

CHURCH *of* GOD

A WORLDWIDE ASSOCIATION, INC.

MARRYING WITHIN THE FAITH

Study Paper

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How should a member of God's Church who is contemplating marriage determine whether it is acceptable to marry outside the Church? Does the Bible tell us?

The Creator God united the first man and woman as husband and wife, saying, "Therefore, a man shall leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife and they shall become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24)

The Church of God has long recognized that marriage is a natural union but a divine institution. By *natural union*, we mean that men and women want and need a close relationship with the opposite sex and will seek out that relationship. By *divine institution*, we mean that God intended marriage between male and female and made the rules that govern the relationship between a man and wife. Therefore, within the Church, it is God—not man or the laws of man—who joins together husband and wife as one flesh.

Marriage is the most important commitment that a human being can make, apart from a baptismal commitment to God. Christian marriage is a covenant made with another person and with God.

The Church desires to teach and practice God's instruction regarding marriage. This paper addresses a specific part of that instruction—marrying within the faith, as enjoined in the New Testament.

We believe the Bible teaches that one who has been called out of the world and has become part of God's Church, the spiritual Body of Christ, should marry only another Christian. Such a marriage is intended to become a type of Christ and His Church, as described in chapter 5 of Ephesians.

Ephesians 5:20-27: "Giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another in the fear of God. Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish."

Ephesians 5:32: "This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church."

According to this teaching, it is evident that marriage is a sort of laboratory in which both parties can learn and grow spiritually by the ways in which they express godly love to one another. Even their mutual sacrifices to serve one another reflect the love of Christ for the Church and the Church's love for Christ.

Because marriage is a natural union and common in most societies, a Christian may conclude that any appealing member of the opposite sex might be an appropriate potential mate. That

person may even have a lot of positive characteristics that set him or her apart from other acquaintances. Yet the Bible makes it clear that a Christian is expected to judge differently, using spiritual discernment.

Christianity is a way of life. It is not just a set of dos and don'ts or ritualistic practices learned by rote. Christianity is a different way of thinking, based on believing the truth of God and the role of Jesus Christ as Savior. It involves, ultimately, the indwelling of God's Holy Spirit, sent to guide us into all truth and to give us strength to come out of the world and resist the influence of its ruler, Satan the devil. The starting place for Christianity is belief in Jesus Christ and His Word.

Questions about whether a member of God's Church should marry within the faith will naturally arise. Counseling on this matter will often involve the terms *believer* and *unbeliever*. Indeed, these are the categories addressed in the biblical instructions. It will be helpful to understand the meaning and context of these words in the New Testament. They are used in descriptions of the Church and discussions of marriage relationships.

What is a *believer*? Is a believer simply someone who claims to believe in Christ? *The Complete Word Study New Testament* by Spiros Zodhiates notes that the Greek for this word (*pistos*) means "persuaded, worthy of belief, trust." This is a distinction that implies conviction and belief in the true Christ. (Various forms of this word are used for "belief," "believed," etc.) A believer has professed faith in Christ and is seeking to live his life accordingly, which would ultimately lead to baptism. In short, a believer believes!

Let's notice a number of scriptures that describe true Christians as believers. Taken together, they give us a good understanding of what it means to believe.

John 1:12: "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name:"

John 20:31: "But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name."

Acts 13:39: "And by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses."

Galatians 3:22: "But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe."

1 Thessalonians 2:13: "For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe."

We conclude then that in Bible language, a believer is one who believes in God and His Son Jesus Christ and has a desire to follow Christ, looking for spiritual salvation. A believer may be in an early stage of belief and perhaps not even yet an adult, but committed to living by what is known and understood.

What, then, is an *unbeliever*? In brief, an unbeliever is the opposite of the person above. Regardless of his academic knowledge of Bible instruction, he does not believe the truth and does not follow Christ with commitment and action. Again, the Scriptures must be our guide.

John 3:36: “He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.”

Acts 14:2: “But the *unbelieving* Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brethren” (emphasis added throughout).

Romans 4:20: “He [Abraham] did not waver at the promise of God through *unbelief*, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God,”

1 Timothy 1:13: “Although I [Paul] was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in *unbelief*.”

Hebrews 3:12: “Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of *unbelief* in departing from the living God.”

Unbelief is thus described as a lack of belief or faith in God and His Son Jesus Christ. An *unbeliever* will not always worship idols or be hostile to God, but may simply not know or believe God and His truth. What about the millions today who “believe” in Christ? There is more to being a believer than just claiming the name of Jesus—one has to understand and follow Jesus, as preached by the apostles. Notice Paul’s words:

2 Corinthians 11:4: “For if he who comes preaches *another Jesus* whom we have not preached, or if you receive a *different spirit* which you have not received, or a *different gospel* which you have not accepted—you may well put up with it!”

Today many preach “another Jesus”—for example, one who came to abolish God’s law by “nailing it to the cross.” Those in God’s Church are begotten through faith in the gospel *of* Christ, while others are attracted to a gospel *about* Christ. The point is that a person who does not share that same belief in (understanding and desire to obey) Jesus is not spiritually compatible with one who is a believer. So a professing “Christian” is not necessarily a believer in biblical terms. Only those who are called by God can become believers (John 6:44).

To the church at Corinth, the apostle Paul gave many instructions regarding marriage. The portion relevant to this discussion concerns the freedom of a widow to remarry, but only to a believer.

1 Corinthians 7:39: “A wife is bound by law as long as her husband lives; but if her husband dies, she is at liberty to be married to whom she wishes, *only in the Lord*.”

In this case, to be “in the Lord” is to be converted. If a *believer* became lawfully single, he or she should not consider marriage to someone who is not converted.

Also, in discussing his own single state, Paul expressed his right to be married, but only to a converted, Christian wife.

1 Corinthians 9:5: “Have we no right to travel with a Christian wife, like the rest of the apostles?” (Moffatt translation)

Unequally yoked

Second Corinthians 6:14 says, “Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers.” The phrase *do not* is a Greek imperative—defined as “the mood that normally expresses a command, intention, exhortation, or polite request” (Michael Heiser, *Glossary of Morpho-Syntactic Database Terminology*). This verse is often read in light of *marriage outside of the faith*. However, “marriage” is not *explicitly* mentioned here. So is this passage really applicable to marriage?

Unequally yoked (*heterozugeō*) means to “be mismated” (Walter Bauer, Frederick Danker, William Arndt and Wilbur Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*) or to “be wrongly matched” (J.P. Louw and Eugene Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*) or “mismatched” (notes on New English Translation). This word, used only in this passage, appeals to a bedrock Christian principle—*spiritual compatibility*.

Let’s examine five key words in this passage that make it clear that this scripture applies to marriage. These are italicized in the verses below. While reading the ensuing definitions, consider whether there is any human relationship where these qualities are more important than they are between a man and woman in *marriage*.

2 Corinthians 6:14-16: “Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what *fellowship* has righteousness with lawlessness? And what *communion* has light with darkness? And what *accord* has Christ with Belial? Or what *part* has a believer with an unbeliever? And what *agreement* has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God.”

The Greek word for “fellowship” (*metochē*) is used only in 2 Corinthians 6:14. It refers to “a relationship involving *shared purposes* and activity—‘partnership, sharing.’ ... ‘How can there be a *partnership* between right and wrong?’ 2 Cor. 6:14” (Louw-Nida).

The Greek word for “communion” (*koinōnia*) indicates a “close association involving *mutual interests and sharing*, association, communion, fellowship, close relationship” (BDAG).

The Greek word for “accord” (*sumphonēsis*) denotes “a state of shared interests, *agreement* ... of someone with someone 2 Cor. 6:15” (ibid.). (In symphony! How can two walk together unless they are in agreement?)

The Greek word for “part” (*meris*) is defined as “part or portion, with the possible implication of a division or significant distinction—‘share, portion’ ... ‘what does a believer share with an unbeliever?’ 2 Cor. 6:15” (Louw-Nida).

The Greek word for “agreement,” *sunkatathesis*, means “to work out a *joint arrangement*. ... ‘How can God’s temple come to a mutual agreement with pagan idols?’ 2 Cor. 6:16” (ibid.).

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There is no human relationship in which the above qualities are more important than they are in marriage. Therefore, it follows that marriage fits the context of 2 Corinthians 6:14 as much as, if not more than, other associations. Though God has called some into His Church while their mates remain unbelievers, He clearly does not want Christians to enter into a relationship where they will become unequally yoked. In such preexisting situations, He places the burden of cooperation on the unbeliever and provides relief if the unbeliever will not live at peace with the believer (1 Corinthians 7:12-15).

Ministerial counsel and instruction

Pastoral counseling is essential in all cases where individuals in the Church are contemplating marriage. When a potential romantic relationship involves one individual who is a member and another who is not attending and has no part in the Church, it is vital that the member talk with his or her pastor to get the biblical guidance and instruction needed. Church members should be fully aware of the Church's teaching about marrying within the faith and should, in fact, seek ministerial counseling to discuss the challenges of marrying outside the faith *even before considering* such relationships.

Some have dated and married outside the faith, believing they would be able to lead their nonmember mate to conversion. Of course, the Church does not *prevent* anyone from making his or her own decisions for dating and marriage. And nonmembers are not shunned or mistreated by the Church. However, the ministry has always cautioned against trying to *coerce and influence someone to come into the Church*. God does the calling (John 6:44). If a member chooses to marry outside the Church through a justice of the peace or similar civil servant, that is his or her choice. In such cases, the ministry would need to take corrective action (suspension, etc.) only if the marriage causes disruption or division within the local congregation, either by the couple's words or actions.

Summary

The teaching and position of the Church is established by the rule, not the exception. Scripture consistently teaches against marrying outside of the faith. And the track record in this regard strongly supports marriages within the faith. Based on all of the above scriptures and word studies, we conclude the Bible teaches that a Christian believer who plans to marry should seek a mate only among other Christian believers. This is the teaching and practice of the Church of God, a Worldwide Association.