



A Bad Yoke

I was recently shown some articles, written by Christian authors who were trying to prove that God does not forbid marriage between a believer and an unbeliever. So yes, the title of this article is about how believers are to be “yoked” in marriage, not about a “bad joke” pronounced with a Dutch accent.

These articles employ three main arguments in an attempt to make marriage of a Christian to another believer a matter of preference rather than law:

- 1) 2 Corinthians 6:14-18 is not, as such, about marriage to an unbeliever;
- 2) 1 Corinthians 7:12-14 shows that it is not unlawful for a believer to marry an unbeliever; and
- 3) Christians are now ruled by the Law of Love, not legalistic rules.

Before I address these arguments, I would like to give a brief overview of the biblical teaching on this subject.

The whole Bible is against religiously-mixed marriages for the believer

Already, in the very dawn of history, the Lord made known His views on religiously-mixed marriage. The subject comes up in Genesis 6:1-8, before Israel was a nation or the Mosaic Law was given. The best interpretation of this passage is, I believe, that the “sons of God” (believing men) saw that the “daughters of men” (unbelieving women) were beautiful. They put “looks” above spiritual qualities, and got hitched. The result was the “Nephilim” – not a race of giants that resulted from the mating of fallen angels with humans, as some have contended, but “strong-arm” men who lusted for power. They were sons who followed the example of their unbelieving mothers, not to mention the worldliness of fathers who were supposed to be believers. The net result was a great spiritual decline in the world, leading to the spread of wickedness everywhere – and eventually to the Flood. While this is not put in the form of a prohibition, we are left in no doubt about the Lord’s attitude to religiously-mixed marriage – in a situation where the context involves the whole human race, not just Israel.

Further on in Genesis 28:6-9 we see Esau disregarding his father’s instructions to avoid marriage with the Canaanites. Here we have the origins of the old covenant prohibition against religiously mixed marriage. That prohibition is formalized as covenant-law in Exodus 34:11-16, where Israel is told not to make any covenants with the Canaanites – in case they intermarry and lead God’s people into idolatry. Deuteronomy 7:3 is even more direct.

To be sure, God’s people often ignored this prohibition. King Solomon is a prominent example, with his tendency to cement political alliances with the nations by adding many foreign women to his harem. Yet Nehemiah 13:26 makes clear that this was sin and led to further sinning on Solomon’s part.

Many other verses could be mentioned. For example, Judges 3:6, where the sin of believing parents in allowing their sons and daughters to inter-marry in this way, is given as an explanation for the decline of Israel in the time of the Judges. It is also worth mentioning the many references to this problem in Ezra-Nehemiah. There, the amount of intermarriage had increased so much that the “foreign wives” had to be put away, with their children (Ezra 10:3). It has been suggested that this extreme solution to the problem was necessary because the number of foreigners was so great in the small and fragile Post-Exilic community – those who held to the true religion were in

danger of being swamped. In Malachi 2:11-12, the prophet pronounces judgement on the man who does what Judah has done – profane the sanctuary by marrying the “daughter of a foreign god.”

When we come to the New Testament, we may not assume that Old Testament regulations automatically terminate. What God has once commanded/prohibited remains in force until such time as He indicates that it has been abrogated.

Is there any such indication of abrogation in the New Testament? Far from it! In 1 Corinthians 7:39, a believing wife whose husband has passed away “*is free to be married to whom she wishes, **only in the Lord.***” Then in 2 Corinthians 6, believers are warned not to be “*unequally yoked*” with unbelievers (v. 14), to “*come out from their midst and be separate*” and “*not touch what is unclean*” (v. 17). The Westminster Confession (24:3) therefore states, “*It is the duty of Christians to marry only in the Lord ... neither should such as are godly be unequally yoked...*” The Confession footnotes most of the passages I have already cited, including 2 Corinthians 6:14, as proof-texts. That makes the issue a confessional matter, as our churches subscribe to the Westminster Confession.

The “unequal yoking” of 2 Corinthians 6:14-18

Some have tried to argue that the apostle is only warning against mixing sinful behaviour with the Christian lifestyle; or perhaps warning against joining with unbelievers in their sinful practices; but not against *marrying* an unbeliever.

When we consider the following aspects of the passage, we see how wrong-headed such interpretations are:

There are 6 words that have to do with personal associations piled up here: “bound together”; “partnership”; “fellowship”; “harmony”; “in common”; and “agreement.” This is not simply talking about behaviour, but relationships and their inherent harmony or lack thereof.

All of these words apply – or should apply – to the marriage relationship between believers. Some of the words in this group were used in biblical times to refer to the marriage-relationship.

The Old Testament texts alluded to in this passage also have to do with the relationship between God’s people and those outside the covenant. Isaiah 52:11, cited in 2 Corinthians 6:17, has to do with Israel separating itself, especially from Egypt. Deuteronomy 22:10, which forbids yoking a donkey and ox together for ploughing, is one of a group of laws against mixing different things. These laws are all designed to remind Israel that the covenant people are to be separate from the nations. They were laws not simply about worldly behaviour, but also about relationships. Charles Hodge is correct when he comments that this passage forbids the union of “incongruous elements or persons.”

That does not mean that the apostle is forbidding only mixed marriages. Again, Hodge hits the nail on the head when he says this passage is against all “intimate association” with unbelievers. The apostle is not forbidding all association – for then we would have to go out of the world – only the *intimate* association that tries to join together two hearts or lives that should not be joined, since one is hostile to God and both are ultimately hostile to each other.

Since intimate associations are in view in this passage, we will certainly have to include the situation where a believer courts an unbeliever, as well as the end-result, the mixed marriage. If these relationships are *not* included in the prohibition, then what relationships could be? After all, these are the most intimate of relationships, the ones that are most likely to put believers at risk of compromise in this area of partnerships. If the most intimate association is ruled out, then how could any lesser associations be a problem?

The mixed marriages of 1 Corinthians 7:12-16

1 Corinthians 7:12-16 should not be appealed to as a way of off-setting 2 Corinthians 6:14-18. The situations are quite different. In the one case, a believer acts against God's command and enters a forbidden relationship. In the other, two unbelievers have lawfully married before one is converted by God's grace. The two have made lawful vows. Perhaps there are children involved. The Lord upholds the vow and the institution of marriage that He gave not just to believers, but to all mankind. He also protects the children of such a union by insisting that the marriage remain intact – so long as the unbelieving party is willing.

The drastic measures in Ezra-Nehemiah, where families were broken up after marriage vows were made, is exceptional. However, the principled objection against those who knowingly broke God's Law remains as a warning to those who would ignore 2 Corinthians 6.

We should also not lose sight of the fact that later in the same chapter (1 Corinthians 7:39), the apostle makes it crystal-clear that a believer who has a choice must marry "in the Lord."

The Law of Love

Lastly, there is an argument that believers today are bound only by the Law of Love – not by detailed regulations. This is really the "Antinomian" ("against the law") view. It is a hole big enough to drive as many trucks through as you might desire. It leaves one free to do anything at all, so long as you can get away with calling it "love."

The "Law of Love" (James 2:8; 1 John 2-3) is about loving God whole-heartedly, and your neighbour as yourself. But how do we know what that looks like? Only by applying the various laws God has given us to show how He wants us to express our gratitude to Him. This how we know that we have come to know God, that we keep His commandments (1 John 2:3-4). "Love" is opposed to externalism, not to rules. It is opposed to lawlessness (Romans 6). True love and gratitude towards God should create a strong desire to let close to our hearts only those who love God as we do, not those who hate Him.

A timely warning

Because we live in an age of great compromise, we need to be clear about the seriousness of this sin of "mixed marriage." In Malachi 2:1-12 it is referred to as "treachery," "profaning" the covenant and sanctuary, and "committing abomination." Malachi calls upon the Lord to "cut off" those who incite others to this sin, or who follow the lead of those who do so.

But we also need to be aware that the human heart is very deceptive – even in a Christian. When we desperately want something that is forbidden, and our emotions are running high, we quickly look for ways to justify what God has forbidden. It is very easy today to get your hands on material that will help you fool yourself, especially via the computer. There is hardly an ethical or doctrinal issue around, where you cannot find articles written by those who claim to be believers, but where the view expressed is completely contrary to the Word of God. It is vital that those who find themselves in a dangerous situation with a relationship don't go looking for a way to justify sin, but listen with an open heart and mind to the Word of God.

In terms of the tendency to rationalize the sin away, I often hear the argument, "Oh, but he/she might be converted by my witness." Isn't this part of the reason the apostle gives in 1 Corinthians 7:16 for a couple remaining married after one is converted? It is, of course, possible that the unbeliever will eventually be converted, whether we speak of a 1 Corinthians 7 case, or a 2 Corinthians 6 situation. But just because the Lord "strikes straight blows with crooked sticks," that does not justify *us* embracing crookedness! Where one party is converted after marriage, he or she may start to give their witness with a "clean slate." It is entirely different when a believer courts and then marries an unbeliever. There, the believer is giving a bad witness from the very start: a

witness of disobedience to the Word of God, and what amounts to idolatry. For it is a form of idolatry to put one's own desires or another human being above God and His revealed will.

The other main rationalisation – “But he/she does not really *hate* God; he/she has promised to support me in my Christian beliefs” – is therefore a lie. Every unbeliever, no matter how noble, hates God. You either love Him or hate Him. There is nothing in between. Someone who hates God cannot truly support the Christian faith. For that reason, I have found that in nearly every case where a mixed marriage has gone ahead on the basis of such false promises and premises, it has later turned bad. In nearly every case – and I have seen a few – either the believer has fallen lower and lower, following the witness of the unbeliever; or, the unbeliever's true character has come out over time, making life more and more miserable for the believer.

It is therefore important to avoid getting into situations that will tempt the heart to become bound to an unbeliever. Meeting up regularly with an unbeliever for intimate dinners and drinks is asking for trouble. Caution is also needed in computer and phone contact, or with any other way that relationships can be developed and deepened. You may tell yourself, “We're just good friends,” but frankly, I've heard that one many times before.

Parents also have a big responsibility to guard their children. Remember, Judges highlights especially the sin of the parents in giving their children to marry unbelievers. Parents need to be aware of whom their children are meeting, chatting with, texting etc. The Lord holds parents accountable, in some respects, over the marriages of their children.

May the Lord give Christian parents the courage to remain firm on this matter. May He also give the youth of our churches a firm conviction that they should only marry “in the Lord,” and the courage to rebuff any advances from unbelievers.

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