



## Christians going out with, and marrying, non-Christians

As those who follow Jesus, we work out the way we live by hearing his Word, the Bible. What we are going to do is look at what the Bible says about can a Christian marry a non-Christian. And having worked through that, we will then consider if we can go out with a non-Christian. We will firstly look at what God has to say in the Bible, which is our authority, and then we will consider the practicalities that work out from that. We will also consider what it may look like in being married to a non-Christian.

Firstly lets consider how we work out things that are not directly discussed in the Bible, as this will help us with working out if we should go out with a non-believer or not.

### 1. How to work out stuff not directly in the Bible

For some decisions we face, we can find direct commands in the Bible. You can look up a verse that tells you what you should do. Should I steal? No.<sup>1</sup> Should I get drunk? No.<sup>2</sup> Should I work? Yes.<sup>3</sup> Sometimes God is very specific.

At other times, we need to work out what God says, by building up a picture from the Bible. For example, you cannot look up a verse about whether stem cell research is right or not. We need to build a picture by bringing together different verses about: what a person is, when someone is a person, how we should treat people, especially those who are weak, and how we understand the concept of rights.

We cannot simply look up a verse about whether a Christian should go out with a non-Christian. Firstly, the Bible doesn't really have a concept of 'youth'. In the Old Testament (OT) and the first century (when the New Testament was written), someone was a child, and then was married at quite a young age. There was no in-between stage (between child and adult) that we call youth. Secondly, Israelites and then early Christians had their marriages arranged for them. Therefore they didn't choose who to go out with. And if parents were Christian, they would arrange a marriage with another Christian.

So to consider if a Christian should go out with a non-Christian, we need to firstly consider marriage.

### 2. Marriage in the Bible

God made men and women and blessed them with the joy of marriage. Biblically, we marry for several reasons. Firstly, we are to be an example of Christ's relationship with the Church.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, to enjoy the relationship that marriage brings<sup>5</sup>, to allow the enjoyment of sex<sup>6</sup>, and to bear children so as to have dominion over the world and care for it.<sup>7</sup>

Yet marriage is not essential to be a satisfied and complete person. Christ is the best example of this. He is The Definition of what it means to be a person. He was the perfect person, but without sin.<sup>8</sup> The apostle Paul also said he had learned to be content in every situation, with plenty or without. Paul was single, and was satisfied. In addition, he argued that because the times are short and Christ could soon come back again, it is a good thing to be single, so that you can completely devote yourself to God's kingdom, without having to look after a spouse (which someone should rightly do if they are married).<sup>9</sup> In addition, in heaven we will not be married, but still fully human.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 6:10

<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 6:10

<sup>3</sup> 2 Thessalonians 3:10

<sup>4</sup> Ephesians 5:32

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 2:18.

<sup>6</sup> Book of Song of Solomon, Proverbs 5:19

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 1:28

<sup>8</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:21- without sin.

<sup>9</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:7-8, 25-29

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 22:30

Sometimes Christians feel that unless they are married they are second rate. Or sometimes it is the loneliness that leads them to so desperately want a boy/girlfriend and husband/wife. Yet neither Paul nor Jesus believed or taught that being married is the most important thing to make us feel fulfilled or satisfied. Marriage is right and good, yet if it becomes all consuming, and leads us to disobey Jesus, then marriage, like everything else, has become our god. It becomes the idol, that leads us to sacrifice our obedience to Jesus.

Marriage is good. Yet marriage between someone who trusts in Jesus and someone who doesn't, *never* pleases God. We can see this clearly in several places.

#### a. Marriage in the OT

Firstly, in the OT, God was crystal clear about whom an Israelite should marry. It was only those who were part of God's people. God commanded Isaac to do this.<sup>11</sup> God commanded that Israel must never get wives for their sons, and husband for their daughters, from neighbouring nations. And the reason: they will lead you to worship their false gods.<sup>12</sup> Israel disobeyed God and this happened.<sup>13</sup> They gave up their relationship with God, because they didn't listen to God's warning.

Solomon did likewise. He was one of the greatest Kings of Israel. Yet his disobedience to God's clear word, led to his downfall.

**1 Kings 11:1** King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh's daughter-- Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites. 2 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. 3 He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray. 4 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. 5 He followed Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites. 6 So Solomon did evil in the eyes of the LORD; he did not follow the LORD completely, as David his father had done. 7 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. 8 He did the same for all his foreign wives, who burned incense and offered sacrifices to their gods. 9 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. 10 Although he had forbidden Solomon to follow other gods, Solomon did not keep the LORD's command. 11 So the LORD said to Solomon, "Since this is your attitude and you have not kept my covenant and my decrees, which I commanded you, I will most certainly tear the kingdom away from you and give it to one of your subordinates.

Notice in verses 1-2 he loved many foreign wives. It wasn't just that he had lots of wives, but that they were foreign wives. And the problem with foreign wives, is that they had other gods. We are told twice that Solomon strictly disobeyed God's command by marrying *foreign* wives (v2, 10). Verse 3 tells the problem: they led Solomon astray, to worship other gods (vv5-8). As a result God became angry with him (v 9). And God judges Solomon by ripping the kingdom he ruled in two. It is clear: God does not want his people marrying people who don't worship Him.

In **Malachi 2:15** God says that he has made a couple (of God's people) one flesh and spirit for a purpose: He wants godly offspring. So important is it to God to have godly children, that he wants his people not to be unfaithful sexually. However, if godly offspring (children who love and follow God) are important, it would be very difficult, to achieve this with a mixed marriage (believer with an unbeliever), as God is not number one for the unbeliever.

From the OT, it is crystal clear that God doesn't want us to marry an unbeliever. In fact he is angry if we do.

#### b. Marriage in the NT

As we come to the NT, we see that God wants those who follow Jesus to live a certain way, which includes those we marry. Firstly, we see in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul talks much about marriage. When he comes to discuss widows and if they can remarry, he says they can. However, notice the one thing he says at the end of verse 39:

**1 Corinthians 7:39** A woman 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.*

A widow can remarry, but she must marry someone who belongs to the Lord. That is, she must marry a Christian. It is very clear.

This is the apostle Peter's situation:

**1 Corinthians 9:5** Don't we have the right to take a *believing wife* along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord's brothers and Cephas?

Paul is arguing that he could have a wife, yet the assumption is, that it should be a believing one.

<sup>11</sup> Genesis 28:1

<sup>12</sup> Exodus 34:16.

<sup>13</sup> Judges 3:5-6.

And when we consider what marriage is, it is essential that we marry a believer. In **Ephesians 5:22-31**, God gives us instructions about what a wife should do and what a husband should do in the marriage relationship. The wife is to submit to her husband in everything.<sup>14</sup> The husband is to love his wife, and to be ready to die for her.<sup>15</sup> He is also to wash her through the Word, to present her as holy.<sup>16</sup> The reason is the marriage relationship between a husband and wife, is a mirror of the relationship between Jesus and his Church. Jesus is like the husband, the wife is like the Church.<sup>17</sup>

From this passage it would be very hard to be married to a non-believer. For a Christian man to have a non-Christian wife would be difficult especially in our culture, since she would not want to submit to her husband. She doesn't love Jesus and so why would she want to follow his commands. It would be very difficult for a Christian wife to have a non-Christian husband, since he doesn't love Jesus and so wouldn't care about the Word (Bible) or about presenting her like Jesus. That just would not be on his radar.

The other passage that has an indirect relevance to this topic is **2 Corinthians 6:14-18**. The context is talking about not being joined together with a false teacher. The image is of being connected by a yoke, which is a piece of wood that allows two oxen to work together. Paul is saying it won't work if you have an ox connected to another type of animal, like a sheep. You need the same type of animal. In fact being yoked together with something different is foolish. Paul makes this point by saying what does Christ and Satan have in common? Nothing. What does light have in common with dark? Nothing. What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? Nothing. Paul is making the point very forcefully that the difference between a Christian and non-Christian is absolutely massive. There is nothing in common. For those tempted to marry a non-believer, they often downplay the difference between themselves and a non-Christian. God says they are mistaken.

It is clear that God does not want one of his children marrying someone who is a non-Christian. So let's look at some outworkings of what we've seen in the Bible.

### 3. Some Practicalities

#### a. A lack of shared treasure.

The Bible talks about knowing God as having treasure.<sup>18</sup> Being in God's kingdom and knowing Jesus as our Lord and Saviour the most important, joyful and precious thing for us. He is our God, and therefore number one in our life. We are willing to give up the whole world for Jesus.<sup>19</sup> If you are marrying someone who doesn't love Jesus, then you are sharing your life with someone who doesn't treasure the 'thing' you find most important. As a Christian, you want your whole life to revolve around Jesus, yet your spouse doesn't want to.

Just imagine being married to someone who you could never pray with. They may do it out of kindness to you (although that is unusual), but God doesn't hear them. They are in rebellion against him.<sup>20</sup> Nor will you be able to read the Bible with them. And if you have the joy of leading someone to know Jesus or help someone grow more like Jesus, you can't share it with them. They won't really care. It is hard to be able to share life with someone who doesn't love the person you love. In addition you will live with the knowledge that the person you love most on this earth is going to hell (unless they turn to Jesus).

#### b. A lack of common values and priorities

In addition, if you marry a non-Christian, you will have different values. The Christian will want to follow Jesus by knowing him through his Word. The non-Christian will take their values from society, or from how their parents or friends relate. The difference in some of these values and priorities can be seen in the following questions:

What is your purpose in life?

This is a big one, as it will lead to a thousand little decisions. If you as a Christian, want to serve Jesus, it will be very different to the non-believer who wants to accumulate possessions, or live for happiness, or go on lots of holidays, or lives for their family (children), or wants to climb the corporate ladder or... There will be many different priorities that a non-believer lives for, since their god is something other than Jesus. We must never downplay the difference between a Christian and non-Christian.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ephesians 5:22,24.

<sup>15</sup> Ephesians 5:25.

<sup>16</sup> Ephesians 5:27

<sup>17</sup> Ephesians 5:23, 25, 32.

<sup>18</sup> Matthew 13:44

<sup>19</sup> Mark 8:35-37.

<sup>20</sup> They are his enemies (Romans 5:8) and cannot please God (Romans 8:8).

<sup>21</sup> 2 Corinthians 6:14-18

What should you spend your money on?

A non-believer will not really want to support gospel ministry significantly. If they are not anti-Christian, they may be happy for some money to be given, but they won't want to be sacrificial in their giving, especially if things become tight. In addition, we live in a world of materialism. If a spouse is non-Christian, they will have no real reason to fight against this, and reality shows that the Christian will find it harder to be a good manager of God's money, when their spouse doesn't care about Jesus. Often fights occur over the use of money in a mixed marriage.

How will you spend your time?

A believer will want to use it for the sake of Jesus' Kingdom. They will want to serve in which ever way they can. They will want to go to Church and Growth Group every week. The non-Christian will not enjoy their spouse going to Church on Sunday as they most likely (from experience of speaking to many people with non-Christian spouses) to have it as a family day. What happens when a conflict of use of time occurs? Who decides what should happen. Speaking to those in this situation, the Christian has to compromise their commitment to Church and Christian things.

How will you do hospitality with non-believers or people from Church?

The non-believer will not want to keep having other Christians around all the time. Maybe some occasionally, but not many. They will not want to have non-believers over for the purpose of getting to know them so you can share Jesus with them, since they don't know Jesus themselves.

How will you raise your kids?

If the non-believer is at best, not anti-Christian, they may not object to many of the morals, but they certainly will not encourage their Christian spouse in helping their children really know Jesus. They won't want their kids to be radical for Jesus or keen evangelists, or missionaries. Raising children is hard work. Raising children to know Jesus is even harder work, since we have to battle constantly against the pressures of this world. To have a non-believing spouse is actually harder than not having a spouse! The reason is, you have one parent encouraging the kids, at least by what they do, and maybe by what they say, to live for different priorities. I have spoken to a wife who found it very very hard. She wanted her children to come to church. Her husband wanted them to go play sport. The kids had to choose. And the teenage children chose sport. Who will read the bible with them every night? Who will pray with them each day? Who will they listen to, when you tell them to follow Jesus in one area, and your spouse says to do something different, or agrees with the world's ways of doing something? Will you say thanks to God before meals?

How will you cope in difficult times?

It is easy when we are going out with someone, when things are fun and rosy, to not see what things will be like when things are tough. And tough for a long period of time. What happens if you become chronically ill for decades? Will they stay with you or leave (many leave). You can turn to God in prayer, but they will not be able. God will provide you with comfort and help, and believing friends. They have none of it. How will they cope if your child dies? Often non-believers will turn to alcohol, or pills or an affair to relieve the pain. Or they just stop communicating with you. Christians are not perfect in coping with suffering but we do cope in a very different way to non-believers.

Will they always be sexually faithful considering they do not want to listen to Jesus?

This is more important today with immorality being accepted in society. It easy to say they will be faithful now, but what about if they get bored sexually after decades, or you get sick and can't have sex?

### **c. Becoming luke-warm**

When a Christian and non-Christian marry, often the Christian thinks that the non-believer will change over time. "Perhaps they may come to know Jesus, by being married to me", some think. However, we shouldn't marry anyone hoping to change them to be something else. From someone who has counselled couples, this is only a source of great tension in a marriage. We should marry them for who they are now.

Secondly, most Christians who marry a non-believer become luke warm in their love, service and relationship with Jesus. Because of all I have said above, they just can't maintain the fire for Jesus. We have seen it in the OT with people being influenced by unbelieving spouses, away from God. And the NT tells us how the Christian walk is a marathon, and it is hard work. It's even harder if the person you are most close to on this earth, doesn't love Jesus.

But it gets worse. Not only does the Christian become luke warm, frequently they end up giving up on Jesus. As time goes on, and the struggle to keep serving Jesus mounts, people married to non-Christians very frequently give up on Jesus. I have seen it

multiple times. In the end they have forfeited their eternity with God, so they could be married. Marriage is good, but it is not worth losing your soul over.<sup>22</sup>

From everything that has been written above, it is very clear: do not marry a non-Christian. God says not to, and experience shows the pain that is caused by it.

Having seen that it is wrong to marry a non-Christian, we are in a better position to see if we should go out with a non-Christian

#### 4. Going out with a non-Christian?

The first thing to ponder is why we would consider going out with a non-Christian.

##### a. Why?

i. Loneliness. We are relational beings. We don't want to always be alone. This is a massively powerful factor. And as we get older, some people feel this even more. However, it is important that we don't let our feelings or desires (which may or may not be godly) determine what we do. Feelings are very powerful, but they often can lead us away from Jesus. Anger is an intense feeling and emotion, but it can lead to sin if not handled rightly. Likewise with the feeling of lust or greed. Emotions can be good and God-given, but sometimes they're not. When we need to make decisions about how to live, we should not put our emotions over what Jesus says in his Word.

ii. The number of single Christians out there. There are less Christians than non-believers.<sup>23</sup> And as a Christian gets older the number of single Christians decreases. And often those who are single are widowed or divorcees.

Along with this, often we will come across a non-believer who initially has more traits we like. They may initially be more attractive, better looking, have more money, be funnier, cooler, sexier or into the same interests that I have, or we just 'connect'. I say 'initially', because what is important in a marriage partner, when you've been married for 30 years or so, is not their looks or sexiness, or humour, or amount of money or same interests. From the Bible and experience, what God says is important in a spouse is just so true. From lots of years of marriage myself, and speaking to others, the most important thing is that they love Jesus and are kind, patient, servant hearted and have the same priorities as me.

iii. Justify it. Often Christians will justify going out with a non-Christian. It goes like this.

- God wouldn't want me to be sad and lonely, he wants me to be happy. I feel happy with this person so it must be OK.
- God wouldn't have given this great love for this person if he didn't want us together.
- It's not as if he or she is not anti-Christian and they are supportive of my being a Christian, so it's OK.
- Surely God won't mind if I disobey him in this one area if it means the difference between a life of happiness or loneliness.
- If I go out with this person, I can share Jesus with them and they may come to know Him. If I break up with him/her, they may never come to know Jesus.

Can I say to this last one, that this is just so not true! If God is in control he can bring this person to Jesus, while you are still obeying him by not going out with them. Why not be obedient to Jesus, break up with them and still share the gospel with them?

In fact you are making it harder for them to become a Christian by going out with them, since you are saying one thing and doing another. You are saying: 'become a Christian, which means having Jesus as Lord'. But by going out with them you are not obeying him as Lord. You are in fact saying, your relationship with them is more important than your relationship with Jesus.

In addition, we should not try and work out what is right by the outcome.

To think: "if I go out with someone and they become a Christian by me going out with them, it must be a good thing". Therefore we conclude: the good outcome means going out with them is a right thing to do. This is a dangerous way of working out what's right and wrong. For example, I could say, if I slept with a prostitute, it allows me to get to know her, and that would give me a chance to share the gospel. The outcome of sharing the gospel doesn't make it right to sleep with her. In the same way that going out with a non-believer which may allow you to share Jesus, doesn't make going out with them right. The end outcome does not justify the wrong means.

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<sup>22</sup> Mark 8:35-37 again.

<sup>23</sup> Jesus said it would be so. Matthew 7:13

- Often we can convince ourselves that the person we are going out with is Christian, because you so desperately want them to be. “They may believe in God. They occasionally talk about him, and even come to church with me”, you think. But they may be doing this with you because they don’t want to lose you. Don’t be fooled.

#### **b. Why we shouldn’t go out with a non-Christian**

Apart from what has been said above, we need to ask the question, why do we go out with someone? In our culture, we go out with someone in order that we would eventually marry them.

Now if God doesn’t want us to marry a non-Christian, then going out with someone should be out of the question. Every relationship has the potential to end in marriage. Once you are involved with someone it becomes harder to not be involved. And the longer the relationship, the harder it is to separate from them because you get to know them better and like them more. The longer you go out with someone, the more excuses we can come up of why you shouldn’t break up with them.

Sometimes Christians say: “I’ll only go out with him or her for a while. If they haven’t become a Christian in a little while I’ll break it off”. If the ‘little while’ comes round, it can be very difficult to break it off, or the ‘little while’ keeps extending or they do something that gives hope they may be saved. And so the little while never comes to an end, but the partner is still not a believer. Moreover, it is cruel to treat someone like this by going out with them, knowing you will probably break up with them, since it will cause them pain too. That is unloving

In addition, going out with a non-Christian is a bad witness to other Christians. They see you do it, and think its OK and as a result are tempted to do it as well. To be the cause of sin in others is a dangerous thing. And we are to consider how our actions will affect Jesus’ Church.<sup>24</sup>

There will also be the pressure for you to compromise your relationship with Jesus, not just if you get married, but while you are going out. The compromise will come in the areas of time, money, priorities and especially sex. In our culture, the expectation will be to have sex or at least go further than God wants us to. When emotions are strong when you get to know someone, it is difficult to do as Jesus wants. And if you do end up going further than Jesus wants us to, it adds a deeper dimension to the relationship, which makes it harder to break up.

Amongst the emotions we feel and the desire for relationship, there is also the temptation of Satan. He is keen that we don’t follow Jesus or at least not too seriously. He will use anything to lure us away from Jesus: romance, physical and sexual attraction, companionship, freedom from loneliness and the feeling of love. TV shows, magazines, friends and parents will do their best to convince you that you are abnormal if you are single, that you have the right to express your sexuality and freedom in a relationship, and that you have the right to be happy, even if it means your relationship with Jesus suffers (but they wouldn’t admit that going out with a non-believer will really do this). Remember Satan is the father of lies and will try and deceive us, which means it is difficult to see the method of temptation.

In the end, we need to answer an important question: Does God want what is best for you? If the answer is yes, which the Bible says is the case,<sup>25</sup> we should obey him. As we said at the beginning, often we make decisions based on our emotions and desires, rather than on God’s word. We desire happiness, or what we think will bring us happiness. But God is much wiser than us (like a parent is with a child) and he says what is best for us in not a non-believing boyfriend/girlfriend, but either singleness or a Christian boy/girlfriend and then spouse.

If we really trust God, we will be willing to let go of what we think is good (which in reality is not good- as shown above by the difficulties of marrying an unbeliever), and seek what God thinks is best. He has given us Jesus, therefore he will give us what is best for us, not what we always want. He is most interested, not in our comfort and what we think will make us happy, but what is best for us. He is interested in us being transformed to be more like Jesus.<sup>26</sup>

Do you trust Jesus? Do you want him to be your ruler? Do you love him? Then he says: obey me.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> 1 Corinthians 5:6-8

<sup>25</sup> Romans 8:28, 32

<sup>26</sup> 2 Corinthians 3:18

<sup>27</sup> John 14:15,23,24

