

Intercultural Romantic Relationships

Today different cultures live side by side in our large cities. You will meet people from other cultures nearly everywhere, at school, at work, at sport clubs, at church. You do not need to travel abroad to 'fall in love' with someone from a different culture. Many Christian organizations encourage short and long term mission experiences – which by the way, can be very enriching, especially if you visit peoples and cultures which are very different from your own. During such trips it is possible to 'fall in love' with another culture or with someone from that different culture.

Nowhere does the Bible condemn or disapprove of romantic relationships between people from different races or cultures. When the Israelites entered the promised land, they were commanded not to marry with the local inhabitants, "for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods" (Deut. 7:3-4). The problem was not their race or culture but their different religious practices and convictions. As Christians we are free to marry someone from another race or culture *but* he or she must also be a born again Christian (2 Cor. 6:14-16), he or she "must belong to the Lord" (1 Cor. 7:39). In God's sight, every person is



equally loved and valuable. Inter-cultural marriages can be joyful and enriching, but cultural differences *must* be taken seriously. Love is a strong bond, but love does not eliminate the effects of deep seated cultural differences and their related expectations. Shared love for the Lord Jesus or for a particular ministry are also strong binding forces, but neither do these eliminate the effects of deep seated cultural differences and related expectations.

My culture feels 'normal'

Resist the temptation to think that your own culture is *good* and that other cultures are in some way *bad* or *defective*. Life is not that simple. There is no such thing as a *perfect culture*. Satan has managed to distort all cultures – including yours. Therefore every culture has good elements and also bad and evil elements. Not everything that irritates you about the other culture is *wrong*. Maybe it is. But maybe they have simply another way of doing things – and their way is just as valid as your way. If you are considering an inter-cultural relationship, you *must* be prepared to make some serious personal adjustments. Expecting that the other will change and become 'normal like me' will lead to long term frustration. Guaranteed! Given that people in every culture have their own set of deep rooted values and expectations, you will be wise to move slowly and carefully. Inter-cultural romantic relationships have their unique joys but also their dangers. Before we look at some of these, let us first consider how to understand another person's culture. In what ways does the cultural background of your friend affect his or her thinking, feeling and behaviour?

Are we so different?

The differences between people from different cultures can be high, medium or low. For example, *high levels* of cultural differences will be experienced in relationships between people from Africa, Western Europe, Asia or Latin America. *Middle levels* of cultural differences will be experienced in relationships between people from countries like Germany, Britain, France or Italy. And *lower levels* of cultural differences will be experienced in relationships between people from different social groupings within the same country, such as successful professionals, people accustomed to live from social benefits, large city dwellers, village and farming communities, Christians from different denominational traditions, and the like. What culture do you bring into a romantic relationship?

Exploring and understanding a culture

Let's start with your own culture. You were born into a given culture, usually the culture of our parents. You are probably not conscious of your own culture because the way you think and behave feels *normal* to you. Most people are blind to their own culture. In fact, we all really believe the world is the way we see it. Those who study and compare cultures tell us that every culture has two levels, a *surface* and a *deep* level. The surface level is a description of how we behave, and the deep level is the set of values, attitudes and beliefs that make us behave that way. Understanding these two levels will greatly help you understand your own culture, the culture of your friend, why he or she sometimes says something strange or reacts emotionally in an 'odd' way or does something that surprises or hurts you. If you are considering working towards an inter-cultural marriage, what follows will help both of you identify areas where you need to talk, to adjust and often simply resolve to accept some differences.

Surface level: The surface level of culture is what makes popular tourism interesting. To explore and understand a culture at this level you will pay attention to three elements. First their **customs**, how they dress, their folklore, what they eat, how they speak, and so on. Then their **ideas**, what topics they like talking about, their shared history, common sport teams, well known TV programmes... and third their **products**, that is, their type of housing, means of transport, what they make and how they use things. Visitors can easily 'fall in love' with a culture based only on these surface level characteristics. But if you plan to live in that new culture or consider marrying someone from that culture you will be wise to take a closer look. It is only after being in contact with a culture for a number of months, perhaps even 2, 3 or more years, that you begin to notice that you and they are different at a deeper level.

Deep level: Culture students tell us that the deep level of a culture also consists of three elements: First their **beliefs**, what they consider to be true and false, their view of reality, what exist and doesn't exist. For example, people from some cultures believe in the existence of vitamins even though they have never seen one. With the same depth of conviction, people from other cultures believe in demons or the spiritual presence of their ancestors in their homes. Second their **feelings**, what they consider to be beautiful and ugly, modest and offensive, desirable and undesirable. How they express their emotions, like happiness and sorrow, acceptance and rejection, love and hate, scorn, sorrow and so on. Feelings are a very important part of culture. You can deeply hurt others and be hurt yourself if you don't understand how emotions are expressed and received within a given culture. And finally their **values**, what they use to judge experiences of life, their notion of modesty, their relation to authority, their work ethic, their family values, their concept of justice, what they consider to be right and wrong, better and worse, good and evil. In some parts of India, for example, losing your temper is considered a greater evil than sexual immorality. In some

African cultures taking what you need from another person is not considered theft. Lying is also viewed differently. In some European cultures arriving late at an appointment or visiting a home without being invited is a serious social offense.

To explore and better understand a different culture, you will need to keep your ears and eyes wide open, to see how they interact among themselves, and gently ask questions that address their beliefs, feelings and values. Once you begin to understand a culture at this deeper level, you will begin to understand why your friend makes certain choices, why she feels so hurt or embarrassed, why he looks angry or avoids you. People of other cultures are not 'odd', they are simply programmed to run on a different cultural software than yours. Our cultural software cannot be easily changed. Some of it will never change. So please take the cultural background of your friend seriously.

Culture and expectations

When it comes to man-woman relationships, romance and marriage, every culture has a deeply ingrained set of protocols and expectations. You will be wise to explore these. Every culture has an 'appropriate' behaviour for men and women before and after marriage. What is considered appropriate dress code for a Christian man or woman can differ greatly between cultures. What are some of the expectations that play in an inter-cultural relationship?

Expectations of your friend's family: If you are to marry your other-culture friend, his or her parents and family will be expecting something from you – something everyone in that culture considers 'normal'. You will be wise to explore this before entering a romantic relationship. For example, in some cultures you do not simply marry a girl, you marry into her extended family. You will be naturally and seriously expected to provide financial and material support to any needy among them. They may expect to be able to visit you for extended periods of time. This is not good or bad, it is simply a cultural thing. You need to be aware of it. You need to be happy to adjust to it and live with it. In some cultures it is very offensive if the wife has a better job than her husband. In other cultures the men do the talking and the women the working. In some cultures it is normal for the grandparents to bring up the grandchildren while both parents work and provide for the extended family. Ask. Read. Observe.

Your friend's expectations: Apart from affection and a good time together, what else does he or she expect from you? This is worth talking about. In some cultures *male dominance* is the norm. Even Christians in such cultures will use the Bible to support such dominance. This is a very sensitive issue for those who come from *we-cultures*. What does he or she and the extended family understand by 'submission'? If you marry, what would be your expected role as husband or wife? What 'freedoms' does he expect you to give up? Does she expect to bring her mother or sister to live with you? Does your friend expect you to learn his language? Does she expect you to eventually move and live in her country?

Your own expectations: Are you unconsciously expecting your friend to change, to abandon their own culture and adopt yours? Are you willing to accept him as he is and adapt to his culture? Are you prepared to change? Does the culture of your friend have some cultural features that you simply *cannot* accept? These deep rooted 'natural' cultural expectations do not automatically change because someone has become a Christian. These differences need to be found, acknowledged and talked about. If *you* are not willing to make the

necessary serious personal adaptations, it may be best to avoid an inter-cultural romantic relationship. You will only frustrate and hurt yourself and the other.

Culture and communication

As in all relationships, we communicate not only with words but also with gestures, facial expressions and behaviour. Cultural differences can enrich this communication process, but it can also make it more difficult. Be aware of these possible differences. When you say 'Shall we be special friends' you may mean one thing, the other-culture person may understand something else. In some cultures it is polite to look at another person in the eye as you speak. In other cultures eye contact with a person from the opposite gender is sexually suggestive. In doing so you will send a message. In some cultures holding hands or a light hug is very normal, in others it may convey a message which you did not intend to give. What is simply a possibility, your idea, your wish or desire, can be understood as your intention or even your promise. So be careful in your communication. Reflect back what you think you understood. Take time and make a serious effort to understand and be understood. Misunderstandings can be very painful.

Feelings are best expressed in your mother tongue. Sharing emotions of fun and laughter in times of courtship is very different from sharing emotions when you are feeling lonely, angry, frustrated, rejected, ill or in pain. Don't underestimate the barrier caused by language differences, especially during these times of stress and hardship. How and when we share our emotions will differ between cultures, even between families, but such sharing is essential in a healthy bonding process.

Inter-cultural relationships: dangers

Inter-cultural romantic relationships has its joys but also its unique set of dangers. Here I list some dangers, not to be negative or to frighten you, but in order to encourage you to move forward slowly with your eyes wide open. Some people may feel attracted to you not because of who you are but what you represent. Attaching themselves to you will help them escape a difficult situation at home. They may see in you the solution to their financial worries. Others may see marriage with you as gaining certain social status, or as the way to get a resident's visa. Of course many will not think this way, but you will do good to bear these possibilities in mind, especially during the early stages, even if you have met someone in a church setting.

You may have noticed that in the circle of people you know some people lack empathy or have very poor social skills. They are socially 'odd'. Of course you may choose to marry such a person. But you should make such a decision while being aware of this person's social limitation. A possible added complication in inter-cultural relationships is that it is not so easy to identify socially 'odd' people from another culture. You may think that the 'oddness' you observe is related to the culture of the person, rather than the person himself. You will need time and the help from people of the other culture to learn the difference.

You may have noticed that opposites attract each other. The noisy extrovert people often feel attracted to the calm and peaceful introvert – and vice versa. This can also play an important role in what initially attracts people from different cultures. A person from a different culture may attract simply because of the great differences. But in time, some of these differences may become a serious source of irritation. A long term healthy relationship is enriched by differences, but does require a fair amount of common ground.

Inter-cultural relationships: divorce rates

The diverse customs and expectations people from different cultures bring into their marriage does increase their chance of divorce compared to those who marry within their own culture. That is a statistical fact. For example, recent studies in America show that marriages between white women and black men are twice as likely to end in divorce by the 10th year of marriage compared with white couples. Similarly, marriages between Asian men and white women are 59% more likely to end in divorce. More interesting statistics from recent studies on *interracial* marriage and divorce rates in America are freely available - for example on Wikipedia. Many of these studies focus on America, where both marriage partners speak English and share a similar American heritage. But *inter-cultural* marriages embrace greater differences. Statistically inter-cultural marriages are even more likely to end in divorce.

Commenting on the draft of this chapter, an experienced leader of an international Christian mission organization remarked, "It is alarming the number marriages between West Europeans and Africans, Arabs and Latinos that end in divorce. In my experience, most of these marriages fail. You should not hide this painful fact from your readers." You have now read his warning. You may think his view is extreme. You may think that you are the exception. Perhaps. It is your life. But please don't take an inter-cultural relationship lightly. Take your time. And listen carefully to those who know you and love you.

Inter-cultural relationships: joys

My wife is Dutch. I am a two culture person, having spent half my life in South America and half in Europe. My wife and I have learnt to enjoy the variety that different cultures bring. We notice that our four children also enjoy hanging around with people from different cultures. In inter-cultural marriages we can pick and choose the best of two or more cultures.

Every culture needs to be 'salted' with Christian values. Our own cultural way of doing things is easily misunderstood as *the Christian way* of doing things. Within a healthy Christian inter-cultural marriage each partner can help the other see their cultural defects (even immoral and sinful tendencies) and work together at ways of being salt and light for Jesus in these cultures.

A person can change his or her surface level cultural expressions and adapt to life in another culture. But cultural deep level changes, that is, changes in beliefs, feelings and values are slow and difficult. Even with a strong desire to change, some deep level cultural features will remain with a person until he dies. You should not enter marriage with the hope of changing another person. Knowing the deep level characteristics of his or her culture, are *you* willing to change, accept and adapt?

After nearly 30 years of married life, we notice that we have developed a bit of a mix of our cultures of origin. In some things I am still quite British. In other things I am quite Colombian. And sometimes my wife can be very Dutch. Unintentionally we have developed and are enjoying our own family mini-culture. I notice that other inter-cultural families do the same. Inter-cultural marriages can bring much joy, adventure and variety. But they also require good communication, more grace and a sincere willingness to adapt.

Stop & consider

How well do I know the culture of the person I feel attracted to? What can I do to better understand the deep level of his or her culture? Am I expecting the other person to adopt my culture? Am I open to take advice from others who know the other culture? Does the culture of my friend have some cultural features that I simply *cannot* or *will not* accept? If necessary, am I prepared to learn another language, live in his or her country of origin and adjust to life in his or her culture? Is the Holy Spirit prompting me to do something in response to the topic covered in this chapter?

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