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Same-Lord Relationships

by Carolyn McCulley

I'd been dating for more than a decade when I went on an international vacation and came back with something more significant than a tan. I returned as a believer — a bona fide, Bible-reading Christian. That was the very last thing I ever expected to happen on my vacation. As one might imagine, this sudden conversion introduced a bit of awkwardness to the way my life had been conducted prior to this turning-point trip, most especially in the area of relationships.

One of my first tests as a new Christian came about four months later: I was asked out on a date. This man was a successful advertising executive at an up-and-coming agency. He was attractive, witty, and articulate. I was flattered so I accepted. I had no indication that he was also a believer, but I was happy to go out to dinner to discuss the matter. In fact, I was happy to go out several times before broaching the subject — call it romantic procrastination.

In the end, it was not my church friends who urged me to get to the point. I'm sure they would have if I had bothered to let them know about it. But I had yet to learn the importance of living life "in community" — that transparent, humble authenticity which is the mark of mature Christians. I was still exercising my perceived "right" to independence and privacy. In other words, I was hedging my bets because I was having fun and I didn't want anyone to interrupt the party. God might be in charge of my Sundays, but I was still wrestling Him for control of the rest of the week. My spiritual immaturity was on full display in my one-foot-in-both-worlds approach to dating.

It was one of my non-Christian colleagues who finally gave me the smack-down. "You have to tell this guy you're not normal," he said in all sincerity. "He thinks you're like everyone else around here, but you're not."

Not *normal*?! It wasn't flattering, but it was utterly true. As a new believer, the Lord was not calling me to live like everyone else, to be like the *norm*. He was calling me to be radically different — to live with Kingdom priorities. That's when I became aware of the Holy Spirit's conviction. I realized I was in this relationship for self-centered and vain reasons. I wanted the attention, so I was ducking the consequences of my actions. I was not being fair to this man (who was expecting our relationship to proceed in the unfettered ways of the world), nor was I honoring God and the priceless worth of the gospel by tip-toeing around temptation in the areas of purity and worldliness.

So the next time we went out, I told him my testimony. It was, no surprise, our last date.

One Rule

Whenever single Christians collect, you can be sure someone will ask about "the rules" for dating or courtship. The problem is that the Bible doesn't hand us any rules for these kinds of relationships. The Bible talks about spouses, families, friends, co-workers, enemies, masters, bondservants, and the betrothed, among other relationships. There's nothing about boyfriends, girlfriends, significant others or "special friends." That undefined intimacy is a modern invention. The Bible simply addresses the unmarried, the betrothed, the married, and the widowed. But there is one rule that is very clear for everyone: The Lord's people are not to marry those who worship other gods ([2 Corinthians 6:14](#)). From the warnings against intermarriage in the Old Testament to the [1 Corinthians 7:39](#) injunction for widows to remarry only in the Lord, the Bible stipulates that those who worship the Lord should only marry those of the same belief.

Okay, but some would say dating is not the same thing as marrying. On the surface, this is true but it's a facile argument. Even dating is not comparable when two different belief systems are involved. One cannot assume that nonbelievers have the same goals in romantic relationships as believers. The biblical mandate for sexual fidelity within marriage and chastity for the unmarried is a foreign system for nonbelievers. It's not the *norm* to reserve sex for marriage. It's not even the norm to get *married*. So for a believer to date an unbeliever is to try to find an intersection between two widely diverging practices and lifestyles. It is rarely attempted without serious compromise in important areas such as sexual purity, accountability, confession of sin, and fellowship in the local church.

In a commentary on the [book of Ezra](#), in which Ezra led marriage reforms among the recently returned Israelites in Jerusalem, pastor and author Mark Dever applied these Old Testament passages to modern Christians with this straightforward counsel:

"If you are engaged to a non-Christian, break off the engagement.... Better to lose your deposits on receptions and invitations than your soul. 'Are you saying that I can lose my salvation by marrying a

non-Christian?' No, I am saying that your actions reveal what you really love.... God has a wonderful plan for us in marriage, and part of it includes finding someone with whom we can establish a peaceful unity, where we reinforce one another, not where we disagree and chafe over the matters that we claim are closest to our hearts."

From the Old through the New Testament, God's Word requires that His people live as witnesses to His character and glory — standing out from the culture around them. This means our relationships should look different, as well. Any intimate relationship between someone who worships the Lord and someone who worships self or other gods would suffer vast differences in sexual purity before marriage and sexual fidelity in marriage; in parenting goals (discipleship versus mere good behavior); in management of time and money; and even in how holidays are celebrated.

What about "missionary dating"? Besides being a contradiction in overall motives on the part of the Christian involved (is the focus on God or on ourselves?), the success rate of such a venture is low. Yes, occasionally God has mercy and, despite the disobedience or even ignorance of His children, He redeems the situation to convert the unbeliever. That the Lord would do this is an example of His kindness and grace. It is not a license, however, to presume upon our own situation and ignore clear Scriptural mandates.

God's Signpost

In many parts of the world, female infanticide and sex-selective abortions have created a massively lop-sided male-female ratio. In the average evangelical church in the United States, the impression is the opposite. We seem to have the excess females. Whether or not this is statistically true, many single women claim this experience in their local churches. This introduces a real temptation for women to look elsewhere for companionship and even marriage.

One believing woman recently justified her marriage to an unbelieving man because he was kind, trustworthy, funny, and would make a good father — she thought he could make her happy in marriage. I'm sure he did possess these qualities. We are all made in the image of God, so it's not as though unbelievers are without some attractive qualities. But our benchmark should not be a comparison among ourselves for our own benefit. If it is, we are aiming too low — because *all* of us sin and fall short of the glory of God ([Romans 3:23](#)). Rather, our benchmark should be God's purposes in marriage. As Gary Thomas writes in *Sacred Marriage*: "The reason God became flesh was so that we might know him; correspondingly, God did not create marriage just to give us a pleasant means of repopulating the world and providing a steady societal institution for the benefit of humanity. He planted marriage among humans as yet another signpost pointing to his own eternal, spiritual existence."

The apostle Paul explains this signpost in chapter five of Ephesians. He starts with the admonition to be imitators of God as His beloved children, walking in love. Then he moves on to address sexual immorality and impurity, which are the deeds of darkness. Those who walk in the light of God's love are not to be filled with debauchery but rather with thanksgiving. After laying this foundation, Paul then proclaims the profound mystery of how Christian marriage testifies to the relationship between Christ and His church. Wives are to be thankful and joy-filled imitators of God by following, supporting, respecting, and encouraging their husband's leadership in the marriage — just as the church is to follow the Lord's leadership. This command is often the focus of debate in our day and age, but husbands have always been charged with the far greater mandate: *to love as Christ loves*.

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. ([Ephesians 5:25-30](#)).

"Please don't think of this as merely a helpful illustration or an interesting perspective," writes C.J. Mahaney in *Sex, Romance, and the Glory of God*. He goes on:

"It's much more than that. This is the essence of marriage.... And don't get it backwards, either. We don't look to marriage to understand the relationship between Christ and the Church. Instead, we seek clear, biblical understanding of the relationship between Christ and the Church so we can better understand the purpose of our marriage. This means that your marriage is meant to be, by the grace of God, the best echo, the most faithful reflection, of that relationship that you can possibly be.... The biblical purpose for marriage, you see, is not man-centered or needs-centered. It's God-centered. It's profoundly mysterious and profoundly significant. Your marriage is meant to point to the truth of the crucified and risen Savior who will return for his Bride."

In God's common grace, there are many people with attractive character qualities who do not worship the Lord. But if we marry men who don't know Christ, how can we expect them to love us as Christ loves us? Or how can we expect our marriages to echo the gospel if one partner rejects the Savior? True, Scripture does encourage those married women who have become believers that their Christian conduct and quiet trust in the Lord can be used by God to convert their unbelieving husbands ([1 Peter 3:1](#)) — but this verse is not a pass to disobey what is clearly spelled out elsewhere in Scripture.

Taking the Long View

This year, I've been reading sequentially through the Old Testament in my personal devotions. After spending months in 1 and 2 Kings, followed by the recounting in 1 and 2 Chronicles, I'm sobered by how few leaders finished well. So many started strong, but later were blind-sided by lust, pride, or the influence of their pagan wives.

Jehoshaphat is a prime example. Early in his reign, he made three strategic moves: he obeyed God and did not worship idols; he removed the false worship from the land; and he sent out teachers to all the cities of Judah to teach the people the law of the Lord. God prospered Jehoshaphat and gave him great riches and honor. But then Jehoshaphat made an egregious mistake: he made a marriage alliance with Ahab, the wicked, idol-worshipping king of Israel who tangled with the prophet Elijah. Jehoshaphat arranged for his son to marry Ahab's daughter, Athaliah, and then made a military alliance with Ahab. After Jehoshaphat died, Athaliah seized the throne and almost killed all of David's descendants — coming within one life of extinguishing the messianic line. She also brought the wicked idols of Israel to Judah, which eventually led to that nation's destruction and captivity in Babylon.

Even Solomon failed in the area of marriage. With all the wisdom God bestowed upon him, Solomon still stumbled because of his 700 wives and 300 concubines. "For when Solomon was old, his wives turned his heart away after other gods; and his heart was not wholly devoted to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father had been" (1 Kings 11:4, NASB).

The moral of the story is never underestimate the negative influence of an unbelieving spouse. God is infinitely wiser than we are and His command to only marry (and by inference, only date) other believers is for both our benefit and His glory. If these biblical leaders couldn't escape the negative influence of their spouses, how can we presume we would do any better?

The beautiful portrait of marriage found in Ephesians 5 stems from the first two sentences in that chapter: "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." Love as biblically defined is different from love as defined in our culture. We are surely called to love those who don't know God, but we are commanded in our closest, most intimate relationships to be imitators of Him as His beloved children. Therefore, our romantic relationships, from dating to marriage, are reserved for those who strive to love as Christ has loved us.

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