Why We Stand
BIBLICAL SEPARATION

Throughout its history the Free Presbyterian Church, in obedience to the word of God and by the grace and help of God, has sought to adopt a separatist position in matters personal and ecclesiastical. Personal separation from an ungodly and corrupt world system, and ecclesiastical separation from apostate and ecumenical religion are not merely the private ideology of our denomination. They are an honest endeavour to obey that which the Lord has made known in His word as His mind and will for His people. At this time of celebrating, to God's glory, the fiftieth anniversary of our denomination, it is important to emphasize that our separatist position is firmly grounded on Scripture. To put it even more succinctly, separation from evil is the inevitable result of a proper understanding of the cardinal doctrines of the gospel.

First, being a separated church is in reality the outworking of the doctrine of sanctification. "To be separate" is essentially the root meaning of the noun *sanctification*, a noun that is derived from the verb *to sanctify*. *To sanctify* basically means "to set apart" or "to separate," though, in its wider use in Scripture, the verb signifies the concepts of cleansing and purging. But the original and strict sense of sanctification is, as noted, "to be separate." According to 1 Thessalonians 4:3 sanctification is the will of God for His people. Therefore, since "to sanctify" is "to separate," separation from every form of evil is the will of God for His church. Seeing the link between separation and sanctification is vital to any understanding of the scriptural validity of the separatist position that Christ's church must occupy.

Second, the sanctification and separation of the church arises from the Lord's eternal purpose to elect a people for Himself out of fallen humanity. Note in Ephesians 1:4 Paul's great statement of God's purpose in choosing or electing a people: "He hath chosen [or elected] us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy." The teaching of the Spirit is clear: The decree of the election of sinners to everlasting life results in their being holy. That is, they are a separated people because the original word for "holy" is this same word that signifies sanctification and therefore separation. Since election is to be chosen unto holiness or sanctification, the separation of the church from both the moral and spiritual pollution of this age is according to the mind and will of God.

Third, the Scriptures reveal that in keeping with the eternal purpose of God in election, the goal of Christ's death was to separate His chosen people from the rest of humanity. Indeed, the work of Christ for His people, performed in obedience to the eternal decree, could not do otherwise than result in the separation of a people unto God. Ephesians 5:25–26 tells us that "Christ … loved the church, and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it." The Spirit's words are clear: The ultimate goal of Christ's redemptive work was to sanctify or separate the church. There is no greater anomaly than for a professedly redeemed person to remain unseparated from his sin. Christ died to save His people from or "away from" their sins. He died to separate them from sin to holiness, to separate them from sin unto Himself, in fact, for the end of separation is always unto Christ

and for the glory of Christ. Separation in the lives of God's people is therefore the inevitable fruit of Christ's death.

Finally, it is no surprise to discover that the experience of salvation is nothing other than God separating a people unto Himself. Solomon's declaration concerning Israel in 1 Kings 8:53 sums up very well what takes place as the Lord saves and gathers His people: "Thou didst separate them from among all the people of the earth." The Lord separates sinners to Himself by calling them out of fallen humanity and by applying to them all the sanctifying merit of Christ's work. It is such a people alone who constitute the church of God. Indeed, the very word *church* signifies the concept of being called out or being separated unto the Lord. The church is a company of "called-out ones." Therefore, in the very word *church* there is clearly the principle of separation from sin and separation unto Christ and holiness. Paul reminded the Roman Christians that they had been called to be saints or called to be "holy ones." The word for "saints" is derived from the verb *to sanctify*. Hence, the Lord's people, on their reception of the saving call of the gospel, are called to separation from all uncleanness, whether of a moral or spiritual kind. Separation, therefore, clearly expresses both the purpose and the success of God's saving grace. James' statement in Acts 15:14 about God's dealings with the Gentiles is always true of the salvation of sinners, irrespective of their background or nationality: "God … did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name."

I trust that it is clear then, that the separatist position our denomination has taken over the years rests firmly on the revelation of God's infallible will for His people to be a holy people. God's sovereign purpose to sanctify a people as a consequence of electing grace, Christ's redemptive work, and the saving power of the gospel all demand that the church of Jesus Christ be a separated company.

It is not easy to stand separated unto the gospel of God. It is a much misunderstood and misrepresented position. Many are the forces at work to have us retreat from it, even to repudiate it. But it is only as biblical separation is maintained and pursued that the purity of the gospel will be preserved. Acts 19:9 refers to the opposition and the resistance raised by unbelieving Jews against the fledgling church at Ephesus. As a consequence Paul took a very decisive but indispensable step—he "separated the disciples." He separated them from the spiritual apostasy and wickedness of the synagogue of the Jews. He obviously saw it as imperative in order to maintain the spiritual health of the young congregation in Ephesus. It was also the most effective manner of spreading the gospel witness. His vision and his stand were vindicated for within two years of separating the disciples from the evil of the synagogue, the gospel had spread throughout all of Asia. Separation results in the preservation of gospel purity and in the promotion of gospel power.

As we in the Free Presbyterian Church mark fifty years of being "separated unto the gospel of God" let us purpose therefore to pursue that same path in the future. It is the way demanded by the very doctrines of the gospel that we preach. It is the way that will continue to make the Free Presbyterian witness an effective and mighty tool in the hands of the Lord. ∎

Rev. John Greer is the minister of Ballymena Free Presbyterian Church, Northern Ireland.