

THEOLOGY OF WORK No. 8
“Partnership with Unbelievers”
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Review

We have been talking about our working lives as Christians, our occupations, these Sunday evenings. We have so far argued that the Bible teaches Christians to see their work as a service rendered directly to God and as an instrument through which God’s blessing comes to us. We have considered the double perspective on work that we find in the Bible, one deriving from creation and the other from the fall. Work is, in the Bible, at one and the same time a futility and a fulfillment, a frustration and a satisfaction, a problem and a solution and *our* work will be and must be always both at the same time. Then we began to consider the Bible’s ethics of work: its specific teaching regarding the moral obligations that govern the working life. We began with the general obligations of the worker or employee and then considered those of the employer, boss, or supervisor. We found that the cardinal principle in both cases was that employers and employees are always to consider themselves as working ultimately for the Lord. Last time we took up the first of several “issues” concerning work, viz. the proper extent of our commitment to it as Christians. When are we working too much?

Tonight I am taking up another specific ethical issue touching our working lives, another existential question or “case of conscience” as the old writers would have called it. Our question tonight is what about working side by side with unbelievers; what of our partnership with unbelievers in our employment?

Holy Scripture directly raises this issue for us when it commands us:

‘Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? ...Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord.’ [2 Cor 6:14-17]

We tend to apply this prohibition to *marrying* outside of the faith more than to anything else. But this stipulation of God’s law is hardly limited in its application to the issue of marriage alone. Indeed, in the context, Paul is not talking about marriage. He is speaking generally, but probably has in the front of his view the participation of Corinthian Christians in the temple cults of the city – especially banquets that were sponsored there – which, as you remember, was an issue addressed in 1 Corinthians. Interestingly, one of the reasons Corinthians would have been tempted to attend such banquets and to participate, at least passively, in the idolatry of those occasions, was that business relationships were often made, cemented, or served in that way. These were the restaurants of the day and just think about how much business is done in America today at restaurants!

But, more interestingly still, the image Paul uses – that of being “yoked together” – comes from

the legislation of the Law of Moses. Twice we hear of such a law. In Lev. 19:19 we read that God's people were not to mate different kinds of animals, were not to plant a field with two kinds of seed, and were not to wear clothing woven of two kinds of material. In Deuteronomy 22:10, even more precisely the origin of Paul's remark here in 2 Cor. 6, we read that God's people are not to plow with an ox and donkey yoked together. These were regulations that, in an agricultural economy, directly concerned the working life of Israelites. Surely, the notion of one's work is hardly absent from an image derived from plowing and, in any case, the prohibition is completely general. Yoke is an unfamiliar term for city folk like ourselves. Nowadays we might say, "you must not get into a double harness with unbelievers." It is a vivid picture and conveys the point powerfully.

Now, we take the burden of those regulations rightly to refer to Israel's holiness and as a way to express, emphasize, and enforce that sense of her special holiness. Such regulations belong to that set of laws we typically refer to as ceremonial laws to indicate that they are peculiar to the life of Israel for what they demonstrated and taught and are not binding upon the church today, except in a general way. But, then, here Paul uses them to say that, at least in a general way, those laws still bind Christians in the new epoch. We too must be pure, a holy people, set apart to God and allowing no unholy mixture in our lives. [V. Poythress, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses*, 322-323] I say all of this simply to indicate that the principle that Paul teaches here clearly has a wide application to our lives and is not by any means exhausted by the commandment that Christians should marry only in the Lord. James, for example, says a similar thing in his first chapter when he says that "true religion is...to keep oneself unspotted by the world." Well, surely that applies to our working life, as it applies to every dimension of our life. There is to be a purity in our life of work that is expressed by no unequal yoking.

What is more, it is simple enough to see why such a prohibition might apply to one's working life particularly. Consider such reasons as these.

1. You spend a great deal of time with those you work with. But, as Paul reminds us, "bad company corrupts good character." [1 Cor 15:33] Few Christians, I think, can live in the moral sewer that is the state of so many American workplaces nowadays without contracting a stain. Even if you are able to avoid actual participation in sin, you can still feel the effect in spiritual and moral numbness. The people you keep company with eight hours a day, five days a week, will see to that.
2. Unbelievers very often act in ways that are immoral and in the *work* place, their actions can implicate you. Some of you have come to speak to me about precisely such situations in your working world. You know of malfeasance and you wonder what your duty is.
 - a. More than once folk in this congregation have come to me concerned because the bosses or the companies they work for are engaged in dishonest business practices and they can't help think that they are participating in dishonesty by working for the company or helping to defraud the company's customers. We lost a church in this presbytery a few years ago from problems spinning outward from the complaint of one church member against another that business practices he was recommending were improper, if not illegal. It concerned shill-bidding on e-Bay, a practice the company itself forbids. These men were both professing Christians, but it often happens that improper practices are favored by the unbeliever and the believer is left to worry to what extent he or she is

implicated in the unethical behavior.

b. Others have wondered precisely what they are to do when they are witnesses to dishonest practices by bosses or fellow employees.

c. Then the whole world of modern business often operates in virtually total disregard of the obligations of Christian holiness: what of working in a medical partnership or in a hospital where abortions are performed; or for a Madison Avenue advertising firm that uses sex to sell; or for tobacco companies that lie about the harmful effects of their products or market them to children; or even for a Christian book publisher that inflates retail prices no one pays to make the so-called sale price seem so much better the bargain? I've seen a set of reprints of Calvin's commentaries in a 19th century translation advertised for, say \$119. According to the add the retail price is \$1000 so the sale price is a *huge* savings; unless, of course, as is very likely, there has never been a person in the world who has actually bought the set for \$1000 or anything remotely close to \$1000.

Or what of working for a bank that markets a special credit card for gays, or a company that requires work on the Sabbath and makes no provision for Christian scruples.

If you work for such firms, are you not right to think that all of those practices become yours in a certain way. At the very least you are implicated in them in the public mind. And, no doubt, the closer the association becomes the more difficult it is to do all things to the glory of God. In partnership with an unbeliever, for example, it would seem, in a certain way, that every decision one makes, is in one way or another, compromised by the different interests and motives of one's unbelieving partner. An elder in our Presbytery some years ago was the other partner in a firm of certified public accountants. His partner, who had been a professing Christian when they established the company, was excommunicated for conduct incompatible with a profession of faith in Christ. He was a womanizer. He was also a very sharp accountant and brought a lot of business into the firm. But he had a hard way with people and often, in the judgment of this elder, mistreated subordinates. What is more, his womanizing had involved at least one company employee. This elder was unsure what to do and requested Presbytery's advice. Presbytery's reply was thoughtful and intelligent but had some bite to it as well. Insofar as this man was a partner in the firm and insofar as the ethics of its management and its treatment of employees were, for that reason, his responsibility as well as his partner's, the Presbytery committee felt that it might be necessary for him to end the partnership even if that would have to be done at considerable financial loss. It is one thing to have unethical behavior going on in the company one works for. It is another thing to have such conduct taking place in a company one owns and is responsible for.

It is obviously a matter of great importance to Paul that Christians not be tarnished by their associations. Notice the conclusion he draws at the end of that section, in 2 Cor. 7:1:

“Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.”

Can a Christian, therefore, work in such an environment, be numbered as a part of such an enterprise without besmirching his name and his honor as a child of God and without, at least over time, contracting the moral pollution of that environment? Do you feel now as though

Christians perhaps shouldn't work with unbelievers at all and as though you will never obtain the holiness you might if you do? Well, good, I'm glad you feel that way.

But now, hear the rest of what the Bible says about your associations with unbelievers:

“I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people – not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral or greedy or swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone *who calls himself a brother* but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat.” [1 Cor. 5:9-11]

Paul seems to say that there is no sin in Christians associating even with unbelieving *swindlers!* Or consider this from 1 Cor. 8:9-10:

“Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol's temple, won't he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols?”

Paul would ask, in 2 Cor. 6:16, the text we read earlier, “What agreement is there between the temple of Gods and idols?” But here he admits that, for certain Christians at any rate, there is nothing wrong *per se* in having a business lunch in a pagan temple eating food sacrificed to idols. He does clearly indicate, along the way, however, that differing measures of associations with unbelievers will be proper or appropriate for different Christians. But he will say again in 1 Cor. 10:27:

“If some unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is put before you.”

No doubt, in many cases, the reason a Christian would be inclined to accept such an invitation would be for the sake of his business. His working world was, obviously, not confined by the fact that he would be associating with unbelievers. And there is much more like this. For example, the instructions Paul gives Christian slaves working for unbelieving masters (e.g. 1 Tim. 6:1) never suggest that a Christian cannot work for an unbeliever and be holy himself at the same time.

A better example still is the instructions given by John the Baptist to repentant Roman soldiers, part of the Roman force then occupying Judea (Luke 3:14).

“Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely – be content with your pay.”

That instruction indicates that a Christian soldier in an occupying army – an army operating under the orders of a profoundly pagan high command – is not corrupted by the fact that the ties of his employment lie across the boundaries of faith. A man could be faithful in his life before God as a soldier imposing Roman rule upon an unwilling, subject people. It was, therefore, we

must conclude, possible for Russian Christians to serve the Lord faithfully in the Russian army during the cold war, or even in the German army during the Second World War, though, no doubt, there were things that they could not do, orders or not.

And, if we had doubts about that, consider these further examples provided in Holy Scripture. Here we have godly men – men to whose godliness the Bible bears its own witness – whose daily work was performed in environments utterly dominated by practices and motivations hostile to the honor of God and harmful to their own spiritual interests. These men were pearls among swine and led sterling lives that were untainted – at least as far as we are given to know – by the moral corruption all around them and in the midst of which they had to work every day.

Consider, in the first place, Daniel, who worked virtually the entirety of his adult life in the Babylonian court. He was, in other words, an agent of the government that had enslaved his people, destroyed the temple in Jerusalem, and exploited what remained of his homeland as a client state. One has only to read Daniel to realize how little regard for the living God there was in Babylon and how utterly indifferent that state was to either the interests of the Jews or those of other subject peoples. Daniel's situation psychologically was like what would have been the situation of an American who had been captured and put to work in the Soviet government during the Cold War.

But more interesting still is the case of Obadiah, not the prophet by that name but the court official during the reign of Ahab, King of Israel. In 1 Kings 18:2-4 we read:

“Now the famine was severe in Samaria, and Ahab summoned Obadiah, who was in charge of his palace. Obadiah was a devout believer in the Lord.” [The NIV's “devout believer” is literally, “Obadiah *feared the Lord greatly.*”]

Now we naturally wonder how in the world a godly man – the Bible tells us he was a godly man – could possibly have worked in the court of a king as corrupt as Ahab and with a queen like Jezebel doing her best thoroughly to integrate the pagan worship of her homeland into the practice of both the court and the nation as a whole. One of George Washington's favorite lines – this taken from Joseph Addison's drama *Cato*, written in 1713 wildly popular in Colonial America – was “When vice prevails...the post of honor is a private station.” [Cited in Richard Brookhiser, *Founding Father*, 124] But Ahab's reign was a time that vice mightily prevailed and yet Obadiah had the furthest thing from a private station. Ahab had threatened and then actually sought the lives of Yahweh's faithful prophets and, in their place, elevated the prophets of Baal to religious authority in the kingdom. Obadiah had himself hidden 100 of the Lord's prophets in two caves and supplied them with food. His boss, Ahab, together with his wife, Jezebel, plotted the murder of Naboth so as to steal his vineyard. We wonder: how could a good man work in such a place, for such employers, and play any role in a government that was so profoundly corrupt. Obviously Obadiah was someone that Ahab considered a faithful and useful employee or he wouldn't have lasted. Nor could he hide in anonymity and save his character by devoting himself to inconsequential labors. He was Ahab's right hand man, as we learn in 1 Kings 18, when, on one particular errand, looking for any remaining grass in the country to support the horses of the king, Ahab went one way and Obadiah the other. He was the first man Ahab thought of when he needed to entrust a serious matter to someone else. Now, it is true that

Obadiah worked behind Ahab's back to undo some of the king's plans. He put himself at risk for his principles (as Daniel would later do in refusing to eat the food set before him); but, clearly most of the time he was Ahab's faithful employee. How was this possible?

I'm not altogether sure, but the Bible plainly praises Obadiah for his godliness in the context of his work for Ahab, or, perhaps better for maintaining such a godly life in such an atmosphere and in such circumstances. He clearly did not agree with Ahab – to the point that he was willing to risk his life to hide the Lord's prophets from the king – but he also, at the same time, in most respects served the king faithfully.

As so often in its ethical instruction, the Scripture sounds two notes and we are to make a harmony of them. It says two things which seem to point in two different directions, but we are to hold them together and in the tension thus created fall neither to the right (retirement from the world) nor to the left (being corrupted by the world). We have called this characteristic biblical pedagogy *dialectical*. And it is obvious that the Bible's teaching on the association of believers with unbelievers in their working life is dialectical in just this way.

A Christian is not forbidden to make such associations in work, *but*:

1. He must be cautious and alert to the dangers (certainly should not rush into such arrangements without thought);
2. He must take care of his name and his heart;
3. He must be willing to give up the arrangement if it involves him in sin;
4. If he finds himself in such an arrangement he must see it as his duty to carry himself as a Christian (Daniel, Obadiah did not betray the Lord), though wisely (they didn't provoke unnecessarily), and to be salt and light (Obadiah and Daniel did both: served their kings well and served the Lord!);
5. And, he or she must take care to make decisions which conform to his or her own circumstances (some associations which would be proper for some Christians would amount to courting temptation for other Christians).

Once again, what is absolutely necessary in all of Biblical ethics is a consecrated heart that deeply wants to please the Lord and will genuinely attempt to do justice at one and the same time to everything the Scripture says. That is, not take the liberty God has given to associate with unbelievers without taking great care to heed the warnings he adds against the corrupting influences of such associations; nor, contrarily, to take the warnings to heart and to deny the liberty of association.