

An Exegesis of 2 Corinthians 6:14-17 With Practical Applications

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Introduction

In his second letter to the Corinthian Christians, Paul reemphasizes his concern, frustration if you wish, about the level of spiritual maturity of his readers. This lack of maturity led them to problems with unionism and syncretism. In the first letter he noted the congregation's insensitivity towards and continued participation in pagan celebrations and feasts. Now he found it necessary to reassert his place as a minister of the gospel (2 Corinthians 10), for the Corinthians were tolerating those whom he calls "super-apostles," false prophets setting forth a different gospel because they had a different spirit (2 Corinthians 11).

These "super-apostles" may well have been Judaizers, for Paul compares their boasts about their ancestry with his own ancestry (2 Corinthians 11:18-28). At any rate, they were neither coworkers with Paul nor friends of the gospel. And Paul grieved over the lack of spiritual discernment on the part of the Corinthians.

Immediately before our section, Paul stressed that he was an ambassador for Christ, urged them to be reconciled to God (5:20), reminded them how completely he had opened his heart to them (6:3-11), and urged them to open up to him (6:12-13).

The Text

Μὴ γίνεσθε ἑτεροζυγοῦντες ἀπίστοις· τίς γὰρ μετοχὴ δικαιοσύνης καὶ ἀνομία, ἢ τίς κοινωνία φωτὶ πρὸς σκότος; τίς δὲ συμφώνησις Χριστοῦ πρὸς βελιάρ, ἢ τίς μερὶς πιστῶ μετα ἀπίστου; τίς δὲ συγκατάθεσις ναῶ θεοῦ μετὰ εἰδώλων; ἡμεῖς γὰρ ναὸς θεοῦ ἐσμεν ζῶντος· καθὼς εἶπεν ὁ θεὸς ὅτι

ἐνοικήσω ἐν αὐτοῖς καὶ ἐμπεριπατήσω,

καὶ ἔσομαι αὐτῶν θεός,

καὶ αὐτοὶ ἔσονται μου λαός.

διὸ ἐξέλθατε ἐκ μέσου αὐτῶν

καὶ ἀφορίσθητε, λέγει κύριος,

καὶ ἀκαθάρτου μὴ ἄπτεσθε·

καὶ ἐγὼ εἰσδέξομαι ὑμᾶς

Textual Notes

Verse 14:

Don't ever be mismated with unbelievers under the same yoke. For what do righteousness and lawlessness have in common? Or what close relationship exists between light and darkness?

Μὴ γίνεσθε – Present imperative to show a permanent prohibition

ἑτεροζυγοῦντες – (hapaxlegomenon) from ἕτερο – another

ζυγέω - to yoke

This periphrastic use of the present participle pictures a person trying to place a yoke on two different animals. Two kinds of animals need two kinds of yokes, so to try to put two different kinds of animals under one yoke would result in a mismatch. *Note:* KJV's "unequally yoked" is open to misunderstanding. The issue is not inequality, but a difference in kind. Thought through to its application in the field, two different animals would not be able to pull equally if one is in the wrong kind of yoke.

Different commentators try mightily to translate this into good, honest English, with varying degrees of success. Meyer does well by writing, “Do not become mismatched yoke-fellows with unbelievers.” Compare that with Lenski’s “heterogeneously yoked up with,” or in Kittel, (Don’t) “go under one and the same yoke with someone else even though one does not have the requisite presuppositions.”

Paul’s prohibition of being mismatched under the same yoke is a figure from Old Testament ceremonial law (Deuteronomy 22:10, Leviticus 19:19), where God prohibited using a clean and unclean animal in tandem. So the Corinthians were to abhor the syncretism and unionism that they had allowed. They and the Judaizers could not pull together.

μετοχή – (hapaxlegomenon) “sharing, participation (as a derived meaning)”

Kittel considers this word a synonym of κοινωνία

“What sharing (is there) between righteousness and lawlessness?”

“What do righteousness and lawlessness have in common?”

δικαιοσύνη – an associative-instrumental dative (Robertson)

Note that we are not just considering the crass, outward pietism of the Pharisees (or Judaizers, for that matter), but the righteousness which is by faith in the gospel.

κοινωνία – root: κοινός – “common” – our word for communion, fellowship, participation

φωτὶ – a dative because of the influence of κοινωνία (Robertson, Moulton)

πρὸς σκότος – πρὸς with accusative to denote relationship (Robertson)

In contrasting light to darkness one may translate, “What close relationship exists between light and darkness?” The implied answer is that there is and can be none.

Verse 15:

Or what concord does Christ have with Satan? Or what does a believer share with an unbeliever?

δὲ – continuative, rather than adversative

συμφώνησις – “agreement, concord” – root denotes a fitting together, hence, harmony

βελιάρ – a name for the devil

According to Arndt-Gingrich this is possibly also a name for the Anti-christ, though Kittel and this author doubt it.

μερίς – “part, hence portion”

The sharp contrasts that Paul is evoking by asking about συμφώνησις between Christ and Satan, and μερίς between believer and unbeliever are heightened when one remembers that Christ represents and is truth. Satan is a liar and the father of lies. Can one ever harmonize the truth and falsehood? Can both be right and acceptable? Can both be welcome in a house of worship? And what about believer and unbeliever? They surely do not share the same mind-set. One is heavenly, a gift from God. The other is worldly, enslaved by sin. How can one conclude that the two sides have much in common which needs to be explored?

Verse 16:

What agreement does God’s temple have with idols? For we certainly are the temple of the living God. As God said, “I shall dwell with them and shall walk among them. (And) I shall be their God, and they certainly will be my people.”

συγκατάθεσις – (hapaxlegomenon) “agreement, union; resolution”

ἡμεῖς γὰρ ... ἔσμεν – ἡμεῖς in position of prominence at beginning of phrase, with the verb ἔσμεν following, puts emphasis on the subject: “We certainly are ...”

ναὸς θεοῦ – not just *a* temple, but *the* temple: a definite subject has a definite predicate nominative

εἶπεν ὁ θεὸς ὅτι – ὅτι recitative

Verse 17:

“Therefore come out from the midst of them, and be separate,” says the Lord. “Do not touch what is unclean; and I will receive you.”

διὸ – since it is true that God dwells with believers and walks among them, that he is their God and they, his people, then God’s people will have a definite reaction to those who bring lies.

ἐξέλθατε – aorist imperative, showing a punctiliar action: they were to come out once. They would not need to keep coming out.

This going out is not to be understood only in the local sense, but also in the sense of breaking off fellowship. Spiritually, they would part their ways and no longer participate in worship together.

ἀφορίσθητε – roots: ὁ ὄρος – boundary; τὰ ὄρια – territory;

ἀπο ὀρίζω – to separate (here, aorist pass. imper.)

As with the preceding imperative, so here, be separate once for all. It need not, should not, be something that needs to be done again and again. Kittel: The attitude of Christians must be as follows: If God separates, believers have to accept this and separate themselves, as a people of salvation, from the people of perdition.

ἄπτειθε – present imperative – active: “to light,” middle: “to touch”

This phrase ends the reference to Isaiah 52:11. The last line of verse 17 is a reference from Ezekiel 20.

Exegesis

A question which needs to be answered is, “Who are the unbelievers that Paul speaks of in verse 14? Are they the pagan worshipers of 1 Corinthians or the Judaizers of 2 Corinthians?” It would be easy to point to the pagan practices and celebrations of 1 Corinthians and say that Paul excluded putting on a yoke of fellowship with them. But that does not say enough. The syncretism in Corinth was not limited to mixing Christianity with paganism. It included tolerance of heresy labeled by the Judaizers as super-fine Christianity.

Paul in response labeled the Judaizers as unbelievers. Why? These were not erring Christians; they were confirmed in their error. They preached another gospel, and the Corinthians listened (2 Corinthians 11:4). Instead of trusting in God’s forgiving grace in Christ, they preached the necessity to comply with Old Testament code which though given by God, would not result in gospel righteousness, but lawlessness.

And so Paul compares the faith in the sweet gospel of Christ with the perverted consequences of the Judaizers. The only conclusion to draw was that the two could not stand side by side. No syncretism was possible. The two sides were opposites. Any attempts to reconcile would destroy faith in gospel righteousness. Hence, the Corinthians were not to worship with the Judaizers, nor were they to set the gospel up with the false teachings of the Judaizers, with the Corinthians subjectively gleaned what they considered the best from the two camps. Paul could not tolerate it and neither would the Judaizers.

In regards to the five questions Paul poses, they may be classified this way: Questions one and two deal with separation between salvation and destruction (righteousness and wickedness; light and darkness); Question three deals with the separation of Christ and Satan; Questions four and five deal with separation between the saved and the destroyed (believer and unbeliever; the temple of God and idols).

Each question points out that the gospel is incompatible with the message of the Judaizers. Can gospel righteousness be combined with lawlessness? May it never be! And lawlessness is lawlessness, whether we speak of the one extreme of license and antinomianism, or whether we speak of the verdict of “guilty” spoken over those who bask in presumed merits of work righteousness. Hence, any mingling of gospel righteousness and lawlessness would be at the expense of the gospel.

Likewise, light and darkness are opposites. They have nothing in common. The application: have nothing to do with the Judaizers.

Christ and Satan can reach no concord, no peace treaty. How could the Corinthian Christians find agreement with those who relied on their own merit to make them “super-apostles”?

What does the believer share with an unbeliever? In the common matters of this world, there may be much: sports interests, business pursuits, etc. But when it comes to the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the believer and unbeliever are poles apart. For the Corinthian Christians to be yoked with the Judaizers could only result in them pulling against each other, pulling in opposite directions.

Paul is not speaking of incidental contact with the Judaizers or, for that matter, other unbelievers. We live in this world and are in contact with more than believers alone. Paul is speaking of worship and religious instruction. What the Judaizers had to offer spiritually was incongruous to faith in the gospel.

What agreement does God’s temple have with idols? For we certainly are the temple of the living God. Since we are the temple of the living God through faith in Christ, what are the Judaizers? They are mere idols, parading around as if they were legitimate.

So why would a believer seek fellowship with idols when by grace he has fellowship with God? The Corinthians had this fellowship through faith and the gospel righteousness which accompanied it. God lived with them and walked with them (a reference to Leviticus 26:11f). Though they could not see God’s presence, Paul wanted the Corinthians to cherish that fellowship highly.

In fact, they were to treasure that fellowship with God so highly that they would come out from the influence of the Judaizers and be separate. Again, Paul is not describing public shunning of unbelievers, doing business only with believers or having only Christians as friends or acquaintances. But in terms of worship and instruction, the Corinthians could not tolerate the continued presence and influence of the Judaizers. That influence could serve as the fulcrum for exerting leverage to sway the believers away from gospel righteousness and the fellowship that comes from being God’s child through faith.

“Don’t touch what is unclean and I will receive you,” is not an action/reaction statement. All of verse 17 except for the final phrase “and I will receive you” is a quote of Isaiah 52:11. “I will receive you” comes from Ezekiel 20. Getting out, being separate, touching nothing unclean go together. The believer who knows of God’s gracious offer of fellowship will heed these warnings. Because through the gospel they had gained much, they should beware of all that could spell loss for them. “I will receive you” comes from Ezekiel 20 where the Lord promises to restore his people who had lapsed into idolatry. God’s faithfulness was true then and Paul said it was true for the Corinthians as well. Yes, they had given an audience to the Judaizers. Yes, they had listened attentively. But though the Judaizers had gained a foothold, though destructive deception had taken place, the God of mercy and forgiveness was there with all the patience and forgiveness that had been shown to his stubborn and foolish people of the Old Testament.

Likewise Paul was not ready to cast off the Corinthians or to call on the Lord to stoke up the fires of hell on their behalf. What Paul stood ready to do was to proclaim the Word, useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16).

Principles

The principles which this section of verses sets down would include:

- 1) By grace God has made us different from the unbelieving world. Although it is true that we were born sinners and that we continue to daily sin much, through faith which the Holy Spirit has placed in us we now have new life and have a new, God-oriented perspective to both God and also to the sinful world around us.
- 2) Therefore, being yoked up in fellowship with those whose beliefs compromise the gospel is wrong. What false teacher or false teaching could bring us closer to our Savior? Consequently, we must avoid unionism with false teachers and must avoid the temptation to try to harmonize doctrinal differences at the expense of the truth of God's Word.
- 3) God commands us to get out of situations of unionism and syncretism, recognizing the difference between erring brothers and those in error. Note that Paul did not first suspend fellowship with the Corinthians and then call on them to suspend fellowship with the Judaizers. Nor did he set a deadline for them to act. But with the Judaizers it was a different matter. He called them unbelievers from the outset.
- 4) For those who have erred, who have fallen into the snare of tolerating syncretism or unionism, and who come to repent, God offers the promise of his forgiveness.

Some have tried to apply principles which are not in fact to be found here:

- 1) God does not direct Paul to condemn all that appears "worldly." To the extreme it would call us to imitate the Amish. To lesser measures it would result in highly subjective opinions and resulting suspicions about the sanctification of our fellow believers. Don't judge in areas of adiaphora.
- 2) Paul does not condemn mixed marriages by these verses. That would go completely against his inspired counsel in 1 Corinthians 7:16 where he asks, "How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?" We must surely counsel those contemplating marriage about the troubles and temptations that accompany marriage to one who does not share our faith. But can we condemn those marriages or excuse the believing party for giving up on such a marriage? No.

Application

The accusation which at least in part prompted this paper was that our Synod sinned in the matter of Reaching Out: specifically this section has been quoted repeatedly to prove that we were guilty of idolatry by improperly by hiring an outside agency to teach us technique for raising money. A second charge was that it was a sin to use the money raised on buildings instead of for people. Although this latter accusation would not be difficult to address, it does not fall under the scope of this paper.

This writer makes no pretensions that this paper is the definitive apology for the WELS in regards to charges of sin with Reaching Out. He has not been privy to all the facts or correspondence that have taken place, nor does he feel he needs to know or wants to know. We have elected brothers to serve as officers. Those entrusted with specific offices have the obligation to know and act.

But it is quite possible and quite proper to dig into this section to see what Paul really says and what he doesn't say. Let us see whether this section has been used legitimately by those who say we have sinned.

But before we look at this specific issue, let us look at where our Lutheran Church has been. A number of times we have been called on to decide whether a situation involved compromise of doctrine by unionism or syncretism, or whether the situation was simply a matter of exercising Christian liberty (an adiaphoron).

First, let us consider the times of the Reformation. Luther's German *Messe* would be an example. Remember, he had called the Pope the Antichrist. He had called the Roman Catholic Mass an abomination. Yet

he did not condone a wholesale purging of all that smacked of Roman Catholicism. He revised the liturgy. Stained glass and pipe organs, for example, remained. Luther was truly a re-former. No doubt Luther appeared mismated under the same yoke with the Antichrist in the eyes of the fanatics. Luther was using Roman Catholic methodology, their technique if you will, for worship to build up God's kingdom. Was it an act of idolatry? Was it that Luther did not trust that God could supply something better, something purer than that which had been used in the past? No, Luther was dealing in a matter of adiaphora. Others could not accuse him of sinning for revising the Mass, nor could he insist that others must worship in the same manner that he did.

In our more recent history, our congregations with Christian Day Schools have had to think through the offer of subsidized milk programs for our students. Does participation in a government milk program mismatch us under a yoke of fellowship with the government? The government and we, as Christians, share the common concern that our youth grow up strong and healthy. Our worship and our beliefs are not changed. The government is not in a position to force us to compromise our faith. The offer falls in the area of an adiaphoron. As a result, many have gone into the program, while some have stayed out. Both sides proceed without labeling the other as weak or sinning. Some may have concerns about the issue from the standpoint of the U.S. Constitution and the separation of church and state. That is a civil concern. However, the mandated procedures clearly disallow using any milk subsidy to further our religious beliefs. And Paul is not commanding us to get out of a subsidized milk program as an unclean thing.

Bible translations are another thing. Does our use of the NIV in our worship and in our materials make us mismated under a yoke of fellowship with the Reformed? Let us remember that the whole area of Bible translations puts us in a field where there is room for a lot of highly subjective opinion about which translation is best. Our faculty at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary supplied input in the translating process for the NIV, and it continues to give editorial comment for revisions. Has the result been unionism in our worship or syncretism of Reformed theology into Lutheran theology? No. It is true that unfortunate translations of specific verses make teaching the truly biblical, hence Lutheran, truth more difficult in those verses. We need to deal with imperfection in translations until something better comes along. Let's be consistent by remembering that there are a number of weaknesses of translation in the KJV as well. Our forefathers who had to work through the changeover from German to English saw the shortcomings of the KJV vs. Luther's translation. But the collective decision was to use the KJV. So also today the consensus is to use the NIV for worship and materials. But, because it is an adiaphoron, we do not force its use by all.

Many of us have used other translations (RSV, NASB, TEV) when we felt that the Greek or Hebrew was conveyed better. The use of other translations is not a sin. Only when a weak translation or mistranslation is used to defend error do we rightfully speak up to defend what God communicates in the original languages.

Let's look also at our activity in evangelism. We want to equip our lay-people to share the good news that Jesus is the world's Savior. To accomplish that goal of training our people we have borrowed techniques from others. Without judging the merits or demerits of a particular approach, we may ask whether the injunction of 2 Corinthians 6:14-17 forbids using someone else's technique. We would again have to say, "No."

Our Synod is involved in the noble task of offering insurance for our called workers' health. Can this be contracted out? If we do it in-house, are we permitted to use techniques from this world?

One may get around to asking, "Must the WELS constantly re-invent the wheel for it to be properly round?" If we must, we must also ask whether we become mismated under a yoke of fellowship by quoting R.C.H. Lenski, James Dobson or Bob Jones.

And so with the issue surrounding Reaching Out. Our hiring of Community Counseling Service does not *ipso facto* mean we were guilty of sin. They were not hired because we failed to trust that the Lord would give results. The Conference of Presidents, which oversaw Reaching Out, was very concerned about maintaining scriptural principles. Could the program have been accomplished in-house? This writer is in no position to say, nor does he intend to over simplify the process, but it appears questionable whether it would have been better stewardship to hire, train, use and fire a staff for a program that had a definite life-span. We need to recognize that our officials saw advantages to going with an outside service at the time.

Did hiring Community Counseling Service lead to a compromise of our confession of faith? Concern has been expressed about the methodology used: namely, solicit large commitments from those capable of making them, then use their example to stimulate larger commitments from the general membership. Some may question the order, preferring:

gospel presentation, leading to a call to give, relating finally how others have responded (and perhaps leave this third part out).

The two are by no means mutually exclusive! I would be greatly surprised if contacts for the initial gifts were done in any other way than gospel motivation! And is there biblical precedent for pointing out the generosity of others before making a request for offering? Indeed there is, and in 2 Corinthians, no less. Check out Paul's procedure and you'll notice in chapter 8:

- 1) he points out the extreme generosity of the Macedonian Christians (verses 1-5);
- 2) he asks the Corinthians to grow in the grace of giving (verses 6-7);
- 3) he seeks to compare their sincerity with the Macedonians (8);
- 4) he gives the gospel motivation, "You know the grace of ..." (9).

This procedure was given by Paul under the direction of the Holy Spirit who did not err in directing Paul to raise funds this way. Nor is a distinction to be made that Paul was here raising donations for people, not a building fund. One may wonder, if Paul were to write to us today in the vein of 2 Corinthians 8, whether all would take it in the spirit in which it was given.

Concern has been expressed about making some memos "confidential," as if confidentiality is used exclusively in connection with sin. This writer feels, again, that this paper would go too far afield from the intent of this paper if this issue were to be resolved. Agenda committees could, if they feel it is warranted, assign a paper which would address the issue of confidentiality as it relates to the repeated references to Luke 12:1-3. But let it be said that there is room in the life of the Christian for confidentiality in areas other than sin.

In charging the WELS with sin, the point was made that this endeavor of sanctification was different from purchasing a computer or pouring concrete. Perhaps this issue seems to be on a grander scale than deciding between a potluck dinner or having outsiders cater it, grander than deciding whether members can re-shingle the roof or if an outside company should be contracted. The issue remains that with Reaching Out, principles were followed which have been followed previously and use of 2 Corinthians 6:14-17 is a misapplication.