
Biblical Standards in Ministry Partnerships

2 Corinthians 6:11-7:1⁷

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Theological compromise leading to church decline:

The erosion of truth in Europe that led to the ascendancy of the Catholic church and the dark ages...

The denial of truth in German liberalism that led to compromise and concord with the Nazis. Sadly, the German Baptist Churches were among the first...

The loss of confidence in the truth that has led to the modern church to become the world. Instead of going into the world with the gospel, the world has come into the church and destroyed the gospel.

The Troubled Relationship (v. 11-13)

¹¹ We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open. ¹² You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections. ¹³ In return (I speak as to children) widen your hearts al

The Leaders (v. 11)

Paul has open speech from an open heart. Because he has a Christian affection for them, he has said the things he wanted and needed to say. His frank discussions are not because he doesn't care for them but because his heart is open to them.

The Church (v. 12)

But the church has cautions and misperceptions from a restricted affection. They have closed up their affections, their heart to Paul. This has caused trouble in their relationship.

The Command (v. 13)

He speaks in tone as he would to children. His response? Open their hearts to wider and deeper affections. It is not merely an invitation. It is a loving command. Having an open to heart to those who are spiritually responsible for you, is a Christian necessity.

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The Forbidden Partnerships (v. 14-16a)

Why does Paul say what he does? Because they seem to be moving into improper partnerships as a church because they do not respect or have a proper affection for Paul.

¹⁴ Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? ¹⁵ What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? ¹⁶ What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God;

We have to pause and remind ourselves of how we handle texts. We always want to take the long-way around. The author's intent, the original audience and the Biblical development all are important. This prevents us from assuming our applications are what the original writer intended. Being sure that we work through these in the proper order and aware of our own frameworks and preconceptions is very, very important. It will affect how we begin to apply this text.

Context governs how we handle this. Paul has been dealing with the resistance and rejection of his Divinely authorized relationship with them. Both overtly and subtly he has appealed for reconciliation between them. He has taken the steps God requires; will they respond? How can they preach the message of reconciliation in the ministry of reconciliation when they are not partnering with Paul?

From both books, we know that the church was seemingly more connected to the world around it than to the Christian leaders who served. They were not only influenced by the unbelieving world, but seemed to be connected to it in formal ways. So, in the context Paul is showing them that the unbelieving world is estranged from Christ, alienated from God and needing to be reconciled. Now they have aligned themselves with the world in ways that, instead of drawing the world to Christ had sucked them into the world.

Its Clear Command (v. 14)

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers...

Where is the emphasis in this command?

It is a negative command with something clearly being forbidden. In whatever we understand the verb to mean, it clearly is forbidding certain kinds of interaction or connection with unbelievers.

What is the allusion in the command?

The allusion is to texts in the Old Testament where it was forbidden to yoke two different kinds of animals together to pull a cart, to pull a plow or to grind the grain. Further, Israel was not to be unequally yoked to Gentile nations, particularly for national defense or for conquest wars.

To whom is this addressed and why?

This is addressed to the church. Now, the question is: is it addressed to individuals in the church about their personal lives or is it address to the church as a corporate body made up of individuals? The command is addressed to the individuals gathered at Corinth but in reference to their work together in ministry in the gospel.

What in the context shapes our interpretation?

The appeal, the command to open their hearts in affection to Paul is in the context of their partnership and relationship. What follows also seems to be much more than just individual partnerships in marriage or in business. What follows in the questions is a kind of shock that the church at Corinth would be joining itself to unbelievers in some way.

The conclusion I draw is that the church was not to be partnered with unbelievers.

Unequal yoke is first and foremost in regard to ministry and who we minister with. This refers to our external partnerships. We are careful here who we do ministry with and who commend you to. This is not because we are just harsh or hard or narrow. It is because we have a direct command that lays a heavy weight on us to choose and commit well.

Also, we see an implication that unbelievers should not be used in ministry. If the first is in our external partnerships, then this is in our internal ministries. We do not hire musicians to fill out the band. We do bring in unbelievers to assist with our translating ministry to ASL. We do not hire people outside the church to do ministry and administrative work in the church. Partnerships in the ministry and in the spreading of the gospel can only be done with those who believe the Bible and uphold the gospel and the faith.

Anyone who denies the cardinal truths of the Bible or the basic holiness of the Bible should not be accepted as believers. Kent Hughes writes:

Just as throughout history, the evangelical church's greatest danger is from within. And this is where the opening command of our text intersects our lives: "Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers." The command is not (as is commonly thought) an injunction against marrying unbelievers or entering into contracted relationships with non-Christians (though both actions are un-Biblical), but rather a command not to be yoked together with those in the church who oppose the truth — unbelievers in the church.

The reason that we must understand "unbelievers" as opponents within the church is that in Paul's long argument that precedes and follows this command he repeatedly references his opponents in the Corinthian church as to their slanderous attacks on his apostleship (cf., e.g., 2:17; 5:12) as well as their bogus devotion in worshiping health and wealth and in preaching another kind of Jesus (cf. 11:1-4, 13-15, 20). (Hughes, p. 140)

The church should not be partnering with the world to try to serve Biblical ends.

Challenges the notion of co-belligerence...

Challenges social-justice partnerships...

Barnett, sees also an important aspect of this command in reference to the temples, worship and practices of false religions.

It is a simple analogy alluding to Deuteronomy 22:10, which forbade the yoking of ox and ass together, suggesting that 'the Christian is a different breed from the unbeliever and is forbidden an improper relationship with him'. There is no call here, as is often claimed, for Christian to separate from Christian for doctrinal or ethical reasons. Neither is Paul requiring a wholesale separation from unbelievers. If a Christian is married to an unbeliever the believer should not seek divorce. If invited to the home of an unbeliever he is free to attend. (Barnett, p. 129)

One final note. We also that just because a partnership is allowed doesn't mean it is compelled. There are many, many good ministries all over our area and all over the world who serve Christ, uphold the gospel and believe the faith. They serve wisely and honorably. We are so glad for that. However, there are other considerations of time, stewardship, resources and accountability that factor in to any of our ministry partnerships.

Its Convicting Examination (v. 14-16a)

Paul now presses this home in series of very sharp and penetrating questions.

For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? ¹⁵ What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? ¹⁶ What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God;

God's people need to realize and respect the very clear boundaries between believers and unbelievers

...righteousness with lawlessness?

...light with darkness?

...Christ with Belial?

...a believer shares with an unbeliever?

....the temple of God with idols?

What kind of relationships are in view?

Partnership? No formal associations...

Fellowship? No personal communion...

Accord? No ministry solidarity...

Portion? No shared finances...

Agreement? No covenant relationship...

Paul is driving home the essential differences between believers and unbelievers. As a consequence he is highlighting all the ways in which as a church we cannot be joined to unbelievers for the work of the ministry.

The Biblical Grounds (v. 16b-18)

Grounded primarily in being the dwelling place of God. This is the redemptive-historical story that evokes the exodus and exile along with God's promises that culminate in the New Covenant. We are now as God's people indwelt by God through the Spirit. This is both corporate and individual. Please don't make this an either-or. God indwells each person and God indwells the corporate body of the church.

as God said, "I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ¹⁷ Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, ¹⁸ and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty."

God Comes In (v. 16b)

We are the New Covenant people of God. As such we are indwelt by God. Now we tend to hear a sentence like this and think, "church (building)", not "church people". So what is commanded here is to the church, both local, us here; and global, all of us everywhere.

God's People Go Out (v. 17)

God's people are to be separate from the world as a people. God's people were to leave Egypt. The wilderness experience was God working to get the Egypt out of Israel. All through Israel's history they were forbidden to make alliances with the nations around them. The more Israel was in sin, the more they tended to do that.

This is not primarily talking about what some of us grew up with as "separation". There was both a good and bad aspect of that in those days. But now the call to the church and to Christians is deeply needed. The church as whole and believers in part are very, very Corinthian. They have God dwelling in them. But they are either going back to Egypt or are making alliances with the world.

God's People Come Home (v. 18)

Again, invoking the exodus and the exile, when God's people obey what Paul has commanded, then they are living out their identities as the sons and daughters of God. Then we will come home to God's welcoming arms both in this life and the one to come.

The Practical Implications (7:1)

How did this begin? 2 Corinthians 5:11 says "Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. " And now...

¹ Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.

Based on Promises

Paul sees the prior statements as being promises whose fulfillment is in this age. These promises are for us. And since they are for us, then there are entailments that go with them.

Decisive Practice

The verb here is a command that implies a one-time initial and decisive act that has ongoing effects. We have a responsibility to clean the mess up. That may require hard conversations, but it is still necessary.

Emerging Holiness

Obedience to this command brings about a mature holiness.

There is a corporate aspect to this. We need to cleanse ourselves and make further progress in practical holiness as a congregation. We tend to think of this in individualistic ways. But each individual's progress becomes the progress of the whole.

There is a personal aspect to this as well. We want to be pleasing to God in our outer and inner persons. We want to be making progress together with God's people. And we do so in reverent respect of God to whom we submit ourselves so that we obey Him.

Reflect and Respond

We must be perpetually vigilant. We must never allow those who oppose the gospel to ascend to leadership. We must yoke ourselves to the truth and the love of God. "For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised" (5:14, 15). (Hughes, p. 145)

Grow in your own personal holiness and godliness so that we as a church, as a gathered people bring practical Christian living to mature holiness. Now this certainly means that single Christians may not marry unbelievers – just not from this text. And, be wise in your contracted professional associations. But be sure we are using the Scriptures properly.

Please affirm with us as we seek to partner with those that God allows and we deem wise.

Have an open heart and affection for one another, even for your leaders who have to make hard decisions for you.