
IS IT A SIN FOR A CHRISTIAN TO MARRY AN UNBELIEVER?

(by George Battey)

THE ISSUE

This study is not asking, *“Is it wise or unwise for a Christian to marry an unbeliever?”* There is unanimous agreement that it is unwise. Statistics can be given to show that many divorces result when couples have different religious views.

There are many instances where we would advise people not to marry a certain kind of person:

Proverbs 22:24-25

24 Make no friendship with an angry man,
And with a furious man do not go,
25 Lest you learn his ways
And set a snare for your soul.

Look carefully at v25 – *“lest you learn his ways.”* This is speaking of influence. By associating with an angry man one is influenced to be like him and *“set a snare for his soul.”* It is possible for one to lose his salvation by the influence of someone who cannot control his temper.

Question #1: Would it be advisable to marry someone who has trouble controlling their temper?

No, this would not be wise.

Question #2: Is it likely that, by marrying “an angry man,” one could be influenced to sin in such a way as to lose salvation?

Yes, this is very possible: *“Lest you learn his ways and set a snare for your soul.”*

Question #3: Is it likely that, by marrying “an angry man,” the marriage will end in divorce?

Yes, this is very likely. Although many marriages endure constant outbursts of anger, the likelihood that such a marriage will survive is greatly diminished.

Question #4: Is it *sinful* to marry “an angry man”? In other words, if a woman marries a man who cannot control his temper, has she committed a sin which, if not repented of, will cause her to be lost in hell – even if she herself never “*learns his ways*”?

No, the woman has not committed a sin. While it is possible to “learn his ways,” there is no guarantee she will. The “snare for your soul” (sin) comes only by “learning his ways.” Until then, no sin has been committed.

No one would desire their son or daughter to marry someone who has a problem controlling his (her) anger. We would advise our young people against this. But none would say, “You have sinned and need to make a confession for marrying this person and until you do make such a confession, you are lost.”

Think of all the married couples you know. Do you know of any marriage where one of the partners has a problem controlling his or her anger? Is the innocent spouse living in a lost condition until they make a confession at church for having married an angry person? The answer is “no.” They are not lost. We may pity the innocent spouse, but we do not condemn them and we encourage them to continue in the marriage as best they can, for anger is no grounds for divorce and remarriage.

There are other cases where it is unwise to marry certain people.

- It is unwise to marry a slothful person.
- It is unwise to marry someone who cannot manage their money.
- It is unwise to marry someone who is deceitful.
- It is unwise to marry someone who has been arrested on multiple occasions.
- It is unwise to marry someone who has recently had a drinking or drug problem or someone who has a repeating pattern of alcohol or drug use.

The list could go on and on. But while it may be unwise to marry any number of people, shall we say it was a “sin” to marry someone who has a history of regressing to alcohol? Shall we say it is a “sin” to marry someone who has a history of encounters with the police? The answer is “no.” It is not wise, but neither is it sinful.

A person who has made an unwise choice in marriage should not be made to feel as though they have sinned and are in a lost condition until such time as they make a confession at church.

If both parties were eligible for marriage, the marriage itself is scriptural. The marriage is not adulterous and, though it may have been unwise, the marriage must be continued in because in

the NT era neither drugs, nor alcohol, nor slothfulness, nor bad-money-managing-skills are grounds for divorce and remarriage.

These illustrations have been given to introduce the question of this present study: ***Is it sinful for a Christian to marry an unbeliever?***

- Just as it is unwise to marry an angry man or a slothful man, it is also unwise for a Christian to marry an unbeliever.
- Just like a person can “learn the ways” of an angry man and “set a snare for her soul,” a Christian can be influenced by an unbeliever, “learn his ways,” and likewise “set a snare for her soul.” In other words, it is very, very possible for a Christian to be influenced to the point of leaving the faith and losing his (her) salvation.

But is marrying an unbeliever a sin within itself that immediately places one in a lost condition and which, if not repented of, will result in that person being lost eternally in hell? This is the question of the present study.

Let us examine the passages commonly used to teach it is sinful for a Christian to marry an unbeliever.

2 CORINTHIANS 6:14

The most often cited passage used to “prove” it is sinful for a Christian to marry an unbeliever is 2 Cor 6:14. The passage reads like this:

2 Corinthians 6:14

14 Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness?

People who use this passage always make an admission: *“I admit that marriage is not specifically mentioned in this passage, but what ‘yoke’ is stronger than marriage?”* In other words, since marriage is a “yoke” and since it is the strongest “yoke” known to man, therefore 2 Cor 6:14 must at least include marriage.

In response to this, there are two important points which must be kept in mind. First, even if it is true that no other yoke is stronger than marriage, it must be proven that marriage is a yoke envisioned in this passage. Whatever the yoke is, it is a yoke that requires “coming out of” and “remaining separate” from (v17). More will be said about this in a moment. It is enough to simply observe at this point that 2 Cor 6:14 may not be applied to just any yoke. For example, someone might argue that going to work and working *for* unbelievers or working *with* unbelievers is a yoke in some sense. But the question we must ask is this: Does 2 Cor 6:14

envision a yoke of working with unbelievers on a job? Again, someone might argue that going to school with unbelievers is a yoke in some sense. But is 2 Cor 6:14 envisioning such a yoke as this? Does 2 Cor 6:14 mean it is wrong to work with unbelievers and go to school with unbelievers? Are we at liberty to take 2 Cor 6:14 and apply it to any and every yoke we can think up or must we apply the passage only to the yoke found within the context of this chapter?

Second, it is assumed that no other yoke is stronger than marriage. If it can be shown that another yoke is stronger than marriage, this argument loses some of its force. This is especially true if the context itself points specifically to a certain yoke that is within itself stronger than marriage.

A YOKE STRONGER THAN MARRIAGE

Let us focus first on the fact that the scriptures do speak of a yoke which is stronger than marriage. Marriage is not the strongest tie known. Notice what Moses wrote:

Deuteronomy 13:6-10

6 “If your brother, the son of your mother, your son or your daughter, **the wife of your bosom**, or your friend who is as your own soul, secretly entices you, saying, ‘Let us go and serve other gods,’ which you have not known, neither you nor your fathers,

7 of the gods of the people which are all around you, near to you or far off from you, from one end of the earth to the other end of the earth,

8 you shall not consent to him or listen to him, nor shall your eye pity him, nor shall you spare him or conceal him;

9 but **you shall surely kill him; your hand shall be first against him to put him to death**, and afterward the hand of all the people.

10 And **you shall stone him with stones until he dies**, because he sought to entice you away from the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage.

Here is a “yoke” stronger than marriage. One’s love and devotion to God is stronger than any marital tie. Jesus said:

Luke 14:26

26 “If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, **wife** and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple.

To repeat for the sake of emphasis, one’s love and devotion to Christ is stronger than any marital tie.

Therefore, the assumption that marriage constitutes the strongest yoke imaginable is a false assumption. While marriage certainly constitutes a strong yoke, there is a yoke stronger than marriage.

Now, having noticed there is a stronger yoke than marriage, let us return to the original passage and read it again along with the verses that follow:

2 Corinthians 6:14-18

14 Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness?

15 And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever?

16 And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will dwell in them And walk among them. I will be their God, And they shall be My people."

17 Therefore "Come out from among them And be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, And I will receive you."

18 'I will be a Father to you, And you shall be My sons and daughters, Says the LORD Almighty."

Notice carefully the instructions given in v17: *"Come out from among them and be separate says the Lord."* The yoke under consideration is a yoke which requires Christians to "come out of" and remain separate from. We are not free to apply this passage to simply any yoke which can be thought up. We must apply it to yokes which must be dissolved. If the yoke of 2 Cor 6:14 includes working *with* or *for* unbelievers, then v17 requires the yoke be dissolved and Christians must no longer work *for* or *with* unbelievers. If the yoke includes going to school with unbelievers, then v17 requires dissolving the yoke and no longer may Christians attend classes together with unbelievers ... or play together with unbelievers on baseball teams ... or do any number of things. If v14 includes Christians who have married unbelievers, then v17 would require such marriages to be dissolved.

Here is the dilemma one finds himself in when he takes the position that a Christian marrying an unbeliever is a sin:

FIRST: It is admitted that, although marriage is not specifically mentioned in the passage, still the passage includes marriage.

SECOND: When v17 is discussed, it is argued that this verse is simply teaching a "principal," but must not applied exactly as it is written.

In other words, what is not specifically mentioned (marriage) is assumed and what is specifically mentioned is ignored.

When v17 is pointed out, the advocates of the “it is a sin” position argue like this:

“Verse 17 is forbidding entering into a marriage with an unbeliever to begin with, but it is not addressing the problem of a Christian who has already entered into such a marriage. First Cor 7:12-15 addresses one who has already entered into a union with an unbeliever.”

In other words: (a) 2 Cor 6:14 forbids Christians from *entering* into a marriage with an unbeliever to begin with but (b) 1 Cor 7:12-15 deals with Christians who are *already* in a marriage with an unbeliever.

GRAMMAR (YUCK!)

The problem with the above argument is that it does not fit the grammar found in the Greek text. The verb in the command, “Do not be unequally yoked together” (μὴ γίνεσθε ἑτεροζυγοῦντες) is a present imperative in the Greek. The Greek language has two ways of prohibiting an action. Ray Summers comments on this:

The distinction between present and aorist in the imperative mood is to be found in *kind* of action. **The present imperative has to do with action which is in progress:** λῦε αὐτόν, “continue loosing him”; **the aorist imperative has to do with action which has not yet started:** λύσον αὐτόν, “loose him,” i.e., “start loosing him.” (p. 112).

Since 2 Cor 6:14 is a present imperative, it means the passage is discussing an action already in progress. Literally, 2 Cor 6:14 is saying, “Stop being unequally yoked together with unbelievers.” It is **not** saying, “Do not begin to be unequally yoked.” In other words, the Corinthians were already involved in a yoke with unbelievers and they must stop it. They stop by “coming out from among them” and “remaining separate” (v17). It is impossible to “come out from among” people without having entered in among them to begin with. Therefore, if 2 Cor 6:14 refers to marriage, the passage would literally be saying, “Stop being joined together in marriage with this unbeliever ... come out of the marriage.” Hence, if 2 Cor 6:14 applies to marriage, the only way to fix the “sin” of having married an unbeliever would be to dissolve the marriage.

UNSCRIPTURAL MARRIAGES MUST BE DISSOLVED

Here is a fact which cannot be successfully denied: If a marriage is unscriptural to enter into in the first place, then it is unscriptural to remain in such a marriage.

This point is verified by what we know from the OT scriptures. The OT clearly taught it was sinful to marry heathens outside the nation of Israel:

Deuteronomy 7:3-4

3 Nor shall you make marriages with them. You shall not give your daughter to their son, nor take their daughter for your son.

4 For they will turn your sons away from following Me, to serve other gods; so the anger of the LORD will be aroused against you and destroy you suddenly.

When the Israelites violated this command, how did they fix the problem? What did repentance require of them? It required dissolving the marriage.

Ezra 10:10-12

10 Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, "You have transgressed and have taken pagan wives, adding to the guilt of Israel.

11 Now therefore, make confession to the LORD God of your fathers, and do His will; **separate yourselves** from the peoples of the land, and **from the pagan wives.**"

12 Then all the assembly answered and said with a loud voice, "Yes! As you have said, so we must do.

The lesson to be learned from these passages is this: If it is wrong to enter into the marriage to begin with, it is wrong to remain in the marriage. Or, to put it another way: ***If it is wrong to enter into the marriage to begin with, repentance requires that the marriage be dissolved.***

We understand this in regards to other unscriptural marriages. For example, if a guilty fornicator remarried, we would argue the marriage was unscriptural. The guilty fornicator had no right to marry. If he wishes to repent and rectify the situation, the second marriage must be dissolved.

Any marriage which is unscriptural to begin with cannot be continued in. "*It is not lawful for you to (continue having) your brother's wife,*" John told Herod (Mk 6:18). If it is sinful for a Christian to enter into marriage with an unbeliever to begin with, the only way to rectify such a situation would be to dissolve the union.

WHAT DOES 2 CORINTHIANS 6:14 REALLY MEAN?

If 2 Cor 6:14-18 does not address the subject of marriage, then what is the passage teaching? E. M. Zerr, a member of the church of Christ, wrote the following comments in regards to 2 Cor 6:14:

Verse 14. Notwithstanding all that can justly be said against Christians marrying those who are not, it is a perversion to apply this passage to that subject. The same subject is under consideration in verse 17, where the apostle commands them to *come out from among them*. If Paul was writing in view of the marriage

relation, then the command would require Christian husbands or wives to separate from their companions who were not Christians. But that would contradict 1 Corinthians 7:12-16 and 1 Peter 3:1, 2, and we are sure the Bible does not contradict itself. The passage at hand refers to religious organizations, or any such that profess to offer religious benefits to the world. That would include the ones that make direct professions of a religious character, such as the sectarian organizations, also those whose claims for spiritual rewards are only a part of their avowed purpose, such as the various fraternal organizations. The New Testament church is the only organization that has any scriptural right to offer spiritual instructions and other benefits to the world. (See Ephesians 3:10, 11, 21, and 1 Timothy 3:15.) (6:56).

Zerr is correct. Second Cor 6:14-18 is addressing the subject of baptized believers who were returning to their old religious worship services. In other words, when we baptize a member of the Baptist Church, we must explain that they may not return to their old church services on Sunday. They are now members of the Lord's church and must *"come out from among"* the unbelievers in the Baptist Church and *"remain separate."* The Corinthians came from pagan religions which were much worse than the Baptist denomination. They were attending both the services of the church of Christ and the religious services of the pagan temples. Paul told them to *"stop it."* Paul was forbidding an action which was already in progress. *"You cannot partake of the Lord's table and the table of demons"* (1 Cor 10:21).

Look closely at the first verse of 2 Cor 6: *"We then, as workers together with Him also plead with you not to receive the grace of God in vain."* Paul wants the Corinthians to become *"workers together with"* God just like the apostles are working together with God. To put this in another way, Paul wants the Corinthians to be *"yoked together"* with God just like the apostles are yoked with God. The yoke under consideration in this chapter is a spiritual yoke to God. This spiritual union was certainly a stronger yoke than any marital union. Whereas the marital union makes a man and woman one flesh, spiritual unions involve both body and spirit.

1 Corinthians 6:15-20

15 Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a harlot? Certainly not!

16 Or do you not know that he who is joined to a harlot is **one body with her?** For *"the two,"* He says, **"shall become one flesh."**

17 But he who is joined to the Lord is **one spirit with Him.**

18 Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body.

19 Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own?

20 For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in **your body** and in **your spirit, which are God's.**

Here is a union stronger than marriage – a yoke stronger than marriage. The union between man and woman is dissolved upon death (Mt 22:30), but the union between man and God survives death (Phil 1:20-21). Unions formed with Satan or followers of Satan also survive death (Jn 8:44). Spiritual unions are greater yokes than marriage. The spiritual union described as “*the mark of the beast*” in the hand or the forehead (Rev 14:9) is a greater and more serious union than marriage. Men who find themselves married to an unbelieving wife will not necessarily find themselves lost (1 Cor 7:12-13), but men who are yoked with the beast will be cast into the lake of fire which is the second death (Rev 19:20). Things which are seen (marriage) are temporary, but things which are not seen (spiritual unions) are eternal (see 2 Cor 4:18).

The 2 Cor 6:14-18 passage is dealing with a union that is much greater than marriage. It is dealing with a spiritual union with unbelievers in false religion. This is why the union must stop. This is why Christians must “*come out from among them and stay separate.*” Second Cor 6:14-18 may only be applied to such unions as envisioned in the context. If we are not careful, we may find ourselves applying the passage to so many yokes that we become guilty of teaching monasticism (i.e. teaching the need to live in monasteries separate and apart from the world). The Lord specifically taught against this (Jn 17:15).

1 CORINTHIANS 7:39

The second most commonly used passage to teach it is “sinful” for a Christian to marry an unbeliever is 1 Cor 7:39 which reads as follows:

1 Corinthians 7:39

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.

If this passage teaches it is “sinful” for a Christian woman to enter into marriage with an unbeliever, then the marriage itself is sinful and remains sinful until it is dissolved. If not, why not? How can it be sinful to *enter* into a marriage, but acceptable to *remain* in the marriage? Remember the Ezra 10:10-12 passage. When the OT taught it was sinful to enter into a marriage with a pagan, that marriage remained sinful and could only be rectified by dissolving the union.

Roy Deaver, in his book Biblical Notes, asked the following pertinent questions in regard to 1 Cor 7:39:

Does this scripture apply only to the widow? Would it apply also to the widower? Would it apply to the young lady who has never been married? To the young man who has never been married? Would the widow sin if she married some man who was not a Christian? Would the widower sin if he married a woman who was not a Christian? The young woman? The young man? Is there inherent sin in a Christian’s being married to a non-Christian?

Does the New Testament say anything about this matter? If a Christian sins in marrying someone who is not a Christian, then how can the sinful situation ever be corrected? Is such a marriage still sinful thirty years after the ceremony? How would one 'repent' of such a marriage? Could one simply say 'I'm sorry,' but continue in the marriage? Would separation be necessary? Demanded? What about preachers who preach that such marriages are sinful, but who perform the ceremonies? What about elderships in relationship to such marriages? Should they see to it that all persons in such marriages *know* that they are in sin? Should they withdraw fellowship from all persons involved in such marriages? What about the Christian young woman who married a non-Christian man (many years ago) and which man is now an elder in the church? How is this to be corrected? Must she be sorry she married this man? Must he be sorry that he married this woman? (via Studies in 1 Corinthians, edited by Dub McClish, p. 345).

These are legitimate questions. For example, in the faithful church in Joplin, MO, brother Jim Stockam is an elder of the church. At the time he married, his wife was a Christian but he was an unbeliever. To my knowledge, no confession was ever made by sister Stockam for the "sin" of marrying an unbeliever. Is this marriage sinful? Was it ever sinful? If it was sinful, but is not sinful now, when did it cease being sinful? What needs to be done to "correct" the situation? Must sister Stockam confess to the church that she is sorry for marrying her faithful husband of fifty years? Must he, an elder in the church, confess that he is sorry for having married his faithful wife of fifty years? These are legitimate questions if the NT teaches it is *sinful* for a Christian to marry an unbeliever.

WHAT DOES 1 CORINTHIANS 7:39 REALLY MEAN?

A legitimate question remains unanswered to this point: If 1 Cor 7:39 is not forbidding a Christian widow from marrying an unbeliever, then what is it teaching?

First, the question hovering around 1 Cor 7:39 is not about whom Christians should marry or not marry. The context is: Should a Christian even marry at all because of the "*present distress*" (see v26). For clarity and emphasis I repeat: The question in 1 Cor 7:39 is not whom Christians should marry, but rather should Christians marry. There is a big difference between those two issues.

The "present distress" (persecution) would cause marriage to become a great hindrance to Christians. When the police burst into homes, they would not put a knife to the throat of the husband and threaten his life, they would instead put the knife to the throat of the wife and threaten her. The husband might not deny Christ if the knife was put to his throat, but what will he do when the authorities put the knife to the throat of his wife? Will the husband just stand there and watch his wife die, or will he deny Christ to save the life of this woman he loves? Paul wanted Christians to be able to serve the Lord "*without distraction*" (1 Cor 7:35).

Being married to anyone, whether Christian or unbeliever, would be a great distraction during times of persecution. Paul explains that it is not sinful to marry even during times of persecution (vv2, 9, 28), but he encourages Christians to remain single if they can control their desires (v26). The context of 1 Cor 7 makes it seem unnatural for v39 to switch from the topic of marriage itself to the topic of whom should Christians marry.

Second, there is some question about whether the phrase “*only in the Lord*” modifies *the man* whom the widow is going to marry or whether it modifies *the action of marrying*. In other words, the verse can be interpreted in two possible ways:

- *Marry only a man who is “in the Lord.”* This interpretation takes the phrase “in the Lord” as modifying the man whom the widow is going to marry.
- *Marry only as the Lord instructed.* This interpretation takes the phrase “in the Lord” as modifying the action (verb) “*to be married.*”

If the second interpretation is the intended meaning of the verse, the passage would read, “*She is at liberty to be married to whom she wishes, but she must marry only as the Lord gave instructions about marriage.*” This is a far cry from teaching a Christian must marry only a fellow believer. “*Only as the Lord gave instructions about marriage*” would drive us to look elsewhere in the NT scriptures to see what the Lord instructed about marriage. Did the Lord Himself teach that Christians must marry only believers? Did He teach it was sinful to marry unbelievers? If so, where did He teach this? The Lord’s instructions about marriage were for one man to marry one woman and remain married for life except for fornication (Mt 19:6-9). His instructions said nothing about Christians marrying only fellow believers.

WISDOM Vs. SINFUL ACTION

At this point I want to reiterate an important fact: *Something may be unwise, but not sinful*. It may be unwise to marry an unbeliever, but not sinful just like it may be unwise to marry an angry man, but not sinful. The absence of explicit NT legislation on whom Christians should marry does not mean it is wise to marry an unbeliever. This is never a wise thing to do. But neither are we permitted to say it is “sinful” and that Christians who marry unbelievers are lost until they “repent.” We are not free to make laws which God did not make. The Pharisees made laws for God and taught their manmade laws as though they were from God Himself (Mt 15:9). This was sinful then and it is sinful now. No matter how worthy the cause, we are not free to legislate for God. If God wants Christians to marry only fellow believers and if He wants us to know that marrying unbelievers is “sinful,” then let Him say so in the NT scriptures. Let us not be guilty of legislating for God.

Third, to prove 1 Cor 7:39 restricts marriages of Christians to believers, it must first be proven that “*only in the Lord*” means “*only a man who is a Christian.*” The phrase “*in the Lord*” is used frequently with a variety of meanings.

Romans 16:12

12 Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, who have labored **in the Lord**. Greet the beloved Persis, who labored much **in the Lord**.

Acts 14:3

3 Therefore they stayed there a long time, speaking boldly **in the Lord**, ...

Revelation 14:13

13 Then I heard a voice from heaven saying to me, "Write: 'Blessed are the dead who die **in the Lord** from now on.'" "Yes," says the Spirit, "that they may rest from their labors, and their works follow them."

1 Corinthians 1:31

31 that, as it is written, "He who glories, let him glory **in the LORD**."

1 Corinthians 11:11

11 Nevertheless, neither is man independent of woman, nor woman independent of man, **in the Lord**.

Colossians 3:18

18 Wives, submit to your own husbands, as is fitting **in the Lord**.

Ephesians 6:1

1 Children, obey your parents **in the Lord**, for this is right.

In all of these passages "*in the Lord*" describes action, not people. In other words, this phrase is being used as an adverb. Adverbs describe actions. This phrase is technically called an adverbial phrase.

In order to prove that the Christian widow must marry only a believer, it must be demonstrated that the phrase "*only in the Lord*" is being used as an adjective (an adjectival phrase) describing the man to whom the woman wishes to be married. Adjectives describe nouns. The "man" is a noun. It must be proven, not assumed, that "*only in the Lord*" is adjectival and not adverbial. Until this is proven, one must be very careful about becoming dogmatic. Assumptions prove nothing. Dogmatism based on assumptions is unchristian. "*Prove all things*" the scripture says ... not "*assume all things*." (See 1 Thess 5:21).

1 CORINTHIANS 9:5

Another passage commonly appealed to in support of the proposition that it is a "sin" for a Christian to marry an unbeliever is 1 Cor 9:5. The passage reads as follows:

1 Corinthians 9:5

5 Do we have no right to take along a believing wife, as do also the other apostles, the brothers of the Lord, and Cephas?

The context of this passage involves financial support of church leaders – in this case, Paul and Barnabas. *“Do we have no right to eat and drink?”* (v4). In other words, Paul is establishing the fact that as a church leader, who is spending his full time in the ministry of the word, he has the right to be financially supported. After mentioning a *“believing wife”* (v5), Paul writes, *“Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working? Who ever goes to war at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its fruit? Or who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk of the flock?”* (vv6-7). If you continue reading the chapter, you will find the entire section is dealing with financial support of church leaders. The *“believing wife,”* mentioned in v5, has some connection with the subject of being financially supported from the treasury of the church. In context, 1 Cor 9:5 is teaching that (a) if a man is busy full-time in preaching the word and (b) if he wishes to take his wife with him in his travels, (c) then the preacher should be financially supported from the treasury and he should receive enough support to pay for the expenses of his believing wife. If the wife is not a believer, the church is not obligated to pay for the expenses incurred as she travels with her husband.

To illustrate, suppose a Russian named *“Anatoly”* (a fictitious name) is converted to Christ, but his wife is not converted. Anatoly studies diligently and eventually becomes a preacher of the gospel. Suppose Anatoly needs to make a trip from Moscow to St. Petersburg in order to study with some prospects. Should the church pay for Anatoly’s expenses to make this trip? Yes, the church should pay his expenses (1 Cor 9:6-14). But suppose Anatoly wishes to take his wife along. Should the church pay for the train fare, food and lodging of this unbelieving wife? No. The collection of the church’s money is *“for the saints”* (1 Cor 16:1-2). This money should not be used for an unbelieving wife. Therefore, if Anatoly wishes to *“take along a wife”* (1 Cor 9:5) at the expense of the church, that wife must first be a Christian.

First Cor 9:5 is not discussing the subject of whether it is right or wrong to marry an unbeliever. It is discussing the subject of whether a preacher and his wife should be supported financially from the treasury of the church.

Do we not wish that all husbands and wives were Christians? Do we not wish that all children would grow up and become Christians? Of course we do. But shall we argue that if one is married to an unbeliever, he has sinned? We have no scripture to make this statement. It may be accurate to say someone made foolish decisions in rearing their children. Perhaps they made a foolish decision in choosing the spouse which they married. But it is going too far to make a blanket statement and say that everyone who has unbelieving children has sinned in the rearing of those children. It is going too far to make a blanket statement and say that every Christian who has married an unbeliever has sinned.

ISRAEL'S LAW

God told Israel not marry pagans because *“they will turn your sons away from following Me”* (Dt 7:3-4). If He made such a law under the OT, why would He not have the same law under the NT? A change in covenants does not alter the fact that an unbeliever will often influence a child of God to become weak and eventually leave the faith. Since this is the case, why would God, in the NT, not forbid marriages with unbelievers?

First, the OT was a national law (Dt 5:1-3), but the NT is an international law (Mt 28:19-20). The NT was written in such a way as to encompass and apply in any society. In some societies marriages for children are arranged by parents and the children have no choice in the matter. In some societies a virgin daughter may have had enough freedom to become a Christian and the father, being irreligious, might not even take notice of such a matter. But when it comes to marriage and receiving a dowry, the irreligious father has great concerns for money and political (social) ties. The NT is not requiring a virgin daughter to die, if needs be, rather than “sin” and marry the unbeliever whom her father has chosen for her to wed.

Second, the OT law forbidding marriage with pagans was more concerned with the welfare of the nation of Israel rather than the welfare of an individual person. This is not to say that God did not care about the spiritual welfare of individual people. He did care about their individual souls. But the law was looking toward the preservation of the nation. The Messiah was to come through the nation of Israel (Dt 18:18). It was necessary that Israel have laws to act as “walls of separation” in order that they remain a distinct nation until the Messiah came. Once the Messiah came and the Lord fulfilled His oath to bring forth the Messiah from Israel, the need for a “wall of separation” had vanished (Eph 2:14-15).

The need for a “wall of separation” was especially important during OT times because the old covenant was made with men who had to be taught to “know the Lord” (see Heb 8:11). They were under covenant, but were not “circumcised in their hearts” (see Rom 2:28-29; 9:6). Only a remnant (very small portion) of the nation were spiritually minded and devoted to God (see Rom 9:27; 11:5). This being the case, it was especially needful to have laws forbidding association and marriage with pagans. Pagan worship included acts of fornication to fertility gods and goddesses (2 Kings 23:7; Hos 4:14). With the majority of the nation fleshly minded to begin with, extra care had to be taken to preserve national identity. Even with these laws God had to intervene from time to time to prevent the nation from losing its identity. When the Messiah finally came, the need to preserve Israel as a nation was no longer necessary.

It is true that intermarriage with unbelievers very often results in Christians becoming weak and falling away. But when this happens in the church, the identity of a nation is not at stake. Today, when a Christian makes an unwise choice in marriage, one person’s soul is at stake. But when Israel intermarried with pagans the salvation of the world was at stake.

When a believer voluntarily chooses to marry an unbeliever, it indicates a weakness on the part of the believer. If a Christian is trying his (her) best to live a life of devotion to God, they will

naturally choose a partner who will help them live a devoted life. It is possible to convert the unbeliever (1 Pet 3:1-2), but there are no guarantees this will always happen (1 Cor 7:16). So marriage outside the faith indicates a spiritual weakness on the part of the believer. Yet marriage to the unbeliever is not sinful. Unwise – yes. Sinful – no. If the marriage was sinful it would have to be dissolved.

Someone may argue, *“The marriage itself is not sinful, but entering into the marriage is sinful.”* This is not a logical argument. How can entering into a marriage be sinful, but the marriage itself be scriptural and acceptable to God? There is no scripture for this conclusion. The fact remains: Any marriage which is unscriptural to enter is a marriage that is unscriptural to maintain. This fact cannot be escaped.

CASES TO CONSIDER

Reflect on the following scenarios which actually happen as brethren preach the gospel to a lost world.

- a) Consider the case of “Steve” (a fictitious name). Steve is engaged and the wedding is set for this coming Saturday. On Thursday Steve and I study. He becomes convinced to obey the gospel and become a Christian. Shall I refuse to baptize Steve until he promises not to marry his unbelieving fiancé on Saturday? If he will not make this promise, shall I simply refuse to baptize him? Shall I go ahead with the baptism and after the baptism “spring it” on Steve that he cannot marry his unbelieving fiancé on Saturday? How much pressure should I put on him to “encourage” him not to “sin” by marrying an unbeliever? Or shall I simply baptize Steve and, when the opportunity presents itself, later study with his newly acquired wife? This last option seems to be the wise option.
- b) Next, consider the case of “Paul” and “Tina” (fictitious names). Paul and Tina have been living together for over five years and have two small children. I study with Paul and he becomes convinced to obey the gospel, but I explain that he cannot live out of wedlock with Tina any longer. Tina is not convinced to obey, but she is willing to marry Paul – for, after all, she loves him and they have two children together. Paul and Tina agree to marry, but they want me to help them get married. Shall I refuse to baptize Paul until he promises not to marry Tina? Shall I condemn them for living together outside of wedlock, but *not* assist them in doing what is right and becoming married? Shall I baptize Paul, help him rectify his living arrangement and then condemn him for marrying an unbeliever? Or shall I baptize Paul, help him rectify his living arrangement and then, as opportunity presents itself, study more with Tina in hopes that she will obey the gospel too? This last option seems to be the correct course of action.
- c) Finally, consider the case of “Frank” and “Melissa” (fictitious names). Melissa is a true convert – someone described as “circumcised in heart” – a spiritual Israelite in the

truest sense of the word (see Rom 2:28-29; 9:6). Frank was reared “in the church” – which means he went with his parents to services all his life and was baptized, but he doesn’t seem to be dedicated. He has all appearance of being “uncircumcised in heart.” If Melissa marries Frank, did a believer just marry an unbeliever in actuality? If Frank is truly an unconverted person, will he not influence Melissa in the same way as if she had married a man who had no Christian background at all? Shall we now begin taking the position that it is a “sin” to marry someone in the church who is not truly converted? How far will we go with this reasoning? What tests must be passed before one can marry without “sin”?

The point of these three cases is to demonstrate that “wise” and “unwise” are the issues involved in Christians marrying unbelievers – not the issue of “right” and “wrong.” When brethren make broad, sweeping statements that it is a “sin” for a Christian to marry an unbeliever, the following questions arise:

- a) How is this “sin” corrected? How does one repent of the “sin” of marrying out of the Lord?
- b) If the “sin” is corrected by simply making a confession, but the marriage may be continued in, what shall we say to guilty fornicators who have been put away by an innocent spouse? Shall we simply require a confession, but allow their second marriages to be continued in?
- c) How can we know for certain that both parties in a marriage are truly converted? What if one is “circumcised in heart” but the other is not? Has the true Christian “sinned” in marrying someone who is not truly a “Jew inwardly” (Rom 2:28-29; 9:6)?

These are serious questions which deserve Bible answers if the position that "marriage-to-an-unbeliever-is-sinful" is truly taught in the NT scriptures.

The point of this present study is not to encourage marriage between believers and unbelievers. As mentioned in the very beginning, it is not wise for a Christian to marry an unbeliever – just as it is not wise for a Christian to marry someone who is “soon angry” (Prov 22:24-25). However, when brethren go so far as to say it is a “sin” for a Christian to marry an unbeliever, they are speaking where the Bible does not speak. They have gone too far. Not only are these well-meaning brethren teaching something the NT scriptures do not teach, there are dangerous implications resulting from this position: *If one unscriptural marriage may be continued in, then all unscriptural marriages may be continued in.* It is illogical and unscriptural to argue, “It is sinful to marry an unbeliever, but the marriage itself is scriptural and may be continued in.” Both logic and scripture cry against this. If it is sinful to marry someone in the first place, it is sinful to continue in the marriage. On the other hand, if it is scriptural to continue in the marriage, then it was never sinful in the first place. These conclusions are inescapable.

The Bible clearly states some marriages are unscriptural and may not be continued in (see Mk 6:17-18; Ezra 10; Neh 13:23-27). Unscriptural marriages are sinful from start to finish and may be corrected only by dissolving the unholy union. Yet the scriptures clearly state that if a brother or sister is married to an unbelieving spouse, they are not to leave this spouse (1 Cor 7:12-14). This marriage may not be the ideal marriage, but neither is it sinful. If entering into a marriage with an unbeliever is a “sin,” the inspired apostle would never have commanded Christians to stay in the marriage. Remember, when the Old Testament taught Israel not to marry pagan wives, the only way to remedy the situation was to dissolve the union after it was formed (Ezra 10; Neh 13:23-27). If the NT commands Christians not to marry unbelievers, why did Paul command Christians to remain with their unbelieving spouses (1 Cor 7:12-14)?

CONCLUSION

This article is written to discuss the question: Is it *sinful* for a Christian to marry an unbeliever? It is not written to discuss the question: Is it *wise* for a Christian to marry an unbeliever? While it is unwise to marry an unbeliever, it is not a sin. Otherwise, the marriage would have to be dissolved and 1 Cor 7:12-15 specifically instructs the believer not to put away the unbeliever if the unbeliever is content to dwell faithfully with the believer. There is no NT passage which indicates marrying an unbeliever is sinful and must be repented of. All the passages commonly used to teach marrying an unbeliever is sinful do not teach this when they are examined in context.

In 1 Cor 7:25-40 Paul gave suggestions as to what was wise and unwise. He wrote that, “he who gives her in marriage does well, but he who does not give her in marriage does better” (1 Cor 7:38). There is such a thing as acceptable and better. There is such a thing as wise and unwise. Not everything unwise is *sinful*.

It is never wise for a Christian to marry an unbeliever. I have never performed a marriage ceremony for a Christian marrying an unbeliever – because I think it is a very unwise decision. But there are also cases where I would not perform a marriage when both parties are Christians. There are cases when either one or both Christians have such serious character flaws that it is unwise for them to be married – especially without proper premarital counseling. Just because both are Christians does not mean they should be encouraged to marry.