

Support Group Issues

“Should Homeschool Organizations be Exclusively Christian?”

A Biblical Evaluation

By Bernie Schock, President, South Dakota Homeschool Association

[Editor: Note the balanced, thorough investigation of this issue—the method that should be employed in checking out any Biblical theory or doctrine. One or two verses taken out of context with man's interpretation is dangerous. The Bible is its own interpreter if you carefully study each reference on a particular subject. The truth (all, not part, of the truth) shall make you free.]

Recently I received a call from a distraught home educator who was denied participation in his homeschool association because he could not sign the group's statement of faith. In another state homeschoolers were encouraged to disassociate from unbelieving homeschoolers because such mixing might weaken a court defense of home education based on religious conviction. In other states Christian home educators have been encouraged to break away from homeschool groups who enroll non-Christians.

Is this how Christians should relate to people of other faiths or no faith? I believe the Bible teaches otherwise.

Holy Living

Paul's instructions to the Corinthian church are frequently quoted by those who advocate exclusively Christian organizations.

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? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people. Therefore come out from them, and be separate," says the Lord. II Cor. 6:14-18.

On the surface this passage appears to support the exclusivists viewpoint. But we need a closer look. "Do not be yoked together." Paul's command is probably based on Deuteronomy 22:10 that prohibited the yoking of an ox and ass for plowing. Thus, some mixing of believers and unbelievers is inappropriate. But what kind?

If Paul had intended Christians to cut off all relationships with non-Christians, he could have said: "Do not associate with unbelievers." Instead he said, "Do not be yoked together." He also talked about fellowship between light and darkness, and harmony between Christ and Satan. Thus, his prohibition seems to be aimed at restricting intimate bonds with unbelievers.

Cathy and I frequently instruct our boys to marry a maturing Christian. We know that God's work--teaching us how to love, to forgive, to be patient, to encourage--is the only basis for a healthy marriage.

Paul was probably also concerned about Christians who continued to have nonbelievers as their closest friends. Corinth was a grossly immoral city and the new believers were in danger of being drawn back into their former life of sin by intimate associations with nonbelievers.

"Come Out From Them and Be Separate." As first glance, it might seem that Paul was encouraging a physical separation from all nonbelievers. But if that was his command, then he was contradicting earlier instructions:

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 the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing 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. I Cor. 5:9-11

Paul makes it clear that associations with non-Christians are normal. How, then, are we to be separate? The Hebrew and Greek words for "holy" mean "to be separate" or "to set apart." Repeatedly in the Old and New Testament we are called to live holy or separate lives (Ex. 19:5f; Lev. 11:44; Rom. 12:1f; I Pet. 1:14-16). But our separation is not spatial. When God told the Jews, "You are to be holy to me because I, the Lord, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own," (Lev. 20:26) he was not suggesting they cut themselves off from contact with Gentiles. In fact, earlier in that passage he told them: "Do not walk in the customs of the nations." (v. 23) He did not say: "Do not walk in their cities," or "Do not walk into their homes." They were to separate themselves from the pagan lifestyle, not the pagans' lives.

God's people were judged because they "worshipped other gods and followed the practices of the nations... They limited the nations around them although the Lord had ordered them, 'Do not do as they do,' and they did the things the Lord had forbidden them to do." (II Kings 17:7,8. See also Lev. 18:3,24). What brought judgment? Improper associations? No-their corrupt lifestyle.

The apostle Peter wrote: "Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us." (I Peter 2:11,12) We Christians don't belong to this world. We are waiting to go to our eternal home. But we must not prematurely pull up stakes!

Michael Jordan is "set apart" from other NBA basketball players by his extraordinary skills. Does he play on a different court? No. He is separated by his unique abilities. Likewise, Christians are not called to live on a different "court." Our separation is not a segregation. We are set apart by lives filled with the fruit of the Spirit-love, joy, peace, patience. We don't have to insulate ourselves from non-Christians to accomplish that goal.

The Jews and Their Gentile Neighbors

Association with Gentiles was not forbidden in the Old Testament. Hiram, King of Tyre, had a friendly business and political relationship with David and Solomon. When Solomon began to build the temple, he turned to Hiram for help:

My men will work with yours, and I will pay you for your men whatever wages you set. You know that we have no one so skilled in felling timber as the Sidonians. (I Kings 5:6)

Centuries later, Ezra drafted an agreement signed by "all who separated themselves from the neighboring peoples." (Neh. 10:28) But what did this separation involve?

We promise not to give our daughters in marriage to the peoples around us or take their daughters for our sons. When the neighboring people bring merchandise or grain to sell on the Sabbath, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on any holy day. (Heb. 10:30)

Jesus and Nonbelievers

The author of Hebrews described Jesus as being "holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners." He was separated by the purity of his character-not by a physical separation. The Jewish leadership chronically complained that Jesus was a friend of "sinners"-"This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." (Luke 15:2). His friendships included the tax collectors, prostitutes and criminals. Once again, Jesus' life demonstrates that separation is not

accomplished by severing our relationship with non-Christians. It relates to our character, not our company.

The Church and Nonbelievers

The church is the body of believers who meet together for worship and edification. Can nonbelievers participate in the gatherings of the church? Definitely! Paul assumed unbelievers would be found in church gatherings. In fact, Paul hoped these non-believing observers would be led to "Fall down and worship God, exclaiming, 'God is really among you'" (I Cor. 14:25)

Furthermore, Jesus' parable of the wheat (believers) and the weeds (unbelievers) warned that trying to remove the weeds from the wheat would damage the wheat. The physical separation of believers from nonbelievers will be the Harvester's task at the end of the age. (Matt. 13).

Finally, the New Testament advocates church discipline-but only for believers. Jesus' words in Matthew 18:15 begin: "If your brother sins." As a father I am responsible for correcting my kids-not the neighborhood's kids. Church discipline is a family affair.

The Christian's Role in the World

Salt in a Corrupt World. Jesus proclaimed: "You are the salt of the earth" (Matthew 5:13) Salt was used primarily as a preservative in the ancient world-a world without refrigeration. Could unsalted meat be blamed for spoiling? Of course not. Unrefrigerated meat naturally becomes rancid without salting. Thus, when a world grows corrupt, who should be blamed? Non-Christians? "You bad, bad people! Straighten up!" No! Unredeemed society will always break down unless salted by the redeemed. But our insipid lives and our isolation has abandoned the world to the natural process of decay.

Fishers of Men

When I go fishing, I don't wait for the fish to swim to my door. I go where I believe the most, the biggest, and the hungriest fish can be found. (I need all the help I can get!) If we Christians are fishing in backyard rain barrels, how can we expect to catch any fish? Of course, fishing is dangerous. I may encounter bad weather; the boat may break down; I may hook myself. Likewise, fishing for men is hazardous--occasionally a Christian's faith is capsized in the process. But that shouldn't keep us from fishing-Jesus commanded us to shed light in a dark world:

You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

The Implications for Homeschool Organizations

It is not wrong for a homeschool group to be founded as a Christian organization. Many Pro-family groups and Christian counseling services are established in this manner so they can stand on Biblical principles. But it is wrong to deny help, attendance, membership or even voting rights to those who don't know Christ. If the apostle Paul wouldn't bar unbelievers from the church, where do we get the authority to bar them from our homeschool organizations?

Unfortunately, some homeschool leaders advocate a statement of faith as the means of denying participation to certain groups of people. They are concerned about white supremacists, those involved in neo-Nazi, survivalist or New Age groups. They worry about homosexual or lesbian parents seeking admission into homeschool organization. But how many unbelieving home educators fit these categories? Are we going to deny help to the many because of the very few?

Furthermore, we tread on dangerous ground when we shut out categories of people. God frequently saves the most skilled sinners. In Jesus' day the zealots were fanatical terrorists. Their goal was the violent overthrow of Roman rule. But Simon, the Zealot, became one of Jesus' disciples!

We homeschoolers need to welcome unbelievers into our midst. Let them join our field trips. Let them participate in our learning cooperatives. Invite them to our mother' support groups. Expose them to a truly separated life--a life given wholly to the love and service of the Living God.

One leader justified his organization's exclusion of non-Christians from their activities by stating: In we allow non-Christians and their children into this training ground; then we have muddied the water. It's hard for children to learn good things, but the bad things they will pick up quickly... Take non-Christian children and put them in with Christian children and who do you think will pick up the bad words, bad attitudes, etc.? Children are being trained up in the way they should go. They are not salt and light yet!

But God has called us to be models for our children in all areas of the Christian life. If they don't see us relating with love and compassion toward those who don't know Christ, how will they ever develop a heart for the lost themselves? Furthermore, if you want your children to avoid non-Christian children; then you will be forced to form Christian basketball and soccer leagues, to build exclusively Christian neighborhoods, and to avoid most church youth groups--which frequently invite non-Christians to hear the message of the gospel.

Conclusion

Jesus' immersion in the "sinners" world tarnished his reputation--he was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard. Why did he identify with accomplished sinners? He explained: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick." Have you ever been accused of being too chummy with unbelievers? Or are you sequestered comfortably with your Christian fellowship? Isolated Christians will hide God's cure from a terminally ill world.

Look again at the Scriptures I have quoted to be certain I am not quoting out of context. Ultimately, it doesn't matter how I or anyone evaluates your actions and motives--the final and eternal accounting will be before God. "So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him." (II Cor. 5:9f)

These are not trivial issues. They have profound bearing on our responsibility to the unsaved. *[Editor: Of course, we need to protect our children from wrong influences in their formative years, but bad examples may be right in our own church or extended family--not necessarily in the children of our unbelieving neighbors or homeschoolers. Occasionally we have stayed over several nights in homes of unbelieving homeschoolers, but the children in each home have been models of behavior--respectful, courteous and obedient. In one case, the family was so careful, they did not even own a TV and in the other it was carefully controlled. Many unbelievers we know want to develop good values in their children. I talked to one on the airplane just the other day who plans to homeschool because she is concerned about the values demonstrated in the public school system. She even objects to the sex education being taught there. I felt sorry that I did not know of a nonexclusive support group in her large city to which I could direct her. Much has been publicized in exclusive Christian newsletters about misbehaving children on field trips, so no one should assume that Christian children are models. The bottom line is that children need relatively little association with children outside the family and none without adult supervision, preferably you.]*