



TRUTH ON TOUGH TEXTS

EXPOSITIONS OF CHALLENGING SCRIPTURE PASSAGES

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THE UNEQUAL YOKE

2 CORINTHIANS 6:14—7:1

BE YE NOT UNEQUALLY YOKED TOGETHER WITH unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty. Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.

This passage is a “tough text” for several reasons. First, there has been some debate about who exactly the **unbelievers** are in the passage. Second, a question has also arisen as to the precise meaning of **unequally yoked**. Third, the application of the text is a further sticking point with readers because it is the narrowest statement in the New Testament on the believer’s separation from unbelievers.

There is yet another debate about this passage, namely, its authorship, which demands brief mention. There are some who deny that Paul even wrote this passage, that it was, in fact, inserted by another writer (the same one, in fact, who inserted chapters 10–13, according to some). In light of the overwhelming internal and external evidence of Paul’s authorship, however, Alfred Plummer says it well: “It is strange criticism that can see in all this the imagination of an anonymous inventor.”¹ (For readers who want more on this point, we have placed that discussion in the “Notes” area.²)

We will, therefore, confine the rest of our study to the major issues under four headings: the *identity* of the unbelievers, the *injunction* to separation, and the *implication* for the believer, followed by the closing *imperatives* from our Lord.

The Identity of the Unbelievers

Who exactly are the **unbelievers** in this passage? The Greek is *apistos*, which is comprised of *pistos* (faith) and *a-*, the

alpha-negative, which makes the word the polar opposite. The literal idea, then, is simply those without faith, but that, of course, is not specific. While the meaning seems obvious, several possibilities have been offered.

In a scholarly article in *Bibliotheca Sacra* (the Journal of Dallas Theological Seminary), William J. Webb discusses at length five possibilities of what *apistos* refers to here: 1) untrustworthy (or unfaithful persons); 2) Gentile Christians who do not keep the Law; 3) immoral people within the church community; 4) false apostles; and 5) non-Christians, pagans outside the church community.³ While the fourth view has its merits, and would certainly be an application of not being unequally yoked (as we will see later), it is the fifth view that has predominated through the ages.

All one need do, in fact, is examine the 12 times Paul used *apistos* in his two Corinthian letters. In the first instance (1 Cor. 6:6), he rebukes those believers for taking their disputes “before the unbelievers,” that is, before the pagan courts. In 7:12–15, he instructs both Christian husbands and wives to stay with an unbelieving spouse if the latter chooses to remain. In 10:27 he tells believers to sit with a clear conscience at a pagan unbeliever’s table and eat whatever is served, even meat that had been sacrificed to idols. In 14:22–24 (which is especially relevant in our day) Paul expressly told them that tongues (and other sign gifts by implication) were a sign not for believers but only “for them that believe not.” Coming to his second letter (4:4), Paul tells his readers the sovereign grace truth that “the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them.”

When we now come to the final two instances of *apistos* in our text, Paul’s meaning is unambiguously clear. The **unbelievers** Paul speaks of are the unsaved, those who are not in Christ, those outside of His Body, both the Church Universal and the Church Local. What, then, is our relationship to be with these unbelievers?

The Injunction to Separation

If the previous point is simply a tough little hill to climb, this one is positively mountainous. There have been no less than a dozen explanations for this injunction of not being **un-**

equally yoked together, of which we will examine only the most common ones in a moment.

The Greek, which is one of several instances of *hapax legomena* in this passage (words occurring only once in Scripture), is *heterozugeō*, a compound word made from *heteros* (another or different) and *zugos* (a yoke an animal wears). As most commentators observe, Paul's imagery comes right out of the Mosaic Law: "Thou shalt not plow with an ox and an ass together" (Deut. 22:10; cf. Ex. 19:19). The reason is obvious: the two animals are so diverse in their nature, gait, and power that plowing with them yoked together would not only be ineffective but potentially disastrous. We will return to this imagery a little later.

By far the most extreme position is what has been dubbed "Qumran-like Separation." Like the Qumran community—this was comprised of Essenes who prepared the Dead Sea Scrolls and separated themselves entirely from what they considered an unclean world—this view calls for minimal contact with unbelievers. This, of course, contradicts Paul's own admonition that while we should not keep "company with [sunanamignumi, mix together, have close connection] fornicators" or other unbelievers, he then adds "not altogether [pantos, wholly, entirely] . . . for then must ye needs go out of the world" (1 Cor. 5:9–10). How can we be witnesses to unbelievers, which is a repeated mandate for us, if we avoid contact with them whenever possible?

Another view of the unequal yoke is the taking of legal matters before the pagan courts. This, however, does not fit the context, which clearly refers to personal purity, which in turn has nothing to do with such legal proceedings.

By far the most popular view is that this is a direct reference to and a prohibition of a mixed marriage, that is, a believer marrying an unbeliever. This view certainly aligns with much of the biblical data. There are, for example, many references to this in the OT that set such a precedent,⁴ not to mention Paul's own clear command in the NT to marry "only in the Lord," that is, a believer (1 Cor. 7:39). This is further substantiated by the reason for such separation, namely, that a mixed marriage will more times than not weaken the believer. In the above Exodus and Deuteronomy passages, for example, the prohibition flows from the inevitable result of God's people being led into idolatry. In addition to all that, the term "yoking" itself is associated with marriage, as in the often used marriage text Mark 10:9: "What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder."

Now, while all that is compelling, we submit, however, that mixed marriage does not seem to be the primary *meaning* of the text (although it is certainly an *application* of the meaning, as we will see later). One reason this seems inappropriate is that Paul is addressing something that is *presently* true not just *potentially* true. In other words, if this is just mixed marriage, it could only be referring to what might happen in the future, not what already existed in the present.

Further, if this is mixed marriage, then the command **be ye separate** would, of necessity, have to refer to those who were already married and would demand that the believer separate from the unbelieving spouse, a direct contradiction of Paul's instruction to such a believer to remain with the unbeliever (1 Cor. 7:12–15).

Further still, the idea of mixed marriage results in Paul

writing to a very narrow group within the Corinthian church. It seems obvious that Paul's words apply to *everyone*, not just one small group. Besides, every issue in that problem-plagued church applied to everyone, not just a select group.

Similar to the mixed marriage view is one that considers this a reference to a believer entering a business partnership with an unbeliever since the "yoking" imagery pictures "work" and how incongruous certain animals (and people) are when yoked together. The obvious problem here, of course, is that it comes "out of left field." There is no indication whatsoever that this was an issue in Corinth, this idea is nowhere alluded to in any of Paul's letters, and like mixed marriage such an issue would apply only to a certain group.

One other common view here is that the unequal yoke refers to involvement in idolatry. "The most probable options," writes one scholar, "are visiting temple prostitutes and joining with pagans in temple feasts."⁵ This argument, however, hinges mostly upon the use of the word **idols**, which, as we will see, is used as one of five contrasts of the believer and unbeliever, not as the primary meaning.

We would, therefore, submit that what Paul had in mind here was not a specific *practice*, rather an underlying *principle*. In other words, the meaning is *implicit*, not *explicit*. He is not targeting just the couple who is about to get married when one of them is an unbeliever, or addressing only the believer who has been sitting down with his friend at a pagan feast, or any other such specific situation.

Paul's meaning is, we submit, the underlying *principle* of the believer's general separation from unbelievers in attitude and action. This seems to me to be the whole point of Paul's imagery of yoking together two different animals, as mentioned earlier. One Greek authority well says: "to go under one and the same yoke with someone else even though one does not have the requisite presuppositions."⁶ In other words, for two people who have the very opposite beliefs, values, goals, morals, worldviews, and so forth to have a close, covenant relationship is impossible and will inevitably lead to serious problems.

To make his point even stronger, Paul goes on to offer five analogies—they are all couched as a rhetorical question that screams "No!"—to demonstrate the polar opposite contrasts that exist between the believer and the unbeliever.

First, there is the contrast of *companionship*: **for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness?** The word **fellowship** is *metochē*, another instance of *hapax legomena* in this passage. It means sharing or participation. The believer simply cannot participate and share in the same things as the unbeliever any more than right (**righteousness**) can participate in wrong (**unrighteousness**), or any more than law can share in lawlessness. True companionship is impossible.

Second, there is the contrast of *communion*: **and what communion hath light with darkness?** The word **communion** is the familiar and important *koinōnia*, which speaks of a partnership, close union, and brotherly bond. It was used in secular Greek to refer to a common enterprise, a business partnership or association, and even to marriage, since it suggested a powerful common interest that could hold two people together. The NT usage is perhaps best expressed by Greek authority Kenneth Wuest: "joint participation in a

common interest or activity.”⁷ Again, this simply must not be the case of a believer with an unbeliever. Their interests and activities are as incompatible as **light** is with **darkness**.

Third, there is the contrast of *concord*: **And what concord hath Christ with Belial?** Here the key word is *sumphōnēsis*, where we get our English word “symphony,” and means unison and agreement. To use a musical term, then, there can be nothing but discord between the believer and unbeliever in the fundamental philosophies of life and conduct. There can no more be agreement between them than their can be between **Christ** and **Belial** (an ancient name for Satan that refers to the vilest of wickedness).

Fourth, there is the contrast of *calculation*: **or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel?** Here we see the Greek *meris* (**part**), a share or portion of something, such as part of a country (Acts 16:12) or portion of an inheritance (Col. 1:12). The believer and unbeliever neither await the same inheritance nor invest in the same things. Their calculations of worth are fundamentally at odds.

Fifth and finally, there is the contrast of *consensus*: **And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols?** The Greek behind **agreement** is *sunkatathesis*, which is still another instance of *hapax legomena* in the passage and means accord, compatibility, or consensus, as in voting the same way. Perhaps Paul had in mind the graven image Manasseh brought into the Temple (2 Kings 21:1–9) and how Josiah later destroyed such things (2 Kings 23:3–16). Or perhaps he was thinking of the abominations described in Ezekiel 8:3–18, among which were the women who were weeping for the Babylonian god Tammuz, the child of Ishtar. This was paralleled in other pagan societies. Among the Canaanites, the child’s name was Baal (child of Astarte); in Greek society his name was Adonis (child of Aphrodite); in Roman society his name was Cupid (child of Venus); and in Egyptian society his name was Osiris (child of Isis). This god was a great hunter and was the god of pasture, flocks, subterranean water, and vegetation. As the story goes of Adonis, he was killed by a wild boar but was allowed to spend six months a year with Aphrodite while the other six were spent in Hades. The same basic story was told of Tammuz. The apparent death of vegetation in the Middle East during the hot, dry summer months was, in pagan thinking, caused by Tammuz’s absence and his descent into the underworld. His followers, led by Ishtar, would weep and mourn his death for forty days, and in the spring he would return bringing the spring rains with him. Worship of Tammuz involved fertility rites such as the annual “divine marriage” of the king to the fertility goddess by way of the temple priestess. Such paganism plagued the Israelites for centuries and was still very much alive in Corinth in Paul’s day. But there is no compatibility between this and Christianity, and the believer should have no consensus with pagans.

All this demonstrates, we submit, that Paul’s underlying thought is the principle of the Christian’s separation from the world (and its inhabitants) in the sense that he allows nothing to compromise his attitudes and actions. As Paul goes on to write in verse 17: **Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you.** The word **separate** is *aphorizō*, which appears ten times in the NT, the most helpful of which is Matthew 25:32, where our Lord Himself speaks of

His rule on the earth at His return: “And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate [*aphorizō*] them one from another, as a shepherd divideth [*aphorizō*] his sheep from the goats.” Likewise, believers in the here and now must be distinct from unbelievers.

Why? Because as Paul then adds in 7:1: **let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.** The key word here is **cleanse**, which translates the verb *katharizō*, which, along with other words in this group, speaks of moral cleanness and being free of stain, spot, or mixture.

The Implication for the Believer

In keeping with the fact that this passage is not about a specific *practice*, rather an underlying *principle*, its application is broad. The passage is, in fact, far more powerful than it is commonly viewed. It serves as a blazing beacon of warning to believers. In light of how the Corinthians (not to mention the Israelites) were tainted in attitude and turned in action by pagans, it challenges us of how easily this can happen to us. Let us note a few practical applications in two categories.

First, the *practical* applications of this principle are obvious. Morally, of course, the separated Christian is not going to commit sexual sin, just as the Corinthians should not have revisited temple prostitution. Socially, neither is the godly believer going to join the drunken Super Bowl blowout at the local sports bar, just as the Corinthians should not have joined their friends at a feast in the pagan temple. While having a meal with an unbelieving friend in his home is an *opportunity*, the previous situation is an *outrage*.

Other practical applications include, as mentioned earlier, a believer marrying an unbeliever. There simply cannot be agreement here of ideals, priorities, values, and the like, and the thought of raising children in such an atmosphere of opposites is obviously fraught with difficulties. For much the same reasons, a mixed business partnership should be shunned. Further, a case can easily be made against a believer being a member of a society or lodge that is patently pagan in its rituals and practices. Sadly, we even have remnants of paganism in some of our cherished holidays.

Second, however, the *philosophical* applications of this separation principle are not so easily faced and accepted nowadays. To yoke together believers and unbelievers in spiritual matters is beyond disastrous, but such mixture is actually commonplace.

Take, for example, apostasy and false teaching. Now, let it be clear: we do not mean that we shun believers who do not hold the same view of the Millennium or separate from those who don’t use “the right” Bible translation. We mean here those who yoke themselves to unambiguous apostasy. Such yoking has occurred with evangelicals signing ecumenical documents, such as: *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium* (ECT) back in 1994, and *ECT II: The Gift of Salvation* in 1997. The latter, in fact, left the critical issue of “imputation” on the table unresolved, a doctrine that was at the core of the Reformation. Even more recent was *The Manhattan Declaration: A Call of Christian Conscience* (2009). With more than 150 signatures from Orthodox, Catholic, and Evangelical leaders, its purpose was to foster unified support of “the sanctity of life, traditional mar-

riage, and religious liberty.” It identifies those three groups as “Christians” and calls all these Christians to unite in “the Gospel.” But the fact is that these three groups say very different things about “the Gospel,” which means many are unbelievers. I personally was very grieved to see some names on this document who I highly regard but also encouraged that men such as Alistair Begg, Michael Horton, John MacArthur, and R. C. Sproul have stood firm and spoken out against it.

In much the same way we have many evangelicals today who have adopted wholesale a philosophy of church ministry that has been drawn exclusively from the same thinking we see in unbelievers. Prosperity teaching, catering to the “unchurched” (unbelievers), appealing to the culture, and other such philosophies are absolutely foreign to Scripture; to adopt them is to yoke oneself to unbelievers.

The Imperatives From Our Lord

In closing, let us consider our Lord’s own mostly positive words about our place in the world from John 17, His “High-Priestly Prayer.”⁸

First, we have been chosen “out of” the world: “I have manifested thy name unto the men which thou gavest me out of the world” (v. 6). Our Lord speaks here specifically of the disciples but also collectively of all the elect. Earlier in John’s account, Jesus said: “I have chosen you out of the world” (15:19). In both verses, “out of” is *ek*, a powerful little preposition that denotes separation from something even though still in it. Albert Barnes put it well: “I have, by choosing you to be my followers, separated you from their society, and placed you under the government of my holy laws.”⁹

Second, while we have been chosen out of the world, we are still “in” the world: “I am no more in the world, but these are in the world” (v. 11). Jesus departed into Heaven but left His servants. This was not abandonment, as He promised to send His Spirit to abide with them (and us) forever (14:16). As we will see in a moment, He has done so because He has much for us to do. But at the same time it means that we will face in this world trials and tribulations, even covert discrimination and overt persecution. As Jesus, therefore, earlier encouraged, “In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (16:33). Yes, we are in the world, but we are not *alone* in the world.

Third, while we are “in” the world, we still must ever keep in mind that we are “not of” the world: “They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world” (vv. 14, 16). This is true separation. We are no longer part of the world system or victims of our culture. We live above both. Again, we hear much about being “culturally relevant,” but we submit that this is another term for “conformity.” Being culturally relevant is to be a follower instead of a leader. Yes, we certainly must speak to the culture, but we must live above it. Instead of being culturally *relevant*, should we not be culturally *resistant*?

Fourth, we have been sent “into” the world: “I . . . sent them into the world” (v. 18). This reinforces the above. The idea in this little preposition (*eis*) is the exact opposite of *ek*; it pictures motion into a place or thing. Our Lord has sent us into the world, into our culture, not to coddle it, cower before it, or conform to it, but to preach Christ in it. Once our attitude toward the world is right, we are then ready to reach out to it with the only message that can transform it. One commenta-

tor well summarizes the issue before us:

Christians are in this world to be salt, to influence a decadent, anti-Christian society with Christ’s gospel, and to work and pray for the coming of God’s kingdom. They are not to yield to the surrounding culture and permit it to govern their lives, for then worldly influences will govern them.¹⁰

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NOTES

¹ *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1915), xiii.

² One reason for such conjecture concerning Paul’s authorship is the “abruptness” of the passage, that this strongly worded (even virulent) admonition comes in so abruptly that it must have been inserted by someone else. But while this passage does burst out of the larger context of 6:11–7:4, this is not damaging at all. In light of the context, as well as his earlier admonition in 5:17—“Therefore, if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new”—this passage is a logical development in Paul’s overall admonition to a church that had allowed itself to be enormously influenced by the pagans around it.

Another major challenge to Paul’s authorship is due to the several instances of *hapax legomena* (words occurring only once in Scripture) that appear in this passage. If we may be so blunt, however, this is silly. There are only six instances in this passage while there are no less than 50 in the whole letter. Further, *hapax legomena* is common in other powerful and blunt passages (e.g., 1 Cor. 4:7–13 has six and 2 Cor. 4:3–10 has four).

It should also be noted that such challenges actually come from liberal critics in the first place. The neo-liberal German theologian Rudolph Bultmann (1884–1976) is just one example. As I have scribbled elsewhere (*Winds of Doctrine: A Survey of Contemporary Theology* [Sola Scriptura Publications, 2014], 49):

[Bultman] was one of the pioneers of one aspect of biblical criticism called “form criticism,” which holds that the written documents of Scriptures are based upon oral tradition. Such stories following a certain pattern (or “form”) that has been handed down from one generation to another. So, according to Bultmann, the gospel writers [for example] did not write actual historical events. Rather, they simply collected and edited material and wrote the way the church traditionally *understood* the events. In other words, the gospels are not historical fact (not even what Jesus said). Rather they are just exaggerations of the facts by the Early Church and are full of myth. He was famous, then, for “demythologizing the Gospel.” To Bultman, “the world picture of the New Testament is a mythological world picture” [Rudolph Bultmann, *New Testament Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, translated and edited by Schubert M. Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 1], and so we must do away with all the myth that is in them.

Others who challenge Paul’s pen in this passage would appear on any who’s-who list of liberalism: Adolf Jülicher (1857–1938), Günther Bornkamm (1905–1990), Dieter Georgi (1929–2005), and Roman Catholic priest and scholar Joseph Fitzmyer (1920–).

³ William J. Webb, “Who Are the Unbelievers in 2 Corinthians 6:14?” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149/593 (Jan. 1992).

⁴ E.g., Gen. 24:3, 37; Ex. 34:10–16; Deut. 7:1–5; Josh. 23:6–13; etc.

⁵ William J. Webb, “What Is the Unequal Yoke in 2 Corinthians 6:14?”

- Bibliotheca Sacra* 149/594 (April–June 1992).
- ⁶ Gerhard Kittel, Ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1964, 2006), Vol. II, 901.
- ⁷ Kenneth Wuest, *Word Studies in the Greek New Testament*, electronic edition by Logos Library Systems, comment on Philippians 2:1.

- ⁸ Excerpted from the author's third daily devotional—*Seek Him Early: Daily Devotional Studies on Knowing, Loving, and Serving Our Lord Jesus Christ*—which is being prepared for publication.
- ⁹ *Albert Barnes' Notes on the Bible*, comment on Jn. 15:19.
- ¹⁰ Simon J. Kistemaker, *Baker New Testament Commentary: 2 Corinthians* (Baker, 1997, 2007), 235.

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