

# UNEQUALLY YOKED

Many Christians have come to me with questions concerning marriage between believers and unbelievers. In response to their desire for knowledge, I have drawn from Scripture, my own counseling experience in this area, and personal observation.

The purpose of this booklet is not to counsel married couples, neither is it to interpret St. Paul's writings in Scripture on this subject. Rather, I wish to enlighten single and engaged believers, as well as to point out some of the difficulties of cross-cultural marriage, in general.

The apostle Paul calls a marriage relationship between a believer and an unbeliever "unequally yoked." He writes to us these words, "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers; for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what concord has Christ with Belial? Or what party has he that believes with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God." (2 Cor. 6:14-16)

A great deal of questioning and discussions have come from this passage of Scripture. In fact, both believers and unbelievers have challenged Paul's teaching. As a result of studying this passage, some believers who are engaged to or dating unbelievers, feel trapped in a narrow path. Their hearts feel uneasy as the Holy Spirit convicts them of sin in their unequally-yoked relationship.

## **Jumping into Marriage**

So often I hear in my counseling, "There aren't very many Christians out there to get married to." Many feel that they have little or no chance of finding a Christian spouse. Unbelievers frequently consider Paul to be prejudiced against them. They justify their actions and persuade their partners to remain in the relationship by saying, "When two people are in love, no third party has the right to impose his views on that love. After all, the Bible says, '*Love never fails.*'" (1 Cor. 13:8)

Experience is a good teacher. If we look at the lives of those living in unequally-yoked marriages, we hear a loud cry for help. Later, many say that they wish that they had never taken the step of marriage, and ask why someone didn't warn them how tragic their lives would be. Someone once said to me that it is hard enough living with a believer. Why make life harder by marrying an unbeliever?

From my experiences with people and counseling, I have found that many people rush into marriage just to get married, rather than giving serious thought and consideration as to how and with whom they want to spend their lives. For example, some marry to escape loneliness. One lady said "Getting married is better than nothing." My reply was that "nothing" is better.

Other people rush into marriage in fear that they will miss the boat if they do not marry when they have the chance. After they are married they discover that they have not only missed the boat, but are now chained to a dock!

Another reason for rushing into marriage, especially common amongst women, stems from a poor self-image. Feelings of not being good enough or beautiful enough to be liked, or of having so little confidence in themselves that they believe that they cannot make it in this world alone, lead to the idea of marrying someone – anyone – who will take them. Speaking from a man's point of view, my response is this: Most men considering marriage may be attracted to a woman's outer appearance, but this lasts only for a while. What they are really searching for is a woman who has a beautiful heart and spirit.

It is always a mistake for a believer to jump into marriage, as marriage is a lifetime commitment in the eyes of God. "...For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall be one flesh." (Matthew 19:5) Before tying the knot, the believer should seek the counsel of God and of mature believers. If one of his or her reasons for marriage is motivated by fear, a warning should be sounded, as the fear of never being married is never a good reason for marriage.

## **Dating**

Before I was married, I was attracted to the tall, slim, blonde-haired, blue-eyed type. Frankly, I have met many women who fit this description, but consistently found that the women of my choice were not God's choice for me. Rather than allowing God to direct our interpersonal relationships, we often find ourselves unable to resist the impulse to pursue this "person of our dreams." Unfortunately, dreams will not endure forever. Soon the dawn will come to interrupt those dreams. So, don't be in a rush to tie the knot with someone just because you find them attractive.

My advice is always the same to those who come to my office for counsel regarding dating an unbeliever, and how far they should let the relationship go: STOP THE RELATIONSHIP, NOW! Unfortunately, some feel very confident that they are too smart to become committed or trapped into marriage, and tell me not to worry, as they are aware of the consequences, and will never marry the unbeliever. What is the result of playing with fire? You burn your hands. Many end up disregarding any advice at all, and finally join hands in an unequally-yoked marriage. "...For what fellowship has righteousness with unrighteousness?" (2 Cor. 6:14) Those who come back to me later seek advice on how to deal with their troubled marriage – the very marriage that they were warned to avoid.

## **Witnessing to the Opposite Sex**

Satan is at work in the life of every believer. His goal is to keep him or her from serving God. One way he does this is to help the believer get entangled in unequally-yoked relationships. We have to recognize the power of Satan. We are not to be afraid of him or even

give him credit, but at the same time, we should not test him. “And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light.” (2 Cor. 11:14) When someone tries to witness to an unbeliever of the opposite sex, Satan may be setting a trap.

Please, do not get the impression that I am completely against witnessing to a member of the opposite sex. However, it is important to be very cautious. It is best for the unbeliever to receive the Gospel of Christ without being influenced by an attraction to the person witnessing to him. As a result of such an attraction, many unbelievers, thinking themselves to be sincere, prematurely accept Christ. That is, they possibly have a genuine interest in Him and believe that He is God; but their faith in Christ is only intellectual, not a saving faith. Experience shows that a profession of faith made in the course of a dating relationship is often made just to please the one to whom the unbeliever was attracted. Later the witnessing believer finds very little or no evidence of a transformed life in his or her friend. “But he that received the seed into stony places, the same is he that heareth the word, and with joy receives it, yet he does not root himself, but stands for a while, for when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended.” (Matt. 13:20-21) The best thing to do is to pray that God will send a believer of the same sex to develop a friendship with and witness to the unbeliever.

## **CROSS CULTURAL MARRIAGES**

In this section, my purpose is to cover some of the difficulties encountered in a marriage with someone from a different culture. It might sound unreasonable for me to write about this since I am Middle Eastern and my wife is American. Nevertheless, I pray that I will not be misunderstood when I discourage cross-cultural marriages.

### **False Teaching**

First, one must be very careful before entering a cross-cultural marriage because, according to the Bible, marriage is a binding relationship. There is a school of thought which contradicts this principle by misapplying certain Scriptures which were directed to Israel and not to the Church today. This false teaching has resulted in both unnecessary and unbiblical divorce. Ministers who uphold this doctrine teach that God’s commandment to the people of Israel not to marry a Gentile or a non-Israelite is to be followed by the Church today. “But King Solomon loved many strange women, together with the daughter of Pharaoh, women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Zidonians, and Hittites; of the nations concerning which the Lord said unto the children of Israel, You shall not go in to them, neither shall they come in unto you; for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods: Solomon clave unto these in love.” (1 Kings 11:1-2) The Israelites were forbidden to intermarry with Gentiles in order to protect them from falling into the system of idol worship which was prevalent among the Gentiles of that time. As a result of intermarriage, the Israelites were turning away from worshipping the true God.

Since the Resurrection of Christ, the Gospel has been preached to and has been accepted

by the Gentiles. Moreover, all believers are the same in Christ. “For you are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:26-28) That is, God makes no distinction between the Jew and the Gentile. In spite of this, it is disturbing to know that some British ministers believe that the British are one of the actual tribes of Israel. They therefore discourage any marriage between a British citizen and the non-British, even if both are believers. In some instances, British ministers have been known to encourage divorce and teach that the marriage was never acceptable in the eyes of God. On the contrary, I would like to state that a marriage is counted as a marriage in the eyes of God whether the ceremony was non-Christian (for example, conducted in a temple instead of in a Christian church), or whether one partner is an unbeliever. “But to the rest speak I, not the Lord; if any brother has a wife that is not a believer, and she is pleased to dwell with him, let him not put her away. And the woman who has a husband that does not believe, if it pleases him to dwell with her, let her not leave him. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband, otherwise your children were unclean, but now they are holy.” (1 Corinthians 7:12-14) Therefore, whatever the case, it does not give the right to divorce the other person.

### **Is Love Enough?**

Why should I discourage marriage between individuals of different cultural backgrounds, even if both are believers? It has nothing to do with race or class differences, but rather in order to ensure a healthy, lasting marriage.

Some people believe that love is enough to keep a marriage going. This is not true, especially in a cross-cultural marriage. The trouble is that many young people fall in love and jump into marriage before taking the time to consider the consequences of cultural differences and expectations. The tragedy is that only after they have made their vows and are living together do they begin to deal with the deep misunderstandings which go hand-in-hand with a cross-cultural marriage, and often lead to disillusionment and estrangement.

### **Witnessing**

Leading a foreign unbeliever to the Lord is a wonderful thing to do. If we are missions-minded, we are to preach the Gospel to the whole world, without exception. “And he said unto them, God ye into all the world, preach the gospel to every creature.” (Mark 16:15) When a person becomes a Christian we ought to rejoice in his conversion and encourage and edify him. “Likewise, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” ( Luke 15:10) But we must keep in mind that although God has changed his heart and he has become a new creation, it does not mean that he has abandoned his culture or that he is willing to adapt to a new one.

### **Marriage and Immigration**

Western men and women should be aware of some of the things which motivate people from overseas to develop cross-cultural relationships. One important fact is that it is much easier to immigrate to a Western country when married to a Westerner. I have known immigrants to marry for immigration purposes and divorce their partners soon after becoming American residents. Other immigrants use such marriages to bring the rest of their family into the country. The result is often the same: DIVORCE.

### **Cultural Differences**

All cultures have similarities and differences. The fact that somebody eats different food, speaks a different language or has different behavioral patterns than we do is not the issue. The question is, can you adapt to the differences in his or her culture?

When two people fall in love they make many promises to one another. One commonly spoken promise is, "I'll do anything at all for you." In most cases, after marriage, this is not true. Therefore, even before getting engaged, the couple needs to explore one another's cultures in order to become acquainted with differences and expectations.

It is very difficult for one partner to learn everything about the other's culture and what changes in lifestyle and behavior are expected to be made following marriage. In fact, I have known people to deliberately withhold details concerning their culture for fear of embarrassment, or of losing their partners. Thus, in many cases I have found that one partner simply was not told the truth about the lifestyle he or she was expected to adapt to, only to encounter a severe shock after marriage. I have heard many cries of, "But you never told me about that!"

## **MIDDLE EASTERN TRADITIONS**

Since I am from the Middle East, I will try to explain some aspects of Middle Eastern culture which Westerners should consider if in a relationship with, or contemplating marriage to a Middle Easterner. It is necessary that you understand, however, that many Middle Eastern people will deny these things because of pride or fear of losing their beloved. Moreover, sometimes they have never even thought about these cultural differences from their partner's perspective.

### **Romance**

The Arabic language is very beautiful and is looked upon as one of the most romantic of languages. In fact, the written word is like a work of art. This artistic beauty encourages people of the Middle East to enjoy romance by expressing themselves through poetry, love songs, and romantic movies. Such romance is always expressed in a beautiful way before marriage. Many times the fiancée is told, "I will take you to the moon." That is to say, our love will soar to the highest peaks imaginable. Unfortunately, marriage brings an end to romance and the wife quickly finds herself shoved into the role of housecleaning, cooking and raising children.

### **Sons in the Family**

In the Middle Eastern family, the sons, especially the eldest, are the supporters of the family. In many cases, the eldest son has to pay for the marriages of all of his sisters, the education of his brothers and sisters, and other living expenses of the family. Plus, he is looked upon as the retirement plan for his parents, since he is expected to provide for them until they die.

The Bible teaches that a man should "leave his father and mother and cling to his wife." (Genesis 2:24) That is, establish a separate home from their family of origin, and consider themselves now one (as husband and wife). The Middle Eastern culture does not ignore this teaching, but practices it differently than the West. In the Middle East, a man "clings to his wife" by supporting her and adding her to his family. He also has to honor his father and mother. "Honor thy father and mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the Lord your God has given you." (Exodus 20:12 and Matthew 15:4) "But if any provide not for his own, and especially for those of his own house, he has denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel." (1 Timothy 5:8) In some cases after marriage, the eldest son will either bring his wife to live with his parents, where she will help care for them, or he will bring his parents to live with them after they have been married for a while. In any case, his responsibility to honor his parents implies much more to the Middle Easterner than it would to a Westerner.

### **Wives in the Family**

A common saying in the Middle East is that when a lady gets married, she marries a

whole family. This means that the wife is subject not only to her husband, but to her in-laws as well, and especially to her mother-in-law. The mother-in-law wants to see to it that no stranger takes her son away from her. This can be expressed in many ways through the interference of the in-laws in the newlyweds' lives. Most of the time the husband receives orders from his family about how to run the household and treat his wife, and does not bother to confer with her about these matters.

Just as frustrating to many Western women is that often the man will feel that he must show his manhood by giving orders to his wife and visibly demonstrating his authority over her in public. One reason for this is that women in the Middle East are considered to be second-class citizens and are treated like property. In fact, many times a woman is not even allowed to express her feelings or give her opinion. If you are a Western woman who is considering marriage to a Middle Easterner, be sure to ask yourself whether you are willing to leave your opinions unexpressed.

### **Who's in Charge?**

This way of life is a reality even for most Middle Eastern Christians. It is the lifestyle that they were used to as unbelievers, and they would not even think of changing this after becoming Christians. Generally speaking, the man is in control and has the final word. Second in authority is his family, which influences what his final word will be. And third in authority are his children, especially the boys. The wife takes last place.

## **ISLAMIC TEACHING ON MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE**

We live in a world which cries out for liberty for women and for their equality with men. People realize that monogamy is far better than polygamy for a close-knit, happy family. Divorce without reason, and lack of birth control, leads to instability. The Qur'anic teaching about women is largely implicate in denying these values, and many Muslim scholars try to paraphrase it to suit society, yet the following verses from the Quran confirm its basic teaching about a woman's position:

Marriage: "If you fear that you will not be able to deal justly with the orphans, marry women of your own desire, two or three or four." (Al-Nisa 4:3)

"And you have it not in your power to do justice between wives..." (Al Nisa 4:129)

Treating wives: "The male has the equal of the portion of two females." (Al Nisa 4:11)

"Admonish those of them on whose part you apprehend disobedience, and leave them alone in their beds and chastise them (beat them)." (Al Nisa 4:34)

"And if you desire to take a wife in place of another and you have given one a treasure, take not back aught therefrom." (Al Nisa 4:20)

Divorce: "There is no blame on you if you divorce women when you have not touched them or appointed for them a portion." (Al Baqarah 2:236)

“And if you divorce them before you have touched them and you have appointed for them a portion, then pay to them half of what you have appointed.” (Al Baqarah 2:237)

Re-marriage: “So if he divorce her, she shall not be lawful to him afterwards until she marries another husband: then if he divorce her, there is no blame on them both if they return to each other.” (Al Baqarah 2:230)

Would a western woman be willing to tolerate sharing her husband with another woman, or two or three? What would she think if he denied her sexual needs and beat her to make her comply with his wishes? Many Middle Eastern women like this way of life and look at Western women as living in immorality because the latter share more authority with their husbands. Though a Middle Eastern man may not express his belief in these particular practices, this is how he has been taught, and the culture within which he has been raised.

### **The Influence of Islam on Eastern Culture**

Let's take a closer look at the influence of Islam in Eastern societies. Eastern societies are generally ruled by men. In fact, men have most of the advantages and usually have the final word. For example, a Muslim man is permitted to divorce his wife for any reason at all. One strong motive for divorcing a woman is for her not bearing children or not bearing boys. It is almost impossible to convince him that the gender of the child or the couple's infertility could be on account of himself! In a Muslim country, divorce proceedings are usually quite easy. In some situations, all a man will say is, “I divorce you” three times and the divorce is legal! This puts women in a very perilous position, especially if they have no means of supporting themselves.

A second influence of Islam is in the definition of adultery. The meaning changes depending upon who is committing it. A man can commit adultery and it may not be considered to be adultery. That is, Islam permits a short-term “marriage” which occurs on the spur of the moment and lasts for just an hour, or for a couple of days or weeks. It is called “motaa,” which means “pleasure.” This is considered particularly understandable if the husband is away from home. In contrast, a woman caught in adultery will be killed. Can you live with such a double standard?

A third factor to consider is polygamy. Islam permits polygamy, up to four wives at a time. The man can trade or exchange them at his whim. There are cases of Western women who have married Muslim men only to find out later that they must share their husband with another woman! Although polygamy is not permitted in the West, Western governments have no right to interfere with already-existing marriages. Thus, a Muslim can immigrate to the West alone, marry a Western woman, and bring the rest of his wives over later. Of course, the Western wife will not find out about the other women until it is too late!

If the family lives in the West, in the case of divorce, the children of the marriage are usually in the wife's custody. This is not the situation in the East. The children are his. A man, fully intending to divorce his wife, may take his wife and family overseas to visit his parents and divorce her on the spur of the moment. I know of cases where a woman has gone overseas with her husband and children and has returned home alone.



## **PROBLEMS WITH DIVORCE**

Divorce never is, and never will be, the end of your problems. In fact, it is the beginning of lifelong hardships; especially if there are children involved. In Arabic we say, “You are married to your partner for X number of years, but you are married to your children for life.” In other words, you may think you got rid of your problems when your partner left, but as long as there are children involved, you will be faced with the many struggles of single parenthood and the hassles of obtaining and maintaining child support.

Both parents face struggles. The battles over child support often serve to drive the father away from his children. Moreover, since he rarely gains custody of the children, he becomes a “weekend” parent, unable to have regular input into his children’s lives. The wife, on the other hand, if not already working, finds herself looking for work which pays adequately enough to support her family. Aside from single-handedly supporting herself and the children, she must find the energy to cook, clean and spend adequate time with them. Although life is difficult for both parents, the children pay the biggest price. In fact, I believe that the emotional damage done to children as a result of divorce has been underestimated.

Let me stress that divorce is not a quick solution to the problem, but the beginning of many heartaches. Unfortunately, some pastors will counsel their flock to take the “easy” way out...get a divorce. This may be for a number of reasons. The first was already mentioned, confusing Israel with the Church. In spite of the fact that the marriage has already been consummated, they will still suggest divorce. Another reason is simply to wash their hands of the problem. They just do not want to deal with the headaches involved in counseling the couple.

### **Marriage Ceremonies**

Some pastors will hold that the marriage was never valid in the eyes of God because the ceremony was not Christian. Therefore, they advise that the believer confess that he or she was living in an adulterous condition, get a legal divorce, and start life all over. This position, however, misses the whole point: In the eyes of God, the couple is married, regardless of whether the ceremony was a civil service, or a pagan service, or was conducted in a Muslim mosque, or performed in a Christian church. “The Pharisees also came unto him, tempting him, and saying unto him, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause? And he answered and said unto them, Have you not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, and said, For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife, and they two shall be one flesh? Therefore, they are no longer two, but one flesh. What God has joined together, let no man put asunder.” (Matthew 19:3-6)

*A note to pastors:* I have found that some partners, who were considered hopeless cases, turned to Christ and became even more committed than their spouses. In fact, the spouses complained that their partners were too committed to the Lord. Therefore, who are we to judge

whether someone will turn to Christ? So, never encourage divorce, but seek the reconciliation of the couple and the salvation of the unbeliever, as in James 5:19.

### **What is Adultery?**

What does the Bible have to say about divorce on account of adultery? Most of us believe that adultery is the sexual act. But it is more than that. Jesus also taught that even looking at someone lustfully is adultery. “But I say unto you, that whosoever looks on a woman to lust after her has committed adultery with her already in his heart.” (Matt. 5:28) I personally will even go further with the Scripture. If adultery can be committed both by the sexual act and the mental, then every marriage in existence has been defiled! No one has the right to cast the first stone. We are all guilty, too. Should every married couple get a divorce because all have mentally committed adultery? Of course not! Furthermore, if God can forgive all sins, can't He forgive the sin of adultery? If He forgave the Samaritan woman, who are we to decide what God will and will not forgive. “For you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband.” (John 4:18) It is only in the case of continued stubbornness in adultery that divorce should be considered. The Biblical principle which applies here is the sanctity of marriage. At all costs, every effort should be made to preserve the marriage.

### **Summary**

Cross-cultural marriages are difficult. In cases where both the man and the woman are believers, neither one should pursue matrimony blind to the cultural traditions and expectations of the other. Each should be honest and open with the other, and should seek the Lord's leading in their lives. Unequally-yoked relationships are absolutely unbiblical. Moreover, the believer should not enter into dating relationships with unbelievers. Believers who are already in unequally-yoked marriages should continue to pray for their partners to become Christians, for as long as it takes. Although this may seem harsh, it is the price we pay when we disobey God's word.

**“Likewise, you wives, be in submission to your own husbands, that if do not believe, they may be won by the conversation of the wives, while they behold your chaste conversation coupled with fear....Likewise, you husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers not be hindered.” (1 Peter 3:1,2,7)**