say that 'they that live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution' (*2 Tim. 3: 12*)? If we suffer no kind of persecution, then are we as godly as we would like to think? Surely, one who is charmed into silence by the flesh-pleasing policy "Keep quiet, you'll have more influence" possesses a doubtful Christian profession. But for the true evangelical, this is no option at all.

If the proposals outlined above were pursued, both in terms of theological reassessment and public activity, then a very definite outcome is envisaged. We will find ourselves with separated ministers and their flocks and the less likely but still feasible possibility of reformed denominational bodies. Out of this situation could arise, by the blessing of God, a visibly united, nationwide evangelical Church. It is impossible to stipulate any kind of time-table, except to say that the times are urgent and delay must not be countenanced. Yet one may say that Phase A of such a venture involves an active commitment to discipline and reform, with mutual support on the part of the separated and the non-separated. Phase B would involve a uniting of all concerned on the basis of a consistent Reformed Evangelical platform.

The pursuit of such a goal requires a clear sense of direction and a vision of the glory of God. Both are provided by a sure knowledge of Holy Scripture. This is the supreme issue of our time - the final and all-sufficient authority of a divinely inspired and inerrant Bible. We must be absolutely clear about this. As with the older threats of Roman traditionalism and rationalistic liberalism, so the charismatic position is a threat to the true, biblical Gospel rediscovered at the Reformation. These three heterodox positions combine in calling into question the sufficiency and thus the exclusive authority of Holy Scripture. We dare not tolerate those who effectively supplement the Bible either with mediaeval dogmas, rationalistic speculations or new visions, revelations and prophecies. The choice is clear. We are all 'RC' in one form or another. We are either Roman Catholics, Rationalist Corrupters, Restorationist Charismatics or Reformed Christians.

Only the last variant will infallibly secure the true Gospel of the Grace of God for mankind. The only basis of the true Gospel is the only basis of true unity. We cannot have one without the other. May God give us grace to ponder these things and to act upon them. Never was it more urgent for us to draw together in a visible unity. God grant that this might be so, to His eternal glory and to the comfort, prosperity and increasing usefulness of His church in a desperate and needy world.