

Hyper-separatism

Stuart Olyott replies to the three articles by Jonathan Stephen, Brian Edwards & John Rosser, Stuart Olyott gives another point of view

The three articles on 'Hyper-separatism' by Jonathan Stephen, Brian Edwards and John Rosser have caused me a great deal of distress. I know of many others who have had the same reaction. I believe that anyone who follows what my three friends have recommended will be making a very big mistake indeed.

I am not a 'hyper-separatist', as this article will make plain. I have lived through the debates on first, second and third degree separation, and 'guilt by association', and have never fully understood them.

So what distresses me about the three articles? It is that they do not tie up with Scripture. In particular, they do not tie up with Galatians chapters 1 and 2.

Galatians 1

Galatians 1.6-10 is a key passage in this debate. What is going on there? Paul is talking about false teachers and how they are to be treated. You find out who is a false teacher by listening attentively to what he says. Does he proclaim exactly the same gospel as that preached by Christ's apostles? If not, he is most definitely a false teacher. This remains true even if the preacher is an angel, and even if he is an apostle who is now preaching something different from what he preached at first. Personality doesn't come into it. It is what a person is preaching at the moment which decides whether he is a false teacher or not.

And what is the message that was preached by Christ's apostles? This is exactly what Galatians is about. The foundation of the message is Scripture. The centre of the message is the Person and Work of the Lord Jesus Christ. The content of the message is that sinners are condemned by their failure to keep God's law, but are justified by God's grace alone through faith in Christ alone, without any reference whatever to rites or works. So it is that the gospel preacher revels in the cross of Christ and doesn't revel in anything else at all (6.14). False teachers are those who don't proclaim this glorious message. How are they to be treated? The apostle is blunt about this. What he has to say, he says twice (1.8-9). He anathematises them, as the original Greek makes clear. He consigns them to hell. He realises that his remarks won't please a lot of people (1.10), but this is nonetheless what he does. The Word of God will simply not allow us to consider any false teacher to be a Christian.

Mixed denominations

With Galatians in mind, let us imagine A1 and B1, two men of God who are in mixed denominations. A1 is a young man, reared in his denomination, who is about to be interviewed by its ministerial recognition panel. Despite the presence of some who are sympathetic to him, he knows that several panel members do not preach the apostolic gospel. He also knows that this is true of several of the teachers at the theological college that he will be expected to attend. Being a godly young man who takes his Bible seriously, A1 knows that Christian honesty will require him to make his position clear: he will not honour these people as ministers of the gospel; indeed, he will not accept them as Christians at all.

B1 is much older and has been a minister in his mixed denomination for years. Recently he has come to submit to the Bible in a new way. Realising that his church is in formal union with churches which tolerate, and even welcome, false teachers, he faces his responsibility to do something about it. Up until now he has been content to preach the gospel to his own people and to be glad that no one stops him. Now he has compassion for the multitudes in his denomination who are perishing under false teaching. So he sets out to make sure that no false teacher in that denomination is accepted as a Christian. He pursues his campaign through every level of denominational life, right up to the church assembly or synod. He refuses to quit while there is one single false teacher left anywhere in his denomination. With Galatians 1.6-10 in the Bible, how could he do anything else?

What do our two friends need from us? This is not a time to separate from them. This is a time to pray for them and with them, to cheer them on, to give them all the help we possibly can, and to meaningfully express our solidarity with them. We love the gospel for which they are contending. We simply can't keep our distance. As they go into battle, we want them to know that every believer is shouting loudly: 'God be with you, Mr. Valiant-for-Truth!'

But let's also be realistic. Which reader honestly thinks that A1 will be accepted by the ministerial recognition panel? The 'Evangelicals' will largely be embarrassed by him and the theological liberals simply won't tolerate such an upstart. This young man of God will soon be looking for a ministry outside the mixed denominations.

The same is true of B1. The denominational authorities will put up with him while he 'does his own thing' locally, but the moment he makes a widespread attempt to discipline false teachers they will make life too uncomfortable for him to remain. Let's not be naïve about this: faithfulness to Galatians 1.6-10 will make it impossible for any biblically-submissive person to remain in a mixed denomination. This is a certainty. So let's cheer them on in their present combat and then surround them with love and support when they join us 'outside the camp'.

But what if . . . ?

But what if A1 and B1 act differently? Let's now call them A2 and B2. At his interview A2 makes it clear that he is an evangelical, but he anathematizes neither the liberal panel members nor the heretical theological professors who later teach him. He eventually settles into a pastorate in his mixed denomination and preaches the gospel there without hindrance.

By the very nature of things, he has to fraternise with false teachers in his denomination and, to be fair, he does this somewhat reluctantly. However, thankful for the liberty that he enjoys in his own pastorate, he makes no attempt to oust them. As time goes by, he comes across B2 who, despite his new encounter with Scripture, has decided on the same policy. They link up with other evangelicals in their denomination and eventually have a measure of influence there. But the false teachers remain undisturbed.

Can you see what A2 and B2 are doing? Although they love the gospel, they are willing to tolerate the presence and activity of false teachers in the denomination to which they are formally committed. With their mouths A2 and B2 are saying one thing: there is only one gospel. By their actions they are saying something else: other 'gospels' are to be tolerated and are, after all, not that dangerous. Their words and their actions contradict each other.

Galatians 2

This is just the sort of situation that Peter has got himself into in Galatians 2.11-21. Peter is a gospel-loving man, so he does not fall under the anathemas of Galatians 1. But his actions are denying the gospel he loves. By refusing to eat with Gentile believers out of fear of what some Judaising visitors might say, he is giving the impression that faith in Christ is not enough for complete integration into the Christian church. This, of course, is not what he believes. But he is transmitting the wordless message that you have to be a signed-up Jew to be fully saved. His words are saying one thing; his actions are saying another.

What does the apostle Paul do when he sees Peter behaving in this way? He doesn't anathematise him, because Peter is a gospel-loving, gospel-preaching man. Nor does he separate from him. Far from it! Instead, he goes and has a public face-to-face showdown with the offending man. Paul disturbs the peace! He does it because Peter is to be blamed. Peter, by his actions, is contradicting the gospel that he loves so much.

We must do the same with A2 and B2. Every time we meet them we must have a showdown with them, even publicly if necessary. They are to be blamed and they must never be allowed to forget it. This item is to be on the agenda on every occasion. We must spell out to them that, although they love the gospel, their refusal to discipline false teachers in their denominations is doing the gospel a massive disservice. Having such showdowns is a duty which evangelical faithfulness requires of us and I am not at all sure that Essentially Evangelical is reminding us of this. If we don't do our duty, we shall answer for it at the great and terrible day of judgement.

Two outcomes

But what happens when we fulfil this uncomfortable duty? There are two outcomes. In some cases A2 and B2 become A1 and B1. They see the error of their ways and set about disciplining false teachers. Very quickly they end up being forced to join us 'outside the camp', where we gladly embrace them. We do not have too much trouble expressing our evangelical unity with such men. They, like us, now find themselves in gospel-loving congregations outside the mixed denominations. Locally, first of all, and then more widely, these churches slowly manage to find various ways of having meaningful fellowship with each other. They usually do this without setting up any sort of formal structure. This is the way it was in the New Testament and with this we are content.

In other cases A2 and B2 decide to remain as they are, where they are. Because we never fail to withstand them to their face about this, they eventually steer clear of us. They deliberately avoid us. We seek them out, but they make it plain that they don't enjoy the contact. Yes, they cut themselves off from those whose blunt and ceaseless confrontations are motivated by a passionate love for the Lord Jesus Christ, for his gospel, and for the lost. Would it be unfair and unkind to say that it is these brethren, and not us, who are the real hyper-separatists?

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