

## Should a Believer Marry a Non-Christian? Jerry Nelson

The following is a 2006 email dialog between me, a pastor, and a parishioner about a believer marrying a non-Christian.

Dear Pastor,

I am sorry our conversation was cut short on Sunday when I told you about my recent engagement. I must confess, I was rather shocked when you told me it was contrary to God's word to marry an unbeliever. Although I've always known that (the church) strongly encourages Christians to marry other Christians, I had no idea the church's position is that doing so is regarded as a sin against God. I do not wish to argue with the head pastor of a church, but I believe I must speak my mind on this matter, even if it may not convince you of anything. At least give me the opportunity to be heard. If I may be so bold as to disagree with you, I personally feel you are taking the words of Scripture way too literally. The reason why God told the Israelites not to inter-marry with the surrounding pagan peoples is because **they had weak faith** and thus were heavily influenced by pagan religions. If I were to take a purist literal view of Scripture, then I would have to conclude that Joseph must have sinned against God for marrying a pagan Egyptian woman and Hosea should never have married Gomer because her unfaithfulness might be a "bad influence" on him. But since the Bible does not say that these men sinned against God in this manner, I must conclude that a "literal view" just doesn't fit the full picture. What does fit the full picture is that these men were men of **strong faith** who were able to bear the burden of being married to an unbelieving spouse.

It pains me to hear that a head pastor of a church would consider it a black-and-white sin for a believer to marry an unbeliever. It also pains me greatly that I will not be able to get married in a church of which I've attended for the last 4 years. I had sincerely hoped that you might marry us. However, I will

not ask that of you if it is still against your conscience to do so. I would not ask you to do something you strongly feel is wrong.

With regards to my fiancé – if he was a man who ridiculed or disrespected my faith in the Lord, or who I felt would somehow attempt to interfere with my devotion to Christ, I never would've agreed to marry him. But because he has always been supportive of my beliefs, even if he may not agree with them wholly, I can accept his proposal of marriage. I am also very much encouraged by his own spiritual pursuit in seeking God. Although I believe the Spirit has been moving in him and revealing Himself to him at time, my fiancé still has some obstacles to overcome. He comes from a Hindu background and still holds to the beliefs of reincarnation, karma, and has trouble believing there is only one true way to the Lord, through the belief in Christ as being Savior and Lord. These things he still struggles with, so I've challenged him to read the Bible himself and draw his own conclusions. And to my amazement, he has been reading the Bible. The rest is purely in God's hands. Only the Spirit can move him and enlighten him with His Truth. I brought him to the single's Bible Study Thursday night and many of my friends there later told me they were impressed with what he had to say, that he seems to be on the brink of becoming a believer. Although I hope for that to happen, I know it may not happen overnight. God is good and gracious, so maybe it will, and my fiancé will wake up one day soon with a revelation.

You asked me Sunday if I could wait till my fiance becomes a believer before getting married. Considering we are already engaged and have already set a date, he would have to convert to Christianity within the next five months which I suppose is possible, but it is entirely in God's hands when, or even if, he will convert to Christianity. So when you ask if I can wait, well I'd have to ask God first when/if he will convert, and there's no guarantee God will get back to me on that. I'm sure you were a

young man once, and know what it's like to be young and in love. When one is in love, one can't wait forever. I know in the Scriptures Jacob had to wait seven years to marry his dream girl, Rachel, but I don't think we can last that long. I may have strong faith, but not that strong.

If you still believe that by marrying I am committing a sin against God, then I cannot ask you to marry us, since it would go against your conscience to do so. But I ask only that you re-examine your views on this matter. Although I agree there are obvious concerns that need to be addressed whenever a Christian marries an unbeliever, I would never call it a sin and I personally don't know of any Christian pastor who shares such a purist, literal view.

Pastor's response:

Thank you for your letter. I am grieved that we have come to an apparent impasse. I long to support you in your decision but know that my higher commitment to you is to be honest with you about God's Word.

As to a Christian knowingly marrying a non-Christian, the policy of our church (determined by the elders of the church) is as follows:

"All weddings must be **between acknowledged and practicing Christians**. Exceptions may be made when neither party is a Christian but are in need of the influence of a pastor and church and in such cases evangelism shall be the ultimate objective."

We know that many evangelical churches have such a policy.

The Scriptural teaching that leads to this policy is not obscure or convoluted at all, nor is it an overly literal or purist interpretation:

Some of the evidence is as follows:

The Bible repeatedly speaks of us believers as belonging to Christ, our highest allegiance is to him. In 1 Corinthians 6 it even says it

matters who we join our bodies to because since we belong to Christ, when we join with another we are, as it were, joining Christ to them. The principle is that we don't take Christ into an intimate relationship (which marriage surely is) without both parties belonging to the Lord.

That same principle is reiterated in 2 Corinthians 6:14 where it speaks of not being "unequally yoked with unbelievers." While the instruction is not specifically about marriage, before you dismiss that instruction too quickly, consider the logic: If that principle is true in religion and business how much more true must it be in the more important and intimate relationship of marriage.

But if those arguments are unconvincing then hear the clear teaching of 1 Corinthians 7:39 "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.**" Could it be any clearer?

We have such a policy not because we are legalistic but because we love people very much and you in particular. We believe the Lord that he knows what is best for us and his kingdom. We want to cooperate with God's Spirit by obeying his word even when it runs counter to popular opinion and yes even when it costly.

I beg you to reconsider. I would be very happy to sit with you and discuss this more fully if you are willing.

The woman responded:

Does the Bible not also say in 1 Peter 3:1 "Wives be submissive to your husbands so that if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives."

And in 1 Cor 7:12-14 If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. <sup>13</sup> And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and

he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. <sup>14</sup> For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.

If a believer should not be joined in flesh with an unbeliever, why not just tell Christians to leave and divorce their unbelieving spouse? But that is not what Paul asked Christians to do.

I responded:

“Thank you for continuing the dialog. You are correct as far as you have quoted scripture but there is context. Paul was writing to people who were already married when one of them became a believer. They were wondering if they should divorce their unbelieving spouse, because of the strong instruction to be married only to another believer, and Paul says "No - you are already married, and divorcing will only compound the problem. Remain married. But if, as I noted before, you, as a believer, are single (or single again) and you desire to marry, he/she "must belong to the Lord" (1 Corinthians 7:39).

Sadly, the dialog ended.