

Chapter 3

“UNEQUALLY YOKED”?

This chapter is for those who are contemplating marriage or are already married and have a partner who holds significantly different religious views. (If you are not in this particular situation, you may want to continue with the next chapter.) These differences can cause significant problems as life unfolds. In this chapter we will explore some of these problems.

Courtship and Marriage

Before I begin the primary thrust of this chapter—talking to married couples—I would like to offer some advice to those of you who may be actively contemplating marriage, but have not yet tied the knot. Those of us who are older—and hopefully wiser—know that romantic love has a way of blinding people. We often speak of it in terms of seeing the object of our love through rose-colored glasses, meaning we simply fail to see the faults in our loved one, or we may unconsciously choose to ignore them for the time being. Please accept some counsel from the legions of us who have gone on before. As relationships mature, that rose-colored tint begins to fade. Now, I know this may come as a surprise to you, but it was true for my wife and me, and for virtually all the other married couples we have known over the years (and we have been married now for thirty-six years). Please don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying that we stop *loving* our spouses. I'm just saying that the heat, passion and fantasy (yes, *fantasy*) of youthful romantic love gives way to a more realistic, deep and mature love. And while romantic love may seem more exciting when you're in its throes, the more realistic mature love is what sees you through all the ups and downs of life. That is just the way it is.

One of the things we tend to overlook during this youthful romantic love period is difference in religious belief and practice. Part of the reason is that people often fall in love and marry in early adulthood, a time characterized by some level of either questioning or rebellion against their religious upbringing. People often return to faith, however, especially when children arrive on the scene. And this return to faith can raise serious issues if the two of you suddenly discover you have incompatible belief systems. For example, if one of you belongs to a genuine Christian church and the other belongs to a church considered a cult. If you go on to read the rest of this chapter, you will get a good feel for some of these issues. And don't think these problems will be yours alone. They will impact all around you—your children, your parents and extended family and your church family.

Please hear this. The most important relationship you have in life is with your God. The second most important relationship is with your spouse. So as you consider marriage, I feel you owe it to each other, to the children you will have, to your parents and to your church families to make sure you have a faith that is compatible with your partner. And be *serious* about it. If you don't, you're risking problems down the road. But because (1) religion is not one of your life's current priorities and (2) romantic love is in full bloom, you may backburner an honest inquiry into each other's faith. And you may sweep under the rug whatever differences you do discover, convincing yourself that all this faith stuff will somehow just work itself out later. After all, "We love each other, and that's all that matters."

If, as you examine each other's beliefs, you discover some red flags that suggest your faith systems are not in line with each other, *now* is the time to deal with them, not after you're married. But beware. Sometimes people feign consent to their partner's church or beliefs to keep the relationship intact. Needless to say, this is a dishonest and potentially dangerous compromise. Don't buy it. On the other hand, the Lord sometimes uses relationships such as yours to help open the eyes of those who are caught up in false religious systems. But make sure that is what the Lord is doing. He will let you know if He is. But don't bank on your partner having a change of heart after you get married. It rarely happens.

If you do discover serious differences in beliefs, it will be better in the long run for you to break off your relationship now rather than risk a life of religious turmoil or abandonment. Many couples sweep their religious differences under the rug early on, only to be plagued with them for life. Some couples abandon church altogether because it creates too much stress at home. This is not something you want to do, no matter how you may feel right now. If you either can't or won't study and pray with each other to know for sure where each of you is spiritually, then think about whether you are mature enough to get married right now. Committing your life to another person is very serious business. I know this may sound stern, but it's the truth. And now you've been told.

Married Couples

Now, for those of you who are already married, it is simply impossible to exaggerate the importance of being on the same page with your spouse all the way through this most critical time of leaving a cult and in the stages that immediately follow your leaving. Faith is a major part of what makes a marriage strong and has undoubtedly been a major source of strength for you up to this point. If the two of you all of a sudden diverge on this most important of life's issues, it could end up being devastating to your marriage. There are consequences to the decisions that lie ahead. It is far more important at this stage to slow things down a bit, if need be, to let your spouse catch up. When you got married you became one flesh. To now race ahead on your own

may mean risking a major breach in your relationship and potential damage in the lives of your children, if you have any. Please, trust me on this. I have watched these very forces operate in several families.

Be very patient and kind with your spouse and children. You must continue to honor, respect and love each other as you go through this process. Above all, you must pray fervently that God will keep you together in your thinking about the issues involved. God loves your spouse and children even more than you do. He will honor your righteous prayer. Your faith is a most intimate relationship that you share with your very closest loved ones—your immediate family. The character you demonstrate to them during this process will bear fruit for many years to come, for better or for worse. Take the time and prayer to make it for better.

My wife and I are blessed in that we made the decision to leave our church together, notwithstanding the fact that we processed our discoveries somewhat differently. We have always been fairly closely aligned on spiritual matters. However, this is not always true with married couples. Sometimes partners diverge along the way. The pathway out of a cult is a deeply personal journey. Spouses may process information differently and at different speeds. And they may have differing degrees of investment in the old church, including family and other relational ties. Or one partner may choose to put their head back in the sand and try to ignore the problems they have discovered, while the other partner may want to forge ahead and find out the whole truth—and then act on it.

I believe that couples who have an otherwise strong relationship will find a way to weather this storm. But for those who are struggling in their relationship already, the additional strain of opposing spiritual views sometimes pushes them over the edge. This is most unfortunate. Because there are likely other issues involved, individual and/or marriage counseling may help.

Children?

When couples diverge from each other along the way, there is no simple solution. Their situation is even more complicated if they have children still at home. Children always end up in the middle and are deeply impacted by their parents' troubles. Leaving a cult is difficult enough when the whole family leaves together. It is dramatically more difficult for all involved if the parents become deeply divided. Children should never have to decide in favor of one parent at the expense of the other, but this is often the way it works out. You must really try to avoid this at all costs. This will not only leave emotional and relational scars, it will also leave spiritual scars for the children to deal with as they move through adulthood. Try your best not to do this to them.

Regardless of the parents' overall relationship, if they become deeply divided on church-related issues, the spiritual upbringing of their children inevitably becomes a problem. Please don't forget that your children have

their own relationship with God, apart from yours. Each parent obviously feels his or her spiritual views are right and wants to raise their children in this right way. And it often seems unbearable for a parent to see their children spiritually influenced by the partner whose views are now considered to be wrong. The children are in the middle, aren't they?

One common solution I have seen is for children to attend church alternately with both Dad and Mom. I have seen spouses attend each other's churches alternately as well—imperfect solutions for an imperfect situation. In this way, at least, the children will be in spiritual relationship with both parents and will be exposed to both ways of thinking. Alternating church attendance does raise three tricky problems, however.

First, it disrupts the children's church relationships, which really benefit from continuity at this stage of life.

Second, when is the appropriate age for children to make up their own minds which church they wish to attend—if any? Whenever that time comes, you then have to agree to live with the child's decision. This is always hard on one parent, obviously.

Third, the children may get fed up with the whole thing and abandon faith altogether. Neither parent wants this to happen. The best that can be hoped in this situation is that over time the family comes back together spiritually. If the parents have a fundamentally strong relationship with each other and with their children, this is a real possibility.

The Apostle Paul: Stick It Out

I believe the apostle Paul offers the best counsel for marriages divided by faith.

If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.

But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife? (1 Cor. 7:12–16)

Is Your Marriage Even Valid?

If you were married by an official minister in your old church, which you have now determined to be an illegitimate church, you may wonder if your marriage is legitimate. The answer is an emphatic Yes! Your marriage is valid. Marriage is a fundamental human relationship ordained by God. In it you and your spouse commit yourselves to each other before God. It's that

simple. The validity of your marriage does not derive from the quality (or lack thereof) of the ecclesiastical authority attending. Churches solemnize marriage, proclaim it publicly and provide a way for the larger community to celebrate it with you.

Because marriage is also a recognized legal entity from a civil standpoint, the state has taken upon itself the right to decide who can create such entities. And they have decided, at least in this respect, that ministers are registered agents of the state to create the legal entity called marriage. That works from a legal standpoint, even if the minister represents a cult. But what about from God’s standpoint, which is really the issue at hand here? He simply says, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). Read through the Bible and find all the marriages you can. As you do, look to see who officiated. Your marriage is still valid no matter who performed the ceremony. And differing on matters of faith is not a legitimate reason to end your marriage. Remember what Jesus said about it.

The Pharisees also came unto him, tempting him, and saying unto him, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause? And he answered and said unto them, Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, and said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder. (Matt. 19:3–6 KJV)

Divorce?

Some cults, however, will actually advise their members to divorce the spouse who leaves, basing their counsel on 1 Corinthians 7:15, claiming the spouse who leaves has made herself or himself an unbeliever. Cult leaders also cite 2 Corinthians 6:14–18, advising their members against being yoked with unbelievers.

Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: “I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people. Therefore come out from them and be separate,” says the Lord. “Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters.”

Paul was not advising the Corinthian Christians to divorce their unbelieving mates. Far from it. He had already advised just the *opposite* in his

first letter to them, in 1 Corinthians 7:12–16. Instead, he was advising the Corinthian church to stop forming alliances with those in the pagan community who were still practicing idol worship, a practice that was widespread in Corinth at the time. Christians had been called out of their temples, which were full of idols, into relationship with the living God. And in the process they themselves had become the actual temple of God! Paul told them not to turn their backs on God now by returning to their old idol worship, not even for the sake of fellowship with their old friends or for their general standing in the larger community.

That some cults recommend divorce is truly regrettable. Often, the spouse who left the cult has no recourse and no say in the matter whatever. But this is not always the case. It depends on the prevailing sense of legalism in the cult and in the person of authority who is doing the counseling. Paul was, in truth, encouraging marriage partners to bear with each other and to see it through together. In time, a spouse who remains in the cult may be won over, especially if the other spouse demonstrates an inviting character—one worthy of a Christian. *“How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?”* Remember, “The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective” (James 5:16). You must remain on your knees in intercessory prayer for the salvation of your spouse and your children. And your best testimony to them is to stay in the marriage and demonstrate your newfound faith.

No one ever said it would be easy, did they?