The Bible Doctrine of the
Separated Life

A Study of Basic Principles

By JOHANNES G. VOS
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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. Inference 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.

1. Separation from Sin

Separation from sin is required of the Christian by the covenant of grace. The conditions of the covenant of grace are repentance and faith. The repentance which constitutes continuance in sin is not true repentance but a more relaxed 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, 1). That God requires separation from sin is the consistent teaching of all Scripture. Romans 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 temptation; 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 thy 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 adornment as soon as possible. For a retired missionary living in America to have an image of the Buddha in his home as a curiosity 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" (1 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. This 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 αἰὼν and κόσμος are frequently used, the latter being much the more common. This latter term is used in the New Testament with at least two entirely distinct meanings, of which examples may be cited as follows:

1. 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...
1 Cor. 5:9-10: Those that use the world, as not using it to the full...

2. 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 14:10: 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 1 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 idolators; 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 I 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 ye partakers of other men's sins: keep yourself 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 7:17.

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. 7:20-31.

But this I say, brethren, the time is short; it is necessary both that those who 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 a come, 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 inadequate 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.

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 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. "Whatever 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, 1 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; 1 Cor. 10:8; 1 Cor. 10:25-20), the observance of certain days (Rom. 14:5, 6), and such matters as marriage and celibacy (1 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 abstemiousness? Or should the Christian assert his freedom by a 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 inadmissible from sin, and therefore cannot possibly, under any circumstance, 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 this pursuit practically all of his time and strength, and makes it the supreme business and chief aim of his life, even above worshipping God and seeking His kingdom and righteousness, then in such a case and when exercised to such an intemperate extent, playing on the piano is sinful. The sin committed, however, is not the sin of piano playing but the sin of idleness. Thus we see that while certain circumstances may render the use of adulterous sinful by a particular person at a particular time or under certain circumstances, still this is very different from assigning 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 adulterous things, we can only entreat them to make a more careful study of the 14th chapter of the Epistle to the Romans. This doctrine is proved by Romans 14:14 and 1 Cor. 10:23. 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 bring 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 (drowning the punishment of eternal death, provided the use of carbolic acid is sinful in itself). Let no one say this is simply a reduction 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 necessary that if the use of any material thing 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 discern 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 1 Cor. 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 Romans 14:5 and 22.

One man eateth one day; another eateth every day alike. Let each man be fully assured in his own mind: ... Happy is he that findeth himself in such a situation as he approves. Since the Christian is declared to be free either to use or not to use things indifferent, it follows that any abstention 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 here translated "good" is the Greek term neuteron, which means "pleasant," "comely," or "noble," but cannot possibly mean "obligatory." The same 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.
The faith which thou hast, have thou to thyself before God.

If 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, let God be not旌owed, and God give thanks.

For none of us liveth to himself, and none dieth to himself.

Judge ye this rather, that no man put a stumblingblock to his brother's way, or an occasion of falling.

For if because of what thy brother is grieved, thou wilt not 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 Rom. 14: 1 Cor. 10: 23-32 are definitely addressed to the individual Christian and not to church assemblies or judicators. The singular number is used throughout. These passages, therefore, present 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 voluntary, 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 voluntary 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.

In Absence 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? This relation of Christian liberty to the conscience is proved by 1 Cor. 10: 23-29.

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 biddest 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 me 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 legitimate and 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 contamination 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 contradicory, 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 error, and from the teaching of 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.

V. The Separated Life and the Sufficiency of Scripture

The principle of the sufficiency of the 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 being prejudiced or otherwise unhonorable in themselves. The opinion of just which scientists — are authoritative and 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. Scripture 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 as harmful to the body, but science can never show that anything is sinful. Scripture alone can show that anything as harmful to the body, but science can never show that anything is harmful to the body. We must therefore determine on the conscience of man. What God has not clearly revealed, let the church not presume to determine. God grant that we may be preserved from error, and from the teaching of a clearer standard than the Bible, or a more complete set of moral laws than that contained in the Word of God!

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perience may show that certain conduct is harmful.
5. Science or experience can never show that anything is sinful.
6. Scripture teaches that what is really harmful is ordinarily sinful.
7. The decision whether science or experience shows that particular conduct is harmful must be made by the individual concerned, not by others.
8. 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 borderline between harmless use and harmful use. Scripture requires abstinence from that which is harmful, but it teaches that no material thing is sinful in itself (Rom. 14:1-4). In the very nature of the case the individual decision must be the judge of the extent of legitimate use in such a case. As 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 judiciary 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 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 folk-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 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 the error of absoluteism, but also to repudiate the sufficiency of the Word of God as the standard of morality, and are under all circumstances sinful, amounts to denying the sufficiency of Scripture and making human science an additional, coordinate authority.
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 its members and officers and members to abstain from 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, and not original in the church itself; it is not 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 acts 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 righteousness 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 no 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, by 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 authority 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 compel 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 its 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 coerce 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: (1) it must be proved that the act was actually committed by the person, and at the time and place specified in the charge; (2) 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.

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 are exceptions to 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 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 (1 Co. 13: 1). 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 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 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, Isaac not, nor even, nor truss (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 overcomimg the fleshly lusts, as we see in Gal. 5: 16:

But I say, Walk by the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh.

The whole passage, Gal. 5: 16-24, is a radical antithese 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 lived under the law, and that every Christian needs to go beyond Scripture and add the doctrines and commandments of men concerning things 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.

We have already shown that no material thing can be sinful in itself. Now if opium, mariahuana or any other material thing is to be regarded as an exception to this principle, the problem is raised as to what authority is competent to determine whether a given thing can be sinful in itself. There is, no doubt, general agreement among Christian people that such substances...
as opium and marihuana, 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, without 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 marihuana, 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 judicature were to enact a rule prohibiting the use of tea or coffee? We are far from holding that it is legitimate for Christ- 

nian 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. Muhlen 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, marihuana 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, as 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 it. We fully agree with the general opinion of Christian people that such substances as opium and marihuana 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 judicature. 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, for reasons of principle, if a church judicature were to enact a rule prohibiting the use of coffee or tea. 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. Muhlen 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, marihuana 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, as 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 it. We fully agree with the general opinion of Christian people that such substances as opium and marihuana 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 judicature. 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.

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man; the use of no material thing can be sinful in itself.

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

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

5. Ecclesiastical legislation concerning things indifferent limited by Scripture.

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 abstension 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 is responsible, not to his brethren, but directly to his Lord, to whom alone the conscience can be subject. It is imperative that the church re-think 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 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 Proverbs 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 disproved by it, and angry at it, yet it will keep its ground; grace 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 endures forever, and that truth is sure to prevail over error in the end.