

UNEQUALLY YOKED – A RE-EXAMINATION OF 2 CORINTHIANS 6:11-7:4

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A very familiar quotation in Christian circles is: “Be not unequally yoked together with unbelievers.” It seems to be applied most often in the context of mixed marriages or mixed business partnerships. That admonition and its related command, “Come out from their midst and be separate...,” are central themes in a very important paragraph. As familiar as those two commands are, the context in which they are found is often totally disregarded in their application. The paragraph in which they are found – 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1 – has been the center of great controversy for over a century. Some doubt that Paul even wrote these verses, while others question their position in the text. In order to correctly understand this passage and its message to the Corinthians and to the church as a whole throughout the centuries, it is essential to examine these verses contextually and historically and thereby come to an understanding of Paul’s purpose in penning these words in their given location in the text.

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One of the most demanding exhortations of the New Testament is found in 2 Corinthians 7:1 where Paul states, “Let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.” This brings a fitting conclusion to a paragraph that begins with the command to “stop yoking yourselves together with unbelievers” (6:14a) and contains the command to “come out from their midst and be separate...and do not touch what is unclean” (6:17). This passage has drawn the attention of many students of the Bible who have studied, preached on, and quoted from it and yet:

For many years now this paragraph has provided a focus of controversy in academic circles. Various scholars have argued that, as it is here placed, it is quite incongruous with the context, both in substance and in sentiment. Some have rejected it as being a non-Pauline interpolation; others, while not

disputing its Pauline origin, have conjectured that through some mischance it became dislocated from its original position, either in this or in some other letter, and was wrongly inserted in the place where it now appears.¹

Many of us who find such comments distasteful have ourselves dealt with this passage as if it were displaced. We (I) have preached on it and quoted from it outside of its context, both immediate and extended, and have failed to come to terms with its message and meaning in its immediate context and possibly drawn unwarranted conclusions.

There are many views on what being unequally yoked together with unbelievers has reference to. In an article in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, William Webb lists 12 different views, among which he lists mixed-marriage as “probably the most popular.”² He goes on to conclude that “Paul probably did not have mixed marriages in mind when writing 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1.”³ Some commentators, drawing from Paul’s discussion in 1 Corinthians 14:23, “have suggested that ἑτεροζυγοῦντες includes the case of speaking in tongues when unbelievers are present in the service.”⁴ Another quite popular view is that believers are not to enter into business partnerships with unbelievers. Webb concludes that this is “completely outside the realm of issues discussed in Pauline writings” and that it “is quite unlikely Paul had business partnerships in mind when he wrote about the unequal yoke”⁵

One major problem for those who refer this passage to such things as mixed-marriage and business partnerships is that if they have not themselves entered into such relationships, they may somehow feel absolved from any responsibility in responding to the demands of this passage. It should become clear from the reading of this paper that this is far from true and that the principles presented in this passage are very applicable to the totality of the membership in the church of Jesus Christ both then and now.

¹ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, in *NICNT*, F. F. Bruce, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 241.

² William Webb, “What Is the Unequal Yoke (ἑτεροζυγοῦντες) in 2 Corinthians 6:14?” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149/594 (April-June 1992): 163.

³ *Ibid.*, 167-68.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 177.

THE POSITION OF 6:14-7:1 IN ITS CONTEXT

With this in mind, to what is Paul making reference in 2 Corinthians 6:14? Providing an answer to that question is the purpose of this paper. The meaning and message of these very important demands will be addressed, primarily from the standpoint of their immediate context (6:11-7:4), but also to some degree from the broader context (2:14-7:4) and the more extended context (1:1-7:16). To begin with, this passage brings to a conclusion 2:14-7:4 which has been referred to as “the longest coherent section within 2 Corinthians and is, arguably, the centerpiece of the entire letter.”⁶ This “longest coherent section” falls between 2:12-13 and 7:5ff. which, as the quotation below indicates, are definitely linked together.

- [2:12] Now when I came to Troas for the gospel of Christ and when a door was opened for me in the Lord,
- [2:13] I had no rest for my spirit, not finding Titus my brother; but taking my leave of them, I went on to Macedonia....
- [7:5] For even when we came into Macedonia our flesh had no rest, but we were afflicted on every side: conflicts without, fears within.
- [7:6] but God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus...

As is evident, both sets of verses (in 2 Cor. 2 and 7) mention (1) Paul’s coming to Macedonia, (2) the unrest in his spirit, and (3) Titus. In addition to that link between 7:5ff. and 2:12-13, Paul also reflects once again (7:5-6) on the theme of comfort which he introduced in 1:3ff. And in between 2:13 and 7:5 is this unparalleled description of Paul’s ministry. Nevertheless, the broader context of 2:14-7:4 is not totally disconnected from what precedes and what follows. As Barrett comments, “To this point Paul has offered an apologia for his conduct, both as to his motives (1:12-14) and to his actions (1:15-2:4). Some of this apologia is picked up in his defense of the ministry of the new covenant that follows.”⁷

A further evidence that this so-called digression (2:14-7:4) is not totally disconnected from the surrounding context is clear as Paul progresses from the conclusion in 7:4 into the verses that follow (7:5-16). Martin writes:

⁶ C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, in *Harper’s New Testament Commentaries* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973) 137.

⁷ *Ibid.*

Paul has been diverted – but only apparently (2:14-7:4) – from the account of his meeting with Titus in order to vindicate his apostolate and to thank God for his place in that ministry. The exposition had continued for some length. Though 7:3, 4, do not refer directly to his Macedonian account, they do pave the way for Paul to return to the topic of 2:13.⁸

Not only do they pave the way, but there is also an evident continuity of thought between the concluding words of this digression in 7:4 and the verses which immediately follow in 7:5-16 as certain common themes suggest. One is the theme of joy. To Paul's statement in 7:4, "I am overflowing with joy in all our affliction" (ὕπερπερισεύομαι τῇ χαρᾷ ἐπὶ πάσῃ τῇ θλίψει ἡμῶν, *hyperperisseuomai tē charai epi pas tē thlipsei hēmōn*), is added, "so that I rejoiced even more" (ὥστε με μᾶλλον χαρῆσαι, *hōste me mallon charēnai*) (7:7); "I now rejoice" (νῦν χαίρω, *nun chairō*) (7:9); "we rejoiced more" (μᾶλλον ἐχάρημεν, *mallon echarēmen*) (7:13); "I rejoice" (χαίρω, *chairō*) (7:16). Another common theme is evident when to Paul's statement about "great is my boasting on your behalf" (πολλή μοι καύχησις ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν, *pollē moi kauchēsis hyper humōn*) (7:4) is added "I have boasted...about you" (ὕπερ ὑμῶν κεκαύχημαι, *hyper humōn kekauchēmai*) and "our boasting...proved to be the truth" (ἡ καύχησις ἡμῶν... ἀλήθεια ἐγενήθη, *hē kauchēsis hēmōn...alētheia egenēthē*) (7:14). There is a third less pronounced theme. Although two different Greek words are used, the English translation shows a continuity of thought between the first clause of 7:4, "Great is my confidence in you" (πολλή μοι παρρησία πρὸς ὑμᾶς, *pollē moi parrēsia pros humas*), and the concluding words of 7:16, "I have confidence in you" (θαρρῶ ἐν ὑμῖν, *tharrō en humin*). There is, therefore, a definite continuity between 2:14-7:4 and the broader context.

It is also helpful to sense the progression of thought leading into these verses. Martin writes, "In our view, and against most interpreters, we see 6:14-7:1 as integral to Paul's closing argument begun in chap. 5 and completed in 7:3ff. It is not a digression but a logical development."⁹ Barnett also sees this as a progression of the flow of thought begun in chapter 5 and offers his suggestion of the continuity.

⁸ Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, vol. 40 in *Word Biblical Commentary*, Ralph P. Martin, NT ed. (Waco, TX: Word, 1986) 223.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 40:195.

Here now is the climax of the apostolic excursus. Paul claimed to have been given the ministry and message of reconciliation, and on that basis he had appealed to them to be reconciled to God (5:18-6:2). Then he defended his ministry from criticism, pointing out that it was marked by both suffering and the power of God (6:3-10). Operating out of this moral authority, he urged the Corinthians, as his children, to widen their hearts for him (6:11-13). This leads into the great ethical imperative with which the excursus comes to its climax. Let the Corinthians separate themselves from the local temple cults.¹⁰

But the primary concern of this article is the development of the argument in the immediate context. First of all, “an overall continuity within 6:11-7:4 is perceptible.”¹¹ Nevertheless, bracketing this passage is 6:11-13 and 7:2-4. Barrett introduces his comments on 7:2 by writing: “Paul, after developing the theme of Christian obligation, comes back with renewed vigour to the appeal of vi. 11ff. ‘Take us into your hearts!’”¹² Or, as Barnett puts it, “The opening words in the passage 7:2-4, ‘Make room for us,’ are well understood as resumptive of 6:13, but with different vocabulary.”¹³ Martin, concluding his remarks on 6:11-13, writes, “Paul continues his appeal that the Corinthians open their hearts in 7:2, but in the present arrangement of the text 6:14-7:1 interrupts that thought.”¹⁴

THE PROBLEMS SURROUNDING 6:14-7:1

There is little doubt that 6:14-7:1 forms a definite unit, and yet most of the problems relative to 6:11-7:4 revolve around this particular passage. The challenges to this passage date back many years, over a century in fact. Fee quotes William Sanday, in an article written in 1890 [“2 Corinthians vi. 14 – vii.1,” *Classical Review* IV (1890), 359-60] as saying, “I confess that this view [that vi. 14 – vii. 1 corresponds to the lost letter of I Cor. v. 9] would have a rather strong attraction for me, if I could get over the initial difficulty...of framing to myself a satisfactory hypothesis as to the way in which the

¹⁰ Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, in *NICNT* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 342.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 339.

¹² Barrett, *Second Corinthians*, 203.

¹³ Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 339.

¹⁴ Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 187.

interpolation came in.”¹⁵ Fee then concludes, “We are left then with the option that Paul is responsible for the passage in its present setting.”¹⁶ Most of those reading this article might suggest that such a conclusion is a given. Yet a lot of sentiment exists to the contrary.

There is a great difference of opinion as to how to view this passage and its relationship to the context. Thrall writes, “It is well known that this passage raises two major questions. Did Paul himself compose it? Is it out of place in its present context?”¹⁷ In broad terms, there are at least three ways to respond. There are those who, in the face of all the challenges, conclude that these words are actually Pauline words inserted into this context by its author. Kümmel responds that “there is no adequate reason for designating the text as un-Pauline.”¹⁸ Hughes concludes that “there is, in short, no *prima facie* evidence that this passage could not have been written by the Apostle Paul.”¹⁹

On the other hand, there is the viewpoint of Martin who begins by stating that, “All in all, there will never be consensus on the authenticity of this passage.”²⁰ He then admits that he is led “to believe that in all probability Paul had some control over this passage” but he stops short of accepting what he calls Hughes’ “unequivocal position.”²¹ He further contends that “it is difficult to attribute this passage solely to Paul’s dictation and originality.... While it appears more or less certain that Paul had control over the writing of 6:14-7:1 and it is not a case of direct borrowing, it is quite doubtful that this paragraph came unaided from Paul’s mind.”²² He then states, “But though he is the final ‘redactor’ of this Essene work and has ‘Paulinized’ it, we cannot judge it to be uniquely Pauline....”²³ He concludes that it is “authentic in the sense that Paul was the one to place it in the letter at this curious juncture.”²⁴

¹⁵ Gordon D. Fee, “II Corinthians vi. 14 – vii. 1 and Food offered to Idols,” *New Testament Studies* 23/2 (1977): 143.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Margaret E. Thrall, “The Problem of II Cor. vi. 14 – vii. 1 In Some Recent Discussion,” *New Testament Studies* 24 (1977): 132.

¹⁸ Werner Georg Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, trans. A. J. Mattill, Jr. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1966) 214.

¹⁹ Hughes, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 242.

²⁰ Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 193.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 194.

There are also those who contend that these verses are definitely of a non-Pauline source. Kümmel states in his *Introduction to the New Testament*, “The authenticity of II Corinthians as a whole is undisputed. On the other hand, the Pauline origin of II 6:14-7:1 has long been denied (recently, e.g., by Jülicher, Bultmann, Dinkler, Bornkamm, Georgi, Fitamyer).”²⁵ Dahl writes, “I therefore assume that 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1 is a fragment of non-Pauline origin, now to be read as part of our 2 Corinthians.”²⁶ Yet he observes, “I am fairly convinced about one thing, namely, that the person who inserted the fragment in 6:14-7:1 is the same one who added chapters 10-13....”²⁷ He himself sees the weakness of his position when he writes, “Yet, Paul’s style and language are so flexible that it is difficult to say with certainty that Paul could not possibly have written the text.”²⁸ If that is not enough, he adds, “I have to confess that I find it somewhat difficult to imagine a later redactor who was capable of expressing his understanding of Paul’s unique apostolic ministry in such an indirect and subtle way....”²⁹ That is reminiscent of another author who wrote, “If a final redactor put the finishing touches on 2 Corinthians, why did he insert 6:14-7:1 in such an awkward place, so alien to its context?”³⁰ There are some practical questions which have no convincing answers, namely, “(1) Why would Paul, or anybody else, insert this supposedly *discrete* non-Pauline passage into a Pauline writing? (2) Why would it be inserted at this precise point? (3) Would the early Christians have felt free to insert an extraneous text into an apostolic writing?”³¹

The Problem of Abruptness

Several things cause people to conclude that this passage is non-Pauline. One is the abruptness – from the standpoint of grammar and content – of the introduction of these verses into the context. Plummer opens his comments on this passage by stating that “the appeal is...rather violently interrupted by the interjection of a sudden warning against heathen modes of life.”³² He then states that “this strongly worded admonition...comes in so abruptly here that a number of

²⁵ Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament* 211.

²⁶ Nils Alstrup Dahl, *Studies in Paul* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1977) 64.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 68.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 69.

³⁰ Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 194.

³¹ Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 339.

³² Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, in *ICC* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1966) 201.

critics suppose that it is a fragment of another letter, and some maintain that the fragment is not by St. Paul.³³ Kümmel writes, "II Corinthians 6:14-7:1 forms a difficulty probably not to be solved, for this section is without thematic connection to its context and interrupts the good connection between 6:13 and 7:2."³⁴ Stanley states that "the intervening passage vi. 14-vii. 1, whilst it coheres perfectly with itself, has no connexion with the immediate context either before or after."³⁵ To which Martin adds, "It becomes difficult to see any transition between 6:13 and 14.... The conclusion of our passage (7:1), which speaks of avoiding contamination of the flesh and spirit does not lead smoothly into 7:2...."³⁶

Nine decades ago, Moffatt, in commenting on Lutgert's view on this passage, began his entry by addressing himself to "those who retain this passage, in spite of its abruptness, as an integral part of the context...."³⁷ He then concluded: "Furthermore, even granting Lutgert's view of 6:14-7:1, we have practically the same difficulty as on all other theories of this class with regard to the internal connexion of 6:12.13 with what follows."³⁸ Thus, according to some, "One crucial question facing interpreters is the integrity of 2 Cor 6:14-7:1. Does it belong here or is it an interpolation?"³⁹

There is no doubt as to the abrupt entrance of these verses into the larger framework of 6:11-7:4. But this is not a negative factor. Instead, Paul intentionally and purposefully placed this paragraph here and, as he sometimes does, he "uses this grammatical method (asyndeton) to make freestanding statements and thus to heighten the impact of his words."⁴⁰ As Paul began his emotional discussion concerning his people Israel in Romans 9:1 with asyndeton, so here, impassioned by what was going on in Corinth, he does the same. As challenging as the understanding of this passage is, this section may be seen as a passionate plea, but it should not be considered a digression. It should instead be seen as a logical development.⁴¹

³³ Plummer, *The Second Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, 204.

³⁴ Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 214.

³⁵ Arthur Penrhyn Stanley, *The Epistles of St. Paul to the Corinthians* (Minneapolis, MN: Klock & Klock, 1981) 464-65.

³⁶ Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 191.

³⁷ James Moffatt, "2 Corinthians vi. 14 – vii. 1," *The Expository Times* 20 (Oct 1908-Sept 1909): 428-29.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 191.

⁴⁰ Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 344.

⁴¹ Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 195.

The Problem of Non-Pauline Theology

Another consideration is what has been referred to as a doctrinal issue that arises out of “the extreme sense of exclusiveness expressed in the passage.”⁴² Betz writes, “The conclusion is unavoidable that the theology of 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1 is not only non-Pauline, but anti-Pauline.”⁴³ Part of the issue has to do with the use of “flesh and spirit” in this context. The contention is that it is non-Pauline theology since “Paul usually has in mind the ‘intrinsically evil’ side of humanity when he uses σάρξ (sarks), ‘flesh.’ Characteristically, Paul would say that ‘flesh’ is incapable of being cleansed of sin. Likewise, Paul would normally consider πνεῦμα (pneuma), ‘spirit,’ as ‘intrinsically good,’ not in need of cleansing.”⁴⁴ This is to assume that Paul could not here be using these terms in a non-theological sense to make reference to the material and immaterial parts of man. In fact, does not Paul use these terms in a non-theological sense in the verses that bracket the “digression” (2:14-7:4) when he writes, “I had no rest for my spirit” (2:13) and “our flesh had no rest” (7:5)? In 7:1 “the two together sum up human nature, and the intercommunion of the parts is so close, that when either is soiled the whole is soiled.”⁴⁵

Another aspect of this concern is the seeming pharisaic attitude of separation which some suggest is found here. This idea of exclusiveness is sometimes drawn from the OT quotations in 6:16b-18.⁴⁶ But “it would be a serious mistake to conclude that Paul is here condemning all contact and intercourse with non-Christians” when it is evident that “his whole ministry and manner of life was a denial of any policy of total withdrawal for fear of contamination from unbelievers.”⁴⁷ Therefore, the context here is not one that reflects Essene separatism nor one that contradicts his statements in 1 Corinthians 5:9-11.

The Problem of *Hapax Legomena*

One of the major challenges to the authenticity of this passage is based on the great number of *hapax legomena* (words occurring only once) which are found in 6:14-7:1. Although the length and nature of this essay does not allow for a detailed response to these matters, a few brief comments are helpful in laying a

⁴² Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 338.

⁴³ Hans Dieter Betz, “2 Cor 6:14-7:1: AN ANTI-PAULINE FRAGMENT?” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 92 (1973): 108.

⁴⁴ Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 209.

⁴⁵ Plummer, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 211.

⁴⁶ Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 192.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

foundation for what follows. As to the matter of *hapax legomena*, it should be noted that “the claim that *hapax legomena* are evidence of non-Pauline authorship is difficult to sustain. Second Corinthians alone contains no less than fifty hapaxes; there are only six in his passage.”⁴⁸ And “further, it is characteristic of Paul that rhetorically powerful passages as this tend to be hapax-laden.”⁴⁹ In support of this, Fee writes:

Five of the alleged NT hapaxes occur in a burst of rhetoric (verses 14-16a), and it is the nature of Pauline rhetoric to have a sudden influx of *hapax legomena*. For example, the outburst in I Cor. iv. 7-13 has six NT hapaxes...and two other words found only here in Paul.... Similarly, the rhetorical expression of apostolic ministry in II Cor. vi. 3-10 has four NT hapaxes...plus one Pauline hapax...and four others in Paul (or the NT) only here and in the comparable passage in xi. 22-29....The quantity of hapaxes in vi. 14 – vii. 1 is therefore not a particularly unusual feature.⁵⁰

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THOUGHT IN 6:14-7:1

The breakdown of 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1 is quite clear. “This passage is an *inclusio*, begun and ended by similar-style exhortations (6:14a; 7:1).”⁵¹ As defined later in this essay, the passage begins with (1) a strong prohibition against “yoking oneself up with unbelievers” (6:14a). (2) This prohibition is then reinforced (6:14b-16a). This entails a series of five rhetorical questions which each expect a negative answer and state “in proverbial form the truth that believers may have nothing to do with wickedness, darkness, Belial, unbelievers, and idols...”⁵² Each of these questions is designed to enforce the thrust of the admonition of 6:14a not to ‘become yoke-mates with unbelievers.’ The questions illustrate the need to be separate, i.e., to avoid association with evil.⁵³ A supporting statement, “For we are the temple of the living God,” follows and reinforces the message being communicated by the final rhetorical question, “Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols?” This then provides (3) a transition

⁴⁸ Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 340.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 339-40.

⁵⁰ Fee, “II Corinthians vi. 14 – vii. 1 and Food offered to Idols”, 144.

⁵¹ Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 343.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 190.

into supporting statements from Scripture, a series of OT quotations, which support his call for separation. As Barnett describes it:

The second line of substantiation springs from the assertion that believers are the temple of the living God, and affirms, by a series of subtly linked OT citations, that God dwells among his people. Based on the ‘promises’ of God in the citations, that the covenant God has received them as his children, the Corinthians are exhorted to “come out...be separate.”⁵⁴

The Scriptural support of a separated life prepares the way for (4) a practical outworking of the call for separation in each individual life (7:1). In this verse, Paul concludes his call to separation by drawing the reader’s attention back to promises recited in the preceding verses with the statement: “Therefore having these promises, beloved” (ταύτας οὖν ἔχοντες τὰς ἐπαγγελίας, ἀγαπητοί, *tautas oun echontes tas epangelias, agapētoi*). The promises in 6:16-18 become the basis for Paul’s concluding exhortation.⁵⁵ On the basis of these promises, he calls on the readers to “cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit” and at the same time be “perfecting holiness in the fear of God.”

THE IMMEDIATE CONTEXT OF 6:14-7:1

With this in mind, it is helpful to set the immediate context by addressing the plea Paul makes in the two bookends of this passage in 6:11-13 and 7:2-4. There is definitely a perceptible continuity between these two sets of verses. Paul concludes his remarks in 6:13 with the plea for the Corinthians to “open wide to us also” and then he “continues his appeal...in 7:2, but in the present arrangement of the text 6:14-7:1 interrupts that thought.”⁵⁶ The opening words of 7:2-4 resume the plea of 6:13 but with different vocabulary (πλατύνθητε/Χωρήσατε, *platunthēte/chōrēsaate* – “open wide to us”/“make room for us”). So following upon the interruption in 6:14-7:1 he resumes his exhortation once again as he pleads with the Corinthians to open wide their hearts to him.

The structure found here is not totally unlike that found in 1 Corinthians 12-14. Paul concludes chapter 12 with the command, “earnestly desire the greater gifts” (ζηλοῦτε δὲ τὰ χαρίσματα τὰ μείζονα, *zēloute de ta charismata ta*

⁵⁴ Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 343.

⁵⁵ Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 191.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 187.

meizona) and following the chapter on love (1 Cor 13), he resumes his discussion on gifts (14:1) with the command, “desire earnestly spiritual *gifts*...” (ζηλοῦτε δὲ τὰ πνευματικά, *zēloute de ta pneumatika*). In both cases, the same verb, the same form of the verb, and the same type of object indicate that there is evident continuity of thought. Chapter 13 in its own unique way interrupts that thought. Because of this, Jean Héring, who accepts the Pauline origin of 1 Corinthians 13, writes, “It could be argued as certain that Chapter 13 did not originally occupy its present place in the Epistle.”⁵⁷ Few would concur with that conclusion. They rather consider the 13th chapter that is sandwiched between chapters 12 and 14 as an integral and very necessary part of the overall message. The relevance and the meaning of chapter 13 and chapters 12 and 14 are to be found in their relationship to each other in the given context where Paul placed them.

The same thing holds true in 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1. Between two very related pleas (6:11-13; 7:2-4) is this very important section (6:14-7:1). Second Corinthians 6:14-7:1 is purposefully sandwiched by Paul between 2 Corinthians 6:11-13 and 7:2-4 and is an integral and most necessary part of the message. The relevance and meaning of 6:14-7:1 as well as the two bookends (6:11-13; 7:2-4) are to be found in their relationship to each other in the given context where Paul placed them.

Paul's Personal Example

At the beginning (6:11) and the end (7:3-4) of his plea for openness on their part toward him, Paul cites his own personal example. In the initial plea in 6:11-13, Paul once again speaks to them directly. “Twice in this short passage Paul uses the pronoun ‘you’ (vv. 11, 13), as he had done in 6:1. The earlier appeal relates to the Corinthians’ relationship to God (5:20; 6:1); this one relates to the Corinthians’ relationship to Paul.”⁵⁸ It is important to notice that “the two are clearly interconnected. To be reconciled to God means to be reconciled to Paul, his minister....”⁵⁹ As he makes his appeal to them, he uses two perfect tenses to express his openness of heart and mouth. “These organs represent the natural two-part division of the sentence. By the one he speaks to them; by the other he thinks and feels about them.”⁶⁰ Having an open mouth “is a picturesque

⁵⁷ Jean Héring, *The First Epistle of Saint Paul to the Corinthians* (London: Epworth, 1962) 134.

⁵⁸ Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 334.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

indication that there has been no reserve on his part.”⁶¹ It is a reference “to the free and open spirit shewn in the whole previous passage on the ministry, in which he had so liberally imparted his inner feelings to them.”⁶² Having a heart that is opened wide suggests that “there are no secrets in it; there is room for you in it, and I long to have you there.”⁶³ His testimony of a continually opened heart sets the tone for the next two verses and is the thought that carries over to 7:2-4. In Paul’s resumption of his plea in 7:2, he explains what he means by his request in 6:13 for them to “open wide to us also” as he tells them to “make room for us *in your hearts*.”⁶⁴ Although the text does not include “in your heart,” the context demands it.⁶⁵ This he had personally modeled for them.

Paul’s Personal Absolution of Blame

In the center (6:12; 7:2b) of each of the sections (6:11-13; 7:2-4) of his plea that bookends 6:14-7:1, Paul reminds his readers that he is not to blame for their lack of openness toward him. In the second part of his plea for openness (7:2-4), Paul is no doubt “reacting to charges against him, the specifics of which are contained in 7:2b.”⁶⁶ In each case, he repeats οὐδένα (*oudenā*; “no one”) in an emphatic manner and each time in conjunction with an aorist tense to indicate that there had “not been a single case in which he has wronged, ruined, defrauded, any of them.”⁶⁷ He makes it a point to quickly negate any reason “which might make them hesitate to open their hearts to take him in.”⁶⁸ Paul is showing here that “on his side at least there is no impediment; he has done nothing to diminish the Corinthians’ confidence in him.”⁶⁹

Paul’s Passionate Plea

Paul’s return in 7:2 to his affectionate appeal with which he concluded 6:13 “is as sudden as the digression at vi. 14.”⁷⁰ In the concluding statement of

⁶¹ Plummer, *Second Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, 203.

⁶² Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1968) 2:670.

⁶³ Barrett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 191.

⁶⁴ Plummer, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 212-13.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 217.

⁶⁶ Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 217.

⁶⁷ Plummer, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 213.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 213.

⁶⁹ Barrett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 203.

⁷⁰ Plummer, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 212-13.

the first section (πλατύνθητε καὶ ὑμεῖς, *platinthēte kai humeis* – 6:11) and the beginning statement of the second section (Χωρήσατε ἡμῶς, *chōrēsatē hēmōs* – 7:2a), Paul issues his passionate plea for them to open up in their relationship to him. Though the verbs are different (πλατύνθητε /Χωρήσατε, *platinthēte/ chōrēsatē*), there is little doubt but that Paul is resuming the thought of 6:13. “The interruption is ended as Paul returns to his argument that they, the Corinthians – not he – are responsible for a less than desirable relationship at this point. Χωρήσατε, ‘make room’...carries with it the idea of expansion.”⁷¹ As he writes to them in this context:

His address to them is painfully emotional (‘our mouth is open ... our heart is wide’), as indeed was the catalogue of his credentials in suffering that he felt compelled to give them (6:3-10). These words, with those, form the climax to the entire apologia for his apostolic office that began at 2:14. Paradoxically, they are at once office-related and emotional. Here we hear Paul in his most human self-disclosure. The apostolic office, which is to a significant degree a model for subsequent pastoral and missionary ministry, is a human ministry; it can never be a mere institution.⁷²

Paul also evidences his passion toward them by the use of “you” (6:11, 13 as in 6:1) and the rare use of the personal vocative address as “Corinthians.” This entire passage is very tender for rarely does Paul address his converts by name and certainly nowhere else in his letters to the Corinthians.⁷³ He also evidences passion in the conclusion of this section when he makes reference to “you also” (καὶ ὑμεῖς, *kai humeis*) and addresses them as “children” (ὡς τέκνοις, *hōs teknois*) 6:13.⁷⁴ His reference to them as children is not an indication of their spiritual immaturity but is rather a reminder of their spiritual relationship to him and a call for them to recognize that fact and respond accordingly.⁷⁵

⁷¹ Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 216.

⁷² Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 335.

⁷³ Plummer, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 203.

⁷⁴ Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 337.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

THE PROHIBITION STATED

The key thought, and the one that is to be picked up at the conclusion of this paragraph and reinforced by a Scriptural quotation in the middle of the paragraph, is the prohibition calling for separation. Betz brings out the significance of this prohibition in its context and how it is tied in with the remainder of the passage as he writes:

The parenetic statement (6:14a) rests upon a detailed theological foundation which includes the entire remaining section and which moves from an ontological affirmation (6:14b-16a) to a self-definition of the congregation (6:16b). In 6:16c-18 the divine promises...are set forth in the form of combined Scripture quotations. From these, the...ethical responsibility is derived in the form of a general parenthesis (7:1), which then is concretized and placed at the beginning of the section as its leading theme (6:14a).⁷⁶

When one reads the prohibition *Μὴ γίνεσθε ἑτεροζυγούντες ἀπίστοις* (*m m̄ ᾧ gineshte heterozugountes apistois*), there is little doubt what Paul is using as the basis of this exhortation. This metaphor is drawn from the OT passages that prohibit two different kinds of animals from working side by side (Deut 22:10) and from being cross-bred together (Lev 19:19). “This principle is adapted and applied by Paul with the purpose of emphasizing the incongruity of believers being paired with unbelievers.”⁷⁷ This “metaphor of the yoke which he uses here shows that he is thinking of close relationships in which, unless both parties are true believers, Christian harmony cannot be expected to flourish and Christian consistency cannot fail to be compromised.”⁷⁸ And in fact, in the statement that follows, “for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness” (*τίς γὰρ μετοχὴ δικαιοσύνη καὶ ἀνομία, tis gar metoch m̄ ᾧ dikaiosun m̄ ᾧ kai anomiai*), “the conjunction ‘for’ shows that there is a logical and obvious incongruity about the unequal yoke, and the pairs of opposites which it introduces illustrate the absolute and ultimate antithesis that exists between the believer and the unbeliever.”⁷⁹

As stated earlier, “It would be a serious mistake to conclude that Paul is here condemning all contact and intercourse with non-Christians: isolationism of this sort would, as he has previously written (1 Cor. 5:10), logically necessitate

⁷⁶ Betz, “2 Cor 6:14-7:1: ANTI-PAULINE FRAGMENT?”, 90.

⁷⁷ Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 244.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 246.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

departure from the world. In other words, it is a position of absurdity.”⁸⁰ It should also be noted that “the proper force, however, of *μὴ γίνεσθε κτλ* (*μή* plus present imperative) is ‘do not go on becoming unequally yoked with unbelievers, as you are already doing.’”⁸¹

Not to be lost in one’s reflection on this prohibition to “stop yoking oneself up with unbelievers” is the opposite message as well. “The negative injunction of course carries with it the opposite and positive implication, that believers should be equally and harmoniously yoked with fellow-believers, so that...they may walk and work worthily of the Lord.”⁸² Hughes concludes, “True Christian partnership is that which exists between...*genuine yokefellows*, and that can apply only to those who already are one in Christ Jesus.”⁸³

THE PROHIBITION REINFORCED

Paul then reinforces the prohibition to “stop yoking oneself up with unbelievers” with five rhetorical questions. Each question commences with the interrogative pronoun *τίς* (*tis*) (‘what’), and “each question is pointed and rhetorical; no answer is stated because the answer in each case is obvious.”⁸⁴ It should be further noted that:

The five rhetorical questions which now follow should be considered as a unit: (1) the connective “for” (*gar*) is found in the first line and again only after the fifth question has been put, (2) each question after the first begins alternatively with “or what” and “but what,” (3) each question then uses a word for likeness or agreement that is followed by balanced opposites, expressing in each case an exact antithesis, (4) there is no verb in any of the questions, and (5) the second part of the antithesis is introduced in turn by “and...to...to...with...with.”⁸⁵

Derrett writes, “The proposition is in five parts, with an appended explanation to the fifth (*ἡμεῖς γὰρ ναὸς θεοῦ ζῶντος*). Each of these is an exploration of the prohibition with which the passage commences. Each exploration brings out a

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 245.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 245.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 246.

⁸⁵ Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 345-46.

different feature.”⁸⁶ But, “considered separately or together, they express in proverbial form the utter incongruity of godliness and ungodliness.”⁸⁷ In addition, in the questions that follow, Paul “gives a clear demand for a distinction between believer and unbeliever.”⁸⁸ Furthermore, the “explanatory connective” - γάρ/“for” in the initial clause, τίς γάρ μετοχή δικαιοσύνη καὶ ἀνομία (*tis gar metochē dikaiosunē kai anomiai*) “introduces not only the first, but...each of the self-answering questions.... With this question, as with the others, the very asking of the question gives the negative answer, ‘none,’ thus reinforcing the prohibition not to be misyoked with unbelievers (v. 14a).”⁸⁹

The statement is quite clear, but how it is to be applied in this passage is a matter of much difference of opinion. The reason for this is summed up by Fee who, having noted its relationship to Leviticus 19:19 and Deuteronomy 22:10, writes, “It is a simple metaphor which suggests that just as it is forbidden to men of old to plough with different kinds of animals under the same yoke, so the Christian is a different ‘breed’ from the unbeliever and is forbidden an improper relationship with him.”⁹⁰ He remarks further, “What that relationship is, however, is not inherent in the prohibition itself; nor does one find help in the metaphorical use of ‘yoke’ in the OT....”⁹¹ He then concludes that “the clue to the passage lies not in the metaphor itself, but in the sets of contrasts in the following rhetorical questions.”⁹²

To what do the prohibition and the following five rhetorical questions make reference? Many ideas exist. Some have concluded that this teaches a separation from the world and have read that into the passage. There are those who, therefore, conclude that 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1 could not have come from the same pen as 1 Corinthians 5:9-11:

- [9] I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people;
- [10] I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters; for then you would have to go out of the world.

⁸⁶ J. Duncan M. Derrett, “2 Cor 6, 14ff. a Midrash on Dt 22, 10,” *Biblica* 59/2 (1978): 235.

⁸⁷ Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 346.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 346.

⁹⁰ Fee, “II Corinthians vi.14 – vii.1 and Food Offered to Idols”, 157.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*

- [11] But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he should be an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler – not even to eat with such a one.

William Webb addresses himself to this issue in two separate articles in *Bibliotheca Sacra* (January-March and April-June, 1992), and in his second article, he lists twelve options, six of which “have their origin in 1 Corinthians,” and two others “are based on data outside of specifics within Pauline material.”⁹³ He concludes that “the evidence strongly favors a traditional understanding of the ἄπιστοι as non-Christians outside the church community.”⁹⁴ But having settled that, he writes, “The difficulty lies in knowing what sort of ‘joining together’ activities Paul had in mind with the word ἑτεροζυγοῦντες (2 Cor. 6:14).”⁹⁵ He then sets forth the twelve different views and following a lengthy discussion, makes these observations:

The specific referent options for μὴ γίνεσθε ἑτεροζυγοῦντες may be grouped from least to most probable. For example the least plausible referent options are the following: going to court before pagan judges, eating idol-meat at a pagan’s home, speaking in tongues before unbelievers, and business partnerships. These cases of metaphorical idolatry may be excluded with a considerable degree of certainty. Also it is improbable that Paul had mixed marriages in mind.⁹⁶

He then concludes, “The most probable referent options are visiting temple prostitutes and joining with pagans in temple feasts. These infractions may be classified as severe violations of one’s covenant with God, as metonymical idolatry, and as forming a close bond with pagans and Beliar....”⁹⁷ There is great merit to his conclusion but a major problem is that there is no specific reference to either of these matters in the immediate or extended context.

It seems that if one were forced to make a choice, the best view would be that suggested by Gordon Fee with reference to food offered to idols and accepted in a somewhat modified form by others. Fee is eminently qualified to

⁹³ William Webb, “What Is the Unequal Yoke (ἑτεροζυγοῦντες) in 2 Corinthians 6:14?”, 163.

⁹⁴ William J. Webb, “Who Are the Unbelievers (ἄπιστοι) in 2 Corinthians 6:14?” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149/153 (January-March 1992): 44.

⁹⁵ Webb, “What Is the Unequal Yoke (ἑτεροζυγοῦντες) in 2 Corinthians 6:14?”, 162.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 178-79.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 179.

handle this matter not only because of his well-known scholarship but because of his outstanding work on 1 Corinthians. Because of his superb grasp of the first epistle, he is able to develop a convincing argument for the close relationship between the vocabulary and concepts used here and that found in 1 Corinthians 10. He concludes his article with the statement that “one can scarcely deny its linguistic and conceptual affinities both with I Cor. iii. 16-17 and x. 14-22.”⁹⁸ Following the same line, Barnett answers the questions about “what is meant by being ‘yoked together’ with ‘unbelievers?’” and “what kind of relationship should not be entered into with unbelievers?” by concluding, “The rhetorical questions that follow give the answer. The Corinthian believers must not be joined with Corinthian ‘unbelievers’ in the cultic life of the city, but rather ‘come out’ from among them.”⁹⁹

It is impossible in this article to fully address the underlying arguments of each author and his respective view. Nevertheless, in assessing these views, it is evident that a basic cause for the differences of opinion arises from the fact that an attempt is being made to draw specific conclusions when Paul himself has chosen not to be specific. Even Fee himself makes it abundantly clear that “what that relationship is, however, is not inherent in the prohibition itself.”¹⁰⁰ And he himself addresses the problem with the view he takes when he writes, “In conclusion, and in all candour, it is admitted that the one real difficulty with this interpretation is that ‘food offered to idols’ is not specifically mentioned either in this passage or its immediate context.”¹⁰¹ Fee also writes earlier in his article, “It is against this background that II Cor. vi. 14 – vii. 1 can be shown to make perfectly good sense, and to do so within the context of II Cor. i-vii.”¹⁰² But he then goes on to say that “this requires at least a partial reconstruction of the events and relationships between Paul and Corinth between the writing of our I and II Corinthians.”¹⁰³ Something must be assumed that is not evident in the context. That is the same problem with Webb’s view concerning temple prostitutes and pagan feasts. In fact, Webb, in summarizing his discussion, shows how difficult specificity is when he speaks of “the most probable referent” and

⁹⁸ Fee, “II Corinthians vi. 14 – vii. 1 and Food Offered to Idols”, 161.

⁹⁹ Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 345.

¹⁰⁰ Fee, “II Corinthians vi. 14 – vii. 1 and Food Offered to Idols”, 157.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 161.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 154.

remarks that “it is quite possible that Paul had in mind a number of cases not explicitly mentioned within Corinthian correspondence....”¹⁰⁴

Although there is probably some allusion to matters relating to pagan feasts and idol worship, it is impossible to identify a single definitive referent. It seems quite clear that the source of the problem is non-Christian pagans but it is also clear that “Paul does not state in specific terms what he means by being unequally yoked with unbelievers.”¹⁰⁵ The nature of the exhortation is general “and hardly to be pressed as applying only to partaking of meats offered to idols...or to marriage with unbelievers...but regard all possible connexion and participation....”¹⁰⁶ In addition, “it appears unlikely that Paul was asking the Corinthians to cease all contact with the Gentile world. He recognized that this was an impossibility (1 Cor 5:10), though his counsel was evidently misunderstood.”¹⁰⁷ “Rather, Paul warns against compromising the integrity of faith.”¹⁰⁸ To sum it all up: “Any action that would cause believers to link up with the world in thought and act (through indifference or connivance) must be avoided.”¹⁰⁹

Two things stand out relative to this matter. First of all, it is important that one say all that the passage says but nothing it does not say. In this passage, there are many ideas (twelve if one follows Webb) about what is addressed, but Paul leaves the matter undeclared and thereby allows the principle of separation to be as broad as possible but specific enough to help them understand the direction in which such separation must move. Secondly, since this passage was placed here purposefully by the Apostle Paul, the separation called for must somehow have direct application to the plea he makes in the passages that book-end these verses (6:11-13; 7:2-4). Plummer brings this out when he remarks that 6:11-7:4 “is rather violently interrupted by the interjection of a sudden warning against heathen modes of life which are sure to pollute the lives of the Corinthians (vi. 14-vii. 1), and would impede their reconciliation with the Apostle.”¹¹⁰ This pollution of their lives must somehow be the cause of the readers being impeded from carrying out the desire of the apostle for them to open up to him as he had to them. It is not the contact with the world that Paul

¹⁰⁴ Webb, “What Is the Unequal Yoke (ἕτεροζυγοῦντες) in 2 Corinthians 6:14?”, 179.

¹⁰⁵ Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 244.

¹⁰⁶ Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament*, 2:671.

¹⁰⁷ Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 197.

¹⁰⁸ Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 246.

¹⁰⁹ Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 197.

¹¹⁰ Plummer, *Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, 201.

addresses here (which would contradict his counsel in 1 Cor 5:9-11) but rather their acceptance of the values and views of the pagan world.

THE PROHIBITION SUPPORTED BY SCRIPTURE

Paul now supports his plea for a separated life from Scripture. Hughes makes an interesting observation from the progression of Paul's argument in this passage. He suggests that "it is almost as though we can in this passage catch an echo of Paul the preacher:

- the series of rhetorical questions,
- the notable variety of vocabulary and construction,
- the quotations from the Old Testament Scriptures,
- and the application of the biblical promises to those he is addressing (7:1) –
- all these together conjure up a vivid picture of the power and effect of the Apostle's preaching."¹¹¹

Paul not only supports this from Scripture but also:

Adapting the words of Lev 26:11-12, Paul discerns this threefold personal promise in the mouth of God: (1) 'I will live with them,' (2) 'I will walk' [among them],' and (3) 'I will be their God.' In the light of the Corinthians' reception of the word of God and God's anointing of them with his Spirit (see on 1:18-22), it is evident that God's words of promise have now been kept; they are a present reality. God *does* dwell in them, *does* walk among them; he *is* their God, and they *are* his people. Thus the Corinthians are, indeed, 'the temple of the living God' (v. 16b).¹¹²

And in this regard, "These powerful verses teach

- (1) the fidelity of God to his word of promise,
- (2) the continuity in the world of the people of God, though under a new covenant (see on 3:3-6), and
- (3) the necessity of separation of God's people-temple from the defilement of idols, as he now proceeds to declare."¹¹³

¹¹¹ Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 246 [indenting and highlighting added].

¹¹² Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 352.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 353 [indenting and highlighting added].

THE PROHIBITION PRACTICALLY WORKED OUT

The Personal Relationship

Paul now draws a conclusion to the message on separation with which he began 6:14a. He does so by addressing the readers with an “affectionate term ‘beloved,’ rather than by more direct words, as in vv. 14a, 17a, b. Moreover, he adopts a cohortative form of address (‘let us...’), consistent perhaps with his earlier identification with them (‘we are the temple of the living God’ – v. 16).”¹¹⁴

The Promises

“The opening connective ‘therefore’ refers specifically to ‘having these promises,’ that is, to the promises in this passage (vv. 16, 17, and 18).”¹¹⁵ The promises referred to are certainly drawn from the previous context. The probable reference here is to the two promises that follow the previous two commands:

The two exhortations – (1) “come out from them and be separate,” and (2) “touch no unclean thing” – are drawn from Isa 52:11 (“Go out from there and touch no unclean thing. Go out from the midst of her, be separate”). . . . Now follows the first of the two promises, “and I will receive you,” which is based on Yahweh’s word given to the people in exile through another prophet of the exile, Ezekiel (LXX Ezek 20:34; cf. 20:41; 11;17). . . . The second promise, “I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters,” is based on Yahweh’s word through Nathan to David about David’s coming son, “I will be a father to him, and he will be my son” (2 Sam 7:14).¹¹⁶

It is evident that “the logical consequence (‘therefore’) of possessing such promises is that Christ’s followers should make a complete break with every form of unhealthy compromise.”¹¹⁷ It should also be noticed that “the addition of ‘almighty,’ though common to the LXX, is found only here in the writings of Paul.”¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 355.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 355.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 353-54.

¹¹⁷ Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 258.

¹¹⁸ Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 355.

The Plea

“What follows is a single exhortation (‘let us purify ourselves...’), followed by the attendant consequences (‘perfecting holiness...’). Specifically, Paul exhorts ‘let us purify [or ‘cleanse’] ourselves...,’ language that specifically picks up ‘touch no unclean thing’ a few verses earlier (v. 17).”¹¹⁹ The promises of 6:16, 17, 18 “become the basis for the concluding exhortation to (1) refrain from all defiling of flesh and spirit; and (2) live as ‘perfecting’ holiness (7:1), i.e., bringing it to completion.”¹²⁰ It is clear from Paul’s use of “all defilement” and the combination of “flesh and spirit” that he is addressing himself to “all defilement of every possible kind, both external and internal, both seen and unseen, both public and private.”¹²¹ Paul’s plea is that every believer will cleanse himself/herself from every action (“flesh”) and every attitude (“spirit”) which has been polluted by the views and values of a pagan non-Christian society. The passage, therefore, “concludes as it commenced, with a charge to live a holy and separated life unto God. The theme of detachment from the pagan world is consistently held throughout the passage.”¹²²

THE OVERALL MESSAGE OF 6:11-7:4

The purpose of Paul’s plea that is found in the two passages (6:11-13; 7:2-4) that surround 6:14-7:1 is to implore the Corinthians to open wide their hearts to him as he had opened wide to them. He “rather violently” interrupts his plea “by the interjection of a sudden warning against heathen modes of life that are sure to pollute the lives of the Corinthians (vi. 14-vii. 1), and would impede their reconciliation with the Apostle.”¹²³ Barrett gives us a worthy reminder with respect to the place of 6:14-7:1 in its broader context. He first of all addresses many of the problems already addressed in this essay as he writes:

The view has long been current that vi. 14-vii. 1 is an intrusion in the text of 2 Corinthians. It has been supported by a twofold argument. (a) There is no connection between vi. 13 and vi. 14, and between vii. 1 and vii. 2. In vi. 13 Paul begs his readers to make room for him in their hearts; in vi. 14 he tells them sharply to have nothing to do with unbelievers. In vii. 1, after quoting

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 356.

¹²⁰ Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 191.

¹²¹ Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 258.

¹²² Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 191.

¹²³ Plummer, *Second Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, 201.

Scripture, he urges them to take thought for holiness of life in the fear of God; in vii. 2 he returns to self-defence, and a renewed personal appeal. (b) Not only is vi. 14-vii. 1 without direct connection with what precedes and what follows; if it is removed, vi. 13 and vii. 2 are found to connect admirably. (11) My heart is wide open to you...(13) As a recompense of like kind – I am speaking as to my children – do you be wide open to me... (2) Take us into your hearts!¹²⁴

He then concludes, “These observations are valid, and the argument must seem a cogent one, unless it proves possible to trace Paul’s thought through without more deviation than can always be expected in a writer of his sort.”¹²⁵

It might be asked whether it is possible to trace Paul’s thought through 2 Corinthians 6:11-7:4 and, if so, what path does it take? Plummer responds, “It is not incredible that in the middle of his appeal for *mutual* frankness and affection, and after his declaration that the cramping constraint is all on their side, he should dart off to one main cause of that constraint, viz. their compromising attitude towards anti-Christian influences.”¹²⁶ It is as one author writes: “Much writing on the puzzling passage 2 Cor 6, 14-7,1 may have missed the point. Perhaps the means of understanding it lies very nearby.”¹²⁷ So it seems.

As Paul abruptly introduced with passion his desire to see his people come to faith in Christ in Romans 9:1, so he passionately (by a use of asyndeton here as well) and abruptly introduces his desire to see the Corinthians cleanse themselves from the defiling attitudes of the pagan world which were restraining them from the openness the apostle longed for. Tying these thoughts together, it is clear in this passage that:

- He has reminded them of his personal example of openness (6:11; 7:3-4).
- He has reminded them of his personal absolution of responsibility for their lack of openness toward him (6:12; 7:2b). In spite of whatever charges were leveled against him, he is in no way responsible for this lack of openness.
- He has reminded them of his passionate desire to have them open up to him in much the same way he has been open toward them (6:13; 7:2a).

¹²⁴ Barrett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 193.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Plummer, *Second Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, 205.

¹²⁷ Derrett, “2Cor 6,14ff. a Midrash on Dt 22, 10”, 231.

- And now in a very abrupt, forceful and dynamic way, he draws their attention to the true cause of their lack of openness toward him: the pollution of their lives because of the lack of separation from pagan worldviews and values that so greatly affected them (6:14-18).
- It is from this pollution that they must now cleanse themselves both in the realm of their actions (flesh) and their attitudes (spirit) (7:1) if they are to be able to share in this openness with the apostle.

THE CONTEMPORARY APPLICATION

Just as 1 Corinthians 13 has an application that stretches far beyond the exercise of spiritual gifts, so 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1 applies to areas far beyond the context in which it is found. Fee makes a poignant observation in his commentary on Paul's first epistle to the Corinthian church when he writes, "We try desperately to identify with Paul, when in fact we are probably much more like the Corinthians than any of us dare admit."¹²⁸ That is likely true of most believers when it comes to the principle established in 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1. The principle remains broad enough that no believer in that day or this could completely absolve himself or herself from the responsibility of applying the truth to his or her individual life. The sinful influence of the world with which the Corinthians had yoked themselves had affected their actions and attitudes and thereby had a negative impact on their exercise of godly behavior in God's church. In like manner, the sinful influence that results from being yoked to the world in this or any age can so affect a believer's or a church's actions and attitudes that it keeps them from living in the manner God desires within His church.

¹²⁸ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* in *NICNT* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987) 182.