

Don't Take It from Me: Reasons You Should Not Marry an Unbeliever

Kathy Keller 1-23-12

Over the course of our ministry, the most common pastoral issue that Tim and I have confronted is probably marriages---either actual or proposed---between Christians and non-Christians. I have often thought how much simpler it would be if I could remove myself from the conversation and invite those already married to unbelievers do the talking to singles who are desperately trying to find a loophole that would allow them to marry someone who does not share their faith.

That way, I could skip all the Bible passages that urge singles only to "marry in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 7:39) and not "be unequally yoked" (2 Corinthians 6:14) and the Old Testament proscriptions against marrying the foreigner, a worshiper of a god other than the God of Israel (see Numbers 12 where Moses marries a woman of another race but the same faith). You can find those passages in abundance, but when someone has already allowed his or her heart to become engaged with a person outside the faith, I find that the Bible has already been devalued as the non-negotiable rule of faith and practice.

Instead, variants of the serpent's question to Eve---"Did God really say?" are floated, as if somehow *this* case might be eligible for an exemption, considering how much they love each other, how the unbeliever supports and understands the Christian's faith, how they are soul-mates despite the absence of a shared soul-faith.

Having grown weary and impatient, I want to snap and say, "It won't work, not in the long run. Marriage is hard enough when you have two believers who are completely in harmony spiritually. Just spare yourself the heartache and get over it." Yet such harshness is neither in line with the gentleness of Christ, nor convincing.

Sadder and Wiser

If only I could pair those sadder and wiser women---and men---who have found themselves in unequal marriages (either by their own foolishness or due to one person finding Christ after the marriage had already occurred) with the blithely optimistic singles who are convinced that their passion and commitment will overcome all obstacles. Even the obstacle of bald disobedience need not apply to them. Only ten minutes of conversation---one minute if the person is really succinct--would be necessary. In the words of one woman who was married to a perfectly nice man who did not share her faith: "If you think you are lonely before you get married, it's nothing compared to how lonely you can be AFTER you are married!"

Really, this might be the only effective pastoral approach: to find a man or woman who is willing to talk honestly about the difficulties of the situation and invite them into a counseling ministry with the about-to-make-a-big-mistake unequal couple. As an alternative, perhaps some creative filmmaker would be willing to run around the country, filming individuals who are living with the pain of being married to an unbeliever, and create a montage of 40 or 50 short (< 5 minutes) first-hand accounts. The collective weight of their stories would be powerful in a way that no second-hand lecture ever would be.

Three True Outcomes

For the moment, though, here goes: There are only three ways an unequal marriage can turn out, (and by unequal I am willing to stretch a point and include genuine, warm Christians who want to marry an in-name-only Christian, or someone very, very far behind them in Christian experience and growth):

1. In order to be more in sync with your spouse, the Christian will have to push Christ to the margins of his or her life. This may not involve actually repudiating the faith, but in matters such as devotional life, hospitality to believers (small group meetings, emergency hosting of people in need), missionary support, tithing, raising children in the faith, fellowship with other believers---those things will have to be minimized or avoided in order to preserve peace in the home.

2. Alternatively, if the believer in the marriage holds on to a robust Christian life and practice, the non-believing PARTNER will have to be marginalized. If he or she can't understand the point of Bible study and prayer, or missions trips, or hospitality, then he or she can't or won't participate alongside the believing spouse in those activities. The deep unity and oneness of a marriage cannot flourish when one partner cannot fully participate in the other person's most important commitments.
3. So either the marriage experiences stress and breaks up; or it experiences stress and stays together, achieving some kind of truce that involves one spouse or the other capitulating in some areas, but which leaves both parties feeling lonely and unhappy.

Does this sound like the kind of marriage you want? One that strangles your growth in Christ or strangles your growth as a couple, or does both? Think back to that oft-cited passage in 2 Corinthians 6:14 about being "unequally yoked." Most of us no longer live in an agrarian culture, but try to visualize what would happen if a farmer yoked together, say, an ox and a donkey. The heavy wooden yoke, designed to harness the strength of the team, would be askew, as the animals are of different heights, weights, walk at different speeds and with different gaits. The yoke, instead of harnessing the power of the team to complete the task, would rub and chafe BOTH animals, since the load would be distributed unequally. An unequal marriage is not just unwise for the Christian, it is also unfair to the non-Christian, and will end up being a trial for them both.

Our Experience

Full disclosure: One of our sons began spending time a few years back with a secular woman from a Jewish background. He heard us talk about the sorrows (and disobedience) of being married to a non-Christian for years, so he knew it wasn't an option (something we reminded him of quite forcefully). Nevertheless, their friendship grew and developed into something more. To his credit, our son told her: "I can't marry you unless you are a Christian, and you can't become a Christian just to marry me. I'll sit with you in church, but if you are serious about exploring Christianity you will have to do it on your own---find your own small group, read books, talk to people other than me."

Fortunately, she is a woman of great integrity and grit, and she set herself to looking into the truth claims of the Bible. As she grew closer to saving faith, to our surprise our son began growing in his faith in order to keep up with her! She said to me one day, "You know, your son should never have been seeing me!"

She did come to faith, and he held the water when she was baptized. The next week he proposed, and they have been married for two and a half years, both growing, both struggling, both repenting. We love them both and are so grateful that she is both in our family and also in the body of Christ.

I only mention the above personal history because so many of our friends in the ministry have seen different outcomes---children who marry outside the faith. The takeaway lesson for me is that even in pastoral homes, where the things of God are taught and discussed, and where children have a pretty good window on seeing their parents counsel broken marriages, believing children toy with relationships that grow deeper than they expect, ending in marriages that don't always have happy endings. If this is true in the families of Christian leaders, what of the flock?

We need to hear the voices of men and women who are in unequal marriages and know to their sorrow why it is not merely a disobedient choice, but an unwise one.