



Before Marrying an Unbeliever, Consider ...

By Earl D. Oliver

1. Marriage is a decision for life.

This isn't commonly believed any longer. Many enter marriage with the hope that it will last, but with some expectation that "most marriages don't last" so the commitments (*or vows*) are often conditional. As much as we may think it is, marriage isn't an experiment that can be tried and abandoned. Although many marriages start with great intentions, and are later abandoned, the tearing apart is never totally clean (especially if there are children involved). Someone once described marriage and divorce as having the effect of welding two pieces of steel together, and then tearing them apart. Some parts of the two have been melted together when they were welded, so the tearing ends up taking part of the other and losing part of one's self. And such a tear is always very hard and leaves jagged edges which we tend to carry into our next relationship.

2. Ideals don't usually match reality.

"We'll work it out as we go along." "Since we really love each other, we can deal with whatever comes our way." "He can believe whatever he wants to and I will believe whatever I want to. Nothing has to change." "We agreed to have the kids raised as Christians." These are some common phrases that help justify a spiritually incompatible marriage. But real life experience proves otherwise. Based on data gathered in the mid 1980's, the fact is that divorce occurs three times as often in spiritually incompatible marriages as in marriages between members of the same faith. The happiness and acceptance experienced when we are in love and are loved by another minimizes our understanding of the obstacles to such a marriage. We may convince ourselves that our situation will be different, that we'd be willing to bet on the "success" of this relationship.

That actually seems to make sense if we keep two things in mind. First, we have to redefine “success.” Success based on God’s desires for us, or success by some lesser standard? Also, we need to remember that though some seem to make such a marriage work, the odds of that happening are something like the odds of winning a lottery. It may work out, but a Biblical marriage is a picture of Christ’s relationship and commitment to His bride, the church. So just as an unbeliever can’t become a member of a Christian church, so an unbeliever and a believer can’t really become one as God intended.

3. God wants better for us.

II Cor. 6:14-16 tells us, *“Do not be bound together with unbelievers . . . for we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, “I will dwell in them and walk among them; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.”* The term “bound” in this verse is the same term used to join two plow animals together with a yoke. Since a yoke is a curved wooden bar that goes over the shoulders of both animals, it is important for the animals to be the same. For example, if an ox and a donkey were yoked together, they would fight each other because one is much bigger and stronger than the other, even though the other may be strong willed and stubborn. But it would be even worse if they were yoked together and facing opposite directions. Then they would not only fight each other, but they would spend a lot of time and energy going in circles. On the other hand, if we approach marriage the way God designed it for us, we will enjoy His help and strength in the hard times. In this and other challenges of life believers are invited by our Lord to *“Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS.”* Mt. 11:29

One story that illustrates the dangers of spiritually incompatible marriages is about Mark Twain. He was a writer, a humorist, and a skeptic about Christianity. He married a true believer named Olivia Langdon who at first had some positive effect upon him. But as the years went by, he expressed strong antagonism to her Biblical beliefs and values. Not only was there no spiritual unity between them, his unbelief produced a paralyzing effect on her until her faith was destroyed. Years later when they were going through some hard trials, Twain tried to comfort his wife by telling her that if it would help her to lean on her Christian faith, to do so. She sighed and said, “I can’t. I haven’t any.”

At the end of traditional wedding ceremonies it is often declared, “What God has joined together, let no man separate.” The reverse is also valid, “What God has separated, let no man join.”

4. A spiritually incompatible marriage lacks common purpose in life.

The Prophet Amos asks us, “Do two . . . walk together unless they have made an appointment?” To walk together we have to agree on certain things. We need to agree on the time and place for such a meeting, and usually we agree on the purpose for getting together. In a spiritually incompatible marriage, agreement is limited, so their “walk together” is equally limited. So there is a loss of companionship with ones spouse, but

there is also the risk of losing good fellowship with your Lord. When we knowingly go contrary to Him and His design for us, we begin to lose the closeness of our relationship with Him. This usually happens gradually over time. This isn't because He abandons us, but because we abandon Him. He promises that He will never desert us or forsake us. (Heb. 13:5)

A striking example of how this can happen is in the life of one of the most privileged men who ever lived, Solomon. He not only chose to live contrary to God's wisdom by marrying unbelievers, but also by marrying more than one wife. And later in his life, his walk with the Lord was crushed. *"Now King Solomon loved many foreign women along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, from the nations concerning which the LORD had said to the sons of Israel, 'You shall not associate with them, nor shall they associate with you, for **they will surely turn your heart away after their gods.**'" Solomon held fast to these in love. He had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines, and **his wives turned his heart away.** 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. For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians and after Milcom the detestable idol of the Ammonites. **Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and did not follow the LORD fully, as David his father had done.**" (I Kn. 11:1-6) Solomon had more wisdom than to do this, but many small choices amounted to some big changes. If we think we can do better, we need to stop and realize that to marry an unbeliever is to turn from God, so we lose even as we begin.*

5. **Your decision not only impacts your life, but also the lives of those who love you and care about you.**

In the story about Isaac and Rebekah, their sons Esau and Jacob had always competed for the affection and approval of their parents. Esau decided that it wasn't worth it any more, so he deliberately married an unbeliever, and part of his motivation seemed to be that *"Esau saw that the daughters of Canaan displeased his father Isaac."* Gen. 28:8

Later when Esau's brother Jacob was seeking a bride, Rebekah said to Isaac, *"I am tired of living because of the daughters of Heth; if Jacob takes a wife from the daughters of Heth, like these, from the daughters of the land, **what good will my life be to me?**"* Gen 27:46

It may be hard for a young person to either understand or be impressed by the reaction of Christian parents to the idea of a spiritually incompatible marriage, but when parents have gladly given so much of who they are and what they have to a child, they can't help but want what is best for that child and their future. Because a continuing relationship with the child is so important to the parents, they will often want that relationship to continue even if such a marriage occurs. But the continuing

relationship with the child will inevitably be somewhat strained and a continuing source of grief and sadness.

Another issue that needs some consideration due to its growing popularity and acceptance is the practice of living together before marriage. This may seem unrelated to the issue of marrying an unbeliever, but it is related because many times a believer is seduced into this kind of relationship by an unbeliever (*or a weak professing believer*), and also because some of the same reasoning that is used in deciding to marry an unbeliever leads couples to this conclusion.

Most of us today don't even notice, let alone feel disturbed, when a famous unmarried couple announces that they are expecting their first baby. We've heard it so often from actors, musicians, athletes, and others, that we barely shrug any more.

There seem to be two general categories of people who choose cohabitation over marriage. First, there are those who have **little or no intention of getting married**. They want the benefits of living together (*easy access to sex, two incomes, shared responsibilities, etc.*) combined with the ease of dissolving the arrangement if things get too hard. The second group sees living together as a **test for marriage compatibility**. This is their version of taking a test drive before buying a car. That sounds prudent and seems to make a certain amount of sense. But let's look at the facts.

There are at least three possible reasons people avoid or delay marriage. First, the **view of marriage in society today is much lower than it has been in the past**. Many today have little perception of, or experience with, good marriages. And since even good marriages aren't perfect, they end up concluding that the only two options they can see are imperfect marriages and bad ones.

This image is enhanced by the second reason. The **rapid increase in the divorce rate** in America over the past forty years has impacted all of us. One researcher estimates that 70 percent of all Americans have been impacted by divorce, from either their parents' divorce or their own. This dramatically increases the anxiety over ever anticipating a long term marriage today.

The third result of the collapse of the institution of marriage is a **decrease of confidence in young people today** to correctly judge what or who would make for a compatible relationship. This creates a powerful ambivalence. On the one hand, they long for companionship, sexual enjoyment and financial stability, while on the other hand they fear they will end up being another fatal statistic. As a result, they are tempted to settle for a person with whom they can imagine a pleasant temporary relationship.

So, why even bother with marriage? Biblical arguments are certainly the most authoritative to a committed Christian. The Bible cautions us to avoid sexual immorality and to keep marriage sacred (*Heb. 13:4; I Cor. 6:18; I Thes. 4:3, etc.*) but realistically, most couples who live together don't care about the Bible, and even believers may choose to ignore what it says. Because of this, another line of reasoning might be

helpful. The findings of psychologists and other social science researchers indicates overwhelmingly that marriage is better than cohabitation for the following reasons:

1. **Marriage vows serve as glue that holds people together.** Many empirical studies destroy the myth that living together is good preparation for marriage, or that it reduces the risk of divorce. In fact, one study involving 3,300 cases found that people who cohabited prior to marriage had a 46% higher divorce rate than people who didn't live together prior to marriage. Another study stated that, although it is commonly agreed that there is a 50% divorce rate in America, the divorce rate among couples who lived together before marriage was around 70%.

The fact is, a live-in relationship is based on conditional commitment in the first place. *"I'll give this a try and stick with it as long as things are going well, but if problems become too great, I'm gone."* Unfortunately, this attitude tends to quietly carry over into the marriage. Marriage and family researchers David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead wrote in their extensive review of recent literature, "Virtually all research on the subject has determined that the chances of divorce ending a marriage preceded by cohabitation are significantly greater than for a marriage not preceded by cohabitation."

2. **Marriage offers promised permanence.** Most wedding ceremonies include vows or promises the couple make to each other. These often include a commitment to love, honor, and cherish each other in sickness or in health, for better or worse, for richer or poorer, forsaking all others, "til death do us part." Such an arrangement not only makes a public commitment, but allows for greater reality in the relationship because when we live in fear of our spouse bolting when things get rough, we are tempted toward destructive pretending or compromise.

The need for such promised permanence is that we don't really know who we are marrying when we say our vows. In reality, when we marry, we all marry three people, the person they really are, the person we think they are, and the person they become as a result of being married to us. Such unpredictability guarantees that things will change, challenges will be hard and we will be tempted to quit. Marriage, rather than living together outside of marriage, helps us resist these destructive temptations.

3. **Marriage creates healthier individuals.** Many studies indicate that married people are better off emotionally, physically, financially and vocationally than unmarried partners. I will give just two examples to illustrate this. The annual rates of depression among cohabiting couples are more than three times what they are among married couples. Secondly, women in cohabiting relationships are significantly more likely than married women to suffer physical and sexual abuse.

4. **Marriage partners are more likely to be faithful.** These statistics differ between men and women. Four times as much infidelity is reported among cohabiting men than among married men. Among married women, one in a hundred reports having had an affair in the past year, compared to eight out of a hundred of cohabiting women.

Based on these disturbing statistics, which dramatically lower the odds of a strong, growing and lasting marriage, we can be assured that marrying an unbeliever or living together before marriage sets us up for a greater chance of failure and sadness. And ironically that is what everyone seems to be trying to avoid.

Dr. John Gottman of the University of Washington has developed a profile that can predict with up to 94% accuracy which marriages will last and which won't. This profile or inventory has been taken by thousands of couples over the past thirty years and is a good predictor of relational compatibility and success. If greater compatibility and a stronger more stable relationship is what we're looking for, there is a better way to find out. Consider starting with spiritual and moral compatibility as a foundation, and then begin the adventure of building your life together.