

Fellowship with Unbelievers

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Question:

How would you respond to those who like to have fellowship with unbelievers? They argue that we are called to be the light, and in order to do so we must send our children to public school and fellowship with unbelievers.

Answer:

It seems to me that there is confusion here. There is a difference between “fellowship” and “witnessing.” In the Bible, the word *fellowship* presupposes that we have something spiritual in common with another person. The word can be translated “participation,” “sharing,” or “communion.” 2 Corinthians 6:14–16 could not be clearer: “Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? And what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? Or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? For ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” Notice how forcefully Paul sets forth the antithesis, which is a word we all should know. He forbids “fellowship,” “communion,” “concord,” “part,” and “agreement.” Christians are “light,” while unbelievers are darkness. Christians belong to Christ, while unbelievers belong to Belial. Christians are believers, while unbelievers are infidels. Christians are the temple of God, while unbelievers worship idols.

Therefore, the statement, “[They] like to have fellowship with unbelievers,” is deeply

troubling to me. A Christian may not and cannot have fellowship with unbelievers. A believer who tries to have fellowship with unbelievers will invariably become corrupted through such attempted fellowship. The prime example of this in the Bible is Jehoshaphat, whose fellowship with wicked Ahab almost ruined him and certainly sowed the seeds of destruction in his own family. (He married his son Jehoram to the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel, Athaliah. God cut off almost all of Jehoshaphat's seed, sparing only Joash. But for God's covenant faithfulness to David, the line of Christ would have been wiped out!).

However, I am not convinced that "fellowship" is the appropriate word here, for the questioner goes on to explain his friend's position. First, the friend argues that God's people are called to be light (Matt. 5:14–16), which is true. Second, the friend argues that to be light means that Christians may (or even should) send their children to public schools, which is false. To be the light of the world does not mean to have fellowship with the world, and there is where the confusion seems to lie. To be light means to shine in holiness before the world, so that the world sees our good works and glorifies our Father in heaven (Matt. 5:16; 1 Peter 2:15). To shine is to be a witness, not to have fellowship. Light shines in darkness and against the darkness. Light does not fellowship with the darkness. Light does not seek some point of commonality with the darkness. "Be not ye therefore partakers with them" (Eph. 5:7). "And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness" (Eph. 5:11).

If we may not have fellowship with unbelievers, does that mean that we cut off all contact and social interaction with them? That is to turn to the opposite extreme. We must live with unbelievers in this world. Many of us work with unbelievers. Social interaction with unbelievers is necessary and unavoidable. We must not treat unbelievers with haughty scorn as if we are better than they are. We must not refuse to speak to our unbelieving neighbor, or (if we

are at a secular university) our unbelieving fellow student or professor. We must not refuse to help them when they are in need. We must not refuse to eat with them. We must witness to them, both in words and by deeds. Paul warns against cutting ourselves off from society in 1 Corinthians 5:9–11. Nevertheless, social interaction with unbelievers is limited. We do not share a spiritual bond, so we cannot do certain things together. Therefore we cannot enjoy true friendship, which is a sharing of life. Our relationship with unbelievers can never reach that spiritual closeness and oneness that we enjoy with our fellow saints in the church.

The last issue is education as an example of fellowship. Our children are *not* called to fellowship with the children of the ungodly in the public schools. In fact, they may not and they cannot do so. The lambs of the flock of Christ have no fellowship with the little vipers of Satan! Public schools *might* be an option for some parents in the absence of a good Christian school and where homeschooling is impossible. (However, few Protestant Reformed parents are in that position, and we do not make rules out of exceptions). Nevertheless, if with a heavy heart, Christian parents have no option but to send their little ones to a public school, they do not send their children there to *fellowship*. In fact, in many ways, they send their little ones to the front line of the battle, and they do so with many, many prayers, beseeching God to clothe them with the full armor of God (Eph. 6:10–18). There are Christian parents who are compelled to do this, but the reason is the unavailability of good alternatives. It is not because such parents deem Christian education too expensive. (If Christian parents in our churches struggle with the cost of Christian school tuition, let them contact the deacons. They stand ready to give advice and help as the representatives of the merciful Christ).

Foolish beyond measure, then, is the parent who, despising the good Christian schools, sends his children into the public schools with such a cavalier attitude! Extraordinary is the grace

necessary to preserve the lambs of Christ's flock among the wolves of public school teachers and the vipers of public school students in a godless, antichristian atmosphere! That grace was given to Daniel during his schooling in Babylon, but neither Daniel nor his parents *chose* Babylonian education. It was forced upon them.

It is not the calling of our little lambs to witness, at least not in the same way as adult saints. It is the calling of parents to protect the little lambs until they are mature enough to witness fully in the world. And it is the calling of all Christians, young and old, to maintain the antithesis, which is the spiritual separation (and not fellowship) between believers and unbelievers. Witness to unbelievers, live a holy life before them, but do not fellowship with them.

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