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Between Two Flocks

The One Who Claims Sunnah
While Sitting With Innovators

An evidence-led study showing that the claim of Sunnah is not judged by labels alone, and that chosen religious companionship can reveal a person's direction, while this subject must be handled with justice and without reckless guilt by association.

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Bismillah ar-Rahman ar-Rahim.

Between Two Flocks

The One Who Claims Sunnah While Sitting With Innovators

The Sunnah is not merely a verbal label. A Muslim's claim to follow the Sunnah is judged principally by adherence to revelation and sound religious guidance; the religious companions and sources he deliberately chooses can also be meaningful evidence of direction.

At the same time, this subject must be handled with justice. Concern about companionship cannot be turned into a slogan of guilt by association. A photograph is not an established friendship. A workplace interaction is not religious allegiance. Family ties are not the same as taking a person as a teacher. Advising someone is not the same as becoming his disciple. A scholar investigating an error in order to refute it is not in the position of an ordinary learner repeatedly exposing himself to it.

There is another distinction that must come before the discussion itself. Not every religious error is itself an innovation. Even when a statement or act is judged innovated, classifying a particular Muslim as one of Ahl al-Bid'ah is a separate question that requires its own evidence and qualified application. Accordingly, when this article uses the expression "people of innovation," it assumes that the underlying classification has been established responsibly through qualified evidence rather than rumor, factional accusation, or personal dislike.

The preceding study, *The Heart Is Weak*, concerned the danger of allowing doubts and religious falsehood to enter the heart unnecessarily. The present study takes the next question: what happens when the issue is no longer a passing statement heard once, but chosen companionship, a regular religious circle, an inner group of trusted associates, repeated source-taking, public identification, or persistent defence?

The answer begins with revelation, but revelation must be quoted exactly and applied within its limits.

1. The Prophetic Image of a Sheep Between Two Flocks

'Abdullah ibn 'Umar رضي الله عنهما reported that the Prophet ﷺ said:

مثل المنافق كمثل الشاة العائرة بين الغنمين، تغير إلى هذه مرة، وإلى هذه مرة

“The likeness of the hypocrite is that of a sheep wandering between two flocks: it goes to this one once and to that one once.”

Source and authenticity: Sahih Muslim, no. 2784, Kitab Sifat al-Munafiqin wa Ahkamihim, ed. Muhammad Fu'ad 'Abd al-Baqi, Dar Ihya' al-Turath al-'Arabi, Beirut, vol. 4, p. 2146. Authentic.

A second route in Muslim has the wording:

تكر في هذه مرة، وفي هذه مرة

“It turns toward this one once and toward that one once.”

The image is vivid: no settled direction, no firm belonging, moving between two sides.

But the first interpretive rule must be stated immediately: **the Prophet ﷺ is describing the hypocrite.** The hadith does not say, “The one who sits with innovators is a hypocrite.” It does not give an unqualified reader permission to take the image and transfer the theological ruling of nifaq to a particular Muslim because of an association.

The article title, Between Two Flocks, therefore uses the image as an editorial frame for divided religious direction. It does not change the subject of the hadith and it does not create a new Prophetic ruling.

There is also a textual point that requires precision. A longer version is reported by al-Nasa'i:

مثل المنافق كمثل الشاة العائرة بين الغنمين، تعير في هذه مرة، وفي هذه مرة، لا تدري أيها تتبع

“The likeness of the hypocrite is that of a sheep wandering between two flocks, going to this one once and to that one once, not knowing which of them to follow.”

Source and grading: Sunan al-Nasa'i, no. 5037, ed. 'Abd al-Fattah Abu Ghuddah, Maktab al-Matbu'at al-Islamiyyah, 2nd ed., 1406 AH/1986 CE, vol. 8, p. 124 in the selected printed pagination. Al-Albani graded it **sahih** in Sahih al-Nasa'i, no. 5052. A parallel longer wording is also reported by Ahmad in al-Musnad, no. 5790, ed. Shu'ayb al-Arna'ut et al., Mu'assasat al-Risalah, 1st ed., 1421 AH/2001 CE, vol. 10, p. 60; Shu'ayb al-Arna'ut graded its chain **sahih according to the conditions of al-Bukhari and Muslim.**

The additional phrase, “not knowing which of them to follow,” must not be inserted into the wording of Sahih Muslim and then attributed to Muslim. The sources are separate, and the wording of each must remain separate.

This source control matters because the strength of the article is not found in rhetorical expansion. It is found in transmitting the evidence as it is, then explaining what it establishes and what it does not.

2. What the Hadith Says—and What It Does Not Say

The hadith establishes a Prophetic image of vacillation. Its explicit subject is the hypocrite, and that cannot be altered. A later scholar or editor may observe resemblance in a particular feature—such as divided direction or movement between two opposing religious circles—but resemblance in one feature does not transfer every ruling of the original case.

This distinction is fundamental here.

A person may be confused without being a hypocrite. He may be ignorant. He may be inconsistent. He may be weak in discernment. He may not know the condition of the people around him. He may be in a necessary worldly setting. He may be advising someone. He may be investigating a matter. Or he may in fact have developed a persistent pattern of religious companionship that contradicts his verbal claim to Sunnah. These situations are not identical, and the hadith does not erase their differences.

The image therefore raises a legitimate question but does not itself answer every particular case: **where is a person actually taking his religious direction from, and what do his chosen patterns of companionship show?**

That question is answered more directly by other Prophetic texts concerning companionship itself.

3. “A Person Is Upon the Religion of His Close Friend”

Abu Hurayrah رضي الله عنه reported that the Messenger of Allah ﷺ said:

الرجل على دين خليله، فليُنظر أحدهم من يخال

“A man is upon the religion of his close friend, so let each of you look carefully at whom he takes as a close friend.”

Source and grading: Sunan Abi Dawud, no. 4833, ed. Muhammad Muhyi al-Din ‘Abd al-Hamid, al-Maktabah al-‘Asriyyah, vol. 4, p. 259; Jami‘ al-Tirmidhi, no. 2378, ed. Ahmad Muhammad Shakir et al., Mustafa al-Babi al-Halabi, 2nd ed., 1395 AH/1975 CE, vol. 4, p. 589. Al-Tirmidhi said: هذا حديث حسن غريب — “This hadith is hasan gharib.”

The word in the hadith is خليل: a close or intimate friend. The Prophet ﷺ did not say that a person is upon the religion of every individual he has ever spoken to, worked beside, purchased from, travelled with once, or appeared beside in a photograph. The hadith concerns a chosen close relationship.

That lexical distinction immediately removes two opposite errors.

The first error is to empty the hadith of force by treating every concern about companions as irrational “guilt by association.” The Prophet ﷺ himself taught that a close friend can be religiously consequential. A Muslim is therefore commanded to examine whom he brings close enough to influence him.

The second error is to expand the hadith beyond its wording so that every form of contact becomes “close friendship.” This is equally unsound. The religious significance lies in the nature of the relationship: intimacy, trust, repeated companionship, influence, source-taking, identification, and the place the other person occupies in one’s religious life.

The hadith therefore establishes the principle without giving permission for reckless application.

4. The Good Companion and the Bad Companion

Abu Musa al-Ash‘ari رضي الله عنه reported that the Prophet ﷺ said:

إنما مثل الجليس الصالح والجليس السوء، كحامل المسك وناfox الكير، فحامل المسك إما أن يحذيك، وإما أن تبتاع منه، وإما أن تجد منه ريحا طيبة، وناfox الكير إما أن يحرق ثيابك، وإما أن تجد ريحا خبيثة

“The example of the righteous companion and the bad companion is that of the bearer of musk and the blower of the bellows. The bearer of musk may give you some, or you may buy from him, or you may at least find a pleasant scent from him. The blower of the bellows may burn your clothes, or you may find from him an offensive smell.”

Source and authenticity: Sahih Muslim, no. 2628, ed. Muhammad Fu‘ad ‘Abd al-Baqi, vol. 4, p. 2026. Authentic.

The hadith establishes influence. Good company can benefit a person even when the benefit is indirect. Bad company can harm him even when the harm is not immediate or total.

This principle is especially important in religious companionship because the effects are not confined to manners or habits. Regular company can affect what a person regards as normal, whom he trusts, which objections he considers serious, whose explanations he accepts, which warnings he dismisses, and what he becomes willing to defend.

But the Prophetic example still does not establish an automatic psychological chain in every individual. It is too strong to say that every instance of sitting necessarily produces familiarity, that every familiarity necessarily produces sympathy, that every sympathy necessarily produces defence, and that every defence necessarily proves formal affiliation. The hadith establishes danger and influence, not a mechanical sequence that unfolds identically in every person.

The correct wording is therefore measured: repeated companionship **can** influence; it **may** normalize what was previously rejected; it **can** create affection and trust; it **can** make a person less receptive to legitimate warning. Whether those effects have actually occurred in a particular case requires evidence.

The Prophetic texts have now established two principles clearly: close friendship matters, and the character of one's company has effects. The early imams applied these principles to religious companionship with seriousness.

5. What the Early Imams Understood About Chosen Companionship

Among the important classical source families for this subject is Ibn Battah al-'Ukbari's al-Ibanah al-Kubra. He included a chapter entitled:

باب التحذير من صحبة قوم يمرضون القلوب ويفسدون الإيمان

“Chapter: Warning against the companionship of people who make hearts diseased and corrupt faith.”

Source: Ibn Battah al-'Ukbari, al-Ibanah al-Kubra, Dar al-Rayah, Riyadh, vols. 1–2 ed. Rida ibn Nu'san Mu'ti, 2nd ed., 1415 AH/1994 CE, vol. 2, p. 430.

The chapter title itself shows that the classical concern was not merely one sentence entering the ear. It included صحبة—companionship.

Ibn Battah also wrote in his own authorial commentary:

فانظروا رحمكم الله من تصحبون وإلى من تجلسون واعرفوا كل إنسان بخدنه وكل أحد بصاحبه، أعاذنا الله وإياكم من صحبة المفتونين ولا جعلنا وإياكم من إخوان العابثين ولا من أقران الشياطين وأستوهب الله لي ولكم عصمة من الضلال وعافية من قبيح الفعال

“So consider, may Allah have mercy on you, whom you accompany and with whom you sit; recognize each person by his intimate companion and each one by his associate. May Allah protect us and you from the companionship of those afflicted by fitnah, and may He not make us or you among the brothers of those who play about, nor among the companions of devils. I ask Allah to grant me and you protection from misguidance and safety from ugly deeds.”

Source: Ibn Battah, al-Ibanah al-Kubra, Dar al-Rayah edition, vol. 1, p. 206, immediately after report no. 45.

This is Ibn Battah’s explanation, not a Prophetic text. Its wording must therefore remain attributed to him. It is also important to notice the term *خدن* in his statement. Ibn Manzur gives the lexical sense *الخدن والخذين: الصديق*—“al-khidn and al-khadin: the friend”—and describes the companion denoted by the term as one who is with a person in his affairs. The context is therefore meaningful companionship, not accidental proximity. Ibn Battah’s warning cannot responsibly be converted into the modern formula: “Every person is legally classified by whoever appears beside him once.”

Lexical source: Ibn Manzur, Lisan al-‘Arab, root *خ د ن*.

The early material becomes more specific when it speaks about an inner circle.

Ibn Battah transmits from Yahya ibn Sa‘id al-Qattan concerning Sufyan al-Thawri رحمه الله:

لما قدم سفيان الثوري البصرة جعل ينظر إلى أمر الربيع - يعني ابن صبيح - وقدره عند الناس، سأل: أي شيء مذهبه؟ قالوا: ما مذهبه إلا السنة، قال: من بطانته؟ قالوا: أهل القدر، قال: هو قدري

“When Sufyan al-Thawri came to Basrah, he began examining the affair of al-Rabi‘—meaning Ibn Subayh—and his standing among the people. He asked, ‘What is his madhhab?’ They said, ‘His madhhab is nothing but the Sunnah.’ He said, ‘Who are his intimate associates?’ They said, ‘The people of Qadar.’ He said, ‘Then he is a Qadari.’”

Source: Ibn Battah, al-Ibanah al-Kubra, vol. 2, p. 453, report no. 421, Dar al-Rayah edition. **Source status:** supporting early report; no independent narrator-by-narrator grading is asserted here, and the report is not used as the sole basis for a universal rule.

The key expression is:

من بطانته؟

“Who are his intimate associates / inner circle?”

The report is therefore not about accidental proximity. It concerns a person’s **بطانة**—the people brought into an intimate and trusted circle.

Ibn Battah also transmits from al-Awza‘i رحمه الله:

قيل للأوزاعي إن رجلاً يقول: أنا أجالس أهل السنة وأجالس أهل البدع، فقال الأوزاعي: هذا رجل يريد أن يساوي بين الحق والباطل

“It was said to al-Awza‘i: ‘A man says: I sit with Ahl al-Sunnah and I sit with Ahl al-Bid‘ah.’ Al-Awza‘i said: ‘This is a man who wants to make truth and falsehood equal.’”

Source: Ibn Battah, al-Ibanah al-Kubra, Dar al-Rayah edition, vol. 2, pp. 456–457, report no. 430. **Source status:** supporting early report; the primary transmission is located, but this article does not rely on an independently established hadith-style grading for the report.

The wording again concerns a man who describes himself as deliberately sitting with both religious camps. It is not an incidental encounter being magnified into a formal judgment.

These early reports must remain in their proper evidentiary rank. The Qur'an and authentic Sunnah carry the principle. The reports show how early imams understood the religious significance of chosen companions, an inner circle, and repeated sitting. They do not give an unqualified reader an infallible formula for classifying every Muslim he observes.

6. Claiming Sunnah While Choosing an Opposing Religious Circle

A person's statement, "I am upon the Sunnah," is relevant. Muslims are not instructed to ignore what people profess. But a verbal claim is not the only evidence that exists about a person's religious direction.

The hadith of the close friend tells us to look at whom a person takes as a close friend. The hadith of the righteous and bad companion tells us that company has effects. The classical material treats an intimate circle and repeated religious sitting as meaningful. It follows that an established pattern of chosen religious companionship can legitimately be considered when evaluating direction.

This is an **inference from the texts**, not an additional hadith.

The contradiction becomes especially serious when the association is not merely social but religious: a person repeatedly attends the lessons of teachers whose innovation is established; treats them as trusted religious sources; brings them into an inner advisory circle; recommends them to others; publicly identifies with them; or persists in meaningful religious association after reliable clarification of the relevant problem.

Such conduct cannot be dismissed on the ground that only verbal self-description matters. The Prophetic texts and early reports above show that repeated choices of close religious companionship can be evidentially relevant.

At the same time, conduct must be interpreted according to what is actually established. The article does not authorize the opposite shortcut: "He sat there, therefore his creed is established." The questions are more exact. Was the relationship chosen? Is it repeated? Is it religiously meaningful? Is there trust and source-taking? Is the person's condition actually known? Has the association continued after reliable knowledge? Is there promotion or defence? Or is the observer inferring all of that from one unexplained scene?

The difference between those questions is the difference between evidence and assumption.

7. When Association Becomes Meaningful Evidence

Not every association carries the same evidentiary weight. The sources themselves point toward degrees of closeness: خليل for a close friend, بطانة for an inner circle, and خدن for an intimate companion. This article therefore uses “companionship” in a defined sense rather than as a slogan.

Close friendship

A person who repeatedly chooses someone as a close friend gives that person access to his time, affection, conversation, and judgment. This is directly relevant to the hadith:

الرجل على دين خليله، فليَنظر أحدكم من يخالل

“A man is upon the religion of his close friend, so let each of you look carefully at whom he takes as a close friend.”

The closer the relationship, the more directly the Prophetic warning applies to the danger of influence.

An inner religious circle

The Sufyan al-Thawri report is valuable here because its controlling word is بطانة, not simple physical proximity. An inner circle consists of people trusted, consulted, and repeatedly kept close. Where the issue is religious direction, such a circle can reasonably carry more weight than a casual acquaintance.

Recurring religious attendance and source-taking

Repeatedly attending a person for religious learning is more significant than encountering him in ordinary life. A “religious source” in this article means someone from whom a person regularly takes religious knowledge, interpretive framing, or guidance with a degree of trust.

This distinction is necessary because the danger is not merely social. Religious source-taking shapes what a person knows and how he judges competing claims.

Public identification and recommendation

Repeated public alignment, shared teaching, platforming, or recommendation can communicate affiliation more strongly than private incidental contact. Yet even here, content and context matter. A shared event does not always mean shared methodology, and a single appearance cannot bear the same weight as a repeated pattern of endorsement.

Persistence after adequate knowledge

Knowledge changes the evidentiary significance of conduct. A person who does not know the relevant condition of another is not in the same situation as one who has received adequate, reliable clarification and nevertheless persists in a chosen religious relationship.

A report preserved by Ibn Abi Ya'la from Abu Dawud concerning Imam Ahmad illustrates this methodological distinction. Abu Dawud asked Ahmad about seeing a man from Ahl al-Sunnah with a man from the people of innovation. Ahmad's reported answer begins not with an immediate final judgment, but with informing the person and then observing his response.

قلت لأبي عبد الله أحمد بن حنبل: أرى رجلا من أهل السنة مع رجل من أهل البدعة
أترك كلامه؟ قال: لا، أو تعلمه أن الرجل الذي رأيته معه صاحب بدعة فإن ترك كلامه
فكلمه وإلا فالحقه به

“I said to Abu ‘Abd Allah Ahmad ibn Hanbal: ‘I see a man from Ahl al-Sunnah with a man from the people of innovation. Should I stop speaking to him?’ He said: ‘No. Inform him that the man you saw him with is a person of innovation. If he stops speaking with him, then speak to him; otherwise, attach him to him.’”

Source: Ibn Abi Ya'la, *Tabaqat al-Hanabilah*, ed. Muhammad Hamid al-Fiqi, Dar al-Ma'rifah, Beirut, vol. 1, p. 160, in the biography of Abu Dawud al-Sijistani. The source transmits it through al-Daraqutni, from 'Uthman ibn Isma'il ibn Bakr al-Sukkari, from Abu Dawud. **Source status:** supporting early application; the primary transmission is located, but no independent narrator-by-narrator grading is asserted here and the report is not used as a load-bearing proof.

The report then cites the saying attributed to Ibn Mas'ud: المرء بخدنه — “A person is [known] by his intimate companion.” That appended attribution is not used here as an independently authenticated Companion report.

The methodological value is the sequence: seeing an association, giving information, then considering the response. This article does not convert this supporting report into a universal lay procedure for technical classification. It uses it to reinforce a more basic point already required by justice: **knowledge and persistence matter**.

Defence and promotion

In evidentiary terms, explicit recommendation or defence supplies content beyond mere proximity and can therefore carry greater weight, while its actual meaning still depends on what was defended, recommended, or promoted. But this article deliberately stops at that boundary. The full study of how exposure can progress into familiarity, sympathy, defence, or opposition to legitimate warning belongs to a separate canonical work. No automatic chain is asserted here.

These categories do not function as a mathematical score. They show why “association” must be described accurately before any inference is made.

8. What Does Not Automatically Count as Such Companionship

A principled warning becomes unjust if its exceptions and boundaries are erased.

Family is one boundary. A Muslim may have relatives whose beliefs or practices are wrong. Kinship itself does not prove religious allegiance or source-taking.

Work and trade are another. Employment, business transactions, medical care, travel, school, public administration, or ordinary social dealings may place Muslims beside people whose religious condition they do not approve. Such interaction is not automatically **khullah**, **bitanah**, or religious companionship.

Advice and da‘wah are also distinct. A person may speak to someone in order to advise him, clarify an error, or call him to the truth. That action by itself does not make the adviser a student, admirer, promoter, or intimate religious companion.

Documented scholarly refutation is likewise a separate category from sitting as a student. The purpose and form of such engagement are not the same as adopting a person as a regular religious source. The detailed rules governing investigation, refutation, and hajr belong to their own studies.

An isolated encounter must also remain isolated unless evidence proves more. One photograph establishes, at most, physical presence at one captured moment. It does not by itself establish friendship, knowledge of the other person’s condition, religious source-taking, agreement, affection, persistence, defence, or an inner circle.

Nor does every praise or defence have one identical meaning. A person may praise a true statement made by someone who has other errors; he may defend him against a false allegation; or he may defend the very falsehood for which the person is criticized. These are not the same. Content and context must be known before an inference is made.

Finally, the premise itself must be verified. Before association with “an innovator” is treated as religious evidence, it must first be established that the person in question is actually from Ahl al-Bid‘ah according to qualified evidence. A factional accusation cannot be inserted as an unquestioned premise and then used to condemn everyone who interacted with the accused person.

These distinctions do not weaken the Prophetic warnings. They define what those warnings actually address.

9. Companionship Is an Indicator—Not an Automatic Judgment

The strongest formulation supported by the evidence is this:

Chosen, repeated, religiously meaningful companionship—especially intimate friendship, inner-circle association, regular source-taking, public identification, or persistence after adequate knowledge—can be a significant indicator of religious direction. It is not an infallible formula by which every unqualified observer automatically assigns a technical ruling to a particular Muslim.

That distinction must govern every practical use of this article.

General texts establish general warnings. Particular judgments require verified facts, justice, knowledge, and qualified application.

Before drawing a serious inference about a particular person, among the facts that require verification are:

1. Is the person being associated with actually established as Ahl al-Bid‘ah by qualified evidence?
2. What is the nature of the association?
3. Was it voluntary or necessary?
4. Was it one event or a persistent pattern?
5. Is there actual friendship, source-taking, promotion, or defence?
6. Did the person know the relevant condition of the companion?
7. Was clarification given through reliable means?
8. What was his response after clarification?
9. Is there a legitimate da‘wah, family, work, verification, or refutation context?

10. Are facts being confused with assumptions about hidden motives?
11. Has a qualified scholar actually applied a technical ruling, or is an unqualified observer doing so independently?

These are application safeguards derived from the distinctions already established; they are not a newly transmitted list of formal legal conditions. They are not a formula for laymen to perform independent tabdī'. Their purpose is to prevent a complex particular case from being treated as established when only one fragment of information is known.

The same balance answers two opposite objections.

If someone says, "You may never consider a person's companions; doing so is guilt by association," the response is that the Sunnah explicitly speaks about the religion of the close friend and the influence of good and bad company. Chosen companions are not religiously meaningless.

If someone says, "I saw him once beside a person called an innovator, therefore his manhaj is established," the response is that the evidence does not permit that shortcut. First establish the classification, then the nature of the relationship, then the pattern, knowledge, context, and response. A snapshot cannot replace verification.

The middle position is not compromise between truth and falsehood. It is adherence to the evidence at the level the evidence actually establishes.

10. Warning Must Remain Just

Allah said:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُونُوا قَوَّامِينَ لِلَّهِ شُهَدَاءَ بِالْقِسْطِ وَلَا يَجْرِمَنَّكُمْ شَنَا نَقُومَ عَلَىٰ
تَعْدَلُوا أَعْدَلُوا هُوَ أَقْرَبُ لِلتَّقْوَىٰ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ خَبِيرٌ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ

"O you who believe, stand firmly for Allah as witnesses in justice, and do not let hatred of a people cause you to abandon justice. Be just; that is nearer to taqwa. And fear Allah. Indeed, Allah is fully aware of what you do."

Source: Qur'an, al-Ma'idah 5:8. **Context:** al-Tabari, Jami' al-Bayan, tafsir of al-Ma'idah 5:8, explains that enmity toward a people must not lead to injustice in judgment or conduct, and that Allah's limits are to be observed with ally and opponent alike.

This verse governs the application of every warning in this article.

Innovation is not opposed by injustice. Falsehood is not refuted by false attribution. Protecting the Sunnah does not permit a Muslim to invent motives, exaggerate what occurred, erase legitimate contexts, or spread a technical judgment he is not qualified to make.

Justice also requires that established religious dangers not be dissolved into vague tolerance. The verse commands justice; it does not command the believer to treat truth and falsehood as equal. The correct response is to state the evidence precisely, preserve its distinctions, and refuse both exaggeration and concealment.

This also protects the subject from partisanship. The criterion is not whether a person belongs to “our side” or “their side.” A modern camp, personality, organization, or circle does not become the measure of Sunnah. The measure is the revealed religion, understood and applied through sound scholarship and the methodology of the Salaf.

Therefore, the same standards must be applied consistently. If evidence is required before judging an opponent, it is required before judging an ally. If one photograph is insufficient for one side, it is insufficient for the other. If an innovation must actually be established before association with its proponent has evidentiary weight, then factional rumor cannot substitute for that establishment.

Firmness without justice is not protection of the Sunnah. Justice without firmness toward established falsehood is not faithfulness to the evidence. Both must remain together.

11. The Positive Alternative: Keep Company With People of Truth and Worship

The revealed guidance on companionship is not only negative. Allah commands the believer toward good company.

Allah said:

واصبر نفسك مع الذين يدعون ربهم بالغداة والعشي يريدون وجهه ولا تعد عيناك
عنهم تريد زينة الحياة الدنيا ولا تطع من أغفلنا قلبه عن ذكرنا واتبع هواه وكان
أمره فرطا

“Keep yourself patiently with those who call upon their Lord morning and evening, seeking His Face. Do not let your eyes pass beyond them, desiring the adornment of worldly life, and do not obey one whose heart We have made heedless of Our remembrance, who follows his desire and whose affair is neglect.”

Source: Qur'an, al-Kahf 18:28. **Context:** al-Tabari, Jami' al-Bayan, tafsir of al-Kahf 18:28.

The verse directly commands the Prophet ﷺ to keep himself with those who call upon their Lord morning and evening seeking His Face, and not to turn his eyes from them for the adornment of worldly life. Al-Tabari explains “with those” as “with your Companions” who worship Allah sincerely. It is not a technical verse classifying every contemporary religious association. Its positive principle, however, is clear: deliberately keep yourself with people of worship and sincerity rather than letting worldly attraction pull you away from them.

The hadith of the musk seller gives the same practical direction. Good companions are not merely people from whom one hopes to avoid harm. Their company itself can carry benefit.

For a student of knowledge, this means choosing reliable scholars, sound students, trustworthy lessons, and beneficial books as regular religious sources. It means seeking companions who strengthen adherence to the Sunnah rather than making falsehood familiar. It means placing trust where knowledge, truthfulness, justice, and sound methodology are established.

This positive side is essential because merely abandoning harmful influence without replacing it leaves a vacuum. A person needs sound companionship, sound teaching, and sound religious habits.

The question is therefore not only, “Whom should I avoid taking as a close religious companion?” It is also, “Whom should I deliberately keep close so that my religion is strengthened?”

This also prevents another imbalance. A person can become so preoccupied with identifying harmful circles that he neglects the more basic work of building a sound one. The revealed remedy is not permanent suspicion of everyone around him. It is deliberate companionship with people whose worship, knowledge, truthfulness, and adherence benefit him. The command in al-Kahf 18:28 is positive: keep yourself patiently with people who call upon their Lord seeking His Face. The hadith of the musk seller is likewise positive: righteous company carries benefit.

For that reason, protecting one's religious direction should include more than avoidance. It should include choosing a dependable teacher, maintaining regular contact with people who strengthen obedience, returning difficult questions to qualified scholarship, and building habits of study that make sound sources familiar. A person who merely removes one harmful influence but leaves his

religious life empty remains exposed to whatever influence next fills that space. The Prophetic teaching concerning companionship points instead toward intentional selection: the believer is not only warned about the bad companion; he is taught to value the good one.

Conclusion — Do Not Remain Between Two Flocks

The Prophet ﷺ described the hypocrite as a ewe wandering between two flocks, turning to this one and then to that one. That is the hadith's explicit subject. The hadith itself does not establish that the ruling of nifaq may be transferred to another person merely because the image of divided direction resembles some aspect of his conduct.

But the rest of the Prophetic guidance on companionship leaves no room to pretend that chosen company is irrelevant. A man is upon the religion of his close friend. The righteous and bad companion have effects. Early imams also treated intimate companions, inner circles, and repeated religious sitting as matters of consequence.

The correct conclusion is therefore neither reckless condemnation nor empty indifference.

A verbal claim to Sunnah matters, but an established pattern of chosen religious companionship also matters. Close friendship matters. An inner religious circle matters. Regular source-taking matters. Persistence after reliable clarification matters. Promotion and defence can matter. None of this is established by one unexplained photograph or unavoidable interaction, and none of it gives an unqualified observer authority to assign technical rulings to particular Muslims.

The believer should therefore seek clarity in his own religious direction. He should choose companions who strengthen truth, take knowledge from reliable people, avoid making falsehood a familiar religious environment, and remain just even when warning against serious error.

Do not make the Sunnah a slogan while allowing one's religious direction to be formed elsewhere. And do not defend the Sunnah through injustice.

Remain with people of truth and worship, take religion from sound sources, and make the direction of one's companionship consistent with the direction one claims to follow.