

“Marching Orders for the Next Fifty Years”

2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1

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Text Comment

v.14 The image of being yoked together is taken from Deut. 22:10. One translation that catches the meaning is: ‘Do not get into a double harness with an unbeliever.’

The five pairs of opposites that follow are all designed to demonstrate the absolute and ultimate antithesis that exists between the Christian and the non-Christian.

v.15 Belial was a common name for Satan in the Jewish literature of the period.

v.16 In several places the people of God are said to have become the temple of the Lord because his presence was among them and because they worshipped him.

v.17 Our relationship with the Holy God lays us under obligation to be holy ourselves.

7:1 Paul, with a gracious tact, includes himself in the exhortation: “Let us...” And, as always in the Christian life, the exhortation is based on the promises of God and what he has done for us. The Christian life is a matter of possessing our possessions, of living out the status and station and situation God has graciously put us in.

I had thought I might interrupt our studies in 2 Corinthians to preach a message apropos of our church’s 50th Anniversary which we have been celebrating this weekend and Lord’s Day. However, when I considered the next paragraph in Paul’s letter, the text that would otherwise be before me on the Lord’s Day morning, it seemed so suitable for the occasion that I have taken it as my anniversary text. So we go on with 2 Corinthians and consider the years that stretch ahead of us as a congregation.

What we have here, of course, is a warning against blurring the distinction between Christians and non-Christians, between the gospel and the message of the world, between the living God and the false gods of men. Now Paul clearly doesn’t mean that Christians shouldn’t have anything to do with non-Christians. He has already said in 1 Cor. 5:10 that that is precisely what he does not mean. If he meant that, he said there, Christians would have to leave the world. Besides, Paul spent his life among non-Christians, seeking to win them to Christ and to salvation. What he means is that Christians must take care not to make the sort of spiritual alliances with the world that will undermine their loyalty to Christ and destroy their witness. He is not worried about Christians getting into the world, he’s worried about the world getting into Christians!

He has talked about some of the ways in which that happens in the first letter. You become unequally yoked when you marry an unbeliever (marriage is too profound, too intimate and consequential a union to share with someone who is at odds with you regarding the deepest convictions, loves, and longings of your life. Marrying an unbeliever, therefore, must weaken

one's faith.). You violate this holiness that God requires of his people, this separation, when you take another believer to court and link up with the world against a fellow Christian. And, you do this same thing when you participate in pagan worship as if somehow that does not involve you in hypocrisy and infidelity and disloyalty to God. When Israel dabbled with the idol worship common to that part of the world, the prophets made it clear that she was not only betraying her faith – acting as if these idols were really gods, acting as if God himself was not the living and true God, acting as if the approval of these non-gods was important and the disapproval of the living God of no consequence – but she was putting her own relationship with God in jeopardy. Well, as we know from the first letter, there were those in the Corinthian church doing the same thing.

Paul wants the life of these Christians to be consistent with their faith. And that absolutely requires that the implications of that faith be embraced and worked out in daily life. And, he warns them, one of the implications of believing in one God, and one Savior, and one salvation is that you cannot live as if you shared a religious viewpoint with people who deny those fundamental Christian convictions. This warning is particularly apropos today given the prevailing viewpoint of our culture that maintaining such firm and clear distinctions as Paul here recommends is harmful, discriminatory, hateful, judgmental, intolerant, and bound to lead to more of the kind of social unrest that we are struggling with today. Why isn't it just that kind of religious dogmatism that led to 9-11?

There are a number of important voices being raised nowadays in our culture decrying this kind of religious certainty and exclusivism. It is the religious sort of extremism that worries such commentators most of all. And, insofar as this is a deeply religious audience, the notion that *you* should be extreme in your views and your living is a matter of deep concern in certain influential circles of our culture. But, these people do not hide the fact that when they speak of this intolerance, this dogmatism, this exclusivism, they mean simply people believing certain things to be absolutely true and living in faithfulness to one's convictions. Shortly after 9-11 Richard Dawkins, Oxford professor, Darwinist pit bull, and modern champion of popular atheism, argued in the British press that the root cause of the kind of fanaticism that caused the havoc in New York and Washington was religious conviction, and, in particular, a firm belief in life after death. That is what turns an ordinary person into a self-guided missile capable of committing such horrible acts. [Phillip Johnson, *The Right Questions*, 108-109] For Dawkins, strong-minded and deeply committed evangelical Christians are dangerous in the same way and for the same reason that the militant Muslims are who brought down the World Trade Center. The root of the problem is religious belief taken seriously. That is what he means by the extremism he decries and he does not see how such extremism cannot but lead inexorably to catastrophes of the type we have witnessed recently. He condemns, in other words, precisely the viewpoint expressed in our text this morning by the Apostle Paul.

The same view has been widely circulated in the United States by Richard Rorty, one of the most consequential of American philosophers and perhaps the most influential champion of the modern philosophical project known as post-modernism. Rorty's is post-modernism with a human face. He means to do good with his post-modernism. It is, if you will, a gospel and, in fact, a gospel of peace.

According to Rorty, our culture is faced with a single alternative. We must make a choice between truth and community, between objectivity and solidarity. He means that real community, human beings living peacefully together, human society enjoying tranquillity cannot co-exist with the notion that there is one truth, valid for everyone, and that those who have found that truth are right and those who have not are wrong. Social harmony cannot survive the notion that objective standards of truth and goodness divide mankind into intellectual and moral haves and have-nots. The worst kind of extremism, therefore, according to Rorty, is the extremism represented in this sanctuary this morning, a room full of Christians of the historic type, who believe that there is one truth and that it lies behind us in one name, one person, one event, and that it has been preserved in one book.

And then comes a recent essay in *Atlantic* magazine by Prof. Bernard Lewis of Princeton, the dean of American orientalists and perhaps our most respected scholar of and commentator on all things Muslim. In the article he notes that the two “expansive and civilization-defining” religions in the world are Christianity and Islam. Both of them, he says, have a problem with tolerance. And that is inevitable. For they both believe that they have the final truth from God and that everyone must believe that truth and accept it and live by it or else. Lewis hopes that more and more Christians will become the so-called Christians of the modern, relativistic type who believe that all religions lead to God, that there are many ways to conceive of religious truth, that there is nothing really important at stake in the choice of one religion or another, and so religion will increasingly become no big deal, certainly nothing to fight and die for. [Cited in *First Things* 134 (June/July 2003) 60]

There are many things to say in response to Dawkins, Rorty, and Lewis. It is a painfully simplistic and shallow vision of the world that they provide. None of them seems to be able to see that they are as dogmatic and judgmental in holding their convictions to be absolutely and universally right, important, and necessary to accept as are those whose convictions they condemn. Read Dawkins vituperation against religious believers and doubters of evolution, or read Rorty liken the sexual ethics of biblically minded Christians to that of the Nazis and it becomes painfully clear that one man’s dogmatism is another man’s common sense. One pundit has wondered aloud if Dawkins or Rorty, virulent as their criticism of religious believers has been, might be willing to sacrifice their own lives in an act of violence if either were convinced that such an act were necessary to save science or philosophy from being taken over by religious fundamentalists! [Johnson, 109] Surely, what is good for the goose is good for the gander.

What is more, much more grief has been visited upon the earth over the past century by dogmatisms of the secular kind than those that are explicitly religious, but neither Dawkins nor Rorty worry over much about secular ideology running amok. Still more, while it is incontestably true that a man or woman whose beliefs are more important to him or to her than life itself is far more dangerous than a person who holds no convictions deeply or intelligently or seriously, convictions so deeply held have been the glory and the honor of mankind and everyone knows it. People who care for nothing for which they would risk their lives are perhaps no threat to social peace, but then they inspire no one either, they are unlikely to improve the lives of others, and they are very definitely never going to make those costly sacrifices that human history repeatedly shows are necessary to better, to ennoble, and to protect what is worthy in the life of human beings. [Johnson, 109]

The fact of the matter is that if it were deep convictions of faith, duty, and sacrifice that motivated the 9-11 terrorists, I don't say that it were, but if it were, it is very similar convictions that compel a firefighter to reenter a burning building in search of the living, a father to work long hours to provide for his family, a soldier to risk his life to bring aid to a wounded comrade, or a citizen to stand up for justice and incur the wrath of a corrupt regime. When we condemn the one act and applaud the others we are admitting that the problem is not strong conviction itself, but *wrong* convictions and the need is not for more tepid faith, but for people to have *right* beliefs.

In any case, all of these secular commentators concede that the religious dogmatism and intellectual certainty that they are condemning means nothing else to them but taking religious doctrines very seriously, believing them to be true and living accordingly. No Christian can thus object to such convictions, however absolute. It is characteristic of all the biblical heroes and of the Lord Jesus himself. He lived a very difficult life, he suffered all manner of ignominy, and finally went to the cruelest imaginable death for the sake of his convictions, what he knew to be true and right and good. He went to suffering and death *precisely because he knew it was absolutely necessary for the salvation of his people and he sent his followers out into the world with the message about him because he knew it was absolutely necessary that people believe in him if they would live forever.*

We are being told on all sides today, that we Christians are guilty of the worst kind of triumphalism, claiming as we do the exclusive possession of the truth, a triumphalism that must finally ruin any prospect of peaceful relations with the other religions of the world. But, of course, this completely begs the question. Is Christianity true? Did the Son of God become a man in Jesus Christ? Was his death necessary as the only means of reconciling sinful men to a holy God? Is it necessary for human beings to believe in Jesus Christ to be saved? Paul, of course, would have answered all of these questions with a resounding "yes!" And, once that "yes" has been spoken, there can be no going back to acting, to living as if Jesus were *not the way, the truth, and the life!* Paul had met the risen Christ and had been commanded to take the news about him to the four corners of the earth. He wasn't about to let some Greek philosophers or Jewish wise men deflect him from delivering what he now knew was the message everyone needed to hear.

What we need to remember, of course, is that there is nothing new in this particular form of attack on the Christian faith. In the fourth century, Athanasius stood for the biblical doctrine of Jesus Christ, the God-Man and Savior of sinners, when it looked as if the civilized world was slipping back from Christianity into the religion of Arius, one of those civilized, sensible, syncretistic religions which are so warmly recommended today and which included among their devotees then as now many highly cultivated clergymen and pundits. It was Athanasius' glory that he didn't move with the times and it was his reward that he remains when his times, as all times do, have moved away. [From C.S. Lewis, *Introduction to St. Athanasius*, 9]

If you ask why churches go bad, why they lose their way, why Christian churches in great number that once stood for the gospel of Christ, now spout smooth, vapid and toothless slogans to largely empty sanctuaries, why such churches no longer interest their own children, why they

never witness the revolutionary impact of the gospel of Christ on human life, the answer is this: they made their peace with the world, they got into a double harness with unbelief, they weakened and then they obliterated the opposition between faith and unbelief, between wickedness and righteousness, between darkness and light, between God and idols. They did precisely what Bernard Lewis is urging us to do! By refusing to make the distinction clear and then live by that distinction, they lost the distinction and became worldly; worldly in thought and then in life. Pretty soon they were Christian churches in name only because they were no longer standing for, nor proclaiming and defending, nor seeking to win others to the truth as it is Jesus Christ. There are legions of such churches in our land and in our world and a large number of Presbyterian churches among them. And such churches are useless. They have become the enemies rather than the advocates of salvation. And, at one time, it was the furthest thing from their mind that they would ever betray the gospel of Jesus Christ or fail to proclaim him as the King of Kings and the only name under heaven given to men by which they must be saved. That is why Paul is so careful to issue this warning. The temptations are subtle. There will always be bright and influential people urging compromise. The Devil is the master compromiser. He will be more than happy for churches to continue to employ Christian vocabulary if only they will cease their opposition to the world and make peace with it.

If we are to be faithful as a Christian congregation, faithful for another 50 years, that faithfulness must begin here. We must heed Paul's warning and maintain the antithesis. In both speech and behavior, we must remain unapologetic advocates of the Truth, capital "T," as it is in Jesus Christ and him alone. We must teach the truth against the backdrop of the world's falsehood. We must teach that truth, as the truth of God, to those who do not yet believe; we must teach it to our children, and we must constantly remind ourselves of it. And what will be the result of that? Will we provoke outrage and social unrest? Will the world become a more dangerous place because of our convictions?

No! It never has and never will. For what are the convictions of a biblical Christian? That God is holy love. That mankind has been made in God's image. That every human being, as God's creation, deserves our respect, our love, and our consideration. That Jesus Christ has provided redemption for those who trust in him. That faith in Christ cannot be coerced from or forced upon a person. It must be the sincere conviction of his or her heart. That the way of serving Christ in this world is the way of love and of sacrifice for others. Such was the life of the Apostle Paul. He taught Christians to preserve at all costs the distinction between truth and error and never to succumb to the beguiling temptations of every age to minimize the importance of the truth once and for all delivered to mankind in Jesus Christ. But, at the same time, never was there a man who made greater sacrifices for the welfare of others, including others who did not believe as Paul did.

The Apostle Paul was a man who had no doubt whatsoever of the authority and the truthfulness of the Bible, but he himself says that he availed himself of every opportunity to gain a sympathetic hearing for its message. He was even willing – and surely this will surprise people who think evangelical Christians to be akin to Muslim terrorists – to be thought to agree with people whom he knew to embrace theological error, so as not to put a stumbling block in the way of their hearing him explain the gospel of God. Paul was anyone's doormat with regard to matters on which it was at all possible to be flexible so that he might win a hearing for Christ.

Paul suffered a great deal on behalf of others; he did not make others suffer. Force and violence was no part of his program and cannot be the part of any program that wishes the blessing of God upon it.

Surely here is a striking juxtaposition of extremisms: a book that demands our absolute submission yet, at the same time, teaches us to bend over backwards to gain a sympathetic hearing for its message. A book that brooks no opposition and yet makes every concession to its opposers for the sake of winning their hearts. Our world is full of those who will bend over backward to win the approval of others and full of people who demand absolute submission to a message, but how few are there who love the unbeliever and the message with a similar passion and are willing to make any personal sacrifice to secure a willing and heart-felt acceptance of the message by others. But every faithful Christian is to be such a person.

There is a wholeness to this living out of Christian conviction, a humanity, even a beauty capable of surprising even the most hardened unbeliever. The Bible, to be sure is an intolerant book. It is the very Word of the living God. It refuses to pander to the spirit of any age. It demands, and rightly, our belief and our obedience and that absolutely. God reserves his favor for those human beings who tremble at his Word. But, in the teaching and preaching of its message, notice how large-hearted and tolerant the Bible is, how forgiving of doubt, how eager to help its hearers understand, to remove the obstacles in the way of their belief in its message.

However impolitic to say it nowadays, however distasteful to the modern mind the notion that there is but one way to heaven and one name by which men must be saved, to deny this for the sake of a seemingly wider and more charitable Christianity is to betray the Lord with a kiss. You must hold fast to Jesus Christ as the only name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved. Many people will think you intolerably dogmatic, extreme, and triumphalistic for holding such a view, so narrow, so exclusive, so discriminatory.

But, be dogmatic, absolutely sure-of-yourself in another way as well. Take every opportunity also to say that the Lord does not desire the death of the wicked but that all men come to repentance and the knowledge of the truth. Speak of the Lord's sorrow over man's rebellion – even his broken heart, for so the Bible speaks – and then speak with your own sorrow of those who are lost in unbelief. Do not content yourself until you can say as Paul did that you wish yourself accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of the unbelievers you know. Nothing is so likely to adorn and render impressive the truth of *solo Christo*, salvation by Christ alone, as Christians who so evidently carry in their hearts the burden of the world's unbelief and who are plainly willing to move heaven and earth if only a man or a woman will believe in Jesus and be saved.

Richard Rorty thinks it actually impossible at one and the same time to live a life of self-sacrificial love, a life that blesses others and draws them into peaceful fellowship, *and* live in submission to an objective truth you believe is rejected by others only at the cost of their eternal life. He is sure that the one is the death of the other. I say that our summons, as a church in coming years and as individual believers, our task in life, in obedience and in conformity to your Lord and Master Jesus Christ is to prove Richard Rorty wrong. And we will do that by living as Paul urges us to live: careful to protect the antithesis between truth and error, light and darkness,

idols and the living God, and, at the same time, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God, a holiness that must always be dominated by love.

You remember the names of Martin and Gracia Burnham, the missionaries kidnapped by a Muslim terrorist group in the Philippines. They were held for more than a year in hopes of ransom before an attack on the group's camp by the Philippine military. The terrorists shot the hostages and made their escape. Gracia Burnham was the sole survivor. During their months with their captors the Burnhams, as you would expect, continued to be Christian missionaries, talking with the rebels about Jesus Christ and the gospel as they could.

“Marching the Burnhams past predominantly Muslim villages in the southern Philippines, the Abu Sayyaf came across a Christian chapel. ‘There used to be a cross there, but we destroyed it,’ one of the rebels proudly told the missionaries. ‘We hate the cross. Any time we see a cross we destroy it if we can.’ [Gracia] Burnham says she was never ‘a real cross fan’ before her abduction. ‘I was raised a Baptist, and that always seemed to be Catholic to me. But I love the cross since my captivity, and I have it everywhere,’ she says. ‘My mind has changed because the Muslims hate it so much, what it stands for.’ The Burnhams tried to explain it to their captors, but to no avail. ‘I don’t want anybody paying for my sin,’ said one. ‘I’ll do my own paying.’”
[*Christianity Today* (June 2003) 35]

Well, one can hate the cross and tear it down, or one can simply dismiss it as nothing more than one of many religious myths that ought easily to be able to get along with the others. But if Jesus is the Son of God, as he is; if he made the world and gave life to every human being, as he has; and if he suffered and died on that cross for the salvation of the world as he did; then we cannot, and we must not, and we will not make peace with any view that denies or diminishes in any way the gospel, the good news of salvation through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. If it is true that a person's sins will be paid for either by Christ or by himself, then we will not rest until we have warned the unbelieving of how terrible it is to pay for one's own sins and urge him to come to Christ for full and complete forgiveness. We won't make war on those who do not believe, but we will by love and good deeds, and by words fitly spoken, do our very best to help them come to know what we have come to know – not simply what we have come to believe, or think or suppose – *but what we have come to KNOW!*