

# The Need to Choose Marriage with a Born-Again Christian (Supplementary Article) – July 21, 2019

## Introduction

This article is a supplementary resource for the pastoral sermon preached at SVPGMB Church on July 21, 2019 in the English Ministry service.<sup>1</sup> Since the sermon's tone, content and perspective were specified in a pastoral approach for our congregation, this article aims to give the biblical foundation of the need for Christians who pursue marriage to choose a partner who is a Christian. The biblical foundation section will be followed by a section on practical considerations.

## 1) Biblical Foundation

Marriage was God's idea. Sex within marriage was God's idea. The Bible tells us that marriage is so profound and wonderful that it unites a man and a woman at the depth of their being (Gen 2:24) and it is meant to be a symbolic display of the glorious relationship between Jesus Christ and the Church (Eph 5:31-32). Contrary to a secular conception of marriage which only includes only two parties, Christian marriage includes a third party, God Himself. Because a Christian's life is meant to glorify God in whatever one does (1 Cor 10:31), marriage should also glorify God. And the only ones who can consciously glorify God with their lips, actions and lives are those who have experienced the grace of God's forgiveness of sin in the person and work of Jesus and have placed their trust in Jesus. This is why the Gospel is the foundation of our understanding about this subject; if we have encountered God in the Gospel, it means that our hearts have been transformed so that we now desire every aspect of life to be yielded to God including our choice of a marriage partner. What we discover in the Scriptures is that both in the Old and New Testament, God's people are commanded to choose marriage only with a person who belongs to God. Plainly speaking, Christians should only marry another Christian. It is important to note that the issue is not race because we find that converts who turned to worship the LORD, the God of the Bible, were accepted among the people of God in the Old Testament. These can be seen in the conversions of Rahab,<sup>2</sup> Moses's wife Zipporah,<sup>3</sup> Ruth,<sup>4</sup> and all those who by the time of Ezra had "joined (the people of Israel) and separated himself from the uncleanness of the peoples of the land to worship the LORD the God of Israel."<sup>5</sup> In the New Testament also, the Gospel has removed any hostility or racial prejudice because Christ has brought peace between all people groups by His sacrifice on the cross (Eph 2:11-22). The issue of "who to marry" is not race, but religion. Moreover, the issue is not nominal/cultural religion, but actual faith and a life that reflects that faith. Christians need to choose a marriage partner who professes Christ *and* lives for Christ in every aspect of life. Below is a brief and simple exposition of some of the key passages that relate to the subject at hand.

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<sup>1</sup> The sermon and article reflect the views of Pastor James Wong. The sermon can be accessed online at the church's website: <https://www.svpgmbc.org/>

<sup>2</sup> Josh 6:17, 25.

<sup>3</sup> Exod 2:21; Numb 12:1.

<sup>4</sup> Ruth 1:22.

<sup>5</sup> Ezra 6:21.

## Deuteronomy 7:1-5

*(This passage is central because Jews in later periods often referred to the first five books of the Old Testament [Moses' Torah] as the foundational moral standard and instruction. They especially referred to the Book of Deuteronomy.)*

In this specific time in Israel's history, God had commanded that Israel acts as the agent of His punishment against the sins of certain people groups when "their iniquity has been completed."<sup>6</sup> God is clear that in this period of Israel under the Old Covenant that they are to devote the pagan worshippers to destruction and make "no covenant with them." An aspect of making a covenant with pagans is not only to allow them to coexist, but to open up the possibility of "intermarrying with them" so that Jewish sons would marry pagan women and Jewish daughters would be given to pagan men in marriage. This is strictly forbidden by God as he warns that "they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods." Within the context of Ezra, while the command to wipe out pagan groups was sobering, unique and specific to the Jews in that particular period, such actions of using force and taking the life of others cannot be repeated and must not be used by Christians under the New Covenant.<sup>7</sup> However, the principle of keeping marriage pure within only the covenant people of God stands; Christians should only marry those who worship the God of the Bible.<sup>8</sup> The deeper problem among God's people had always been idolatry whereas God's priority was pure worship; therefore, the foundational reason for choosing a spouse who worships the LORD is so that the follower of God would remain faithful to in his or her worship.

## Ezra 9-10

God had raised up Ezra the priest to return to Jerusalem with a second wave of returnees from Exile in Persia to instruct God's people in God's Word so that they would be a people who worship God in obedience in accordance to the Scriptures. Shortly after, Ezra grieved over the sin of many of the Israelites (including their leaders) because they had sinned by intermarrying with pagans who had not converted to Judaism.<sup>9 10</sup> It is important to note that the basis by which Ezra assessed this act of inter-religious marriage was based on the Torah, the writings of Moses in the first five books of the Bible, and he referred specifically to Deuteronomy. It is equally important to note that Ezra refers to these acts of marrying pagans as "iniquities," "guilt" (9:6) and "the breaking of faith" (10:10). It is clear that the author portrays Ezra's confession of sin on behalf of the community as appropriate. The Jews were

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<sup>6</sup> Gen 15:16.

<sup>7</sup> For more information on the ethical and philosophy objections to how God can be good if He commands the annihilation of people groups in the Old Testament, please refer to Dr. William Lane Craig's response in "Did God Commit Atrocities in the Old Testament?" (<https://www.reasonablefaith.org/media/reasonable-faith-podcast/did-god-commit-atrocities-in-the-old-testament/>) and the ESV Study Bible's ethics article on "War."

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Exod 34:11-16; Joshua 23:12-13; the example of Solomon's apostasy due to marrying pagan wives (1 Kings 11:1-6) later used an archetypal warning – Neh 13:26-27; Mal 2:11; Judges 3:5-6 – This latter passage in Judges demonstrate that apostasy (the abandoning of faith and worship of the LORD) was precisely what happened to the Israelites when they inter-married with those of other religions.

<sup>9</sup> The people had not converted because, after all, they were still "practicing these abominations" (referring to evil and idolatrous practices). - Ezra 9:14, 11-13; Deut 12:31, 29-30.

<sup>10</sup> What's interesting is while in Neh 10:28, the people had to separate themselves from foreigners, in Ezra 6:21, the act of separation is from the sin ("uncleanness") indicating that there were Gentile converts into the Jewish community at this time. They were allowed to participate in this worship ceremony and were considered to be a part of the community.

impacted by Ezra's penitent response and followed suit by making confession and restitution. Perhaps what is most shocking to modern readers of this Biblical account is that the resulting action is to put away their pagan wives and children. Due to the pervasiveness and seriousness of this sin, especially at this point in redemptive history (cf. Ezra 9:8ff), it required extreme measures. Unfortunately, the narrative does not give more information about how these women and children would be provided for although some commentators note that they may have returned to the house of the woman's father.<sup>11</sup> The point is that the act of marrying unconverted pagans was still sin even after 800 years since the time that Moses gave the command.

### Malachi 2:10-16

The important thing to note here is that God's will for marriage is that families would produce "godly offspring" who would be devoted to loving, obeying and worshipping the LORD. This is relevant to the current discussion because it is the role of both parents to raise their children to worship God (Eph 6:4; Deut 6:7-9; Prov 1:7-9; 4:1-13). Statistics show that religious affiliation of parents positively affect the religious affiliation of their children,<sup>12</sup> and some statistics even show a stronger influence of passing down faith by the father when compared to the mother.<sup>13</sup> This sociological observation affirms the Biblical priority that both parents should be devoted to the LORD and raise up their children in the LORD. By being faithful in the spiritual upbringing of their children, parents become the means of influencing their children toward salvation as they entrust their children to God. God's intent in marriage for godly offspring relates to the priority of Christians finding a spouse who also worships and serves God.

### 1 Corinthians 7:39; 9:5

The Apostle Paul writes that "A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord." We should pause and be amazed by the fact that in God's sovereignty, he gives an unmarried Christian a choice to marry "whom she wishes"; God give us the freedom to choose our spouse. However, the condition is that such a prospect must be "in the Lord." Later in 1 Corinthians 9:5, Paul and Barnabas raise the consideration of marrying a wife, but they specify, in such a case, that they would "take along a *believing* wife." A Christian should only marry another Christian.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The ESV Study Bible comments on Ezra 10:2 "The word translated married is not the usual one, but means literally "we have given a home"; Shecaniah's words may imply that these illicit relationships were not marriages in the full sense." While this may mitigate the sting to modern readers (since the "sending away" was not an act of divorce), it still does not account for the provisional responsibility that the men should have for their children, who in this interpretation, were born out of wedlock.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/parent-of-children-under-18/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.christianpost.com/news/fathers-key-to-their-childrens-faith.html>

<sup>14</sup> Some people object to this passage by saying that this refers only to widows, but the principle applies for all unmarried Christian. It would be silly to think that the Apostle Paul only restricts widows to marry Christians, but becomes liberal towards people considering their first marriage.

## 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1

The theme of not being “unequally yoked” is a continual theme in the Bible which says that God’s people should separate themselves from non-Christians when the non-Christians are participating in sinful activities (Rev 18:4; 1 Pet 2:11-12; 4:3-4). In an earlier letter by Paul, he indicates that this principle is not absolute and does not apply to neutral social settings such as having a meal together (1 Cor 5:9-10; 10:27). However, this passage specifies that we should separate from relationships that influence us to adopt a sinful lifestyle and worldviews;<sup>15</sup> this is the meaning of being “yoked”<sup>16</sup> which refers to a horizontal bar put on two oxen so that both would move in the same direction. In other words, being “unequally yoked” refers to being in an intimate relationship which can influence you to live a certain way. Therefore, Christians ought not to enter in relationships where the sinful and worldly influence of non-Christians inevitably compromise Christian behaviour. If such a relationship is evident, then the Christian should not engage in such a relationship at all. Or if Christians find themselves in such relationships, they should disengage from that relationship. Since marriage is the closest human relationship, marriage would be included in the intimate relationship about which this passage speaks. What about friendships in general? Because the Apostle Paul taught that this principle does not refer to every single social context and friendships have various degrees of mutual influence, Christians should use discernment and seek godly advice to make decisions as to how close of a friendship they should develop with a non-believer and how to draw necessary boundaries.<sup>17</sup>

## 1 Corinthians 7:12-16; 1 Peter 3:1-2

In the New Covenant, there are further instructions that a believer who is already married to a non-Christian ought not to divorce their spouse. Such a Christian should remain married to their non-Christian spouse, be faithful to their spouse and try to influence their spouse towards the faith. These passages describe a situation where a Christian is already married to a non-Christian<sup>18</sup> and does not justify an unmarried Christian choosing to marry a non-Christian. Furthermore, the instruction is that

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<sup>15</sup> Note that 2 Cor 7:1 refers to the need for cleansing both externally (“body”) and internally (“spirit”). While it doesn’t specify worldview, it does refer to our inner life which can refer to the “heart” which signifies the seat and direction of our inner being, as well as the “mind” what we think about and our volition. The point is that close relationships with non-Christians lead us to think, feel and live life in a way that dishonors God.

<sup>16</sup> In a former church, a Sunday school teacher had taught that this verse cannot be used to support the principle that “Christians should not marry a non-Christian” because “yoke” is referring to work. In response, this passage generalizes that a Christians should avoid and cease from any relationship that causes you to participate in sinful activities. Moreover, even in the unlikely interpretation that “yoke” narrowly refers to work, we are taught from Genesis that the helper for a man’s work is his wife (Gen 2:5, 15, 18); so still, we should not be unequally yoked to a life-partner who does not worship God. Some also take the view that this passage refers specifically to false apostles, but I personally take a broader view that it refers to all close relationships in which non-Christians may cause a Christian to sin. Cf. “Should a Christian date or marry a Non-Christian?” by Dr. Jeremy Pierre who comments helpfully from 2 Corinthians 6:14:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N7LHQTMNd5w&list=PLBA1qC80OEBdivoQvS7wtiUgvF5jpkBe&index=5>

<sup>17</sup> Some examples of necessary boundaries would include:

- Not participating in sinful activities such as watching pornography, getting drunk, stealing, lying or breaking the law.
- Not taking the advice of non-Christians in spiritual matters (e.g. “Should I keep sharing the gospel?” Most non-Christians in the West would advise that Christians should keep their faith to themselves and not be “intolerant” of other religions. This is a reasonable but unbiblical advice. – Cf. Acts 4:19-20)

<sup>18</sup> This seems to be the best explanation for the context given in 1 Cor 7:1, 12-15; 1 Pet 3:1-2.

there is hope that the non-Christian spouse might be influenced towards faith in the Gospel through that of the Christian (7:14)<sup>19</sup> although this is not a guarantee (7:16). This, however, must not be used by unmarried Christians to justify their actions to try to convert a non-Christian by being in a romantic relationship because the Bible does not teach this as a legitimate method.<sup>20</sup>

### The Issue is Our Heart

After having examined these passages, we should conclude that it has always been God's will for His covenantal people to choose marriage with someone who is also within the covenant. Christians should only choose to marry another Christian. In Western churches, there has been an erroneous idea that somehow it is okay to date a non-Christian as long as one brings the non-Christian partner to church and as long as one seeks opportunities to evangelize them. Such a practice is an invention of man, but it is not taught in Scripture. It is equivalent to Sarah taking things into her own hands because she could not wait for God to grant her pregnancy; the consequences of her decision were devastating (Gen 16). A Christian should not presume on what God can do (in converting one's non-Christian boyfriend or girlfriend), but he/she should do according to what God has already commanded. In this case, God has commanded that we choose a marriage partner or a romantic prospect from among Christians.

After having spoken with many Christians who have struggled with such a life-choice, I have concluded that the struggle surrounds one's heart. I don't deny the struggle in loneliness, in wanting marriage, in the difficulty in waiting for God's timing, and in the relatively fewer Christian prospects around us due to the secularization of our city, etc. But at the end of the day, the question is: "Who or what do you love more? Is God the One whom you love the most? Then be who you are and choose God's will for your life and trust Him for the consequences. Or is your heart going astray and you are prioritizing a person or a good thing like marriage even more than God in your life?" We as Christians are called to be stewards and this subject is primarily about "the Stewardship of our Heart."<sup>21</sup> Since you have trusted God with your eternal life, will you also trust God with your love life?

## II) Practical Considerations

One of the greatest needs in Christian churches today is to develop a God-honouring worldview based on a robust understanding of Scripture. While the Bible is clear that Christians should only marry another Christian and it is a sin to marry a non-Christian, we need wisdom to discern all the factors involved in specific situations. While this section cannot cover every situation, it aims to address some practical considerations as a resource to begin the reflection. For guidance in specific circumstances, Christians should consult church leadership or older, mature Christians for advice and counselling.

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<sup>19</sup> "For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy." (1 Cor 7:14) The second half of this verse even mentions the spiritual hope towards children so that the presence of the Christian parent is a positive influence toward the children and gives them an additional means for the children to know Jesus.

<sup>20</sup> "A romantic relationship is not a pre-condition to salvation;" friendship will do. (I want to acknowledge that the quoted idea comes from my friend and Christian brother On.

<sup>21</sup> A helpful phrase by Dr. Jeremy Pierre.

### A. If marrying a non-Christian is a sin, then is dating a non-Christian also a sin?

The Bible does not speak specifically to dating because dating and a boyfriend/girlfriend relationship is a relatively modern social practice. Because of this, we need to wrestle with the principles of Scripture as it relates to dating. Since we laid the foundation that all of life should be lived for the glory of God, then surely the choice to date someone should be done for the glory of God also. Although space does not allow for extended elaboration, it is important to note that the Bible does not have a category for engaging in a romantic relationship without considering marriage. This means that when Christians think about romance, sex and an exclusive life-partner, they should be thinking about marriage. Therefore, it would be inappropriate for a Christian to choose a dating partner who is a non-Christian because they should be thinking about marriage and the Biblical command is to choose marriage only with another Christian. To go against this advice would be unwise and will lead to unnecessary difficulties if the relationship escalates to the possibility of engagement and marriage.<sup>22</sup>

### B. What about Christians who are already dating a non-Christian?

If the relationship is new and the Christian has recently come to the realization that he/she should only marry someone who is a Christian, I think it is appropriate to seriously consider breaking up. The heart of the matter is always: "Who is more important: this person or God?" However, I understand that there is sensitivity to the consequences of breaking up and hurting the feelings of the other person. Because of these complicated factors, such a Christian needs wise counsel from a church leader, a pastor or a mature older Christian.

What if the relationship has gone on for a long time? I think the consideration of breaking up is still appropriate given the biblical teaching. However, I also understand the inner turmoil and the reluctance to break up for a variety of reasons. So, I offer the following advice for those seeking an alternative:

- In your prayer, be opened to God about any option, even if that means to break up.
- Regularly check your heart for ulterior motives and confess those to God. (E.g. "I don't want to be lonely," "I am afraid of saying 'no'." etc.)
- You as the Christian need to set godly physical boundaries and to communicate your worldview about sexual purity and the need to be blameless (that is, wait till marriage before you travel alone together, live together, have sex or engage in any sexual activities before and leading up to intercourse).
- Have conversations with your boyfriend/girlfriend about your relationship with Christ and how the Bible teaches that you can only marry another Christian. Invite the person to consider Christ and share the gospel with them. Invite them to church and introduce them to your pastor to have follow-up conversations about the gospel.

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<sup>22</sup> Note: People have different definitions of dating. Some people have a looser definition of dating which seems to have a closer meaning to "going on dates," that is, to go out for coffee or bubble tea with a friend of the opposite sex just as friends. If this is the case, I don't think that it would be a problem just to "go on a date." It gets sticky, however, when this becomes a repeated occurrence and the two people develop attraction towards each other and it no longer becomes just "hanging out" but closer to considering each other as formal romantic partners. For this latter case, the principles stated above would apply.

- On the condition that your non-Christian boyfriend/girlfriend concretely demonstrates a seeker's heart, perhaps it would be permissible to remain in a dating relationship and wait on God's mercy to bring them to faith.
- If your non-Christian boyfriend/girlfriend consistently shows resistance to the gospel, it is time to prayerfully consider breaking up. (They refuse to talk about Christianity, they don't want to go to church, they don't want to meet your pastor etc.)
- Throughout the whole process, I need to repeat the point that it is essential to include your pastor, church leader and/or older mature Christians throughout every step of the way. Our hearts are deceitful especially when it comes to romance and we need advice and a 3<sup>rd</sup> opinion.

### C. What about Christians who have already married a non-Christian?

It is not a sin to remain married to a non-Christian according to 1 Corinthians 7:12-13. A Christian is under the same biblical commands given to all Christian spouses to honour the marriage. For Christian women particularly, extra patience is required because their husbands are the heads of their household and wives are called to follow their leadership even if they are non-Christian (cf. the instructions in 1 Peter 3:1-6). God has put you in your spouse's life to be that Christian influence, to regularly pray for their salvation, to seek opportunities to have spiritual conversations and to invite them to church. Space does not allow for further elaborations about numerous factors such as raising children, or when your spouse disagrees with your decision to go to church, tithe, raise your children in church etc. For further discussion, please consult your pastor and church leaders.

One more comment should be made. If a Christian is married to a non-Christian not because he/she converted after marriage, but because he/she chose to disobey God's commands, this Christian should meet with a pastor or church leader and go through a process of confession for that former sin. Some people object to confessing former sins from a pragmatic point of view, but the Bible holds the perspective that we should always confess unconfessed sins. Others think that this confession can be done privately, but given the public nature of marriage and the choice to marry a non-Christian, church leaders should be involved.

### D. What is the role of Christian parents regarding this subject?

When the children are still minors and under the household of parents, parents have the spiritual responsibility to raise up their children "in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." (Eph 6:4) This responsibility is especially on the father who is the head of the household and a shepherd of his wife and children. This means that this subject should be included in the multitude of subjects about which parents should initiate conversation, study Scripture and pray; fathers should take the leadership.

*For Christian parents with young children* – It is entirely appropriate to speak about this subject as soon as it is appropriate to speak about family, marriage and sex. Children at a very young age already role-play "family" and so one can start talking about the centrality of our faith in Jesus as it relates to whom they choose to marry even if their understanding is in minimum. The key is to normalize spiritual and biblical conversations throughout their whole upbringing in age-appropriate ways.

*For those with teenager* – Continue to have conversations with your teenagers. As parents, you'll need to be well-versed and well-studied in all the Scriptures surrounding this subject as well as be aware of

common objections to the Biblical standard. Most importantly, the best method is to *demonstrate* a godly marriage and the joy that both you and your spouse have as you seek the Lord; show that many joys can only be had in a marriage between two Christians.

*For those with adult children (age 19 and up)* – Parents would do well to take the role of a friend and an available advisor. It is advisable not to use the same authoritative parental approach as you did when your children were younger. However, it is appropriate to share your view from Scripture and particularly the reasons why God’s way leads us to a better and happier marriage and family life.

\*The important note is for Christian parents to take up this spiritual responsibility of discipling and teaching Scripture to your children as soon as possible. If you have been neglecting this responsibility so far, I advise that you confess your negligence to God in the name of Jesus for forgiveness and to ask God to give you strength, faith and discipline to begin implementing spiritual discipleship in your home. (If your child has started to date a non-Christian, you may need to consult a pastor or a church leader for guidance and support.)

#### E. What is the role of Christian brothers and sisters who see a Christian friend date or consider marriage to a non-Christian?

The Apostle Paul teaches this in Galatians 6:1: *“Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.”* If you are a friend with a Christian who is struggling with this life-choice, it is your responsibility to pray and start a conversation about the Biblical teaching and the consequences of choosing to engage in a romantic relationship with a non-Christian. Here are some considerations depending on the situation:

1. *The Christian is thinking about dating a non-Christian* – This is the best time to speak to them because there are no social consequences to their actions since they have not made the decision to date a non-Christian. You should sit down with brother or sister in Christ and speak about this subject from a Biblical point of view. Most of all, it is important to emphasize that this is a matter of the heart: *“Are they willing to trust God with their love life or will they take things into their own hands?”*
2. *The Christian is already in a dating relationship with a non-Christian* – This becomes a more complicated situation and you’ll need to help them form a biblical worldview and to consider the tertiary option offered above in *“Practical Consideration #B”* explained above. You’ll probably need to include a pastor, a church leader, or an older, mature Christian.
3. *The Christian has dated a non-Christian for years and is now considering marriage* – The situation has intensified, and you’ll definitely need to include a pastor or a church leader. This may be an indication that you need to speak more extensively about this subject with your friend. (Warning: Having such conversation at this point may risk your friendship, but if you are a close friend, it may be that God is calling you to be the friend who speaks truth with love.)
4. *The Christian has married a non-Christian* – At this point, the person should remain married to his/her non-Christian spouse, and I advise that any later *“confession”* should be supported by pastors and church leaders. As their friend, continue to have fellowship with them and support them in how they can be a witness to their spouse. Pray with them regularly.