

MIXED MARRIAGE

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Scripture says so much about marriage because it is a universal experience. Besides, it is an intense experience. Married life calls for more skill and understanding than other relationships. It is harder than living alone because it is more complicated, especially when children enter the picture. It is harder than being a good neighbor, getting along with people at work, or even living together in the community of faith. Marriage affects the full range of life rather than just some aspects of it (total). The actions of one partner likely affect the other, and marriage involves a degree of intimacy. We find it possible—and even fulfilling—to relate to many people in varying degrees of “distance” or “closeness,” but in marriage there is no “distance,” and nothing is hidden. Besides, marriage is all the time whereas work is only part of the waking hours and not every day. Marriage is exclusive of all other relationships; its distinctives are not experienced with anyone else. Finally, marriage is permanent while other relationships are not necessarily for life. In a universal, total, permanent, exclusive relationship, it is imperative that the partners share at least the basic values by which marriage operates.

Value differences do not always impress people leading up to marriage. That is particularly the case in western culture where marriage grows out of romantic inclinations more than it does in some parts of the world. “Love is blind” can be all too true. Young people get caught up in the exhilaration of being accepted by someone of the opposite sex, and they find it difficult to believe that these emotions will “wear off,” that the motivation to please each other can wane, and that life together on the long haul will settles back into a relationship built on the “real You.” That means a relationship built on values and the degree to which the spouses have matured in conforming their behavior to their ideals.

Having a home that operates according to shared values and moral code brings in religious convictions. Values are aspects of life that grow out of people’s worldview—the big picture; religion is worldview. Differences at this level have far-reaching effects on choices and behaviors. These differences are significant enough between husband and wife; they become crucial when children come into the home. So, scripture has a good bit to say about Christians getting married.

Marriage between Christians and non-Christians involves a distinction between morality and expediency. Discussions about mixed marriages can proceed as if there are only two considerations: is it right or wrong, moral or immoral? Bringing in expedience complicates the issue, and at the same time makes it more soluble. The complexity in our mind approximates the complexity in the question itself and in the scripture’s treatment of it. The construction of the topic now has (a) a matter related to what is moral: although

something is moral, the student of scripture must ask whether it is expedient. Bringing expedience into the discussion also brings in (b) a degree possibility: things that are moral may vary in how expedient they are. The conceptual “tools” we apply to an issue must vary enough to correspond with the aspects of the problem. Morality *vs.* expediency applies to several matters. Without that distinction the biblical materials on them do not seem to sort out naturally. We create tensions in the biblical data if we do not bring to the data all the variables that the writers had in mind when they wrote.

The morality-expediency distinction could also be called a law-wisdom distinction, the commandment-advice distinction. An imperative statement is not necessarily a mandate or prohibition; it may be advice. Whereas Proverbs 23:31, for example, says not to look at the wine when it is red, Paul says in Romans 14:21 that it is not good to eat meat or drink wine if it causes a brother to stumble. His comment implies that it is a matter of expediency, which implies that drinking wine in itself is not a moral matter. That point drives us back to take the proverb as advice to avoid contradiction between writers.

Since drinking alcohol is controversial, using it as an example is probably not as convincing; but comparing these two issues might illustrate an apparent divergence in scripture on this topic (even though we are not inclined to controvert total abstinence for practical reasons). We could make the expediency option better in connection with eating meat offered to idols. Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25 treat that issue in a way that might look like moral prohibition since the passages incorporate things sacrificed to idols in a list of moral matters—fornication particularly. But Paul’s presentation in 1 Corinthians 8 treats it as a matter of conscience for participants and observers. (c) Not taking advice is not a sin; disregarding it is unwise and even foolish, depending.

Introducing advice-expediency-wisdom into passages about mixed marriage with unbelievers implies that marrying an unbeliever would not be sinful; it would not be wise depending on the case. That marrying “*in the Lord*” (1 Corinthians 7:39) is advice would seem implied by what Paul says earlier in the chapter (7:12-16). He makes it clear that marriage between believers and unbelievers is still marriage. So, it is not a Christian institution, but a social one, even though Christian values should govern it. Christians married to unbelievers are not ceremonially or really “unclean,” nor are their children illegitimate. There is no religious reason a believer should divorce an unbeliever. If remaining in a mixed marriage is not immoral, then entering a mixed marriage is not immoral.

Those points do not tell the whole story because they do not address practical aspects. There can be a difference between remaining in a mixed marriage and entering one. An existing marriage may involve children, and their welfare adds a reason for continuing with the relationship so the believer can influence them for the Lord (cp. Lois and Eunice, 2 Timothy 1:5; 3:14-15; Acts 16:1-3). A wife may win the spouse to the Lord (1 Peter 3:1-2; cp. 1 Corinthians 7:16¹). She is making the best of a less-than-ideal situation. But entering a

less-than-ideal situation invites a risk that she need not take. Other options offer better results for the kingdom as well as greater personal peace and satisfaction throughout life (note 1 Corinthians 7:15). The reasons for remaining in a mixed marriage do not apply fully to entering a mixed marriage.

Experience does not indicate what will happen in this next case, but religious factors would not appreciably differ whether a believer is a husband or wife. There are apparently fewer believing husbands with unbelieving wives than *vice versa*. On the other hand, everyone knows about husbands who were eventually won either by their wives or by someone else who used their influence in the home as a foundation for that conversion. In some cultures, the tendency for husbands to influence wives could be stronger than the other way around. That seems most likely in cultures where women are not regarded as highly as they are in the Judaeo-Christian heritage.

There are drawbacks to being a wife with an unbelieving husband. She does not feel free to support Christian endeavors financially with the resources earned by a non-Christian husband. She may have difficulty participating in Christian activities. A husband that works all week may not be understanding about her attending Sunday services and evening get-togethers and “taking the kids away from him.” Another frustration is trying to raise children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord—especially boys. When sons get old enough to start identifying with their father, they may stop attending church because they think it is not manly. She ends up feeling that she has brought sons into the world to be lost. Her husband may feel out of place as well because his wife is “taking over” an important aspect of family life. His sense of responsibility is undercut even though he is not fulfilling it.

These concerns apply as well to marriages between different kinds of Christians depending on the amount of difference between their Christian heritages.

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 7:16 does not mean that a believer ought to stick with a mixed marriage “at all costs” because “*Who knows? you may be able to win the unbelieving spouse.*” The opposite is more likely the point: “*What makes you think that you can win an unbelieving spouse that is wanting a divorce, trying to desert you, or perhaps beginning to ‘run around’ on you?*” The preceding verse seems to deal with a deteriorating situation rather than a neutral one.