

## A READER'S QUESTION

**What stance would the church be likely to take in the light of the Bible, where a believer married an unbeliever? Or a Church of Christ member marries a non-member?**

### AN ANSWER

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I have quoted the question precisely as I received it, because it raises a number of issues, not all of which can be discussed in the space available to us.

#### **'What stance.....'?**

The first part of the question arouses my curiosity because it raises its own question. **"What stance would the church be likely to take..?"**

Are we looking at an event which has not yet occurred, but which is being considered? I wonder!

Furthermore, the question does not ask **"What action, should the church take?"**, or, **"What response would the church make?"**, but **'what stance'**.

The Oxford dictionary states that the original definition of the word *'stance* is, *'The position taken for a stroke'*, and, of course, any golfer could tell you that!

However, by common usage it has become a synonym for **'attitude'**, or perhaps even **'reaction'**.

#### **'Church'**

Before we proceed any further, let us also think about the word **'church'**. I am always uncomfortable with questions which ask, **'What does the church believe?'**, or **'What should the church do?'**, because no-one today is qualified or authorized say what *'the church'* believes, or to speak on behalf of *'the church'*, using 'church' in its proper, wider sense. And I wish that brethren could understand this fact.

The most anyone can do is to show what the Word of God teaches on a particular subject, or, where there is no explicit

scriptural teaching, express a considered *personal* opinion – always bearing in mind that it is *only* an opinion.

In the context of the question before us, therefore, the word ‘church’ probably means the local congregation in which the questioner has membership.

### ‘Attitude’

If we are to discuss the ‘*attitude*’ which should be displayed by the local congregation when a marital situation occurs such as that which has been described, we have no problem. The church’s *attitude* should always be one of concern and care, and not merely one of carping, censorious criticism and condemnation.

It is all too easy, at such a time, for brethren to speak reproachfully and un-helpfully. But perhaps it should also be seen as a time for reflection and self-examination, when those who occupy positions of leadership in the congregation ask themselves to what extent they may have been guilty of failing to give sound guidance to their unmarried brothers and sisters. If there is one skill in which we have become experts, it is at closing the stable door after the horse has bolted.

### ‘In the light of the Bible’

However, I appreciate the fact that our questioner asks for guidance ‘*in the light of the Bible*’, for this is the phrase which indicates the direction we need to take.

As I see it, the question presents us with two quite different scenarios. We are to consider the cases of:-

1. ‘*A believer marrying an unbeliever*’ and
2. ‘*A church of Christ member marrying a non-member*’.

I wonder if the questioner recognizes that the two are not the same. I rather think that he/she does!

If, then, we are to consider the problem from a scriptural standpoint, we must first appreciate the fact that, whilst we have

clear teaching concerning a believer's relationship with an unbeliever, no such clear teaching can be quoted with respect to a 'Church of Christ member' marrying a 'non-member'. Perhaps this needs further clarification. Let me, therefore, explain what I mean.

**Situation number 1** appears to involve someone who holds '**the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ**', as **James 2:1** describes it, and someone who is **without faith**. In other words, one who does *not* believe; that is, an '*un-religious*' person.

**Situation number 2**, unless I am mistaken, relates to church membership. It concerns the marriage of one who is a member of the Lord's Church, to one who is a member of a religious body which is not named in the scriptures, but which is popularly regarded as 'Christian'; in other words, a member of a religious denomination.

With the first situation, involving the believer and the non-believer, we can deal confidently, because we have scripture to guide us. With the second situation this is not so. There exists no biblical reference to marriage between a member of the New Testament Church and a member of a denominational body, for the simple reason that the situation itself did not arise in New Testament times. 'Christian denominations', so-called, such as we know today, did not then exist, and in a sense, the issue was much simpler and clearer.

Reading the New Testament scriptures we find ourselves in a Roman world in which there were Christians – (that is, members of the Lord's Church) - Jews, and Pagans. Today we must add to these, in our 'multi-cultural society' as it is called, not only an estimated 500 'Christian' denominations, sects and parties, but a variety of faiths which include the Muslim, Hindu and Sikh religions... And whilst these latter religions can be dismissed immediately from our consideration as 'non-Christian', and perhaps even 'anti-Christian', we may not be so readily

dismissive of others, who claim to believe in the Bible, the God of the Bible and the Lord Jesus. Certainly, they may be *'non-members'*, but who is prepared to say they are *'non-believers'*?

Yes! I am well aware of the fact that what they believe about God and Christ is not sufficient to make them 'Christians' in the New Testament sense, **and that what they believe about the Gospel falls short of obedience to the Gospel**. Nevertheless, they are not *'unbelievers'* in the sense in which that word is used in the New Testament. Of this there can be no question.

So how are we to deal with the two situations?

### 1. 'Believer and Unbeliever'

Where one who *'holds the faith'* contemplates marriage to one who is *'without faith'*, **2<sup>nd</sup> Cor. 6:14** supplies the answer.

In the A.V., writing to the church at Corinth, Paul states, **"Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers"**. Later versions will say, **"Do not be mis-mated with unbelievers"**.

I still feel that the older version presents the picture more vividly, since it depicts pairs of oxen working side by side, under the same yoke. For them to work effectively they must be of similar or equal strength. There must be no imbalance to cause strain. This is why, in New Testament times no farmer would dream of attempting to plough his field with unmatched animals. Of course, it has often been pointed out, quite correctly, that this verse applies to other relationships, such as business associations, besides to the relationship of marriage. **But it undeniably applies to marriage.**

The kind of problems which inevitably arise when a believer marries an unbeliever are too numerous to deal with in this article, but it must be obvious that the believer cannot make a real commitment to the Lord when the marriage partner is not fully supportive. In such a relationship the believer is faced with the need to make unhappy compromises, out of consideration for the unbelieving partner.

## **2. A member of the Lord's Church to a Denominational member**

When a member of the Lord's Church marries a member of a denomination, the problems may not be quite so acute, but there will still be difficulties to be faced and compromises to be considered. Although a such a partnership may be compatible in other respects; socially, intellectually, emotionally and physically, it lacks the most important element which is the source of strength and stability; the element of *spiritual* harmony is absent.

The reason why, in these days, so many marriages fail, is that this dimension is missing. In marriage at its highest and best, husband and wife should be able to present themselves *together* before the Lord in worship, and it is sad when one of partner goes to worship with brothers and sisters in Christ, whilst the other either goes elsewhere, or even remains at home.

### **Understanding Needed!**

To return to a point I made earlier in this article; leaders in local congregations will, I feel sure, recognize the difficulties which face young, unmarried members of the Church today as they seek life-partners.

In these days, there do not appear to be very many Christian prospects around – as any eligible young Christian will readily tell you!. And, therefore, church-leaders will, I hope, show sympathy and understanding.

Writing as one who was been happily married for 66 years, and who has seen the difficulties which have beset the lives of many Christians who have become '*unequally yoked.*'

I am very well aware of the seriousness of the problem. But the situation is not helped by excommunicating those brothers and sisters who are involved in it. I have yet to see anything positive result from that course of action. Such brethren need help so that they may remain faithful. Better to keep them in the fold than to cast them out. They should not be abandoned and

forgotten. Our younger brothers and sisters want to do what is right and what pleases the Lord. Of this we may be sure. But they need to be *told* what is right; and if church-leaders fail in their duty in this respect, it is quite reprehensible to criticize when things go wrong.

**A final thought:** When Paul, in **1<sup>st</sup> Cor. 7:39**, writes about Christian widows on the subject of re-marriage, he says that they are free to marry. ***'but only in the Lord'***. Let us think seriously about these words. If they mean anything at all, they surely mean that 'Christians should marry Christians.' Notice that Paul states clearly that he is expressing the mind of the Lord on this matter.

Remember also, that 1<sup>st</sup> Cor.7 is the chapter which deals comprehensively with this subject. In it Paul reveals both what the Lord Himself taught during His earthly ministry and what he, Paul, was authorized to state in his capacity as an inspired apostle of Christ.

When you read the chapter, also bear in mind the fact that Paul had been required to pronounce on relationships which did not exist during the Lord's ministry, but which developed after the Church was established.