

Remedies for an Ailing Church

2 Corinthians 6:3-7:2

March 12, 2023

Dr. Ritch Boerckel

Churches, like people, experience illness. A church may be strong for a season and then a “bug” hits it and down it goes. When that happens, the answer is to go to the Great Physician. Jesus is sufficient to bring healing and strength to every condition. **No disease is irreversible IF a church humbly receives the voice of God in His Word.**

There are many kinds of illnesses that may attack Jesus’ church, weaken her . . . even threaten her life. But three pathologies are primary culprits:

Three Common Pathologies that Damage Jesus’ Church

1. The pathology of false doctrine.

2. The pathology of sinful behaviors . . . Satan tempts God’s church with many debilitating sins. . . sexual immorality, anger, slander, bitterness, greed, envy, grumbling, self-righteousness, deceit . . . to name a few.

3. The pathology of apathy toward God. A church slowly dies when she loses her first love.

Jesus identifies these three pathologies in Revelation 2-3 as He walks among the seven churches. **Notice that these three pathologies come from WITHIN the church and not OUTSIDE of her.** Yes, Satan does seek to destroy the church through the external assaults of persecution and pressures. But the primary way our Adversary brings disease into the church is through INTERNAL failures. We pose the greatest danger to ourselves.

Truth: The greatest hazards to Jesus’ church are internal, not external.

God calls elders in every church to stay alert for disease. We are called to be watch out for spiritual pathogens. Like dads/moms who respond out of loving concern when their children are sick, so elders do not shrug their shoulders when illness enters the spiritual family. In love, parents seek out a remedy for high fevers, broken bones and other ailments. To this day, if you talk to my adult boys, they may share with you that I still urge them to go to the doctor. I still encourage them to take all their medicine. I still implore them to get more rest. I cannot help myself! I want them to be healthy!

Godly elders in the church bring instruction and correction to individual members and to the church as a whole from the same loving motives. We want the whole to be strong. We want every member to flourish.

Jesus is the great Physician who speaks to us by the Spirit. through scripture. So we listen to God's remedies through the Bible and then we share those remedies in love. As Jesus gives the medicine to diseases among the seven churches in Revelation 2-3, He says, ***"He who has ears to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the church."***

In 2 Corinthians 6, the apostle Paul lovingly writes to an ailing church. Here he makes two appeals to this church knowing that their illness will take their life if it is not addressed . . . knowing that the cure is accessible. "He who has ears to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the church."

Two Appeals to an Ailing Church

An Appeal for Relationship and Affection – 6:3-13

The relationship between church members and her God-appointed spiritual leaders is vital to the health of the church. God has so designed his church to thrive through strong, loving relationships between the elders and church members. If this relationship between shepherd and sheep is broken, the church will suffer in her worship and mission. If this relationship between the pulpit and the pew is damaged, then the Word of God will be rendered ineffective in the church. Satan knows this so he often attacks this relationship in order to destroy Jesus' church.

"We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way:" (2 Corinthians 6:3-4a [ESV](#))

Paul is being slandered in this church by the false apostles. They malign him as being weak and selfish. They accuse him of making promises and then breaking them. The whisper that he really does not care about them like they do. They cast doubt about his leadership abilities. **This smear campaign was effectively stealing the hearts of the people away from Paul.** Remember that Paul is the man whom God chose to bring the Gospel to this city. Remember that Paul is the one who sacrificed and suffered so that this church could be planted! Now Paul is in the humiliating position of having to defend himself against his attackers. Why did Paul defend himself? Why not just "shake it off" . . . just "let it go"?

Two-reasons for Paul's defense of His leadership in the church:

1. **He really values his relationship with the people at Corinth.** He loved these folks. He treasures their friendship in Christ. He was not going to let those relationships be destroyed without an attempt to hold them together. It is a Christlike thing to exert energy to restore broken relationships. Paul's flesh might have said, "Hey Paul. You are not to blame. Do not humble yourself and go after these ingrates. Leave them in your rear view mirror." But Paul knows the will of God. Through him the Holy Spirit says,

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Colossians 3:14 And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony." (Colossians 3:12–14 [ESV](#))

As a man filled with God's Holy Spirit, Paul can't simply walk away from them.

Application: Leaders, let us treasure our relationships with God's people in our own local church. Let us lead in loving with genuine affection and devotion. We sacrificially serve not because we must, but because we love.

2. **He cared for their eternal souls.** He knew that if the church separated from him that they would also separate from the Gospel. He is God's servant sent with the Message of Jesus. The false apostles were proclaiming another gospel and if they won the relationship war then they would lead the whole church away from Jesus.

Application: Leaders, let us yearn to see every member of our church grow to maturity in Christ. Let us labor for the good of their souls because eternity stands in the balance.

Paul's defense of his credentials as a reliable leader is not an expression of self-love, but of selfless love.

To prove the genuineness of his love, he first reminds the church of the sufferings that he endured for their sake.

“by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger;” (2 Corinthians 6:4–5 [ESV](#))

To prove the God-centered motives of his heart, he reminds the church of his methods in ministering to them.

by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left;” (2 Corinthians 6:6–7 [ESV](#))

To prove the genuineness of his faith in Christ, he reminds the church of his life story.

8 through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; 9 as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; 10 as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.” (2 Corinthians 6:8–10 [ESV](#))

These reminders would have NO IMPACT upon the church if what Paul said was not true. One of the effects of slander is that it robs those influenced by it of their memories. They forget all that is true about the person who is under attack. Paul is shining the light of truth and jogging their memories regarding the truth that they had forgotten.

11 We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open. 12 You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections. 13 In return (I speak as to children) widen your hearts also.” (2 Corinthians 6:11–13 [ESV](#))

When we are slighted, pride rises up like a dragon within us and breathes fire at the offenders. Pride promises to protect us if we keep a cold heart. Pride whispers, “They started it. They need to take the first step.” Pride justifies our refusal to open our hearts again to those who failed us.

I am stunned by verses 11-13. We find one of the most humble statements that I have ever read.

Remember as we read these words that Paul did no wrong to the Corinthians. Most often broken relationships are because both parties carry some fault. But here the break is solely because the Corinthians listened to slander, believed it and acted upon it. Yet Paul says, *“I am not leaving the fellowship table. I am going to stay and wait for you. I am here with an open heart for happy*

communion with you. Come back and sit down with me. Open your heart again to me." Paul writes NOT out of a pitiful neediness to be loved, BUT out of sincere affection and concern for the good of these former friends.

Friends, we live the age of the closed heart. Satan whispers, *"You are right to close your heart to those whom you perceive hurt you! You need to feed your anger and vent it. Do not let others get a pass if they offend you."* In the past two decades, it has become a common experience for sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, husbands, wives to sever communication and relationship with close family and friends for the slightest reasons. This is a great darkness that offers no comfort or conclusion.

Notice that Paul does not include an "or else". No manipulation. No threats. Only open-hearted love.

Application: Ask God for grace to open your heart to someone who has hurt you. Ask God for wisdom and strength to communicate your open heart to them.

Paul knows that he is powerless to open the Corinthians heart to him. He cannot MAKE THAT happen. In humility, he says, *"Hey, there is a distance between us. I want you to know that I am not the one moving from the bond of love that we have. I am here. My heart is open. I am not holding any grudge for any wrongs suffered. I know you are restricted by the attitudes of your own heart. My heart invites you to sit at the table with me and draw near to each other. In fact, I want this restoration of relationship so badly that I am taking the risk of speaking to you as a dad would his own sons and daughters. Please widen your hearts to me. Do not keep them closed! Do not hold me at arm's length."*

Why does Satan work so diligently to break the relationship between pastors and the church?

- The church will not receive the instruction, counsel and correction that the elders bring.
- The church will be divided in her fellowship.
- The church will be weakened in her Gospel ministry to the world.
- The church will be vulnerable to false ideas about God and life.
- The church will lose qualified leaders to shepherd the church.

-The church will be impeded in her joyful worship.

Joyful affection between the God's shepherds and God's flock is not merely a nice add to church life. Loving relationship lies between shepherd and sheep lies at the center of God's plan to sanctify a people for His own possession.

Illustration: "Every Sunday, I listen in to a church in New York or Virginia or England. That is my church." Friends, God designs His church to thrive through real, personal relationship.

Application: If you are a leader, labor to build relationship with God's people. If you are a member, labor to build relationship with your spiritual leaders. The church' strength and sanctification depend upon it.

An Appeal for Separation and Fellowship – 6:14-7:2

"Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers." (2 Corinthians 6:14 [ESV](#))

The idea of an "unequal yoke" comes from Deuteronomy 22:10, "You shall not plow with an ox and a donkey together." The ox was a clean animal and the donkey was unclean. They are different in size and strength. Pull against each other. Also, they have two different natures and do not work well together. **The idea is that Christ-followers must not try to cooperate with unbelievers in any spiritual work.**

Paul is likely pointing to the false apostles as "unbelievers". He says, "Be careful with whom you join in spiritual work, in spiritual worship and in your spiritual walk." **I think this principle applies to relationships like marriage and business partnerships.** Much sorrow in many families because of unequal yokes between husbands and wives or between co-owners of a business. BUT here, the main application is joining in worship, fellowship and ministry with unbelievers.

Often we are tempted to "yoke ourselves with unbelievers" to accomplish God's work for a number of motives. We may see that the unbelievers have lots of resources. We may see cooperation as "bridge building" to the unsaved world. We may see that while our goals are different from the unbelievers, cooperation will help us accomplish our goals.

The call of God is complete separation from unbelievers in any area where we are worshipping or serving Him. Some resist this total separation from unbelievers.

“Hey, we have some common goals with unbelievers . . . racial reconciliation, helping the poor, economic development, crime prevention, giving comfort to the grieving . . . I think we can do more if we broaden our scope. So let us do everything we can to maintain our working relationship with people who disagree about the Gospel. Yes, let us maintain necessary boundaries but let us rescue the relationship for the greater good.”

The motive of such thinking is love and desire to accomplish good. **One problem:** God says this is wrong. **We cannot be part of unbelievers efforts to serve God, to worship God or to walk with God.**

Principle: Christ followers must not join any spiritual work, regardless of how noble its intentions, that does not exalt Jesus as Savior and Lord.

Keep in mind that the “false apostles” represented themselves as “Christ followers”. Paul asks the church to have discernment regarding the true spiritual nature of these claims. He calls them to evaluate on the basis of the message the false apostles preach. He asks for doctrinal integrity in our ministry for Christ.

Illustration: March for Jesus. Community Prayer Meetings. Racial reconciliation efforts.

Question: How does this harmonize with the fact that Jesus was a friend of sinners and He received them. Or with God’s call to go into all the world and preach the Gospel?

Paul is NOT suggesting that we have no contact with unbelievers. (cf 1 Cor 5:9-10). THIS passage does not forbid individual Christians from joining a community effort to feed the poor or to educate children or to help unwed moms or to clean up parks or to accomplish many other good things. **BUT it does forbid us as Jesus’ church from yoking the ministry of Jesus with the resources and people of the world.**

Principle: In short the Christ-follower is free to participate in the moral efforts of the unsaved world. But the unsaved world must not be allowed to participate in the ministry of the church.

Today, under the banner of Jesus, food pantries distribute resources, counseling centers give advice, churches sing praises, prayer meetings lift up needs, racial reconciliation efforts are begun, anti-crime efforts made, literature is distributed, adoption is promoted, and houses are built.

Not all who claim Jesus represent Jesus. Difficult. We need discernment.

How do we get discernment? By looking to Jesus. Is He the center? Is He exalted? Is He acknowledged as God and LORD? Is He proclaimed? Is His cross emphasized as the only way to God? Is His Word the only word from God? Look to Jesus? Is He presented as the only solution to man's problem?

For the believer, we are yoked together to Jesus. That is the call of Christ upon our lives.

"Matthew 11:29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. Matthew 11:30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:29–30 [ESV](#))

Why must we not be yoked with unbelievers?

Reason #1: Because of God's new life.

14 For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? 15 What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? 16 What agreement has the temple of God with idols?" (2 Corinthians 6:14–16 [ESV](#))

Paul asks five great questions to help us understand WHY separation from unbelievers is NECESSARY for God's people.

Why is the church to separate from the world? Because by our new nature God's people ARE A SEPARATE PEOPLE. Jesus has made us so!

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." (2 Corinthians 5:17 [ESV](#))

“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Corinthians 5:21 [ESV](#))

We were once unrighteous, but now we have become the righteousness of God through Jesus. We once walked in darkness, but now we have the light of Jesus shining in our hearts so that we see the glory of God. We once followed idols, but now we worship Christ.

Everything changes when a person decides to follow Jesus. **Our nature no longer mixes with the people that with whom we used to mix.**

Illustration: Grandchildren love the zoo. All kinds of animals. But the animals are not all the same. They live in the same zoo, but they are separated from one another. **For instance, I have never seen a zoo where the wolves are in the same enclosure as the sheep.** Why not? Because if they did there would be no sheep. They would be destroyed and through digestion become part of the wolves.

Every person is born as being part of this world. We are worldly by birth. What happens at our new birth that separates us from the world?

1. We behold the glory of God and now know Him and enjoy Him. We know that our purpose in life is to bring God glory.
2. We are reconciled to God. We have aligned our loyalties to Him. We are at peace with God and this makes us to be at war with all who oppose Him.
3. We have become the righteousness of God through Jesus. This righteousness that we receive as a gift through faith in Jesus is a righteousness that changes our behavior, our values, our worship, and our purpose.
4. We are delivered out of the kingdom of darkness and we are transferred into the kingdom of His beloved Son (Col 1:13). We have a new king. We have a new citizenship in heaven. We are foreigners here in this present world.
5. We are adopted into God’s family. We are no longer orphans, but we have God as our Father and every Christ-follower is our brother and sister whom we love.
6. We are God’s temple. WE TOGETHER form a community in which our whole purpose is WORSHIP. We exist to bring glory to God!

“For we are the temple of the living God;” (2 Corinthians 6:16 [ESV](#))

Plural. WE TOGETHER are the temple of the living God. This means that together we display the glory of God to the world. Together we communicate the goodness of God. Together we worship God. This is our new identity.

Why must we not be yoked with unbelievers? Because of our new nature . . . because . . .

Reason #2: Because of God’s sure command.

16 as God said, “I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing;” (2 Corinthians 6:16–17 [ESV](#)).

To convince the Corinthians to break ties with the false apostles, he pulls out the ultimate weapon . . . the command of God as written in the Word of God. There is NO GREATER MORAL AUTHORITY than the command of God in the Word of God. God’s clear commands ends the debate. We can imagine a discussion about whether complete separation from the false apostles is good, noble, loving or wise. Lots of opinions. Lots to consider. Until Paul lays down God’s Word. Then the path becomes clear. We must separate.

Paul quotes from Isaiah 52:11 and Ezekiel 20:41. As God’s people came out of captivity to Babylon they were to remember that God had a special purpose for their existence. God’s purpose required separation FROM ungodly people and separation TO God.

Few commands are repeated by God more often than His call for His people to live lives that are separate from the rest of the world. IN the OT, the entire Levitical law is written to maintain separation of the Jews from the Gentile world. IN the NT, the spiritual nature of separation is emphasized:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” (Romans 12:1–2 [ESV](#))

Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God. For the time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry. With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you;" (1 Peter 4:1–4 [ESV](#))

Friends, the LORD is NOT calling us away from relationship and connection with the people of the world. He is calling us toward a kind of relationship with the people of the world where we can bring light to them. **If we who are children of the light do not separate from darkness, we will not be any eternal influence on those who are still walking in darkness.** If we wish to love unbelievers, we must commit to biblical separation from the world.

Yet despite the clear command of God's Word, the church wrestles with separation. We think that less separation will lead to MORE spiritual fruit.

The church growth strategy asks, "How can we accommodate the world so that worldly people will like and perhaps want to be part of us?" The Holy Spirit would have us ask, "How can I be more like God so that worldly people would have a picture of who God is and make a decision about Him?"

Forty years ago liberal theologian Langdon Gilkey gave this assessment of his church in America, an assessment that could describe much of the evangelical church today:

All around us we see the church well acclimated to culture: successful, respected, wealthy, full, and growing. But are the transcendent and the holy there? In the area of belief we find widespread indifference to the Bible and ignorance of its contents—and strong resentment if a biblical word of judgment is brought to bear on the life of the congregation. In worship we find notably lacking any sense of the holy presence of God and of what worship is for.... In ethics we find the cultural ideals of friendliness and fellowship more evident than the difficult standards of the New Testament or historic Christendom.³

R. Kent Hughes, *2 Corinthians: Power in Weakness*, [Preaching the Word](#). Accordance electronic ed. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2006), 140.

Why must we separate ourselves from the world? Because of our new nature . . . because of God's sure command . . . and because of . . .

Reason #3: Because of God's happy promises.

Separation from the world is necessary to receive God's promises.

17 then I will welcome you, 18 and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty.”” (2 Corinthians 6:17–18 [ESV](#)).

Without separation, the world will turn our hearts away from the Lord. We will lose the benefit of His offer to be a father to us. Question: what value do you place on God's promise to be a father to you?

What does it mean to be a father? Unconditional love. Wise instruction. Constant emotional support. Occasional correction. Intense intercession. Enjoyment of relationship.

Principle: Contact with unclean things will move our hearts from God.

We do not think our heart will be impacted, but it will.

Illustration: Solomon. Began by receiving God's favor and love.

*“[1Kings 11:1](#) Now King Solomon loved many foreign women, along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, [1Kings 11:2](#) from the nations concerning which the LORD had said to the people of Israel, “**You shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you, for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods.**” Solomon clung to these in love. [1Kings 11:3](#) He had 700 wives, who were princesses, and 300 concubines. And his wives turned away his heart. [1Kings 11:4](#) For when Solomon was old his wives turned away his heart after other gods, and his heart was not wholly true to the LORD his God, as was the heart of David his father.” (1 Kings 11:1–4 [ESV](#))*

Conclusion:

Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.” (2 Corinthians 7:1 [ESV](#))

Time of quiet confession. GOSPEL.

Now being separate from the world has NOTHING to do with EXTERNAL RELIGIOUS but has everything to do with INTERNAL HEART matters. The internal heart matters reference the world's ideas about God (doctrine), the world life choices (sin issues) and the world's values (worship). As we commit to being separate from the world's ideas, the world's life choices and the world's values, we are right to refuse to separate over lesser issues that are disputable. Those who seek God's kingdom do not quarrel over eating and drinking matters.

"For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." (Romans 14:17 [ESV](#))

Audience of One: At the end of time, everyone will agree with the Lord's opinion.