

# Should a Christian marry a non-Christian ?

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## **Should a Christian marry a non-Christian?**

By Henry Dixon

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### **Introduction**

The purpose of this booklet is to address the following issue: Should a Christian voluntarily enter into a marriage covenant with an unbeliever? I am not asking the question, should a Christian who is already married to an unbeliever walk away from such a marriage. The answer to that question is clear from Scripture: "No!" There are various ways in which a Christian might find himself married to a non-Christian. He and his wife might have both been unconverted when they married, and then he subsequently became a Christian and his wife did not. Or he might have been a Christian when he married, and he might have married his wife in good faith believing her to be converted, only to find out subsequently that her profession of faith was false. Or he might be a Christian who deliberately entered into a marriage with an unbelieving woman. However he got into the marriage, once he is in the marriage he should make the best of it that he can. And the same applies to a Christian woman married to a non-Christian man. The teaching of Scripture about what to do in such circumstances is clear: the Christian party in the marriage relationship should not leave. If the non-Christian ends the marriage relationship, then this leaves the Christian free to remarry. But the Christian should not do anything to endanger the marriage relationship. See 1 Corinthians 7.12 – 16, 1 Peter 3.1 – 6.

The question I am addressing, then, is not what should a Christian do if he finds himself in a position where he is married to a non-Christian, but what should a Christian do if he is not married but is attracted to a woman who is an unbeliever? What should an unmarried Christian woman who is attracted a non-Christian man do?

This is an important issue to face. In any church there are likely to be some believers who are “going out” with, or engaged to, unbelievers. There may well be others who will think of doing so in the future. Some may have family members who are “going out” with unbelievers, and be unsure how to advise them. Church members also need to know how to relate with fellow church members who “go out with”, or become engaged to, unbelievers.

As we approach this subject, I want to do so under the following headings:

What marriage is

What Christian is.

The things which believers have in common

Direct teaching against mixed marriages

Conclusion

## **1) What marriage is**

The first thing then to think about is what marriage is. And for this we need to turn to the verse which is the cornerstone for the Bible’s teaching on marriage, and is quoted by both the Lord Jesus Christ and the apostle Paul, namely Genesis 2.17 and 21 - 24:

The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him"....So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man." For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

This passage teaches us about the need for marriage. “It is not good for man to be alone.” He needs a companion, a friend, a helper, to share his life with him. So the point of marriage is to give a man someone who is going to help and strengthen him in his life. And by implication, it is to provide the woman with a man to help her in her life.

The passage then goes on to speak about the key ingredients of marriage. First of all there has to be a leaving from parents. The man “leaves his mother and father”. This is more than just “leaving the nest” physically. It means that his allegiance moves from his parents to his wife. She is now the one with whom he has the strongest relationship. Of course he does not cut off contact with his parents, but now his closest relationship is with his wife. And the same applies to the woman. She “leaves” her parents.

Secondly, the man “cleaves” to his wife. This speaks about how he enters into a covenant with her. He is united with her in a bond that should only be broken by death. The union they make in their covenant leads to a uniting together of their lives. They live under one roof. Their finances are joined together. Their lives are meshed to together. They become the best of friends. If they are Christians, at the centre of their friendship will be the common relationship that they have with God through the Lord Jesus Christ.

The third ingredient is that they join together physically, in sexual union. The Bible is clear that the term “one flesh” is talking about sexual union which is like a glue that joins a man physically to a woman. This is why a Christian man should never sleep with someone to whom he is not married, because he is thereby joining himself to that woman. “Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute becomes one with her in body? For it is said, ‘The two will become one flesh’ ” (1 Corinthians 6.16).

So we see that the Bible teaches that marriage is far more than just a “functional relationship” whereby a man and woman set up in some sort of limited partnership, but otherwise live separate lives. It is true that, sadly, many marriages fall well short of the ideal that the Bible depicts, with two virtual strangers living under the same roof. But the ideal that is held out before us is of a man and his wife having a very close and intimate friendship, helping and supporting each other in their lives, and expressing that love and intimacy physically through sexual union.

## **2) What Christian is**

The second thing to think about is what a true Christian is. And for this, I wish to refer to Ephesians 2.1 – 10:

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the

kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

In this passage the apostle Paul is speaking to believers, and he is reminding them of the situation that they were in before they were converted, and what has happened to them subsequent to their conversion.

Prior to their conversion they were in the most dreadful state. He says six things about their position they were in:

1. They were spiritually dead. “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins”.
2. They were living in sin: “in your transgressions and sins in which you used to live”.
3. They were following the ways of this world: “when you followed the ways of this world”
4. They were following the devil: “following the ways...of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.
5. They under the control of sinful passions and desires: “All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts.”
6. They were on their way to Hell: “Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.”

By implication, now they were believers, the opposite of all these things was true. They were now alive to God. They were now living lives in obedience to the law of God, not perfectly, but nevertheless distinctly different from how they were before. They were now following God's way rather than the way of the world. They were now following Christ rather than the devil. They were now under the control of the Spirit rather than the control of the flesh. They were now on their way to glory rather than on their way to Hell.

So we see that the Scripture teaches that those who belong to Christ and those who do not belong to Christ are diametrically opposed to each other. The true believer belongs to God. The unbeliever belongs to the devil. This contrast is brought out again and again in God's word. Take, for example, Psalm 1, which sharply differentiates between God's people (the "righteous") and those who are not God's people (the "wicked"):

Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers. Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

Something very similar is taught by the apostle Paul in Romans 8.5 – 11:

Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God. You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.

This passage brings out the huge difference there is between a true believer and

an unbeliever. The unbeliever lives “according to the sinful nature”, or the flesh, whereas the believer lives “in accordance with the Spirit”. Unbelievers set their minds on what the flesh desires. Believers have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of someone who is unconverted “is death.” But the mind of a true believer is “life and peace.” The unbeliever does not submit to God’s law nor can he do so. The true believer does submit to God’s law, albeit not perfectly in this life. The unbeliever cannot please God. The true believer can.

So we see the huge difference that there is between the believer and the unbeliever. When you put together teaching about what marriage is meant to be, a close and intimate friendship and partnership, with teaching about the difference between the believer and the unbeliever, you immediately see how a marriage of a true believer to an unbeliever is going to be fraught with difficulty. A believing man is going to have totally different aims, ambitions and desires from his unbelieving wife, and the same is true for a believing woman who is married to an unbelieving man. The more the believer in the marriage seeks to serve Christ wholeheartedly, the more there will conflict. As long as he or she does not really seek to serve the Lord, there will be able to be a certain degree of harmony. But at what a price to the believer’s walk with God!. So the believer in a mixed marriage will caught on the horns of a dilemma. Either serve Christ, and have a distant relationship with his or her marriage partner, or be close to the marriage partner and have a weak and disobedient walk with Christ.

All sorts of conflicts are likely to emerge in a mixed marriage. If a believing man seeks to serve God over and above a minimal attendance at meetings of the church it is bound to lead to complaints. There are likely to be conflicts over decisions to do with expenditure. The Christian will want to give to the Lord’s work. The unbeliever is likely to want to spend money on luxuries or save it for investments. Then there are liable to be conflicts over the upbringing of children. The Christian is going to want to take children to church and to teach them the Bible at home. The unbeliever is liable to say that the believer is “indoctrinating” the children and that he should let them “make up their own minds.”

### **3) What believers have in common with each other**

It is widely agreed that for a marriage to be successful the two who get married need to share a lot in common. The more they share in common, the happier the marriage will be, generally speaking.

The wonderful thing about believers is that they share so much in common. The unity that they have in Christ outweighs all the other cultural and other factors which might otherwise divide them. Paul writes in Galatians 3.26 – 29: “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Think of the things that two believers share together in common. They have a common experience of forgiveness. They have a shared experience of Christ. They both know God as Father. They are both indwelt by the Holy Spirit. They share together the joy of church life. They both know the privilege and delight of serving God. They both know the hard work of prayer, and the joy of seeing prayers answered. They both experience the delight of finding treasure in God’s word. They know what it is to struggle with temptation, and the thrill of seeing sins overcome.

A man who marries an unbeliever will never be able to share these joys and trials with his or her spouse. If he goes to church at all, he will go home to a wife who will be utterly fail to understand the joy he felt when meeting with God’s people and hearing God’s word. He will not dare to share his real struggles and temptations with his wife, for fear that he will be “casting pearls before swine” and that the weaknesses he has revealed will be later “used in evidence” against him.

One of the most precious experiences that a believing couple can enjoy is to pray together. What a wonderful thing it is to be able together to draw near to God and bring concerns about the family and friends to him! This experience is impossible for the person who marries an unbeliever.

#### **4) Direct teaching against mixed marriages**

I have so far avoided direct teaching about mixed marriages, because I have sought to show how the big principles of the Gospel militate against mixed marriages. The reader should not think from this that there is no direct teaching against mixed marriages in the Bible. On the contrary, both the Old Testament and New Testaments directly teach that a believer should not marry an unbeliever.

In the Old Testament law God taught that the people should not marry idolaters,

in case their hearts are turned towards their idols.

When the LORD your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess and drives out before you many nations-- the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, seven nations larger and stronger than you – and when the LORD your God has delivered them over to you and you have defeated them, then you must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods, and the LORD's anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you. This is what you are to do to them: Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones, cut down their Asherah poles and burn their idols in the fire. For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession. (Deuteronomy 7.1 – 6)

Arguably, it was Israel's disobedience to this very command which was the reason for her descent into idolatry and subsequent exile. Certainly disobedience to this command was the reason for Solomon's downfall. Although he knew God so well, and was the instrument of so much wisdom coming into the Bible, in his later years he turned away from the true worship of God, through marrying women who were idolaters.

King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh's daughter – Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites. They were from nations about which the LORD had told the Israelites, "You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods." Nevertheless, Solomon held fast to them in love. He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray. As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been. He followed Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites. So Solomon did evil in the eyes of the LORD; he did not follow the LORD completely, as David his father had done. On a hill east of Jerusalem, Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the detestable god of Moab, and for Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites. He did the same for all his foreign wives, who burned incense and offered sacrifices to their gods. The LORD became angry with Solomon because his heart had turned away from the LORD, the God of

Israel, who had appeared to him twice. (I Kings 11:1 – 9)

After the exile the people again sinned by marrying into the nations around them, leading to Ezra's anguished prayer:

But now, O our God, what can we say after this? For we have disregarded the commands you gave through your servants the prophets when you said: 'The land you are entering to possess is a land polluted by the corruption of its peoples. By their detestable practices they have filled it with their impurity from one end to the other. Therefore, do not give your daughters in marriage to their sons or take their daughters for your sons. Do not seek a treaty of friendship with them at any time, that you may be strong and eat the good things of the land and leave it to your children as an everlasting inheritance.' What has happened to us is a result of our evil deeds and our great guilt, and yet, our God, you have punished us less than our sins have deserved and have given us a remnant like this. Shall we again break your commands and intermarry with the peoples who commit such detestable practices? Would you not be angry enough with us to destroy us, leaving us no remnant or survivor? O LORD, God of Israel, you are righteous! We are left this day as a remnant. Here we are before you in our guilt, though because of it not one of us can stand in your presence. (Ezra 9.10 - 15)

In the New Testament the apostle Paul writes that a Christian woman is "is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord. [literally "in the Lord"]" (1 Corinthians 7.39).

In his second letter to the Corinthians the apostle warns against being "unequally yoked" with unbelievers.

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. (2 Corinthians 6.14 – 7.1)

Although this passage does not specifically speak of marriage, it is surely directly relevant to our subject. What closer partnership can two humans have than the marriage partnership? If this passage does not apply to marriage it does not apply to anything! The argumentation that the apostle uses is exactly what we have seen all the way through. The believer has nothing in common with an unbeliever. The believer stands for righteousness; the unbeliever for wickedness. The believer is in the light. The unbeliever is in darkness. The believer belongs to Christ. The unbeliever belongs to the devil. The body of a believer is a temple of the living God, the body of the unbeliever is the temple of idols.

You might say, “But I hope that the woman I love will be converted”. Of course you will hope that if you are a Christian. Some of us will know of instances where God in his grace has stepped in and saved the unbeliever in a mixed marriage. But the warning of Scripture and the lesson of experience is that in the vast majority of cases this will not happen, but rather the believer will be dragged down by the unbeliever.

## **Conclusion**

I put it to you that the case against entering into a mixed marriage with an unbeliever is overwhelming. I suggest that you cannot honestly read Scripture without being forced to the conclusion that to marry an unbeliever is not only wrong, it is also very unwise, and potentially very detrimental to your Christian life. If you are “going out” with, or engaged to, an unbeliever, what should you do?

First of all, I would urge you to pray to the Lord for forgiveness. By pursuing this relationship you have jeopardised your relationship with your Lord and Saviour. Do you value your relationship with Christ so little that you are prepared to risk seriously downgrading that relationship for the sake of another? Come to Christ and ask his forgiveness. Seek him for strength to do what you know you must do.

Then I would suggest to you that the *loving* thing to do is to say quite honestly to the person you love that you have been unfair to her. You have led her to believe

that you can have a close and intimate partnership that in fact will not be possible while she remains unconverted. Let the blame be on yourself, as indeed should be. Ask her for forgiveness, for raising her hopes. Who is to know? Perhaps this bold and loving move might be used by God to lead the one you love to consider her own position before the Lord. The same would apply to a Christian woman who is "going out" with or engaged to a non-Christian man.

What about Christian friends and family members of those who are involved in mixed relationships. What should we do? We should first of all pray for the one who is in such a relationship. In all probability his relationship with God is already weak, and liable to become weaker. We should lovingly urge him to reconsider his position, pointing him to the Scriptures.

I would not urge that the family and friends of a believer who is in a mixed relationship should cut the person off from fellowship or family relationships, or refuse to attend a wedding should there be one. But I would also urge that the concern that you have should be clearly spelt out, and the family member or friend who is in such a relationship should be warned of the danger he is placing himself in.

## **APPENDIX**

### **THE SWORD AND THE TROWEL.**

*DECEMBER, 1901.*

"UNEQUALLY YOKED TOGETHER."

#### ***A PRAYER-MEETING ADDRESS BY C. H. SPURGEON.***

DEAR FRIENDS, — I have here a request for prayer on behalf of one, whose name would be recognized by you, if I mentioned it, as that of a sister who was a member with us at New Park Street Chapel, but who has been away from us for a long time, for, alas! she married an unconverted man, and suffered the usual consequences that almost always follow in such cases. When I saw her, a few days ago, she said to me, "You do not seem to recollect me, Mr. Spurgeon." I replied, "No, I do not." That was something very extraordinary, for I have a remarkable power of remembering faces that I have once seen. So she said, "My name is So-and-so; do you not recollect me now? Oh, yes!" I answered, "I do, but

what an altered woman you seem to be! Excuse me making the remark, but you seem to have changed much more than I should have thought could have been possible even in so many years."

She had just come out of the infirmary, and told me that she must go back again, for she was very, very ill. She wanted me to send somebody to see her while she was in the infirmary, and that I promised to do. "But," I asked, "how did you get into such a state as you are now in?" "Oh, sir!" she exclaimed, "I married an ungodly man; and, as the natural result, I had a world of trouble."

This evil is far more common than many people believe. I was talking, this afternoon, with an excellent Christian woman, who is coming to join our church. She also had been passing through very deep waters, and she said to me, "I consider that God has been most merciful to me, for I turned aside from Him, and from His people, by marrying a very ungodly man." Now, happily, the Lord has brought her back. I was talking to Mr. Archibald Brown, the other day, and he told me that he was visiting, lately, in one of the worst slums in the East of London, and there he saw a poor woman who had scarcely any clothes upon her, and her little children round about her were crying for bread. Mr. Brown said to her, "From your appearance, I should judge that you were not always in such depths of poverty as this." The poor woman put her hand inside her dress, and drew out a communion card of this church, and said, "I used to be a member there, and I always keep that card in memory of what I once enjoyed." "But," inquired Mr. Brown, "how did you get here?" "Oh!" she sorrowfully answered, "I married an ungodly man, and that is the top and bottom of all my misery."

Having these cases coming immediately under my own eye, or brought before me in the way I have described, and all of them having turned out badly, I thought it was my duty to remind all Christian men and Christian women of the warning given by the apostle Paul to the Corinthians, —

I recollect a young woman coming to ask my advice about marrying an unconverted man. I soon saw that she had made up her mind — as they mostly do in such cases, — what she was going to do. What is the use of asking advice when you have made up your mind as to your own course of action? However, she said that, such was her influence over the young man in question, that she felt certain of bringing him to the Saviour. She has not done so, but he has been the means of our losing her from church fellowship, and I do not know where

she is now. I remember that I said to her, "Well, if you believe what you say to be true, I will tell you what to do; go home, and try this little experiment. When the young man comes to see you, climb on the top of the kitchen table, and try to pull him up, and tell him to see if he can pull you down. If you succeed in pulling him on to the top of the table in spite of all his exertions to drag you down, I think you may safely marry him." Why, the result always is, and always must be, that the one who is down pulls the other down; at least, I have always found it so, and I have had the painful knowledge of many such cases. Do not you run such a risk, my young friend, or you will bitterly repent of it. Even when young women marry young men who are members of the church, it is not always that they make a happy match, for there are men who even become members of a Christian church for the very purpose of winning the heart and hand of another of the members. It is a most grievous thing, and a shameful sin; and I am sorry to have to say that it has been done sometimes even here. Take care, young friends, and older ones, too, that you keep your eyes open; and if the man, who desires to be your lover, is not a lover of the Lord, do not give your heart to him; and, my brother, if that young woman, to whom you are being attracted, does not love the Lord, let her find somebody else who will be more suited to her present condition than you are. I am sure that this warning ought to be laid to heart by all of you who are true Christians. If you are a hypocrite, you can get on very well with an unconverted partner in life; but if you are a genuine child of God, and you sin in this way, depend upon it that you will get a whipping from your Heavenly Father. The best thing that can come of such unequal yoking together will be grievous to your own soul, and dishonouring to your Lord and Saviour. Remember how the apostle warns us against all wrong association with the ungodly: "For what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be My sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty."

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