

Separation From Evil

by John Nelson Darby

The sermon discusses the essential principle of separation from evil as the foundation for true Christian unity centered in Christ.

Scripture: Romans 16:17, 2 Corinthians 6:14, Ephesians 1:10, Ephesians 4:3, Colossians 1:18, 2 Timothy 2:19, Hebrews 12:14, 1 Peter 1:16, 1 John 1:7, Revelation 18:4

Topics: "Unity in Christ", "Separation from Evil"

Description

John Nelson Darby emphasizes the necessity of separation from evil as the foundation of true unity among Christians. He argues that while the desire for unity is strong, it must be rooted in God's holiness and the rejection of evil, as any unity that tolerates evil is a denial of God's character. Darby warns against the dangers of sectarianism and the false sense of unity that can arise from human agreements, urging believers to adhere to the principles of God's Word. He highlights that true unity is centered in Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit, and that separation from evil is essential for maintaining this unity. Ultimately, Darby calls Christians to recognize their responsibility to uphold God's standards and to seek genuine fellowship based on His truth.

Transcript

Separation From Evil God's Principle of Unity

The need of union is felt now by every right-minded Christian. The power of evil is felt by all.

Its pressure comes too near home, its rapid and gigantic strides are too evident, and affect too nearly the particular feelings which characterise distinctively every class of Christians, to allow them to be blind to it, however little they may appreciate its true bearing and character.

Better and holier feelings, too, arouse them to the sense of common danger, and - as far as it is entrusted to man's responsibility - the danger in which the cause of God is, from those who never did, and never would spare it. This need is felt wherever the Spirit of God acts, so as to make the saints value grace and truth and one body. The feelings which the sense of the progress of evil produces may be different.

Some, though they are but few, may yet trust to the bulwarks they have long looked at, but which had their force only in a respect for them which exists no longer.

Others may trust to a fancied force of truth, which it has never exerted but in a little flock, because God and the work of His Spirit were there; others, to a union which never yet was the instrument of power on the side of good - that is, a union by concord and agreement. While others may feel bound to abstain from such an agreed union, by reason of previously subsisting obligations, or prepossessions, so that the union tends to form only a party.

But the sense of danger is universal. That which was long mocked at as a theory is now too practically felt to be denied; though the apprehensions of the word, which made those who were subjected to that mockery foresee the evil, may be rejected and slighted still. But this state of things produces difficulties and dangers of a peculiar kind to the saints, and leads to the inquiry, where the path of the saint is, and where true union is to be found.

There is danger, from the very blessedness and desirableness of union, of those who have long truly felt its value, and the obligation that lies on the saints to maintain it, being led to follow the impulses of such as refused to see it when it was spoken of from the Word, and to abandon the very principles and path which their own clearer apprehension of the Word of God led them to embrace from it, as foreseeing the coming storm.

They learnt from that precious Word that it was coming; and, while calmly studying it in the Word, saw the path marked out there for the believer as such, and indeed, in every time.

It is now pressed upon them to desert it for that suggested to men's minds by the pressure of the anxieties they anticipated, but which, though there may be an impulse of good in it, the Word of God itself did not furnish when inquired into in peace.

But is this the path of the saints, to turn from that which generally rejected intelligence of the Word afforded them, to pursue the light of those who would not see?

This, however, is not the only danger; nor is it my object to dwell on the dangers but the remedy. There is a constant tendency in the mind to fall into sectarianism, and to make a basis of union of the opposite of what I have here just alluded to: that is, of a system of some kind or other to which the mind is attached, and round which saints or others are gathered; and which, assuming itself to be based on a true principle of unity, regards as schism whatever separates from itself - attaching the name of unity to what is not God's centre and plan of unity. Wherever this is the case, it will be found that the doctrine of unity becomes a sanction for some kind of moral evil, for something contrary to the Word of God; and the authority of God Himself, which is attached to the idea of unity, becomes, through the instrumentality of this latter thought, a means of engaging the saints to continue in evil.

Moreover, continuance in this evil is enforced by all the difficulty which unbelief finds to separate from that in which it is settled, and where the natural heart finds its ties, and, generally, temporal interests the sphere of their support. Now, unity is a divine doctrine and principle; but, as evil is possible wherever unity is taken by itself so as to be a conclusive authority, wherever evil does enter, the conclusive obligation of unity binds to the evil, because the unity, where the evil is, is not to be broken.

Of this we have a flagrant example in Romanism. There the unity of the Church is the grand basis of argument; and it has been the ground of keeping the world, we may say, in every sanctioned enormity, and made the name of Christianity its warrant: an authority to bind souls to evil, till the name itself became shameful to the natural conscience of man.

The plea of unity may then be, in a measure, the latitudinarianism which flows from the absence of principle; it may be the narrowness of a sect formed on an idea; or, it may be, as taken by itself, the claim to be the Church of God, and hence in principle to secure as much indifference to evil, as it is the convenience of the body or its rulers to allow, or is in the power of Satan to drag them into.

If the name of unity then be so powerful in itself, and in virtue of blessings withal which God Himself has attached to it, it behoves us well to understand what the unity He owns really is.

This it is I would propose to inquire into; acknowledging the desire for it to be a good thing, and many of the attempts at it to contain in them elements of godly feeling, even when the means may not carry conviction to the judgment as being those of God. Now, it will be at once admitted, that God Himself must be the spring and centre of unity, and that He alone can be in power or title.

Any centre of unity outside God must be so far a denial of His Godhead and glory, an independent centre of influence and power; and God is one - the just, true, and only centre of all true unity. Whatever is not dependent on this is rebellion. But this so simple, and, to the Christian, necessary truth, clears our way at once.

Man's fall is the reverse of this. He was a subordinate creature, an image too of Him that was to come; he would become an independent one, and he is, in sin and rebellion, the slave of a mightier rebel than himself, whether in the dispersion of several self-will, or its concentration in the dominion of the man of the earth. But then we must, in consequence of this, go a step farther.

God must be a centre in blessing as well as power, when He surrounds Himself with united and morally intelligent hosts.

We may know that He will punish rebellion with everlasting destruction from His presence into the hopelessness of uncentred and selfish individual misery and hatred; but He Himself must be a centre of blessing and holiness, for He is a holy God, and He is love.

Indeed, holiness in us - while it is by its nature separation from evil - is just having God, the Holy One, who is love too, the object, centre, and spring of our affections. He makes us partakers of His holiness - for He is essentially separate from all evil, which He knows as God, though as His contrary - but in us, holiness must consist in our affections, thoughts, and conduct being centred in, and derived from Him: a place maintained in entire dependence upon Him.

Of the establishment and power of this unity in the Son and Spirit I will speak presently. It is the great and glorious truth itself on which I now insist. This great principle is true even in creation. It was formed in unity, and God its only possible centre.

It shall be brought into it yet again, and centred in Christ as its Head, even in the Son, by whom, and for whom, all things were created. Colossians 1: 16.

It is man's glory - though his ruin, as fallen - to be made thus a centre in his place - the image of Him that is to come; * * See Ephesians 1. He hath made known to us the mystery of His will; that is, gathering together in one all things in Christ, in whom we have received an inheritance. J.N.D. but alas! his imitator in a state of rebellion in this same place, when fallen.

I know not - I would venture to say no more - that angels were ever made the centre of any system; but man was. It was his glory to be the lord and centre of this lower world - an associate but dependent Eve his companion and help in his presence. He was the image and glory of God. His dependence made him look up; and this is true glory and blessedness to all but God. Dependence looks up, and is exalted above itself.

Independence must look down - for it cannot in a creature be filled with itself - and is degraded. Dependence is true exaltation in a creature when the object of it is right.

The primæval state of man was not holiness, in the proper sense of it, because evil was not known.

It was not a divine - but it was a blessed creation - state; it was innocence. But this was lost in the assertion of independence. If man became as God, knowing good and evil, it was with a guilty conscience, the slave of the evil he knew, and in an independence he could not sustain himself in, while he had morally lost God to depend on. With this state - for we must now descend to the present actual question of unity - with man in this state, God has to deal, if true real unity, such as He can own, is to be attained. Now, He must be still the centre. It is not therefore in mere creative power. Evil exists. The world is lying in wickedness, and the God of unity is the Holy God.

Separation therefore, separation from evil, becomes the necessary and sole basis and principle, I do not say the power, of unity.

For God must be the centre and power of that unity, and evil exists: and from that corruption they must be separate who are to be in God's unity; for He can have no union with evil.

Hence, I repeat, we have this great fundamental principle, that separation from evil is the basis of all true unity.

Without this, it is more or less attaching God's authority to evil, and rebellion against His authority; as is all unity independent of Him.

It is a sect in its lightest and feeblest forms; in its fullest, it is the great apostasy, of which one of the characteristics, as ecclesiastical or secular power, is unity; but unity by subjection of man to what is independent really or openly of God because it is of His Word; not established by subjection to the Holy One, according to His Word,** and by the power of the Spirit working in those that are united, and by His presence, which is the personal power of union in the body.

** This is characteristic of the independent unity. I believe that it will be in an openly infidel state, and a manifestation of the power of Satan. But supposing it is not openly such, it is clear that subjection to God is shown in subjection to His Word. Now, the authority of the church is confessedly antecedent to the authority of the Word in Romanism, and the saints are not all of them allowed to be the immediate objects of God's own Word, nor act upon it - that is, be subject to it. They are to be subject to the Church: let the Church allow it or not, that makes no difference. He who allows can hinder - that is, hinder God's addressing the saints. For this is the true question of Protestantism, not man's title to the Bible merely, but God's title to address man directly by His word: more particularly to address each of His own servants, or those professedly such. J.N.D. But this separation is not yet by judicial power, which separates - not the good from the evil, the precious from the vile, but - the vile from the precious, banishing it from His presence in judgment; binding up the tares in bundles, and casting them into the furnace of fire; gathering

out of His kingdom all things that offend - Satan himself and his angels being cast down and all things thereupon being gathered together in one in Christ, in heaven and in earth. Then the world, not the conscience, will be cleared from evil by the judgment which will not allow it, but early cut off all the wicked - not by the power and testimony of the Spirit of God. It is not now the time of this judicial separation of the evil from the good in the world, as the field of Christ, by the cutting off and destruction of the wicked.

But unity is not therefore given up out of the thoughts of God; nor can He have recognized union with evil.

There is one Spirit and one body. He gathers together in one the children of God who were scattered abroad. And now, as to the principle in general: God is working in the midst of evil to produce a unity of which He is the centre and the spring, and which owns dependently His authority.

He does not do it yet by the judicial clearing away of the wicked; He cannot unite with the wicked or have a union which serves them.

How can it be then this union? He separates the called from the evil.

"Come out from among them and be ye separate, and I will receive you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty". As it is written, I will walk in them and dwell in them.

Now here we have it distinctly set forth. This was God's way of gathering. It was by saying, Come out from among them. He could not have gathered true unity around Him otherwise.

Since evil exists - yea, is our natural condition - there cannot be union of which the Holy God is the centre and power but by separation from it. Separation is the first element of unity and union. We may now inquire a little further into the manner in which this unity is effectuated, on what it is based.

There must be an intrinsic power of union holding it together to a centre, as well as a power separating from evil to form it; and, this centre found, it denies all others.

The centre of unity must be a sole and unrivalled centre. The Christian has not long to inquire here.

It is Christ - the object of the divine counsel - the manifestation of God Himself - the one only vessel of mediatorial power, entitled to unite creation as He by whom and for whom all things were made; and the Church as its Redeemer, its Head, its glory, and its life. And there is this double headship: He is the Head over all things to the Church which is His body, the fulness of Him that filleth all in all. This will be accomplished in its day. For the present we take up the intermediate period, the unity of the Church itself, and its unity in the midst of evil.

Now there can be no moral power which can unite, away from evil, but Christ.

He alone, as perfect grace and truth, detects all the evil which separates from God, and from which God separates.

He alone can, of God, be the attractive centre which draws together to Himself all on whom God so acts. God will own no other.

There is no other to whom the testimony could be borne, who is morally adequate to concentrate every affection which is of God and towards God.

Redemption itself, too, makes this necessary and evident: there can be but one Redeemer, one to whom a ransomed heart can be given, as well as where a divinely quickened heart can give all its affections, the centre and revelation of the Father's love.

He, too, is the centre of power to do it. In Him all the fulness dwells. Love - and God is love - is known in Him. He is the wisdom of God and the power of God. And, yet more than this, He is the separating power of attraction, because He is the manifestation of all this, and the fulfiller of it in the midst of evil; and this is what we poor, miserable ones want who are in it; and it is what, if we may so speak, God wants for His separating glory in the midst of evil.

Christ sacrificed Himself to set up God in separating love in the midst of evil. There was more than this - a wider scope in this work; but I speak in reference to my present subject now. Thus Christ becomes, not only the centre of unity to the universe in His glorious title of power, but - as the manifestor of God, the One owned and set up of the Father and attracter of man - He becomes a peculiar and special centre of divine affections in man, round which they are gathered as the sole divine centre of unity.

For indeed, as the centre, necessarily the sole centre, "he that gathereth not with me scattereth".

And such, as to this point, was the object even, and power of His death:-- "I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto me". And more specially, He gave Himself not for that nation only, but that He might gather together in one the children of God which were scattered abroad.

But here again, we find this separation of a peculiar people, He "gave himself for us, that he might purify to himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works".

He was the very pattern of the divine life in man, separate from the evil, by which it was universally surrounded; He was the friend of publicans and sinners, piping in grace to men by familiar and tender love; but He was ever the separate man.

And so He is as the centre of the Church and High-Priest. "Such an high-priest became us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners" - and, it is added, "made higher than the heavens". Here in passing we may remark, that the centre and subject of this unity then is heavenly.

A living Christ still became the instrument of maintaining the enmity, being Himself subject to the law of commandments contained in ordinances. Ephesians 2: 15.

Hence, though the divine glory of His person necessarily reached over this wall as a fruitful bough of grace to poor passing Gentiles without- and it could not be otherwise, for where faith was, He could not deny Himself to be God, nor what God was, even love - yet in His regular course, as a man made of a woman, He came under the law. But by His death He broke down the middle wall of partition, and made both one, and reconciled both in one body unto God, making peace.

Hence it is as lifted up, and finally as made higher than the heavens, that He becomes the centre and sole object of unity. Let us remark in passing, that hence worldliness always destroys unity.

The flesh cannot rise up to heaven, nor descend in love to every need. It walks in the separative comparison of self-importance. "I am of Paul", etc. "Are ye not carnal and walk as men?"

Paul had not been crucified for them, nor had they been baptized in the name of Paul. They had got down to earth in their minds, and unity was gone.

But the glorious heavenly Christ in one word embraced all. "Why persecutest thou me?"

This separation from all else was more slow among the Jews, as having been outwardly themselves the separated people of God; but having fully shewn what they were, the word to the disciples was, "Let us go forth to him without the camp, bearing his reproach".

The Lord - when as the great result He would have one flock and one Shepherd - put forth His own sheep, and went before them. Indeed we have only to shew that unity is God's mind, and separation from evil is the necessary consequence; for it exists as a principle in the calling of God before unity itself.

Unity is His purpose, and, as He is the only rightful centre, it must be the result of holy power; but separation from evil is His very nature.

Hence, when He publicly calls Abraham, the words: "Get thee out of thy country, and out of thy kindred, and from thy father's house". But, to continue; from what we have seen, it is evident that the Lord Jesus Christ on high is the object round which the Church clusters in unity.

He is its Head and Centre. This is the character of their unity, and of their separation from evil, from sinners.

Yet they were not to be taken out of the world, but kept from the evil, and sanctified through the truth; Jesus having set Himself thus apart to this end.

Hence, as well as for the public display of the power and glory of the Son of man, the Holy Ghost was sent down to identify the called ones with their heavenly Head, and to separate them from the world in which they were to remain: and the Holy Spirit became thus the centre and power down here of the unity of the church in Christ's name - Christ having broken down the middle wall of partition, reconciling both in one body by the cross. The saints, thus gathered in one, became the habitation of God through the Spirit.

The Holy Ghost Himself became the power and centre of unity, but in the name of Jesus, of a people separated alike from Jew and Gentile, and delivered out of this present evil world into union with their glorious Head.

By Peter, God visited the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for His name.

And of the Jews there was a remnant according to the election of grace; as Paul, one of them, was separated himself from Israel, and from the Gentiles, to whom he was sent. And so was the constant testimony. He that saith he hath fellowship with Him and walketh in darkness, lieth and doeth not the truth.

Separation from evil is the necessary first principle of communion with Him. Whoever calls it in question is a liar - he is, so far, of the wicked one. He belies the character of God. If unity depends on God, it must be separation from darkness. So with one another. If we walk in the light, as God is in the light, we have fellowship one with another.

And mark, here there is no limit. It is as God is in the light. There the blessed Lord has placed us by His precious redemption; and hence, by that, the whole manner of our walk and union must be formed: we can have no union - as of God - out of it; the Jew could, because his - though separation, and hence the same

in principle - yet was only outward in the flesh, and the way into the holiest was not yet made manifest - no, not even for the saints, though in God's counsels doubtless they were to be there through the sacrifice about to be offered. So, again, one with the other. What fellowship hath light with darkness? Christ with Belial? What fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? What agreement hath the temple of God with idols?

And then, addressing the saints, the Holy Ghost adds, "For ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate".

Otherwise we provoke the Lord to jealousy, as if we were stronger than He.

Of this unity and fellowship, I may add, the Lord's Supper is the symbol and expression. For we, being many, are all one bread - loaf - for we are all partakers of that one bread. We find then most distinctly, that, as the unity of Israel of old was founded on deliverance and calling from the midst of, and maintained separation amongst, the heathen which surrounded them, so the Church's unity was based on the power of the Holy Ghost come down from heaven, separating a peculiar people out of the world to Christ, and dwelling amongst them; God Himself thus dwelling and walking in them.

For there is one Spirit, and one body, as we are called in one hope of our calling.

Indeed, the very name of Holy Spirit implies it; for holiness is separation from evil.

Whatever failure, moreover, there may be in attainment, the principle and measure of this separation is necessarily the light, as God is in the light; the way into the holiest being made manifest, and the Holy Ghost come down thence to dwell in the Church below, and so in power of heavenly separation, because the indwelling centre and power of unity - just as the Shekinah in Israel - He establishes the holiness of the Church and its unity in its separation to God, according to His own nature, and the power of that presence.

Such is the Church, and such is true unity. Nor can the saint recognize, intelligently, any other, though he may own desires and efforts after good in that which is short of it. Here I might close my remarks, having developed the great, though simple, principle, flowing from the very nature of God, that separation from evil is His principle of unity.

But a difficulty collateral to my main object and subject presents itself.

Supposing evil introduces itself into this one body so formed actually on earth, does the principle still hold good?

How then can separation from evil maintain unity? And here we can touch on the mystery of iniquity.

But this principle, flowing from the very nature of God, that He is holy, cannot be set aside.

Separation from evil is the necessary consequence of the presence of the Spirit of God under all circumstances as to conduct and fellowship.

But here there is a certain modification of it.

The revealed presence of God is always judicial when it exists; because power against evil is connected with the holiness which rejects it.

Thus, in Israel God's presence was judicial; His government was there which did not allow of evil. So, though in another manner, it is in the church.

God's presence is judicial there - not in the world, save in testimony, because God is not yet revealed in the world, and hence it plucks up no tares out of that field. But it judges them that are within. Hence the Church is to put out from itself the wicked person, and thus maintains its separation from evil. And unity is maintained in the power of the Holy Ghost and a good conscience.

And indeed, that the Spirit may not be grieved, and the practical blessing lost, saints are exhorted to look diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God.

And how sweet and blessed is this garden of the Lord, when it is thus maintained and blooms in the fragrance of Christ's grace.

But, alas! we know worldliness creeps in, and spiritual power declines; the taste for this blessing is enfeebled, because it is not enjoyed in the power of the Spirit; the spiritual fellowship with Christ, the heavenly Head, decays, and the power which banishes evil out of the Church is no longer in living exercise.

The body is not sufficiently animated by the Holy Ghost to answer the mind of God. But God will never leave Himself without witness.

He brings home the evil to the body by some testimony or other - by the Word or by judgments, or both in succession - to recall it to its spiritual energy, and lead it to maintain His glory and its place. If it refuse to answer to the very nature and character of God, and to the incompatibility of that nature with evil - so that it becomes really a false witness for God - then the first and immutable principle recurs, the evil must be separated from. Further, the unity which is maintained after such separation, becomes a testimony to the compatibility of the Holy Ghost and evil: that is, it is in its nature apostasy; it maintains the name and authority of God in His Church, and associates it with evil.

It is not the professed open apostasy of avowed infidelity; but it is denying God according to the true power of the Holy Ghost, while using His name.

This unity is the great power of evil pointed out in the New Testament, connected with the professing church and the form of piety. From such we are to turn away.

This power of evil in the Church may be discerned spiritually, and left when there is the consciousness of inability to effect any remedy; or if there be an open public testimony, it is then open condemnation to it.

Thus, previous to the Reformation, God gave light to many who maintained a witness to this very evil in the professing church, apart from it; some bore testimony and still remained.

When the Reformation came, it was openly and publicly given, and the professing body of Romanism became openly and avowedly apostate, as far as a professing christian body can, in the Council of Trent.

But wherever the body declines the putting away of evil, it becomes in its unity a denier of God's character of holiness, and then separation from the evil is the path of the saint; and the unity he has left is the very greatest evil that can exist where the name of Christ is named.

Saints may remain, as they have in Romanism, where there is not power to gather all saints together; but the duty of the saint as to it is plain on the first principles of Christianity, though doubtless his faith may be exercised by it.

"Let every one that names the name of Christ depart from iniquity".

It is possible that "he that departs from evil may make himself a prey"; but this, of course, makes no difference; it is a question of faith. He is in the true power of God's unity. Thus, then, the Word of God affords us the true nature, object, and power of unity; and, in so doing, it gives us the measure of it, by which we judge of what pretends to it, and the manner of it; and, moreover, the means of maintaining its fundamental principles according to the nature and power of God by the Holy Ghost in the conscience where it may not be realised together in power.

Its nature flows from God's; for of true unity He must be the centre, and He is holy; and He brings us into it by separating us from evil.

Its object is Christ; He is the sole centre of the Church's unity, objectively as its Head.

Its power is the presence of the Holy Ghost down here, sent as the Spirit of Truth withal from the Father by Jesus.

Its measure is walking in the light, as God is in the light; fellowship with the Father, and with His Son Jesus, and, we may add, through the testimony of the written Word - the apostolic and prophetic word of the New Testament especially. It is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets - of the New Testament - Jesus Christ Himself being the corner stone. The means of maintaining it is putting away evil - judiciously if needed - so as to maintain, through the Spirit, fellowship with the Father and the Son. If evil be not put away, then separation from that which does not, becomes a matter of conscience.

I return, if alone, into the essential and infallible unity of the body, in its everlasting principles of union with the Head in a holy nature by the Spirit.

The path of the saints thus becomes clear. God will secure by eternal power the vindication, not here perhaps, but before His angels, of them who have rightly owned His nature and truth in Christ Jesus. I believe these fundamental principles are deeply needed in this day, for the saint who seeks to walk truly and thoroughly with God.

Latitudinarian unity it may be painful and trying to keep aloof from; it has an amiable form in general, is in a measure respectable in the religious world, tries nobody's conscience, and allows of everybody's will.

It is the more difficult to be decided about, because it is often connected with a true desire of good, and is associated with amiable nature.

And it seems rigid, and narrow, and sectarianism to decline so to walk.

But the saint, when he has the light of God, must walk clearly in that. God will vindicate His ways in due time.

Love to every saint is a clear duty; walking in their ways is not. And he that gathers not with Christ scatters.

There can be but one unity; confederacy, even for good, is not it, even if it have its form.

Unity, professed to be of the Church of God, while evil exists and is not put away, is a yet more serious matter.

It will always be found to be connected with the clerical principle, because that is needed to maintain unity, when the Spirit is not its power, and, in fact, takes its place, guides, rules, governs in its place, under the plea of priesthood, or ministry, owned as a distinct body, a separate institution: it would not hold together without this.

J. N. Darby.

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