

The Bible Doctrine of the Separated Life

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Part I

The question of the separated life is a very important one, not only because it is a practical question which must be faced by every thoughtful Christian, but also because of the doctrinal ramifications that it has. Insistence upon the obligation to live what is called 'the separated life' is very prevalent in some circles of earnest Christians today. The details of the separation demanded vary greatly; practices which are tolerated by some groups are denounced by others as inconsistent with Christian duty and fellowship, and vice versa. In general, 'the separated life,' as the term is commonly used, may be understood to be a life which is separated not only from what can be proved by Scripture to be sinful, but also from various other practices which may be indifferent in themselves; and this separation is regarded as binding on the conscience of the Christian, and is sometimes made a term or condition of ecclesiastical or even of Christian fellowship.

This problem is far more important than is at first apparent. It is far more important than the mere question whether Christians ought to participate in or to abstain from certain particular kinds of conduct. Other problems of the greatest importance are involved. If we give a wrong answer to the question, 'What is the Bible doctrine of the separated life?' we are certain to fall into serious errors in other doctrines. Using the term 'separated life' in the Biblical, not the popular, sense, we may say that the separated life is an ethical implication of the covenant of grace and is related to the doctrine of sanctification as the latter deals with the nature and place of good works in the Christian life. The other doctrines which are involved in the question of the separated life are:

1. Christian liberty in the use of things indifferent;
2. liberty of conscience from the commandments of men;
3. the sufficiency of Scripture as the standard of faith and conduct;
4. the nature and limits of the authority of the Christian church.

The purpose of the present paper is to set forth the teaching of Scripture concerning the separated life, and then to show how erroneous teaching about the separated life affects the four doctrines enumerated above.

I. Separation from Sin

Separation from sin is required of the Christian by the covenant of grace. The condi-

tions of the covenant of grace are repentance and faith. The repentance which contemplates continuance in sin is not true repentance but a mere feigned or hypocritical repentance. When a particular course of conduct is demonstrated to be sinful, that is, contrary to the moral law of God, then separation from such conduct is required of the Christian by God himself. The moral law of God binds all of Adam's posterity to personal, entire, exact and perpetual obedience (Westminster Confession of Faith, XIX.i). That God requires separation from sin is the consistent teaching of all Scripture. Rom. 6:1-2 may be cited as an example: 'What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. We who died to sin, how shall we any longer live therein?'

That the Christian may continue in sin in order that grace may abound is Antinomianism, which is one of the most harmful of all heresies. We may confidently assert that Scripture requires the separated life, in the sense of separation from sinful conduct, of every Christian — indeed, of every human being.

II. Separation from Occasions of Temptation to Sin

The Christian is required to separate not merely from sin itself but also from known occasions of temptation to sin. It is not a sin to be tempted; the Lord Jesus Christ was tempted by the devil, yet He was wholly without sin. It is, however, a sin deliberately to place ourselves in the path of temptation to sin. In the Lord's Prayer we use the petition, 'Lead us not into temptation.' Concerning this the Larger Catechism, no. 195, states: '. . . that we, even after the pardon of our sins, by reason of our corruption, weakness, and want of watchfulness, are not only subject to be tempted, and forward to expose ourselves unto temptations; but also of ourselves unable and unwilling to resist them, to recover out of them, and to improve them'

Christians are here said to be forward to expose themselves unto temptations, and doubtless this forwardness is itself sinful, inasmuch as it proceeds from our corruption of nature. Christians, therefore, instead of being forward in exposing themselves to temptations to sin, ought to separate themselves from such temptations and those things which are known to be occasions thereto. This is substantially taught in the words of Christ in Matthew 5:29-30: 'And if thy right eye causeth thee to stumble, pluck it out and cast it from thee; for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not the whole body be cast into hell. And if thy right hand causeth thee to stumble, cut it off, and cast it from thee; for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not thy whole body go into hell.'

Of course these words are not to be understood literally; the Lord does not intend us to attempt to avoid sin by actually mutilating our bodies. The real meaning is that the Christian is bound to cut off occasions of temptation to sin. A hand or an eye is not sinful in itself; they are here used metaphorically for occasions of temptation, which may be quite harmless in themselves, but which for various reasons cause the Christian to stumble. The Lord's command is to cut them off, even though they may

be harmless in themselves.

It will be noted that the command is conditional: 'If thy right eye causeth thee to stumble,' etc. Therefore no universal rule can be made in this matter, for what is an overwhelming temptation to one person may be no temptation at all to another person. For a Chinese just converted from heathenism to keep a small brass image of the Buddha in his house, would be to tolerate a serious occasion of temptation to sin. For him the only safe course, even the only right course, is to get rid of the abomination as soon as possible. For a retired missionary living in America to have an image of the Buddha in his house as a curio cannot possibly be an occasion of temptation to him or to anyone else; to dispose of such an object in order to avoid temptation would be absurd. The image itself is 'nothing in the world' (I Cor. 8:4); it is simply 'a piece of brass' (II Kings 18:4); but to the man just saved from paganism it is a symbol of all the abominations of idolatry and a constant invitation to return to the old ways.

We should always remember that in reality all temptation is so dangerous because of the corruption of man's sinful heart, not because of the inherent nature of any material thing. The truth is elementary, but it is constantly being overlooked or misunderstood, not only by earnest Christians but even by popular religious teachers of the present day. Since the real menace of temptation comes from the corruption of the human heart, not from the material things which surround us or the situations in life with which we are confronted, we see how false the doctrine is which would formulate hard and fast rules about separation from occasions of temptation to sin. Since, in the very nature of the case, that which tempts one man does not affect another, such formulations ought not to be made, and if made, they ought to be rejected by all Christian people who value their freedom of conscience. Beyond question it is a duty to separate from occasions of temptation to sin; but just what constitutes an occasion of temptation to sin, no man can authoritatively say for another so as to bind the other's conscience; much less can any man or church formulate universal regulations binding upon all men in such matters as these.

III. Separation from the World

In addition to the obligation to separate from sin and from occasions of temptation to sin, there is a sense in which Scripture requires of the Christian separation from the world. In the original languages of Scripture, various terms are used which are translated 'world' in the English Bible, and these are used with various meanings. In the New Testament the words *aion* and *kosmos* are frequently used, the latter being much more common. The latter term is used in the New Testament with at least two entirely distinct meanings, of which examples may be cited as follows:

5. *The World of Men, Regarded as God's Property*: — Matt. 13:38: 'And the field is the world...' Rom. 5:12: 'Through one man sin entered into the world...' I Cor. 7:31: 'Those that use the world, as not using it to the full...'

6. *The Sinful World, Regarded as Satan's Kingdom:* — I John 2:15: 'If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him...' John 14:30: 'The prince of this world cometh, and he hath nothing in me...' Eph. 2:2: 'According to the course of this world, according to the prince of the powers of the air...'

That the Christian is not required to separate from human society or from the world itself is proved by I Cor. 5:9-10, 'I wrote unto you in my epistle to have no company with fornicators: not at all meaning with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous and extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of the world.'

Medieval monasticism was an attempt to separate from the world itself, an attempt to escape corruption by abstaining from all association with the corrupt. The Apostle Paul, in the text cited above, rejects this as an absurdity. The Christian is not required to separate from all association with unregenerate and sinful men; he is permitted to have civil association, even with fornicators, covetous, extortioners and idolaters; but he is forbidden to regard such as within the pale of Christian or ecclesiastical fellowship.

The Christian is, however, required to separate from all participation in the sins of the world. This is taught by II Cor. 6:17-18 and I Tim. 5:22, 'Wherefore come ye out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; and I will receive you, and I will be to you a Father, and ye shall be to me sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.' 'Neither be partaker of other men's sins: keep thyself pure.'

In this sense, separation from the world is the same thing as separation from sin. It simply means separation from those things, sinful in themselves, which specially characterize the world regarded as Satan's kingdom.

The Christian is also bound to witness against the world as Satan's kingdom. Jesus Christ was a witness against the world in this sense, as shown by John 7:7, 'The world cannot hate you; but me it hateth, because I testify of it, that its works are evil.'

The Christian must follow the example of Christ, and testify of the world, that its works are evil. The Christian must maintain a consistent testimony against the world, and this involves separation from all conduct inconsistent with that testimony. This kind of separation from the world is required of Christians in Rev. 18:4, 'And I heard another voice from heaven, saying, Come forth, my people, out of her, that ye have no fellowship with her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues'

Even in the legitimate use of the world considered as God's possession, the Christian must be moderate, as is shown by I Cor. 7:29-31, 'But this I say, brethren, the time is shortened, that henceforth those that have wives may be as though they had none;

and those that weep, as though they wept not; and those that rejoice, as though they rejoiced not; and those that buy, as though they possessed not; and those that use the world, as not using it to the full; for the fashion of this world passeth away.'

The Christian is a stranger and pilgrim on the earth (Heb. 11:13); his citizenship is in heaven (Phil. 3:20), where he already is in the person of his representative, Christ (Col. 3:1); the present world, even regarded apart from sin, as God's creation and possession, is only temporary, a mere preparation for the eternal order of things (Heb. 13:14); and therefore the Christian must abstain from everything inconsistent with his position as a stranger and pilgrim, that is, from all inordinate use of the world. The expression 'not using it to the full' might be paraphrased 'not using it too intensely.' In this matter, as in the case of occasions of temptation to sin, it is obviously impossible to formulate specific rules; each case must be decided on its own merits by the person concerned, acting in accordance with a conscience enlightened by the Holy Spirit.

Part II

IV. The Separated Life and the Use of Things Indifferent

Scripture recognizes a classification of things or actions which are commonly called *adiaphora*, or 'things indifferent.' This term must not be misunderstood. It does not mean that a Christian, in performing any particular act, can be regarded as himself morally neutral or indifferent, or that the Christian can at any time take a moral holiday and concern himself wholly with things morally indifferent. Man is a moral agent and is always accountable to God for the state of his heart and for his every thought, word and deed. Everything that the Christian is and does always has moral significance. This is shown by Col. 3:17 and I Cor. 10:31: 'And whatsoever ye do, in word or in deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.' 'Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.'

No matter what he does, the Christian is always either living for the glory of God or else sinning against the glory of God. 'Whatsoever is not of faith is sin' (Rom. 14:23). A Christian performing any particular act under any particular set of circumstances, must be either glorifying God or else committing sin; there can be no third possibility. This does not mean that there are no *adiaphora* or things indifferent in themselves; it simply means that the right use of things indifferent, that is, the careful, temperate, God-fearing and conscientious use of or abstinence from them, is for the glory of God, whereas the wrong use of things indifferent, that is the abuse of them, is contrary to the glory of God and therefore sinful. But while the Christian himself is never morally neutral, still there are certain things and practices which, considered in themselves, are morally indifferent. This cannot be denied for it is clearly taught in Scripture, especially in such passages as Rom. 14:1-23, I Cor. 8:1-13 and I Cor. 10:23-32.

One part of Christian liberty consists in the conscientious free use of or abstinence from things indifferent, that is, things which are not in themselves unlawful. In this category Scripture includes such practical matters as what we shall eat and drink (Rom. 14:2-3, 6, 14, 17, 21; I Cor. 8:8, 10:25-26), the observance of certain days (Rom. 14:5-6), and such matters as marriage and celibacy (I Cor. 7:28).

What is the duty of the Christian with respect to things indifferent? Should he abstain from all conduct which might offend any Christian? If so, what are the proper grounds for this abstinence? Or should the Christian assert his freedom by the free use of things indifferent before the eyes of men? The teaching of Scripture on these and related questions may be summed up as follows:

1. *Things Indifferent Can Never Be Sinful In Themselves.* To classify something as indifferent and then regard it as sinful in itself is to become involved in a contradiction in terms, as if one were to speak of an honest thief, or a truthful liar. It is true, of course, that the use of things indifferent may, under certain circumstances, be *sinful*, but this is very far from implying that things indifferent can be sinful *in themselves*. When we affirm that a particular thing or act is sinful *in itself*, we mean that it is *inseparable from sin*, and therefore cannot possibly, under any circumstances whatever, be done without sin. For example, adultery is sinful in itself; under no possible circumstances can it be committed without sin. Its sinful character is not contingent upon special circumstances, but is inherent in its very nature and inseparable from it. Playing on the piano, on the other hand, is in itself morally indifferent. Just because it is a thing indifferent, it can never be sinful in itself. But there may exist circumstances in which such an act is sinful. If a child has been forbidden by its parents to play on the piano at a particular time, but does so anyway, then under those circumstances playing on the piano is sinful. The sin committed, however, is not the sin of piano playing, but the sin of *disobedience to legitimate parental authority*. Again, if a person develops such a consuming passion for piano music that he devotes to this pursuit practically all of his time and strength, and makes it the supreme business and chief aim of his life, even above worshiping God and seeking his kingdom and righteousness, then in such a case and when carried to such an intemperate extreme, playing on the piano is sinful. The sin committed, however, is not the sin of *piano playing* but the sin of *idolatry*. Thus we see that while certain circumstances may render the use of *adiaphora* sinful by a particular person at a particular time or under certain circumstances, still this is very different from affirming that the things in question are sinful in themselves. Let us assure ourselves, then, once for all, that Scripture does really teach that certain things or actions are not sinful *in themselves*, but morally indifferent. If this fact be denied or ignored, only confusion and error can result. If any of our readers are disposed to deny that Scripture teaches the existence of *adiaphora*, we can only entreat them to make a more careful study of the fourteenth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans. This doctrine is proved by Rom. 14:14 and I Cor. 10:23. 'I know, and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean of itself; save that to him who accounteth anything to be unclean, to him it is

unclean.' 'All things are lawful; but not all things are expedient. All things are lawful; but not all things edify.'

There can be little doubt that certain groups among American Fundamentalists have to a considerable extent revived the ancient Gnostic doctrine that material things can be sinful in themselves. It is not difficult, however, to show how contrary this conception is to the Biblical doctrine of sin. According to Scripture, the seat of sin is the corrupt heart of fallen man, not any material thing or impersonal matter. This is shown by our Lord's words in Mark 7:21-23, 'For from within, out of the heart of men, evil thoughts proceed, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, covetings, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, railing, pride, foolishness: all these evil things proceed from within, and defile the man.'

Scripture also teaches that sin has an *absolute character*; even the slightest sin is a violation of the whole moral law of God and brings on the sinner the sentence of eternal separation from God (James 2:10-11; Gen. 2:17; Rom. 6:23). If the use of any material thing is sinful in itself, then that use partakes of the absolute character of sin and brings upon the user a deserved sentence to eternal punishment. Thus, if the use of any material things is sinful *in itself*, then such use is sinful *regardless of the degree of use*. In that case, even the slightest possible use is an offense against the righteousness of God which brings His deserved wrath upon the user (Rom. 1:18).

This may be illustrated as follows: Beyond doubt it is sinful to commit suicide by drinking carbolic acid. This, however, is not because the use of carbolic acid is sinful in itself, but because it is used with suicidal intent. In such a case, the sin committed is the sin of suicide, not the sin of drinking carbolic acid. Carbolic acid being a material thing cannot be sinful in itself. If its use were sinful *in itself*, that use would be sinful *regardless of the quantity used*. If one drop of carbolic acid were to be dissolved in a thousand gallons of water, and one drop of the resultant solution drunk, the drinking of that one drop would be a sin deserving the punishment of eternal death, *provided the use of carbolic acid is sinful in itself*.

Let no one say that this is simply a *reductio ad absurdum* and therefore not worthy of serious consideration. Scripture does teach that sin has an absolute character, and that any sin, even the least, is a violation of the whole moral law and therefore deserving of the judicial sentence of eternal death. This being the teaching of Scripture, it follows necessarily that if the use of material things can be sinful in itself, then the slightest such use is deserving of the judicial sentence of eternal death. The absurdity is in the notion that sin can be inherent in the use of any material thing, not in the Scripture doctrine that even the least sin has an absolute character. It is extremely important at the present time to defend the proposition that things indifferent cannot be sinful in themselves, for this proposition is widely denied in some Fundamentalist circles today. A return to the teaching of Romans 14 and I Corinthians 8 would be a most salutary thing in the life of many churches today.

2. The Christian Is Free To Use Or Abstain From Things Indifferent.

Since things indifferent are not sinful in themselves, the Christian is free to use them except when there is some special reason for abstinence from them. Scripture expressly uses the word 'liberty' (I Cor. 8:9; 10:29) in dealing with this matter. The Christian's freedom to use or abstain from things indifferent is also brought out by Rom. 14:5 and 22: 'One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let each man be fully assured in his own mind. . . . Happy is he that judgeth not himself in that which he approveth.'

Since the Christian is declared to be free to use or not use things indifferent, it follows that any abstinence from things indifferent must in the nature of the case be voluntary and not obligatory. This is brought out by Rom. 14:21, 'It is good not to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor to do anything whereby thy brother stumbleth.'

The word translated 'good' is *kalon*, which means 'pleasant,' 'comely,' or 'seemly,' but cannot possibly mean 'obligatory.' The same Greek word is used in Mark 9:5, where Peter, speaking of the Mount of Transfiguration, says to the Lord, 'It is good for us to be here.' This should be sufficient to show that Rom. 14:21 cannot possibly be interpreted as a divine prohibition of the use of any material thing.

3. It Is Not Of The Essence Of Christian Liberty That It Must Be Exercised In The Sight Of Men.

Scripture teaches, rather, that it is to be exercised in the sight of God, and that God holds the Christian accountable for his use or abuse of this freedom. This is proved by Rom. 14:22, 6, 12, 'The faith which thou hast, have thou to thyself before God.' 'He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord: and he that eateth, eateth unto the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, unto the Lord he eateth not, and giveth God thanks.' 'So then each one of us shall give account of himself to God.'

A corollary of this truth that the Christian is responsible to God for his use or abuse of Christian liberty, is the command to refrain from judging others for their conscientious use of things indifferent, as shown by Rom. 14:4, 10, 13, 'Who art thou that judgest the servant of another? to his own lord he standeth or falleth' 'But thou, why dost thou judge thy brother? or thou again, why dost thou set at naught thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God.' 'Let us therefore judge one another any more'

These texts speak of individual judging of individuals. The judicial function of the church in these matters will be dealt with in a subsequent section of this paper. As to individual judging, can there be any doubt that uncharitable and presumptuous judging of others for their legitimate and conscientious use of things indifferent is exceedingly common at the present day?

4. *The Christian Must Take Care Take He Does Not Cause Others To Stumble.*

The Christian is accountable to God to take care that in his use of things indifferent he does not cause others to stumble or be offended. The Christian is his brother's keeper, and has a responsibility for his brother's welfare. He should therefore deny himself and voluntarily abstain from the use of particular things which are in themselves indifferent, when a brother would be offended or caused to stumble by their use. This is shown by Rom. 14:7, 13, 15, 21, 'For none of us liveth to himself, and none dieth to himself.' 'Judge ye this rather, that no man put a stumbling block in his brother's way, or an occasion of falling.' 'For if because of meat thy brother is grieved, thou walkest no longer in love. Destroy not with thy meat him for whom Christ died.' 'It is good not to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor to do anything whereby thy brother stumbleth.'

In this connection, it must be repeated and emphasized that, *so far as the Christian's relation to his brethren is concerned*, the abstinence spoken of in these texts is voluntary and not obligatory abstinence. It should be carefully noted that Romans 14, I Corinthians 8 and I Cor. 10:23-32 are definitely addressed to the individual Christian and not to church assemblies or judicatories. The singular number is used throughout. These passages, therefore, present principles for the guidance of Christians in regulating their personal conduct, not principles for the guidance of church assemblies in formulating conditions of church membership. A Christian may feel that it is his duty, before God, to abstain from a particular thing which is in itself indifferent, while yet realizing that, so far as men are concerned, it is not mandatory upon him to abstain. In such a case, abstinence is obligatory so far as the relation between the Christian and God is concerned, but voluntary so far as the relation between the Christian and his brethren is concerned. Abstinence can be truly voluntary only when it is a matter between the Christian and his Lord; when it is made mandatory by ecclesiastical enactment it ceases to be voluntary and becomes obligatory. This would seem very clear from the texts above cited, taken in their context, yet it has been repeatedly claimed that Rom. 14:21 contains a divine prohibition of the use of certain material things. If that is the true meaning of Rom. 14:21, then all the rest of the chapter is without point and its teaching is utterly obscure.

5. *In Abstinence From Things Indifferent, The Christian's Conscience Is Free.*

Abstinence from things indifferent, while it may proceed from consideration for the weak conscience of a brother, can never proceed from our own conscience, except in the indirect sense that our conscience requires us to be considerate of the weaknesses of fellow Christians; for if a thing be regarded as indifferent, how could the use of it be sinful in itself, or how could we abstain because of our own conscience? The relation of Christian liberty to the conscience is proved by I Cor. 10:25-29, 'Whatsoever is sold in the shambles, eat, asking no question for conscience' sake; for the earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof. If one of them that believe not biddeth you to a feast,

and ye are disposed to go; whatsoever is set before you, eat, asking no question for conscience' sake. But if any man say unto you, This hath been offered in sacrifice, eat not, for his sake that showed it, and for conscience sake: conscience, I say, not thine own, but the other's; for why is my liberty judged by another conscience?'

The closing words of the above citation need to be emphasized today: 'Why is my liberty judged by another conscience?' Why should my liberty, in those things in which Christ has left me free, be subject to the judgment of an individual brother's conscience, or to the collective judgment of the conscience of a church assembly or judiciary? Let us ask ourselves in all seriousness, what right has any person or power on earth to bind the conscience of the Christian in matters in which Christ has declared that conscience to be free under God? The very heart of the Scripture teaching concerning the use of things indifferent is that the Christian is free to use or to abstain from using such things, according to his own conscience, and that for his use or abuse of this freedom he is accountable to God. The moment that specific rules are made by men concerning things indifferent, the moment that any man or body of men requires of the Christian abstinence from things indifferent for religious or moral reasons, at that moment liberty has become bondage, and the conscience, left free by God as to things indifferent, has become enslaved to the commandments of men. At that moment abstinence ceases to be voluntary and becomes obligatory, and the entire Scripture teaching on this subject is utterly perverted.

6. A Matter Must Be Regarded As Indifferent In Itself Until Proved Sinful By Scripture.

The question may be raised, How are we to decide whether or not a particular matter belongs in the category of things indifferent? In this, as in all other questions of faith and conduct, the Word of God must be our chart and compass. A matter must be regarded as indifferent until proved to be sinful, not vice versa. A man is regarded as innocent until proved guilty. Nothing could be more false and dangerous than the contention of some religious teachers that a matter must be regarded as sinful until proved to be indifferent. When there is any doubt that the matter is sinful in itself, it must be left to the individual conscience. If the teaching of Scripture about a particular matter appears to be doubtful or obscure, or even seems to be contradictory, this is all the more reason for church assemblies not to make authoritative pronouncements or laws about such a matter. What God has clearly revealed, let the church confidently enforce. What God has not clearly revealed, let the church not presume to determine. God grant that we may be preserved from trying to have a clearer standard than the Bible, or a more complete set of moral laws than that contained in the Word of God!

Beyond question a great deal of the present insistence on the obligation to live what is called the separated life proceeds from misunderstanding of the Scripture passages dealing with the use of things indifferent. When groups of earnest Christians demand separation from particular things, in themselves indifferent, as the condition of

Christian fellowship, they set up a false and unwarranted standard of fellowship, and become guilty of presumption by judging their brethren in those things in which Christ has left them free under God.

Part III

V. The Separated Life and the Sufficiency of Scripture

The principle of the sufficiency of Scripture as the standard of faith and conduct is involved in the problem of the separated life. Separation is sometimes demanded from things which Scripture does not declare or imply to be sinful. Sometimes the attempt is made to show that some of these things or practices are sinful by bringing in a secondary authority, such as experience, physical science, the so-called Christian consciousness. Experience or science may show good reasons for abstaining from certain acts or habits, but experience or science can never of itself be binding on the conscience of man.

Moreover, those who wish to introduce science as an additional authority always speak as if it were a very simple matter to ascertain what science has to say on any particular question. They always speak as if somewhere there were a sort of scientific pope who could utter *ex cathedra* the final, united, unquestionable voice of science. They seem to presuppose that the voice of science can be heard, speaking with authoritative accents, by simply consulting a few volumes in the public library. The truth is, however, that 'science' is an abstraction. There is in the world today no such thing as the voice of science; there are only the voices of a multitude of scientists, and they are anything but agreed among themselves. Now who is to decide which of these many voices is to be accepted as the authoritative voice of science? One scientist, a professor in a great university, states that years of research have failed to demonstrate that a certain practice shortens life. Another scientist, of equal scientific standing, maintains the contrary position. Who is to decide which represents the authoritative voice of 'science'? All too often those who wish to place science alongside of Scripture as a standard of faith and conduct wish at the same time to be the judges of what is science; those who hold certain views they regard as scientists; all others they reject as being prejudiced or otherwise untrustworthy. Can any pope or church assembly decide just what kinds of science — the opinions of just which scientists — are authoritative and therefore, along with Scripture, binding on the conscience of man? No, in matters of science every person must decide for himself. And even if certain scientific theories are believed to be true, they cannot be binding on the conscience. We must beware of the sin mentioned in the Larger Catechism, no. 105, of 'making men the lords of our faith and conscience.' *All human authority, however expert or learned, is fallible, and therefore cannot bind the conscience.* Science may show that certain things are *harmful to the body*, but science can never show that anything is sinful. Scripture alone can show that anything, for example a particular course of conduct, is sinful. It is true that the light of nature, or the moral law written on the heart of man (Rom 2:14-15), shows that certain acts, such as murder, are wrong; but

the light of nature does not tell us anything about morality in addition to what is revealed in Scripture; Scripture is a fuller revelation than natural revelation and includes all of the latter and much besides; therefore when Scripture does not declare or imply that a certain practice is sinful, we cannot turn from Scripture to natural revelation for fuller light on the matter. (In this connection it may be remarked that the modernist notion that all human knowledge and science is a divine revelation in the same sense that Scripture is a divine revelation, is utterly false and destructive. Natural revelation is a provision of God by which the heathen, who do not have the light of Scripture, may know something of His power, divinity and moral law. It is insufficient for salvation, but leaves men without excuse and provides a standard by which those who lived and died without the light of special revelation shall be judged. Rom. 1:18-20; 2:12-16.)

Scripture of course teaches that it is ordinarily the duty of Christians to abstain from what is harmful to the body (this is not always the duty of Christians, for there may be circumstances when loyalty to Christ requires that our own physical welfare be disregarded, or even that, rather than deny the Lord, we suffer martyrdom and allow the body to be entirely destroyed); the sixth commandment, 'Thou shalt not kill,' is stated by the Shorter Catechism to forbid 'the taking of our own life, or the life of our neighbor, unjustly, or whatsoever tendeth thereunto' (no. 69). This commandment is binding on every man, and the interpretation of it given in the Catechism is doubtless the correct one. It thus becomes binding on the conscience of the Christian to abstain from that which tends toward the unjust destruction of his own life, or that of his neighbor, that is, from that which is harmful to the body. But we should not that the decision whether a particular act is harmful must be made by the individual concerned. Science is never infallible; it cannot bind the conscience; *therefore the individual Christian must judge of the statements of science, and the statements of science must not judge the Christian.* To deny this means to make science, instead of God, the Lord of the conscience. No alleged 'findings' of science can be formulated into an authoritative list of harmful things or acts. The relation between the sufficiency of Scripture as the standard of faith and conduct and the problem of the separated life must be summarized as follows:

7. The Christian is required by God to separate from what is sinful.
8. Scripture alone can demonstrate that a given course of conduct is sinful.
9. Natural revelation cannot be regarded as a fuller revelation than Scripture, or as coordinate with Scripture in any sense whatever.
10. It is possible that science or experience may show that certain conduct is harmful.
11. Science or experience can never show that anything is sinful.
12. Scripture teaches that what is really harmful is ordinarily sinful.

13. The decision whether science or experience shows that particular conduct is harmful must be made by the individual concerned, not by other persons.
14. Church assemblies may not issue authoritative regulations based in whole or in part on any other standard than Scripture.

To depart from these principles is to deny the sufficiency of Scripture as the standard of faith and conduct and to elevate experience or science to the position of an additional authority coordinate with Scripture. This may be illustrated as follows: Science, let us say, has demonstrated that in certain conditions the eating of large amounts of certain foods is harmful to the body; this does not prove that the use of those foods is sinful in itself; science, moreover, cannot tell precisely where lies the border line between harmless use and harmful use. Scripture requires abstinence from that which is harmful, but teaches that no material thing is sinful in itself (Rom. 14:4). In the very nature of the case the individual concerned must be the judge of the extent of legitimate use in such a case, so far as his conscience is concerned. Some may say that the individual's physician is the proper judge in such a case but, even so, judgment is still left with the individual; he is free to follow or to reject his physician's advice, and also free to change or dismiss his physician. For an ecclesiastical judicatory to assert that science declares the matters in question to be harmful, therefore they are under all circumstances sinful, amounts to denying the sufficiency of Scripture and making human science an additional, coordinate authority.

If a Christian suffering from some bodily pain, takes more aspirin than is good for him, he may by this do something which is harmful to the body; he may even be doing something which, though not sinful in itself, is in that particular instance a sin against God; but the fact that it is possible for a person to commit sin by excessive use of aspirin by no means warrants a church assembly in enacting a rule limiting or prohibiting the use of aspirin by church members; because the use of aspirin is in itself morally indifferent, in the nature of the case the extent of legitimate use is a matter between the person and his Lord. No third party can be admitted to determine the question, so far as the morality of the matter is concerned. A physician may give good advice concerning the care of the body and the proper dosage of medicines, but he has nothing to do with the consciences of his patients. No fellow Christian, no bishop, pope, or ecclesiastical assembly can step in and say: 'So-and-so many grains of aspirin constitute a legitimate medicinal dose, provided you have so-and-so many degrees of headache; but at that precise point aspirin ceases to be morally indifferent and its use becomes sinful.'

Many persons today are ready to take the real or alleged 'findings' of science (or rather of certain scientists) that certain material things or certain habits are harmful to the body, and on this basis alone to affirm confidently that those things or those habits are necessarily sinful in themselves. To do this is not only to fall into Gnostic error, but to repudiate the sufficiency of the Word of God as the standard of morality, and to make fallible, human knowledge an authoritative standard of conduct.

VI. The Separated Life and the Nature and Extent of the Authority of the Christian Church

In the formulation of creedal doctrine, the Christian church is strictly limited by Scripture. The church has the right to require of her officers and members assent to everything that can be shown to be taught or implied in Scripture, but the church does not have the right to add anything to what is contained in Scripture. The authority of the church is ministerial and declarative, not legislative; it is derived from Christ, not original in the church itself; it is no an absolute authority, but one limited and regulated by a definite revelation, the Scriptures. From these considerations it follows that the church has no right to go beyond Scripture and compile lists of specific things or acts, in themselves indifferent, which experience or science purport to show to be deleterious and which are therefore alleged to be wrong for the Christian to use or to do.

There are some Christian denominations which actually single out certain specific acts, in themselves indifferent, and require of church members abstinence from those things as a condition of membership. In some cases this requirement of abstinence is written into the denomination's creedal doctrine, and members are not merely required to abstain from the particular things involved, but are also required to express their assent to the rightfulness of this requirement of abstinence. This tendency, which assumes various forms in various circles, is a very unhealthy one, for it tends to give people the notion that the church can, by its own authority, legislate for the lives of its members, and even go beyond Scripture in requiring of them abstinence from particular things which are in themselves indifferent.

Of course the church may and should require its members to abstain from everything that can be proved by Scripture to be sinful. The breach of such abstinence can be justly censured by ecclesiastical judicatories when the fact is proved. But the church has not authority to require abstinence from things indifferent. The church has no authority to usurp the functions of the individual Christian conscience and decide for her members concerning the use of things indifferent. For the church to censure her members for doing that which cannot be proved from Scripture, without the use of any additional authority, to be sinful, is to exceed the limits of legitimate church authority. At the point where a secondary becomes necessary, the matter automatically passes from the church to the court of the individual conscience, *precisely because God alone is Lord of the conscience, and human authority cannot bind the conscience.* Let all church courts beware of committing the sin which Spurgeon described as 'violating the crown rights of God who alone is Lord of the consciences of men.'

Even though a church member may have committed an act which in the *opinion* of the members of a judicatory would be sinful if committed in like circumstances by themselves, still the judicatory has no right to censure such a person unless it can be proved from Scripture that the act was sinful; just as in criminal law a jury may be of

the opinion that a defendant has committed a wrong, but has no right to convict him unless the evidence proves that he has violated the law of the land. A church judicatory may not decide cases by opinion, but must decide according to the law and the evidence.

It will be seen to follow from the foregoing that just as the church has no authority to go beyond Scripture in legislating concerning particular things which are in themselves indifferent, so the church has no authority to censure her members for any use of things indifferent *unless that use can be proved to involve the violation of an express or implied command of Scripture*. It is not sufficient to show that a command of Scripture may have been violated, or that an act has been committed which might, under some circumstances, involve the violation of a command of Scripture. To be justly liable to ecclesiastical censure, a church member must be charged with a particular act, committed at a particular time and place, and concerning this act two things must be proved:

15. it must be proved that the act was actually committed by the person, and at the time and place specified in the charge;
16. it must be proved that the act, in the circumstances under which it was committed, involved the violation of a command of Scripture, that is, that it was sinful.

Church discipline must always deal with *real offenses*, not with the legitimate and conscientious use of things indifferent. Its function is to remedy actual wrongs already committed, not to prevent the commission of wrongs by enforcing abstinence from things which are in themselves not sinful but indifferent.

Part IV

VII. The Work of the Holy Spirit vs. the Doctrines and Commandments of Men

Those who wish to add to what God has spoken in Scripture certain man-made regulations concerning things indifferent often take this position because they believe these rules necessary in order to prevent various evils. They assume that unless a rule is made, a particular evil will exist unchecked. So a church in China makes a rule against the use of opium by church members, and a church in Mexico a rule against the use of marijuana. In each case the motive is a laudable one, namely to prevent church members from becoming addicted to certain drugs. Nevertheless, a careful study of the problem leads us to the conclusion that the enactment of such regulations proceeds from false assumptions, is ineffectual for the intended purpose, and is very dishonoring to the Holy Spirit.

For a church judicatory to enact a rule prohibiting the use of opium by church members, for example, shows a presupposition that such a rule is necessary. Clearly the

assumption is that, unless such a rule is made, some church members will use opium. And it seems to be assumed that some church members will abstain from the use of opium because of a church rule, who would not abstain if there were no such ecclesiastical regulation. Now those who advocate man-made regulations concerning things indifferent reason as though the Holy Spirit did not dwell in the hearts of the Lord's people, as though there were no such thing as sanctification by the Holy Spirit, and as though Christian people were the same as the children of the world. They fail to take the power of the Holy Spirit into their reckoning. How are the members of the church to be kept from using opium or marijuana? The only way they can think of is to make a rule prohibiting the use of these things by church members. What a confession! What ignorance concerning the nature and power of the Holy Spirit's work. What an admission concerning the spiritual state of the church members for whom the rule is made!

Church members are supposed to be Christian people. If they are not Christian people, they really have no right to be church members at all. This does not mean that church officers can examine people's hearts and admit to membership only those who are truly regenerate, for they cannot. It does mean, however, that in a church where the gospel of Jesus Christ is faithfully proclaimed, where a credible profession of faith is required of those admitted from the world, and where the discipline of the Lord's house is faithfully administered, the hypocrites will be very few. Such a church will be made up of regenerate Christian people. Now the Word of God teaches us that every Christian is indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and that if any person does not possess the Holy Spirit, he is not a Christian at all (Rom. 8:9). The Holy Spirit is God, He is omnipotent, and He carries on in each of God's children the work of sanctification until each is made perfect in the likeness of Christ. Therefore, where the gospel is faithfully preached and taught there will be no need to go beyond Scripture and add the doctrines and commandments of men concerning things in themselves indifferent. The Spirit of God will work true holiness in the hearts and lives of the people, their consciences will be enlightened and their walk consistent.

Long ago the Apostle Paul warned the Colossians against all such man-made rules, as we read in Col. 2:20-23, 'If ye died with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, do ye subject yourselves to ordinances, Handle not, nor taste, nor touch (all which things are to perish with the using), after the precepts and doctrines of men? Which things have indeed a show of wisdom in will-worship, and humility, and severity to the body; but are not of any value against the indulgence of the flesh.'

From this we learn that man-made regulations about things indifferent are *ineffectual*: they are 'not of any value against the indulgence of the flesh.' Whatever men may say about such rules and regulations, the Holy Spirit here tells us that they are useless as a means of restraining fleshly appetites. In another place the Holy Spirit has given us through the Apostle Paul the true secret of overcoming the fleshly lusts, as we see in Gal. 5:16, 'But I say, Walk by the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfill the lust of

the flesh.'

The whole passage, Gal. 5:16-24, is a radical antidote for the false belief that man-made rules and regulations can curb the sinful tendencies of the Christian's old nature. Many of those who today are so zealous for human ordinances about things indifferent fall into the error of the Galatians, who supposed that the Christian life is begun in the Spirit, but perfected in the flesh (Gal. 3:3), begun by the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit, but completed by human efforts, actions and abstinences.

Someone may object that opium and marijuana, for example, are not indifferent, but sinful in themselves. We have already shown that no material thing can be sinful in itself. Now if opium, marijuana or any other particular material substance is to be regarded as an exception to this principle, the problem is raised as to what authority is competent to decide which substances are exceptions to the principle that no material things can be sinful in itself. There is, no doubt, general agreement among Christian people that such substances as opium and marijuana, for example, are so dangerous and harmful that they should not be used at all. This general agreement is, however, no proper ground for church judicatories authoritatively pronouncing such substances sinful in themselves, or declaring their use to be sinful *per se*. The Word of God, not the so-called Christian consciousness, is our only infallible rule of faith and conduct. What authority is competent to determine the *harmfulness* and on this basis to infer the inherent sinfulness of the use of a particular material substance, withal making this inference binding on the consciences of the Lord's people? Are church judicatories qualified to issue authoritative pronouncements on such matters? By what right does a synod or assembly composed of ministers and elders decide questions concerning the physiological action and toxic properties of various narcotic drugs? If we grant to ecclesiastical bodies the right to decide concerning opium and marijuana, do we not thereby concede the entire principle that the church may legitimately decide for its members concerning the use of things indifferent? And if so, could we consistently object, for reasons of principle, if a church judicatory were to enact a rule prohibiting the use of tea or coffee? We are far from holding that it is legitimate for Christians to use dangerous drugs. What we are contending for is not license to use poisonous drugs, but freedom under God to decide for ourselves what material substances we ought to leave alone. We would keep the consciences of Christian people free from what Dr. Machen called 'the tyranny of the experts.' We maintain that the individual Christian, and not the church, must pass judgment on the pronouncements of experts concerning such things, so far as questions of morality are concerned. We are far from holding that it is 'all right' to use opium, marijuana or a great many other material substances, but if the question as to the sinfulness of the use of these things is to be decided for us by a synod or pope, then our freedom of conscience is destroyed and our soul reduced to bondage to the commandments of men. If the thing is indifferent in itself, whatever it may be, then the individual Christian, not the church, has the God-given right to decide ethical questions concerning its use. We fully agree with the general opinion of Christian people that such substances as opium and marijuana should not be used at all, except possibly by a physician's orders;

but we claim the God-given right to make this decision ourselves, and not to have it made for us by an ecclesiastical judicatory. The conscience of each and every one of the Lord's people is enlightened by the Holy Spirit; to require Christian people to accept ecclesiastical regulations on such matters is akin to the 'implicit faith, and absolute and blind obedience' which is required by the Church of Rome.

In a previous section of this discussion we made the statement that 'Since things indifferent are not sinful in themselves, the Christian is free to use them *except when there is some special reason for abstinence from them.*' Lest this statement be misunderstood, we would add that the reference is to things indifferent as a class, not to every specific *adiaphoron* individually. We do not mean that the Christian is free to use every indifferent thing, except when there is some special reason for abstinence, but rather that, of the whole class of things indifferent, the Christian is free to use any specific things except those in the case of which there exists some special reason for abstinence. If a particular material substance is known to be a dangerous, habit-forming narcotic drug, that is certainly a valid special reason for abstinence from that particular substance, but the decision that a consistent Christian walk requires abstinence from that particular thing must be made by the individual Christian, not by the church. If it be alleged that this position fails to safeguard the members of the church against harmful and dangerous habits, we reply that the contrary position dishonors the Holy Spirit and minimizes His work. Regeneration of the heart, sanctification of the life and enlightenment of the mind and conscience of Christian people by the Holy Spirit are realities, and we for our part believe they are far more powerful and effective than any man-made rules and regulations revised to supplement the Word of God.

Having stated and defended the foregoing principles, we wish to add three qualifying statements in order to avoid any possible misunderstanding:

17. Though it is not proper for ecclesiastical bodies to legislate concerning things indifferent, it is sometimes entirely legitimate for the civil government to do so. Civil legislation does not purport to bind the conscience, but only to control the conduct of citizens.
18. While it is not proper for church judicatories to make rules concerning opium or marijuana, for instance, it may be perfectly legitimate for a church session to reject an applicant for membership who uses one of these things, not because the use of these or any other material thing is sinful in itself, but because, in the particular case under consideration, the church session may decide that the degree, manner and circumstances of the use of a particular thing are such as to involve the actual commission of sin of such a nature as to render the applicant's profession incredible.
19. While it is not proper for church bodies to make rules concerning the use of things indifferent, it may be perfectly legitimate for a church judicatory to censure a church member for the use of something which is not sinful in itself,

when it is proved that in the particular case in question the use really involved the commission of sin. It is one thing to administer church discipline if and when real scandal occurs, and quite another to attempt to prevent its occurring by binding a universal man-made rule upon the consciences of the Lord's people.

Conclusion: The True vs. the False Doctrine

In conclusion, then, we may say that there exist a true and a false doctrine of the separated life. The Christian life must be a separated life, in the sense in which Scripture uses the term 'separate.' But this by no means implies that all that is meant by the separated life in common speech today is mandatory upon the Christian so far as his relation to his brethren is concerned. The differences between the true and false conceptions of the separated life may be shown by the following comparative table:

The Biblical Conception:

1. Obligatory separation from conduct which is sinful in itself.

The Popular Conception:

1. Obligatory separation from conduct which is sinful in itself and from certain conduct not sinful in itself.

The Biblical Conception:

2. The seat of sin is the corrupt heart of fallen man; the use of no material thing can be sinful in itself.

The Popular Conception:

2. Sin is inherent in the use of certain material things, as well as in the corrupt heart of fallen man.

The Biblical Conception:

3. Conscientious free use, under God, of things indifferent. The conscience free from the commandments of men.

The Popular Conception:

3. Human prohibition of things indifferent. The conscience enslaved to the traditions and commandments of men.

The Biblical Conception:

4. Scripture the only standard of faith and conduct that can bind the conscience.

The Popular Conception:

4. Sufficiency of Scripture denied; other authorities added and regarded as binding the conscience.

The Biblical Conception:

5. Ecclesiastical legislation concerning things indifferent limited by Scripture.

The Popular Conception:

5. Ecclesiastical legislation concerning things indifferent extends beyond what Scripture warrants.

Departure from what Scripture teaches concerning the separated life is fraught with peril to the Christian church. The notion that sin is inherent in the use of material things is widespread in American fundamentalism today. The doctrine that the church has the right to decide for her members concerning the use of or abstinence from things indifferent appears to be very widespread, and very seldom challenged at the present day. Persons who have the courage to oppose publicly these two false doctrinal tendencies are likely to be attacked as being opposed to holiness and in favor of sinful license. The practice of ecclesiastical assemblies issuing authoritative pronouncements on all sorts of questions which Scripture places in the sphere of the individual Christian conscience, has become a notorious evil. Many in their zeal to have the church 'take a stand' on this, that or the other evil, quite forget that in some matters the Christian responsible, not to his brethren, but directly to his Lord, to whom alone the conscience can be subject. It is imperative that the churches rethink this whole problem and return to the solid rock of Scripture, and build solidly thereon. The alternative is a Gnostic doctrine of sin and a tyrannical, totalitarian church which destroys the God-given Christian liberty of her members. Our appeal is to the Word of God. Popular conceptions and ecclesiastical traditions are of no weight whatever in determining what we should believe and how we should live.

Many earnest Christian people are strongly opposed to the doctrines set forth in this article, and persons who proclaim these doctrines are likely to suffer considerable criticism, misunderstanding and reproach, but these are of little importance. Let us lay aside all prejudices and search the Scriptures to see whether these things are so. We may safely take our stand with Matthew Henry who wrote, commenting on Prov. 12:19, 'Be it observed, to the honour of truth, that sacred thing, that, if truth be spoken, it will hold good, and whoever may be disobliged by it, and angry at it, yet it will keep its ground; great is the truth, and will prevail; what is true will be always true, we may abide by it, and need not fear being disproved and put to shame.' The truth of the Lord endureth forever, and that truth is sure to prevail over error in the end.