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*Equipping, Enabling, and Encouraging Marketplace Leaders*

# Yoked Relationships

**If you're an ox, don't team up with a donkey!**

The issue of yoked relationships in business is one of those Biblical principles that are easy to comprehend, but difficult to administer in real life.

Especially when a sure-fire opportunity to make an enormous amount of money comes via a partnership with a nonbeliever and you must make a decision in the cold, hard dawn of reality: do you, or don't you?

The verses that cause all this controversy are 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1. The second letter to the Corinthians was written by Paul to the church in Corinth and Achaia (Greece). Many false teachers were prevalent in the land challenging Paul's integrity and his authority as an apostle of Christ. Let's take a look at these verses:

*"Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people." "Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing and I will receive you." "I will be a father to you and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty." Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God."*

So, what exactly does the phrase, "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers" mean? Let's start back in Deuteronomy 22:10 where Moses instructs Israel, *"Do not plow with an ox and a donkey yoked together."*



The yoke was a heavy beam that was strapped across the upper shoulders and around the neck of the animals to tie them together. The yoke was then harnessed to a plow or wagon. As the animals walked, the weight of the wagon or plow pulled on the harness through the center of the yoke between the two animals.

The selection of animals to be yoked together was given a great deal of thought. For example, animals of the same type were paired together; oxen with oxen, donkeys with donkeys.

The animals also needed to be about the same size and strength. If one animal were taller than the other, the smaller animal would bear the greater load and soon become tired. If one animal were stronger than the other, it would pull ahead of the weaker animal.

And finally, the animals needed to have a similar temperament. You were asking for trouble if you tied two strong willed animals together. One needed to be a leader, the other needed to be willing to follow.

If all these conditions were not met, the animals would be “unequally” yoked, and would not be able to get as much work done as a better matched pair of animals.

Moses knew what would happen if an ox and a donkey were yoked together, and Paul understood that the same principle applied to the Corinthians. At no point does Paul hint that believers are somehow superior to nonbelievers. Indeed, it would be hard to make that case looking back at the history of Israel! But in this letter Paul makes it very clear that believers could easily be led astray, their beliefs corrupted by the idols of the “world.”

So, what do Moses’s instructions to farmers and Paul’s to the Corinthians have to do with us in today’s business? Plenty! The following three stories are real. Each of these men was a believer who entered or considered entering into a partnership with a nonbeliever.

Dave was a successful real estate developer in southern California. He had developed several projects himself and had worked for other, larger development companies. Eventually, he formed a partnership with a nonbeliever to develop a parcel of land for residential homes. Dave’s partner spent large sums of money without Dave’s knowledge, and coupled with the declining real estate market; the partnership was soon bankrupt. Dave lost his investment and had to sell his home to cover other expenses. Dave is now back on track. But he learned a very expensive lesson.

Ray and his partner sold custom materials through the mail. Ray was in charge of production; his partner was in charge of finances and marketing. The business grew rapidly. Ray kept asking to see the books, but his partner kept stalling. Ray got out of the partnership. A few weeks later the FBI stood at Bill’s doorstep. Apparently, his partner had taken in money from the mail orders,



then threw the orders away. He had been giving Ray just enough orders to fill to keep him from getting suspicious!

George had a great new idea for selling a new product. George talked to a long-time friend who also had some good ideas. They talked many times developing their ideas and finally decided to form a partnership. As they developed their business plan, George started to get cold feet, and finally decided not to proceed in the partnership. Later George found out through friends that his “partner” had already gone behind his back developing similar products on his own!

In each of these cases, the believers were yoked with nonbelievers as partners. The nonbelieving “partner” violated the partnership for the sake of money. We may not have golden calves as idols, but our legal tender seems to make a great substitute!

A nonbeliever’s entire value system is different than a believer’s. Ethics, integrity, the way time is spent, company culture, and company policies all point to the differences between believers and nonbelievers.

A partner relationship with a nonbeliever will almost certainly lead to the corruption of your belief system. That’s what Paul was so worried about in his letter to the Corinthians. And that is why it is important for believers to avoid yoked relationships with nonbelievers today.

## **What Constitutes a Yoke?**

Of the sixty-six times that the Bible refers to a yoke, it is only used eight times in conjunction with animals. The other 58 times that the word “yoke” is used it is regarding a burden or relationship with people and God. The Old Testament references regarded the yoke of Israel’s relationship with God or the relationship between the nation Israel and other countries. When used to describe a relationship, the word generally indicated a covenant or contract that governed the terms of the relationship.

A yoke then is any relationship that formally ties two people together where the actions of one can directly affect another. We have three basic legal forms in today’s business; proprietorship, partnership, and corporation. In a proprietorship with employees, there is a relationship between employees and the employer. In the corporation, there are employee/employer relationships, as well as relationships with stockholders. In the partnership, there is a relationship between the partners and the employees.

## **Is Partnership a Yoke?**

There are at least eight legal forms of partnership. Generally speaking, they can be divided into two classifications; general and limited.



In a general partnership, partners are active or have the right to be active in the partnership. In the limited form, a partner only has an investment interest, without any right or say in the operation of the business.

General partnerships, regardless of the legal form, constitute yoked relationships because there is a formal agreement between two or more parties regarding the operation of a business. Clearly then, general partnerships constitute a yoke. Believers should avoid general partnerships with nonbelievers.

Limited partnerships do not usually constitute a yoke because the limited partner has no say in the operation of the partnership.

### **Is Stock Ownership a Yoke?**

For most of us the answer to the question, “Is stock ownership a yoke?” is “No.” A few shares of a company held as an investment do not constitute a yoke. You could, after all, dissolve the relationship with a simple call to your broker.

But what if you hold a majority stock interest in a company and are an employee? What about a closely held corporation where there are few owners who have equal shares?

The guiding principle is this; does the relationship bind you legally to the company or other shareholders? If you have a majority stock interest and are an employee, you probably have a legal fiduciary relationship.

If in a closely held corporation, the intent is to create a relationship between shareholders for the purpose of sharing responsibilities and profits, then you have a partnership whether the word partnership was used or not.

### **Is the Employee/Employer Relationship a Yoke?**

The employee/employer relationship does not constitute a yoke. The employer has authority over the subordinate employee.

As an employee, you need to maintain your integrity in all business relationships. As Colossians 3:23 reminds us, *“Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord.”* Your work should be your witness to the world.

The possible exception to the employer/employee relationship as being a yoke might exist when an employee is under a contract to the employer. For example, an actor, model, consultant, etc. If an employment contract is involved, you might find yourself in a yoked relationship. Be very careful with employment contracts, and remember the guiding principle; is the purpose of the relationship a partnership?



## What About Existing Relationships?

The advice to not enter into a relationship in the future is easy to take, but what about relationships you're in already? Paul's first letter to the Corinthians gives us some insight as he discusses what to do in a marriage relationship (1 Cor. 7:12-13), *"...If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him."*

The principle is if you are in a relationship with a nonbeliever you should stay in it unless the relationship threatens your spiritual values. Paul goes on to say, *"But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances..."* (1 Cor. 7:15). If a nonbelieving partner wants to leave the partnership, you should let him.

What do you do if the nonbelieving partner is a family member, perhaps a parent, or a child? The same principles apply. If you are in a relationship that does not compromise your spiritual values, you should try to make the relationship work. *"...each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him"* (1 Cor. 7:18). Perhaps the relationship you're in is just where the Lord wants you to be to accomplish His work!

## Creating a Successful Partnership

Courtroom halls are a graveyard testifying to the difficulties of creating and maintaining successful partnerships. But if you are convinced that it is right for you there are a few things you can do to help improve the odds of your partnership not ending up being dissolved in a court of law.

- 1) Who are the other partners?** If they include nonbelievers stop right there.
- 2) Do you know the other partners?** If you know the other partners through work related experiences over a period of time, you have a better indication of how they might respond to various business situations in the future.
- 3) Equal versus unequal partnerships.** Many times, one guy will say, "I'll make 'em, you sell 'em, we'll split 50/50." This situation is an argument waiting to happen. The first time the production guy wants more money to buy a machine that will build more widgets faster, the marketing guy will say he needs a bigger budget for advertising. And the fight is on. There are partners who can handle this kind of business dispute and grow, but over the long haul, they are the exception, not the rule! If there is one partner who has a controlling interest, what he says goes. Really knowing your partners is the only way to know whether you have a chance with an equal relationship.



**4) Establish your values.** Spend a lot of time determining how the business will be run. What will you do to collect debts? Will you sue people? Will you tithe corporate profits? Will you hire family members? Will you hire nonbelievers? These are just a few of the questions that reflect your values. Make sure that you and your partners understand what values will be reflected in the operation of the business.

**5) Write it down.** Most of us can't remember the details of conversations from a month ago. Don't trust your memory and the "good intentions" of your partners. Write out specific partnership agreements, as well as policy manuals that will spell out how you will handle different situations that are bound to come up in the everyday operation of a business.

These five steps will not guarantee success, but they will help. The enthusiasm that gives birth to most businesses is one in which prudence is often a casualty. Please, whatever you do, take a deep breath before you enter into a partnership agreement and make sure that you really understand your partners, their values, and who will be responsible for what work.