

TH505 Ecclesiology
Question # 11 - Dec. 07, 2000
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1. Define and briefly explain the different “degrees of separation”.

When dealing specifically with Ecclesiastical separation there have traditionally been two “degrees of separation”.

First Degree: from the unsaved, liberals, etc.
Second Degree: from those who are saved, but they fellowship with the unsaved (neo-evangelical).

- Should We Ever Separate From Christian Brethren? – Ernest Pickering
- Should Fundamentalists and Evangelicals Seek Closer Ties? Pickering

Recently we have seen the development of a third and fourth degree.

Third: from Fundamentalists who fellowship with new-evangelicals
Fourth: from Baptist who are not “just like us”

I believe that according to Scripture there are no “degrees of separation”. In response to the following question I will demonstrate that if Scripture is followed we in essence only have to separate from the unsaved (or those who are acting like unsaved).

2. What Scripture references support your position on each of the “degrees” described above?

The issue of separating from the world/unsaved is one that not many in our circles debate or has trouble with. 2 Corinthians 6:14-18 makes it very obvious that we as believers and churches are not to be associated with unbelievers. The real question of separation comes up when we are talking about separating from someone or a group that claims to be Christian and claims to believe the Bible. Do we separate from them? If so in what way and for what reasons?

There are numerous passages that speak of we, as believers and as churches, separating from “brothers”/ other believers or at least those who claim to be believers. (2 Thess. 3:6,14; Matt. 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 5:7,13; Rom. 16:17)

The question that arises is, is this another degree of separation, and if so how is this done? I believe that in the context of the majority of these passages it is obvious that this is not actually another “kind” of separation. However, it is dealt with in a somewhat different manner.

A great example of this is found in Acts. 15 where we have a local church in Antioch disagreeing with some teaching practices that they heard coming out of another local church in Jerusalem. The way the church in Antioch handled this issue is exactly like the rest of the passages listed above exhorts us to handle a brother in error. We are to confront him with his error and if needed take witnesses.

The purpose of this confrontation is to determine all the facts and gain a clear understanding of the issues underlying the disagreement. Once this is completed we will discover that in fact we do not disagree after all, at least not on anything of doctrinal importance. Or the other person will see our position clearly and realize their error, making any necessary changes in their life and ministry therefore eliminating the need for separation. Or, lastly, this “brother” will insist on continuing down the path they are on, even after the facts have proven that they are in error according to Scripture. If this last outcome is the result of the confrontation, then separation is necessary, but you are in fact separating from a person who is not living like a believer, so in essence you are separating from an unbeliever.