



“Do not be yoked together with unbelievers”: New Testament perspectives on how Christians should live and act in a society of diverging convictions

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Abstract

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The exhortation found in 2 Corinthians 6:14 “not to be yoked together with unbelievers” has been interpreted and applied differently by Christians. Some Christians try to hide from the realities of everyday life in a kind of escapism and religious isolation, while others compromise by trying to accommodate the societies’ demands and current trends in all kinds of worldly religious practices. These extreme positions cause Christians to be without any influence in the world. The primary aim of the article is to show how believers in New Testament times handled the situation when they were yoked together with unbelievers. In order to propose Scriptural guidelines for contemporary believers, the focus will be on the example of the apostles while the teaching of Paul to the slaves and of Peter to the aliens in this world will also be discussed. Some other New Testament perspectives are touched upon, inter alia the kind of authority to be obeyed and teaching on the responsibilities and attitude of believers. After the discussion of each part, pointers will be suggested. In conclusion, guidelines towards a Christian lifestyle within a secular context will be proposed.

Opsomming

“Moenie in dieselfde juk trek as die ongelowige nie”: Nuwe-Testamentiese perspektiewe op hoe Christene behoort te leef en op te tree in 'n samelewing van uiteenlopende oortuigings

Die vermaning in 2 Korintiërs 6:14 om “nie in dieselfde juk as die ongelowige te trek nie” word verskillend deur Christene geïnterpreteer en toegepas. Sommige Christene probeer om die realiteite van elke dag te ontduik in 'n lewe van ontvlugting en godsdienstige afsondering, terwyl ander weer probeer om die samelewing se eise en hedendaagse strominge in wêreldse godsdienstige praktyke te akkommodeer. Hierdie uiterste standpunte veroorsaak dat Christene sonder invloed in die wêreld is. Die primêre doel van hierdie artikel is om aan te toon hoe gelowiges in die Nuwe-Testamentiese tyd die situasie hanteer het waar hulle met ongelowiges in een juk moes trek. Ten einde Skriftuurlike riglyne vir hedendaagse gelowiges te bied, sal daar op die voorbeeld van die apostels gefokus word, terwyl die onderrig van Paulus aan die slawe en Petrus aan die vreemdelinge in hierdie wêreld ook aandag sal kry. Enkele ander Nuwe-Testamentiese perspektiewe word aangeraak, onder andere die soort gesag wat gehoorsaam moet word en onderrig oor die verantwoordelikhede en houding van gelowiges. Na die bespreking van elke gedeelte, word merkers aangedui. Ten slotte word riglyne gebied wat vir 'n Christelike lewenstyl binne 'n sekulêre konteks kan geld.

1. Introduction

Contemporary Christians find themselves living in a postmodern context where they are increasingly confronted with people holding different views. Their Christian values and ethics are challenged by the 21st century society, which is sometimes even explicitly hostile towards Jesus Christ and his followers (Bakker, 2004:117-118; Kolden, 2004:423). Some scientists and even Nobel prize-winning physicists openly state that they prefer to restrict their field of view to that which can be observed and verified, subsequently *excluding* most matters of faith (Yancey, 2003:2-3). In addition to the pressure Christians experience to live out their faith in the postmodern environment, they are also confronted with the Biblical teaching in the passage of 2 Corinthians 6:14 – “do not be yoked together with unbelievers” – which can give the impression that they should avoid contact with unbelievers. As this passage clearly sheds light on the relationship between believers and unbelievers, it is imperative that believers, in order to obey God, should understand what kind of conduct is forbidden (Jordaan, 1999:469).

This verse forms part of the pericope comprising of 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1 which, ever since the nineteenth century, has been subject to many critical questions and arguments regarding its authorship. Despite some difficulties, many scholars still believe that this passage is authentically Pauline (Harvey, 1996:75-76; McCant, 1999: 62-63). Paul exhorts the Corinthians to renew their covenantal faithfulness as God's people (Long, 2004:235). He urges them, according to Thrall (2004:472-474), not to be closely associated with unbelievers because of the absolute contrast between the moral uprightness which is required of believers and the wickedness which is common among the unbelievers. Theron (2004:41-43) highlights the way in which Paul metaphorically applies the Old Testament instruction that different animals are prohibited to be yoked together (Deut. 22:10; Lev. 19:19). Futato (1997:296) argues that this Old Testament law underscores the necessity of holiness and thus prohibits Jews to plough with an ox (clean) and a donkey (unclean) yoked together. Hoffmeier (1997:712) states that God wants to remind the Israelites that they are his people and that they should not mingle with pagans. They should not have fellowship with those who despise the salvation of God, just as light cannot exist in union with darkness and no harmony exists between Christ and Belial (2 Cor. 6:14-15).

By means of the metaphor Paul warns believers not to be *intimately involved* with unbelievers (Barnett, 1999:130). Another word, suggested by Garland (1999:331-332), is "ally". Paul prohibits an alliance between spiritual opposites as it could lead to spiritual disaster. The fact that believers are sealed by the Holy Spirit does not mean that they can be careless about their associations in the world. Paul is not implying that Christians should totally separate themselves from the world, because that would mean that they will have to leave this world altogether (1 Cor. 5:10). They still have to shop at the market (1 Cor. 10:25) and may be invited for dinner at an unbeliever's house (1 Cor. 10:27), but they may not form their spiritual identity in the pagan society and realign their values accordingly. Belleville (1996:177-182) mentions that the quotation of Isaiah 52:11 in this pericope, suggests that Paul is referring to associations or partnerships between Christians and non-Christians of compromising nature, rather than casual or occasional working relationships. The reason for the prohibition in v. 14 is given in v. 16 – "for we are the temple of the living God". It means that they belong exclusively to God and should forsake all associations that would be incompatible with God's ownership.

Paul’s metaphor conveys the message that believers should live holy lives by separating themselves from close relationships in which, unless both parties are true believers, Christian consistency will be compromised. However, to be effective witnesses in the world, believers should be seen and be accessible (Martin, 1986:197, 211). Paul states that Christians are *called* to be God’s letter to the world (2 Cor. 3:2-3) and may hence *not withdraw* from the world (Vosloo & Van Rensburg, 1999:1535-1536). The Bible depicts believers as God’s ambassadors in the world. Throughout history, God has never removed his followers *from* the world, but has left them *in* the world to have an impact. In his high priestly prayer, Jesus Christ does not ask his Father to take his disciples *out* of the world, but to protect them *in* the world (John 17:15, 18). The vital question, according to Van der Walt (2007:2, 4), still remains: How should Christians, living in today’s context, have a positive influence on the world around them? It will not happen if they are accommodative towards a society which ignores God’s norms. Neither will it happen if they isolate themselves from the “sinful” world. It is extremely difficult for Christians, says Bohnen (2004: 111), to find the healthy balance between “identity” and “involvement”. Moltmann uses the metaphor of the fossil and the chameleon to describe the two above-mentioned extremes on the position of Christians *in* the world. The fossil depicts the tendency of some Christians to preserve their old traditions. The chameleon represents the inclination of others to compromise and adapt to society in order to remain unnoticed. Neither the fossil, nor the chameleon pass the test of Karl Barth on the characteristics of the authentic church: “For the church to be true, she needs to be ‘church for the world’” (Bakker, 2004:118).

The primary aim of this article is to propose Scriptural guidelines for a Christian lifestyle within a secular context. In order to attain this objective, believers who were yoked together with unbelievers in New Testament times will be identified and their lives will be discussed to see how they handled the situation. New Testament teachings on the responsibility of Christians in the world and the desired attitudes and responses of believers in an environment of mostly unbelievers will also be investigated.

2. The concepts *believer* and *unbeliever*

As the purpose of this article is to propose guidelines from the New Testament on how Christians should act and live within a contemporary context of unbelief, it is important to clarify the concepts of

believer and *unbeliever* in New Testament terms. The concept *believer* is understood as somebody who has heard and believes the gospel of Jesus Christ (Richards, 1985:123; cf. McKim, 1996:28). A believer is someone who believes in the Triune God, but often lives and works in a context in which the majority of people are unbelievers (cf. 2 Cor. 6:14). A believer has put his trust in Jesus Christ and has a new focus in life. This change of heart and life is, however, only possible if a believer has been born again by the working of the Holy Spirit (Theron, 2004:8). The Bible refers to a believer as *disciple* or *Christian* (Acts 11:26). Within the framework of this article *unbelievers* are regarded as non-Christians who do not believe the gospel (Furnish, 1984:371; Louw & Nida, 1989:124; Webb, 1992:43-44; Jordaan, 1999:479; cf. McKim, 1996:291).

3. Some New Testament figures who shared the yoke with unbelievers

The New Testament provides examples of believers who lived and worked among unbelievers. In order to provide possible guidelines for contemporary Christians, hence attention will be given to the way in which the apostles asserted themselves when they experienced hostility from the religious leaders of their day. Paul's teaching regarding the conduct of slaves and masters, included in the household codes and the example of Onesimus before and after his conversion, will be investigated, as well as Peter's teaching to the "strangers in the world".

3.1 Apostles

Peter, John and other apostles made momentous declarations before the Sanhedrin:

Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. (Acts 4:19.)

We must obey God rather than men. (Acts 5:29.)

The gospels portray these men as fearful and slow to understand, but after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit during Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4), they were changed men, willing to share the gospel even at the cost of their own lives (Lloyd-Jones, 2001:97, 101, 107). Peter is not precluding obedience to men, but if one must choose between obeying God or men, God must be obeyed (Barrett, 1998:288). The apostles did exactly this when they disobeyed a specific order of the authority (Acts 5:28) because of God's command (Acts 1:8). The

apostles acknowledged, just like Daniel (Dan. 6:10-13), that there is a *higher authority* from whom they take their orders (Alexander, 2001:1035). Believers are consequently free to disobey the state if it requires disobedience to God (Lea & Griffin, 1992:318). Jesus Christ prepared his disciples that they might experience opposition (Luke 12:11-12), but also promised the Holy Spirit who will teach them what to say (Wall, 2002:92).

The passage in Acts 5:29 is Scripture’s leading justification for civil disobedience, but as Wall (2002:109) argues, Peter’s response is directed toward a particular kind of authority. His expression of civil disobedience does not serve political, but *missionary* ends. According to Romans 13, Paul emphasises that civil authority is divinely sanctioned to serve the purposes of God in the world. The church thus supports civil authority, but opposes authorities whose self-interest is contrary to the purposes of God. In such cases, actions of civil protest or disobedience may be necessary, e.g. sit-in strikes, hunger strikes or disruption of traffic. This, says Van Wyk (1999:76-78), corresponds with the opinion of Calvin who never opted for unconditional obedience to the government. Christians may be involved in organised peaceful resistance if their God-given fundamental rights of freedom and justice are violated. Van der Walt (1994:501) defines civil disobedience as demonstrative (visible), yet non-violent actions, deliberately breaking the laws of the country, in order to bring about change in the policy of government.

Pointers from the apostles’ lives:

- Pentecost changed fearful disciples into bold apostles.
- Jesus warned his disciples about possible opposition, but promised the presence of the Holy Spirit.
- The authorities should always be obeyed, except when they require something against God’s will.

3.2 Slaves

The teaching regarding the conduct of slaves and their masters will be divided in three groups. Firstly, attention will be given to the household code as treated by Paul. Then the specific case of the relationship between Onesimus and his slave-owner, Philemon, will receive attention. To conclude, the teaching of Peter regarding slaves and masters will be studied.

3.2.1 The household codes

The household codes or *Haustafeln* can be traced back to Aristotle and address the mutual responsibilities of people in different relationships (Schreiner, 2003:125). The purpose was to ensure good management of households, as a household was seen as the basic unit of society in the Greco-Roman world. Good relationships within households contributed to the stability of the state and formed part of Christians' witness to a hostile society (Jobes, 2005:179-183). Paul addresses Christians in different sectors of life and strongly emphasises submission and obedience (Barclay, 1997:68-69).

- **Ephesians 6:5-9**

The Pauline authorship of Ephesians was universally accepted until the beginning of the 19th century when scholars started to question it on the grounds of the absence of Paul's favourite words, on the impassionate style in which the letter is written and several other theological arguments (Stott, 1999:16-18). Many scholars hold the view that these arguments are sufficient to prove that Paul is not the author of Ephesians (Kitchen, 1994:7; Perkins, 2000:351; Yee, 2005:33). The authors of this article agree, however, with many other scholars who are of the opinion that Paul is indeed the author of the letter according to Ephesians 1:1 (Liefeld, 1997:19; O'Brien, 1999:45-46; Hoehner, 2004:60). Slaves should serve their masters with "respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart" (Eph. 6:5). They should be honest and people of integrity with pure motivation (Louw & Nida, 1989:747). As Christians, they are ultimately working for God and not for people and should therefore demonstrate a willing and wholehearted obedience (Ryken *et al.*, 1998:967; Best, 2004:575, 577). Paul's teaching to the slaves and their masters can be applied to the employer-employee-relationship (De Klerk, 2001:116). Paul asks employers and employees to set an example as believers *within* the prevailing order, without overturning it. He encourages slaves to be as obedient to their masters as to the Lord. Employees should not focus on their employers, but on the Lord who is the real Employer. Then their work will be good and enjoyable (De Klerk, 2001:117; Janse van Rensburg, 2003a:767; Hoehner, 2004:808). They will be conscientious and dedicated in their work, even when the owner's back is turned (Best, 2004:577-578). As the slaves' real Master is in heaven, they will work to win his favour – no need to be "men-pleasers" (Louw & Nida, 1989:300).

Paul reminds the Christian masters that the Lord is their Master (Eph. 6:9). The way they experience God as Master should influence the way they act as masters (Janse van Rensburg, 2003a:767). They should always treat their slaves with integrity as they are accountable to their Master in heaven (Hoehner, 2004:814-815).

- **Colossians 3:22-4:1**

Paul's teaching focuses on the motivation of workers and the standard of their workmanship – both should be of the highest standard, because the work is done for Jesus Christ (O'Brien, 1998:1275; Clinton & Ohlschlager, 2001:1590). Many Christian slaves had non-Christian owners and it was probably difficult for them that their lives were spent to benefit unbelievers. They were perhaps tempted to do the minimum, but Paul urges them to give their best in their work (Barclay, 1997:91). They should see their lives as being spent *in service of Christ* (Col. 3:23, 24). Paul therefore discourages “eye service” (Col. 3:22) – service to impress others (Louw & Nida, 1989:461). He urges Christians to accept the status quo, as it is only the circumstances *in which* they serve the Lord and not the circumstances *for which* they live (Barclay, 1997:92). They should respond to it with a Christian attitude of obedience, love, compassion and justice. Such behaviour demonstrates spiritual maturity (Stuckenbruck, 2003:125). They should allow God to transform them inwardly so that their lives can be a witness (Murphy-O'Connor, 2001:1197).

The masters should remember that they are before the impartial God the same as slaves and should therefore answer to their Master in heaven (Stuckenbruck, 2003:125).

- **1 Timothy 6:1-2**

Slaves often experienced injustice and it was natural to retaliate, but Paul reminds them that their behaviour should never jeopardise God's Name, even if they endure discrimination (Vosloo & Van Rensburg, 1999:1641). Paul distinguishes between *slaves of unbelievers* who should, for the sake of their witness (missionary aim), respect and obey their masters, and *slaves of believers* who should not expect different treatment because their masters are brothers in Christ. On the contrary, these slaves should work even harder, because a Christian brother will benefit (Guthrie, 1998:1310; Quinn & Wacker, 2000:483; Drury, 2001:1227; Marshall, 2004:627).

- **Titus 2:9-10**

When Paul encourages slaves to “show that they can be fully trusted” (Tit. 2:10), he wants them to be faithful (Louw & Nida, 1989:377). The stereotypical Greco-Roman view of slaves’ behaviour was that they steal and talk back, but Paul advocates behaviour that will commend the Christian religion to outsiders and make the teaching about God attractive. Outsiders must see that the Christian faith produces members of society whose lives are in accordance with their social status (Bassler, 1996:198; Mounce, 2000:416; De Klerk & Janse van Rensburg, 2005:83). The message is clear: people can live a Christian life within the existing orders of society (Marshall, 2004:257-258). Obedience to the Lord also includes obedience to human authorities (Janse van Rensburg, 2003b:827).

Pointers from the household codes

- Employees should be honest, faithful and obedient. They should work with respect, integrity and dedication, even if their employers are unbelievers and their backs are turned.
- They are ultimately working for God and his Name should never be jeopardised.
- Eye-service is ruled out, because they are actually in service of Jesus Christ. He is their *real* Master.
- Christians should accept the prevailing social structure, as it is only the circumstances *in which* they serve the Lord and not the circumstances *for which* they live. They should set an example *within* it – a sign of spiritual maturity.
- Christian employees should allow God to transform them inwardly so that their behaviour can make the gospel attractive to other people.
- Christian employers should remember that the Lord is their Master and they are accountable to Him. They should treat their employees with integrity and goodwill.

3.2.2 Onesimus

The life of Onesimus serves as an example of an unequally yoked situation which changed after the slave’s conversion and the implications it has on his relationship with his Christian owner, Philemon. What Paul is actually requiring of Philemon regarding

Onesimus has always been one of the most difficult interpretative issues in the short letter to Philemon (Frilingos, 2000:99-100; De Vos, 2001:89).

From the diplomatic language of Paul, Stuckenbruck (2003:128) argues that it is apparent that Onesimus left Philemon in an unlawful manner and probably owes him money (Philem.:18). With his cautious and humble approach, Paul hopes to extinguish Philemon's justified anger (Gorday, 2000:312-313). Paul argues that Onesimus' conversion changed everything, irrespective of what has happened in the past: he was *useless*, but now is *useful* both to Paul and Philemon (Philem.:11). Barth and Blanke (2000:141, 143-144) give the meaning of the name *Onesimus* as *useful*. His usefulness becomes apparent only *after* his conversion, as the scoundrel becomes a “new man” – a total transformation. Barclay (1997:117), Nordling (1997:278) and Stuckenbruck (2003:129) comment on how Onesimus' conversion influences his relationship with Philemon – the slave-master-relationship changed to *brothers in the Lord* (Philem.:15-16; Col. 4:9). Philemon's Christian charity is stretched further as Paul expects him to treat this former thief as an equal before God. According to De Vos (2001:102, 104), Paul is more interested in the fundamental change in the nature of their relationship (brothers) than in the legal aspects (the slave's manumission). The fact that Paul wants Philemon to consider Onesimus as a *brother* also has implications for Onesimus' reinstatement as member of the church, which was important to demonstrate the integrity of his conversion (Taylor, 1996:274).

Pointers from Onesimus' life:

- Onesimus, a useless, runaway slave, becomes *useful* after his conversion.
- His conversion entirely transforms a scoundrel into a *new man* worthy of his name.
- The conversion changed the former slave-owner-relation into a brother-relation.

3.2.3 Slaves in Peter's letter

The exhortation to slaves in 1 Peter 2:18-25 is based on the slave's obligation to God – in reverence for God (Achtmeier, 1996:193). Peter instructs slaves to submit to their masters, even if their masters are wicked and harsh, because it is *commendable* (1 Pet. 2:19) or *pleasing* (Clowney, 1988:115). The slaves' obligation to

submit is not cancelled by the unjust behaviour of the master (De Klerk & Janse van Rensburg, 2005:61). Slaves should live as witnesses of Jesus Christ in spite of injustice and persecution. They may only disobey if their masters expect something against God's will. If slaves suffer unjustly, they will be rewarded by God (Schreiner, 2003:127, 134, 137-138). Kolden (2004:424) and Jobes (2005:187-189) show how Peter reminds the slaves to focus on God's Son who also had no rights and was treated unjustly. They should thus submit to their masters' authority and bear unjust treatment, because of Jesus, the Suffering Servant who said: "No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also." (John 15:20). Abused slaves are exhorted to follow Christ's example (1 Pet. 2:21) when He experienced injustice from office-bearers (De Klerk & Janse van Rensburg, 2005:61).

Pointers from Peter's letter concerning slaves:

- Slaves should submit to their masters in reverence for God – even if they are wicked and harsh.
- Slaves should live as witnesses of Jesus Christ in spite of injustice and persecution.
- Slaves may only disobey if their masters expect of them something against God's will.
- Suffering may be part of God's plan for them, but in their suffering, they should focus on the Suffering Servant and follow Christ's example.
- God will reward them if they endure unjust suffering.

3.3 Strangers in the world

Peter refers to Christians as being alienated (1 Pet. 1:1; 2:11) within the structure of a non-Christian environment, an environment that is non-supportive and sometimes quite hostile towards them (Janse van Rensburg, 1996:37; Kolden, 2004:423; De Klerk & Janse van Rensburg, 2005:60). He instructs them on how to live in a justifiable relationship with unbelievers with whom they are *unequally yoked*. Peter reminds his readers that although they are living in an alien world with different values, they should still submit to the authorities (Bakker, 2004:117; Kolden, 2004:423; Jobes, 2005:165). Submission to secular human authorities is part of God's will, for He wants his people to silence any slander and suspicion by *doing good* (1 Pet. 2:15) and by being law-abiding citizens (Schreiner, 2003:

126). Good behaviour is the most successful way to win the approval of one's accusers. *Doing good* has always been an imperative part of Christian spirituality, because Christians should bear witness to the gospel in the society in which they live through it (Bakker, 2004:117-118). Good works, according to the Heidelberg Catechism (2001: 59), are done in faith, for God's honour, according to the Law of God and not based on human discretion. Peter's instruction clearly contradicts a worldview that promulgates separation from society and withdrawal from civil responsibility (Jobes, 2005:175-176).

Peter urges Christians not to permit the hostility of the secular society to enter the Christian community (Achte-meier, 1996:222). He wants them to return unbelievers' evil and insults with blessings (1 Pet. 3:9). This admonition, according to Schreiner (2003:164-165, 168), corresponds with the teaching of Paul (Rom. 12:17) and Jesus (Luke 6:28-29). With *blessing* Peter means that believers should ask God to shower his favour and grace over other people. Why? Because believers are called to do this and in doing it, they will inherit eternal blessing.

Christians are encouraged not to fear suffering (1 Pet. 3:13-17), for nothing can bring lasting harm to the person who does God's will. It is also the pathway to blessing (Achte-meier, 1996:228). Peter warns Christians that they might experience unjust suffering (Jobes, 2005:226-228). Although God's eye is on the righteous, suffering may be part of his will. The knowledge that no persecution can remove them from God's divine favour, gives them courage to remain faithful *in* their suffering. Part of this faithfulness is being prepared to explain the reasons for their beliefs and hope (1 Pet. 3:15). Cultural isolation is never an option for a Christian community. They are called to live their lives openly and to give reasons for it in the midst of the unbelieving world (Achte-meier, 1996:230, 232-234). It is imperative, says Schreiner (2003:168-174), that believers should prepare themselves for suffering (1 Pet. 4:1-6). They will face opposition, but it will only be temporarily and they will not be conquered, as God will vindicate them.

God uses suffering for purification, because it is a sign of God's *presence* through his Spirit (1 Pet. 4:14), and not his *absence* (Schreiner, 2003:219). Suffering, according to Achte-meier (1996: 306, 309) and Jobes (2005:233, 287), is inevitable and nothing strange. Christians must therefore be reminded that if suffering comes, it is under God's sovereign control. If they suffer for Christ, they should experience joy (1 Pet. 4:13), because their suffering

means that they are blessed by the presence of God's Spirit. It is further a sign of future eschatological deliverance. This future-directedness, says Kolden (2004:427), gives hope for everyday living. Hope has transformative power as it changes the believer's perspective on the present situation. Without hope, a situation may seem unchangeable, but with hope the inflexible becomes flexible. Hope does not make suffering less real, but puts it in the right perspective and provides patience to endure.

Pointers from Peter's letter:

- Christians live in an alien place with different values, but they should still submit to the authorities and be witnesses of Jesus Christ by *doing good*.
- Christians should be law-abiding citizens and may not withdraw from civil responsibility, even if society is unjust.
- They should respond to evil and insult with blessings.
- Suffering should not be feared, for nothing can bring lasting harm to the person who does God's will.
- The knowledge that no persecution can remove one from God's divine favour, gives courage to remain faithful *in* suffering.
- Believers should be prepared and ready to explain the reasons for their beliefs and hope.
- God uses suffering for purification. It is never a sign of his *absence*, but of his *presence*. This gives *hope in suffering*.
- Hope does not make suffering less real, but puts it in the right perspective and provides patience to endure.

4. God's people's responsibility towards the world

Attention will now be given to some metaphors and particular teachings in the New Testament which explain the relationship and responsibility of the believer towards the unbelieving world.

4.1 To act like salt, light and a lamp

There is a connection between *light* and *salvation* in the Old and New Testament. Believers are called *the light of the world* (Matt. 5:14) and they must bring God's light to those who are still in darkness – to *Israel*, but also to the *whole world* (Selman, 1997:328-329; McConville, 1997:752). When Jesus calls his disciples the salt

and light of the world, there is a warning included: if the disciples do not carry out their mission, they will be thrown out, just like salt when it loses its salinity (Matt. 5:13). Just as salt is not salt for its own sake, the disciples do not exist for themselves, but for the world (Hagner, 1993:99; Davies & Allison, 2000:472-473). For the lamp to give effective light to those around it, it must be put on a stand (Matt. 5:15). The disciples of Jesus Christ should therefore be *in* the world (Davies & Allison, 2000:476). The metaphors of the salt and the light, says Lucas (2002:58), carry the message of involvement combined with distinctiveness:

- Light is the antithesis of darkness, but light must shine into the darkness.
- Salt must be combined with that to which it must give taste and to that which it must preserve, but must keep its salinity, otherwise it will be ineffective.

Hagner (1993:100) emphasises the importance of Christian involvement. For the world not to be left in darkness, Christians must fulfil their calling. It is good to become aware of Christians who are serious about their calling by being actively involved to bring hope in a suffering world. These two examples speak for itself:

- The WMF (Word Made Flesh) Organisation focuses on serving Jesus Christ among the poor in urban slums, red-light districts and refugee camps (Heuertz, 2007:90).
- Members of the Tabernacle Baptist Church in New York are reaching out to Karen refugees from the jungles of Myanmar (Burma), helping them in practical ways in their resettling process (McGill, 2007:97).

It is actually impossible, argues Hagner (1993:100), for disciples not to be involved in the world, just as a city on a hill cannot be hidden (Matt. 5:14). Salt should be saline, a light should shine and a disciple has a mission. Religion in isolation does not exist (Boring, 1995:182). Davies and Allison (2000:470, 472, 478) see the message of Matthew 5:13-16 as the summary statement of the task of God's people in the world. *Closet-Christianity* and self-directed service are ruled out. Jesus calls his followers into a *visible* discipleship that should be lived out before the world. Christians should constantly be built up in their faith and reminded of their task in the world (Blomberg, 1992:103; Hall, 2004). Young Christians need to be taught the implications of their conversion to Christ: their

lives should have an outward focus to serve God and their fellow human beings in *all* spheres of life (Van der Walt, 2006:31-32).

4.2 To be a letter to the world

Paul uses metaphorical language in 2 Corinthians 3:2-3 when he states that the Corinthians are a letter from Christ “written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts” (McCant, 1999:37). Their lives are actually a *communication* from Christ and a witness to the world about the change that God brings in the lives of people (Martin, 1986:51). The fact that the letter can be “known and read by everybody” confirms that their lives are a testimony (Barnett, 1999:60-61; Thrall, 2004:222). The letter was written by “the Spirit of the living God”, that is the *life-giving* Spirit. With this emphasis, Thrall (2004:227-228) and Lotter (2005:493) believe that Paul wanted to accentuate the point that the power at work in the hearts of the believers, is the Holy Spirit. Through his working, the believers have experienced a profound change of heart and it is visible in a new lifestyle (Lotter, 1993:57; Barnett, 1999:62). If the letter was written in pen and ink, it was only visible to a few people, but now it is visible to *everybody* – everyone can observe their salvation (Belleville, 1996:89; Savage, 1996:104; Garland, 1999:158).

4.3 To be *in* the world, but not *of* it

Jesus does not pray that his disciples be removed *from* the world, but protected *in* the world (John 17:14-15). The Father does not abandon the world and his disciples must be witnesses of it (Beasley-Murray, 1999:300). Jesus does not want his disciples to withdraw from the world like the gnostic groups, but to be active in it (Scott, 2003:1202). Although the disciples do not belong to the world, God has a mission to fulfil through them. It is therefore imperative that they should stay *in* the world. Jesus modelled for his disciples the meaning of being alien *from* the world, but still committed to the mission *in* the world (Borchert, 2002:204).

4.4 Attitude towards the enemy

Jesus Christ quotes the ancient Mesopotamian law of “an eye for an eye” (Matt. 5:38). His command, however, is radically different: “do not resist an evil person” (Matt. 5:39). He wants his disciples to respond to evil without retaliation, to unreasonable requests with compliance, and to be charitable when people ask something (Hagner, 1993:130-131). There is no room for revenge in God’s

Kingdom (Allison, 2001:855). Jesus Christ expects his disciples to be unselfish, to show humility and to be prepared to suffer loss. He set the example when He prayed for his persecutors on the cross (Lucas, 2002:156). The former minister of law and order in South Africa, Mr. Adriaan Vlok, demonstrated this attitude when he washed the feet of Rev. Frank Chikane as a sign of penitence over events under the apartheid's regime (De Lange & Coetzee, 2006:1).

4.5 Submit to authorities

According to Romans 13:1-7, believers must submit to authorities, even to non-Christian governments, because it is instituted by God to maintain public order (Mounce, 1995:243; Jordaan, 1999:488). Paul was well aware of the possibility of persecution when he wrote these instructions, as it follows directly after Romans 12:14-21, where he advocates that Christians should not curse their persecutors, should not repay evil with evil, and should not seek personal revenge (Wright, 2002:718). If somebody resists authority, he resists God's institution and brings judgement on himself (Mounce, 1995:243). Paul gives in Romans 13:5 two reasons why Christians should submit to authorities, namely to be free of possible punishment and to be free from the accusation of one's conscience (Wright, 2002:721). He repeats these instructions in Titus 3:1-2. Believers should be obedient to the governing authorities and should be ready to *do good* (Mounce, 2000:444). When Paul exhorts Christians to *be ready to do whatever is good* (Tit. 3:1), he wants them to be positively involved in society (Lea & Griffin, 1992:318).

5. Proposed guidelines when a yoke is to be shared with unbelievers

From the research done, guidelines valid for contemporary Christians will now be suggested:

5.1 Importance of the Holy Spirit

- The Holy Spirit transforms fearful people into bold witnesses of the gospel.
- He is present and guides believers on how to handle difficult situations.

5.2 In the face of suffering

- When God allows suffering in believers' lives, they should focus on the Suffering Servant and remember that God is sovereignly in control.
- Suffering should not be feared, for nothing can remove them from God's divine favour. This gives believers courage to remain faithful *in* their suffering.
- Believers should be prepared to explain the reasons for their beliefs, actions and hope.
- God uses suffering for purification – it is never a sign of his *absence*, but of his *presence*. This gives *hope in suffering*.
- Hope does not make suffering less real, but puts it in the right perspective and provides patience to endure.
- God's Kingdom has no room for revenge: believers should return evil and insult with blessing.

5.3 Obedience to authorities

- Christians should submit even to non-Christian authorities, but it is never an unconditional obedience.
- Authorities may be disobeyed if they require something against God's will.
- Christians should be law-abiding citizens and may not withdraw from civil responsibility.
- When Christians' God-given fundamental rights of freedom and justice are being violated, they may be involved in organised non-violent resistance.

5.4 Difficult choices

- When believers are in a situation where they must disobey one commandment of God in order to obey another, they may count on the forgiveness of Jesus Christ.
- When believers are in a situation where they must disobey a commandment of God, they can have a clear conscience if they have the conviction that God knows that there is no other option.

- Disobeying a commandment of God will always go hand in hand with repentance and assurance that God will not despise a broken heart (Ps. 51:17).
- Love for God comes first in choosing between the interest of God and man. Love for the neighbour comes first in choosing between self-interest and the interest of others.

5.5 Attitude at work

- Christians should be honest, faithful and obedient and work with respect, integrity and dedication, even if their employers are wicked and harsh unbelievers.
- Eye-service is ruled out, because Christians are ultimately working for God and his Name should never be jeopardised.
- Prevailing social structures are only the circumstances *in which* Christians serve the Lord and not the circumstances *for which* they live. They should set an example *within* it – a sign of spiritual maturity.
- Christian employees' behaviour should make the gospel attractive to other people.
- Christian employers should treat their employees with integrity and goodwill, because their Master is the Lord and they are accountable to Him.

5.6 Involvement in the world

- Jesus Christ never removed his disciples *from* the world, but protected them *in* it. Although they do not belong to the world, God has a mission to fulfil through them.
- Religion in isolation and *closet-Christianity* are ruled out. Jesus Christ calls believers into a *visible* discipleship, to serve Him and their fellow human beings in *all* spheres of life.
- With involvement comes distinctiveness, because believers have experienced a profound change of heart that should be visible in a new lifestyle.
- Their lives are actually a *communication* from Christ and a witness to the world about the change God can bring in the lives of people.

6. Conclusions

In this article, it has been shown how believers in New Testament times handled the situation when they were “yoked together with unbelievers”. Attention was given to the teaching of Paul to the slaves and of Peter to the aliens in this world. Some metaphors and particular teachings in the New Testament explain the relationship and responsibility of the believer towards the unbelieving world. In conclusion, guidelines for a Christian lifestyle within a secular context were suggested. Although Christians may feel like strangers in this world, they may not practice their religion in isolation, because God has called them to be witnesses to the world and He has promised the assistance and presence of the Holy Spirit. If they experience injustice and suffering, they should remain faithful by focusing on the Suffering Servant and remembering that God is sovereignly in control. Their behaviour will make the gospel attractive to unbelievers. The article ends with proposed guidelines when a yoke is to be shared with unbelievers.

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Key concepts:

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Kernbegrippe:

basis-teoretiese riglyne
juk: 2 Korintiërs 6:14
sekulêre konteks
verantwoordelikhede: gelowiges

