



Mixed Marriage

One of the issues in the Christian church that never seems to go away is the issue of mixed marriage. By "mixed" I mean the union in holy matrimony of someone who is a Christian with someone who is not.

Why it never goes away

Why will it not go away? The simple reason is that our hearts are sinful and we do not want to listen to God. What is often called "love" takes over and this emotion becomes so powerful that it dominates over everything else. Whether it be the will of God, the teaching of parents, or the advice of friends, once "love" swoops in all else pales in comparison and has to take a backseat to what we are feeling. The flutterings of our heart become paramount.

They also lead to countless rationalizations. "I will marry him and I have every hope that over time he will become a Christian." "I am going to marry her because she is such a kind and considerate person." "I want to marry him because I can not face a life of singleness any longer." "I plan to marry her (or him) because I have no choice as there are no eligible young ladies (or young men) in the church."

Lonely hearts

Now it is easy to dismiss these responses as little more than mistaken arguments; however, we do well to realize that so often they represent the cries of a lonely heart. Someone who really wants to find a partner for life but can just not find him or her in the church is dealing with a painful and distressing situation. Living in a church community in which so many people are married and you are single has more than just a few challenges. Looking at your future and seeing no one to share it with – no soul mate, no children, no grandchildren – is much more than just a minor irritant.

Hence in no way do I want to minimize the pain of those who are single and cannot find a spouse. We need to empathize with them. We need to pray for them. We need to encourage them. Why, at times and with great care and much wisdom we may even need to give them a helping hand.

Scripture is clear

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that when it comes to this matter, Holy Scripture is clear. In 1 Corinthians 7 the Apostle Paul is led by the Holy Spirit to give a lot of advice and direction on matters of marriage and singleness. As he concludes that chapter he writes these words, *"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"* (1 Corinthians 7:39). Notice that Paul says that this woman is free to marry whomever she likes but there is one qualification or condition that must be met, namely, that he must be someone whom the Lord has bought with his blood and claimed for himself. Quite simply, he must be a believer.

In his second letter to the same church of Corinth, the apostle elaborates on this qualification. No sooner has he finished addressing the Corinthians in a very emotional way and pleaded with them to open wide their hearts, and then he says this: *"Do not be yoked together with unbelievers"* (2 Corinthians 6:14). He uses an agricultural image here. The picture is that of two oxen who are harnessed together under one and the same wooden bar or iron yoke. These two animals need to work in step and in harmony. Joined and linked as they are, they have a lot of plowing to do.

Only what is fine and fitting for two oxen is not so for a Christian and a non-Christian. There is no way that these two should be tied or harnessed together. Paul even supplies any number of reasons:

- 1) *"What do righteousness and wickedness have in common?"* (v. 14);
- 2) *"What fellowship can light have with darkness?"* (v. 14);
- 3) *"What harmony is there between Christ and Belial?"* (v. 15);
- 4) *"What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?"* (v. 15);
- 5) *"What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols?"* (v. 16).

Incompatibility

What Paul is stressing here is the matter of incompatibility. A believer and an unbeliever may think that they are compatible because they love one another; however, the apostle stresses that there is much more that divides them than unites them. They may possess in common what they think is "love" but what they lack are such essentials as "righteousness," "fellowship," "harmony," "commonness," and "agreement."

And that is not all, for Paul also brings in the fact that believers are holy. *"We are the temple of the living God"* (v. 16), meaning that Christians are the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. The Third Person of the Triune God has set us apart. He has sanctified us. He has come and made his home in us and with us. He has transformed us into temples, and one thing you can never do with a temple is defile it or bring something into it that is unclean.

Defilement

Yet that is what a mixed marriage does. It defiles the believing partner. It contaminates the temple. It turns what is holy into something that is unholy. Listen to Paul again, *"Therefore come out from them and separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty"* (2 Corinthians 6:17, 18). Here he reaches back all the way into the Old Testament and into the books of Isaiah and 2 Samuel to make his point. He is saying then and now to believers everywhere that they are not to be mismatched with unbelievers. The gulf is just too wide. The chasm is just too deep. The difference is just too great.

Now, as if these biblical words are not clear enough, there is more that can be cited. We have that scandalous situation mentioned in Numbers 25 where Israelite men sought out Midianite women and joined themselves to them. How the anger of the Lord was ignited when his covenant people defiled themselves in this way. Or what about the situation that Malachi prophesies against in his day? He accuses Judah of desecrating the sanctuary the Lord loves by *"marrying the daughter of a foreign god"* (Malachi 2:11). Then too there is Ezra who complains *"You have broken faith and married foreign women, and so increased the guilt of Israel"* (Ezra 10:10).

Hence Scripture is clear. Its testimony is unambiguous. Marrying an unbeliever is a violation of the will of God. In addition, it is also a recipe for disaster.

Past experience

This last point has been driven home to me over the years in countless pastoral situations. I have dealt with members of the church who insisted on entering into what I some times call "a missionary marriage" but which soon became "an unholy alliance." I have seen the bitter fruits of these relationships: faith abandoned, marriages shipwrecked, children adrift, family despair, abject loneliness, and much bitterness.

In China

Recently I returned from a two-month stay in China and everywhere I went I was confronted with the tales of mixed marriage sadness. One sister complained to me that her husband had promised

when they married that he would go with her to church, but he never did. Another sister married an unbeliever and for a while he worshipped with her but then when sickness befell him, he blamed God and refused to attend. A brother of Reformed persuasion married a Pentecostal lady and although both claim to be Christian, their marriage is a daily battleground. A sister confesses that she had such great hopes for her marriage even though her husband did not believe, but he has since turned on her, found another woman on the side and treats her like dirt.

The tales of sadness and pain are everywhere in China. The landscape is littered with broken hearts and countless tears. Heaven is being inundated with the petitions of those whose hopes and dreams have been dashed. It is a sad, sad situation.

At the beginning of our Chinese stay, our translator, who is single and longing to be married, said that she too was thinking about marrying an unbeliever. She complained that there are just too few men in Chinese Christian circles. But then as we visited with believers who had married outside the faith and heard their sad tales, she talked less and less about going down that perilous road. Singleness is a state that one may wish to escape but to trade it for a marriage filled with unbelief represents a very bad deal.

So where does that leave those who cannot find a believing spouse? The main thing that they, and all of us, must do is pray. This difficult situation needs to be brought to the Lord repeatedly in earnest petition. Another thing that should receive serious consideration is using the modern means of communication to link Reformed singles together no matter where they are in the world. And that brings us to another related topic, which is moving. Sometimes those who cannot find a spouse in one part of the country or world should give serious consideration to living elsewhere. Should these kinds of efforts not find favour, then the end result may be that one decides to remain single. Contrary to what many people even in the church may think, being single is not an inferior way of living. Why, the Apostle Paul even commends it (see: 1 Corinthians 7).

At the same time I would also remind you that marrying in the Lord is not a sure formula for success. Even among believers there can be and often are problems, tensions, and disagreements. There can also be unfaithfulness and heartbreak. Thankfully most believers who confess a common Lord are determined to deal with and work through their problems. They acknowledge the presence of sin and see the need for confession. They choose for the road of forgiveness and are willing to work at reconciliation. They do not want to throw overboard their vows, their spouses and, above all, their Lord.

Indeed, blessed are those who follow the will of the Lord when it comes to finding believing spouses. May the Lord hear many prayers, open many doors and make happy many hearts.

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