

Separate or Integrate: How should Christians relate to Unbelievers?

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How should Christians relate to the unbelievers around them, by separating from them or by integrating with them? This is an important and very practical question, one that is taken up and partially answered in Paul's two letters to the Corinthians, but it is not always as easy to maintain this biblical standard in life as one may suppose. It may call for a sacrifice of self to be of benefit to others.

On the one hand, separation is taken up in 2 Corinthians 6:14-17. There we read, v.14, "Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers." The imagery here is taken from two dissimilar animals, such as a horse and an ox, hitched together in an ill-advised attempt to get them to pull a heavy weight or plough a field. Because of the exceptional differences between them in body mass, in their starting and stopping times, etc., these animals could not effectively get the job done but could only pull each other apart. Even if such an arrangement should work in some of the lighter tasks, it could never succeed in the heavier ones which are bound to come along, for then these animals would destroy each other.

The point is that the believer and unbeliever are too different from each other, both in outlook and commitment, ever to work together effectively in any kind of binding partnership, whether it is in marriage or in business. Oh, they might agree in minor matters – and from that they might assume that the partnership could prosper also in the weightier things – but those heavier tasks are inevitable, and those are the ones which will destroy both them and their working relationship. Better to learn this lesson beforehand and so avoid that painful, destructive and utterly unnecessary grief altogether!

Paul goes on in this passage, vv.14-16, to draw out five very graphic contrasts: (a) what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? (b) what communion has light with darkness? (c) what accord has Christ with Belial? (a synonym for Satan) (d) what part has a believer with an unbeliever? and (e) what agreement has the temple of God (see 1 Corinthians 6:19) with idols? These are penetrating arguments, and the only possible answer in every case is "None, absolutely none!" If we see the overwhelming point of all this, let us not suppose that any active and intimate partnership of believers and unbelievers could ever succeed.

Late in nineteenth century America a movement known as fundamentalism sprang up in reaction to the spreading liberalism of the day. Some of the most enlightened minds of the evangelical world contributed papers as a means of drawing Christians back to the Bible, to the inspired Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, and of motivating them to stand firmly on this one and only infallible Word of God. Moving into the twentieth century, however, fundamentalism changed and moved in an entirely new direction. It no longer focused on drawing Christians back to the Bible, but on separating from everyone, even from other professing believers, who did not see and practise everything as they did.

It should be noted that this was not what Paul argued for in 2 Corinthians 6 when he wrote of Christians not being unequally yoked together with unbelievers. To be yoked with someone is to engage in a shared partnership of activity; it does not rule out all interaction with them. With other believers, we are “to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). With those who profess faith in Christ, but do so hypocritically (people who are subject to church discipline), we are not “to keep company” (1 Corinthians 5:9-13). With unbelievers in the world outside of the Church, we may and must have some meaningful contact. To cut off all unbelievers, regardless of how they live, the Christian “would need to go out of the world” (v.10), and that is a course which God never intended for us. Indeed, the great commission calls us to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature (see Matthew 28:18-20).

This brings us, on the other hand, to the subject of integration which is taken up in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23. Paul was wholly committed to the great commission, travelling extensively and seizing every opportunity available to him to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ to all who would listen. This, after all, is the means that God has ordained in reaching unbelievers for Christ. The apostle understood that such preaching could be profitable only if the Holy Spirit mixed the word with faith in those who heard it. But he also knew that he himself had to offer his best, relating to those hearers and identifying with them as much as he could without compromising the message he so boldly declared. He wrote, v.19, “For though I am free from all men” – he would not submit to any beguiling influence or effort on their part to control him – “I have made myself a servant to all” – he would place their needs before his own, and for what purpose? – “that I might win the more.” This is biblical integration, not going into partnership with unbelievers as

if the people of God could ever work as a team with them, but presenting Christ to them respectfully and in the most winsome way possible in order to rescue them from Satan's grip. We are limited in what we can do *with* unbelievers, that is true, but, surely, there are countless things that we can do *for* them!

Paul continues in this same passage, vv.20-22, to offer five concrete examples of what he did to reach men for Christ: (a) to the Jews he became a Jew (he identified with their culture which he knew so well); (b) to those who were under the law – well, he too was a sinner, a sinner saved by grace who endeavoured to reach out to other sinners; (c) to those who were without law he sought, without compromise, ways to appeal even to them; (d) to the weak, knowing how weak he was in himself, he acknowledged himself to be weak and even boasted of his infirmities (2 Corinthians 12:9); and (e) finally, he summarizes it all when he tells us, "I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some." Why all this repetition when he might just have given us his concluding statement? It is to emphasize how we must seek to relate to people, to all people whoever they may be and in whatever ways we can, if we care to win them to the Saviour. Again, this is biblical integration.

Oh, Paul knew alright the offence of the cross, what a stumbling block it was to Jews and foolishness to Greeks, but he was also determined that by the grace of God he would not present himself an offence to either of them. He knew that he could impress many people by engaging them with philosophical dialogue, but he approached them, rather, "not with persuasive words of human wisdom," but simply and clearly so that their faith "should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God" (1 Corinthians 2:4,5). He would try to fit in, in other words, living like them (Philippians 4:11-13), dressing like them (1 Corinthians 11:2-16), speaking like them (2 Corinthians 11:6), working like them (Acts 20:33-35), and not demanding more or less of them than what the Lord Himself had prescribed.

This was also the custom of William Burns, and later of Hudson Taylor, and these nineteenth century missionaries to China were greatly used of God, in part because they were willing to become all things to all men that by all such means they might save some. Let us commit to this same principle, dear Christian, putting away our own customs and man-made traditions, that we, too, may go into the world or wherever we are in it as servants to all and to win the more!

As I said at the beginning, this biblical standard is not always easy to maintain. There are two dangers, particularly, that we need to watch out for and try to avoid. The first danger in seeking to relate to unbelievers in order to witness to them, and this too often happens, is that they may have a greater influence on us than we have on them. We see this, for example, in the Church Growth Movement which began in the 1960's. The intended purpose of it was to win the world for Christ – a very noble motive, to be sure. This movement, however, has won few souls to Christ but has watered down the gospel message, leaving many churches with little or no gospel at all. Oh, if the Church only had as much influence on the world as the world has on the Church, this would be a very different world from the one we are presently living in! (See James 1:27 and 4:4.)

The Bible is clear that we are to maintain the regulative principle of worship (Deuteronomy 12:29-32) and reverence before God (Hebrews 12:28,29), that we are to preach the whole counsel of God, not just what we like of it (Acts 20:27), and that we are to give specific focus to Christ and Him crucified, looking at everything in the light of that one greatest of all events (2 Corinthians 2:2).

The second danger can come upon us in seeing some other Christian trying to relate to an unbeliever in order to witness to him. We may not like the fact that he is doing this in a way that is contrary to our own, in a way that seems to us to be too different from our own entrenched tradition. We may therefore resent him for that – how dare he! – and we may even speak to him, or to others, later on in order to call him out. We are given a case of this very thing in Luke 9:49,50, and we, too, may need to be reminded, as did the disciples, “that he who is not against us is on our side.”

In spite of these dangers, however, and in spite of the opposition we may face, let us not hold back in seeking to win the world to Christ. The glory of the second temple is the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace (Haggai 2:9), and flowing out of that, in turn, are the good works of the redeemed which are the product of His work in and for them. These works will follow the ransomed of the Lord into heaven (Revelation 14:13) where they will abound to His glorious praise forever. Among the best of good works is turning sinners from their evil ways, as anyone so turned about and now in Christ can tell you (James 5:19,20).

