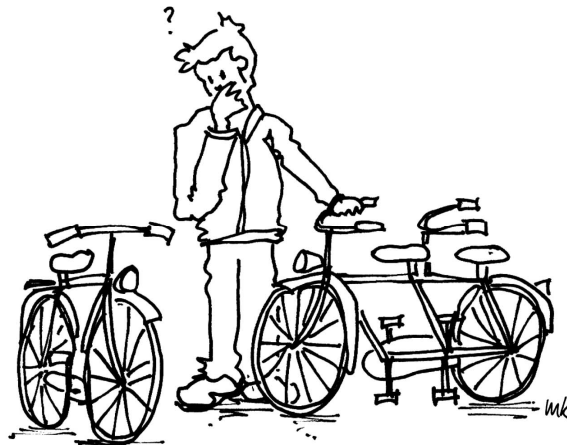


Pre-Marriage Relationships

About the search for a
Christian life partner



Philip Nunn

Source : www.philipnunn.com

Expanded version: 25 July 2016

CONTENT

Foreword

Introduction

1. Involve God in your search
2. Learn to enjoy other people
3. Singleness, marriage and purity
4. The 'fishing-pond' model
5. Becoming romantic and exclusive
6. Culture, expectations and communication
7. Seven FAQ's
8. How to end a romantic relationship

Conclusion

FOREWORD

Every generation of Christians faces the challenge of understanding and living God's design for marriage and singleness in an attractive and culturally relevant way. What can be said about that preparation phase, that special period which precedes marriage? In this short book I invite you to think through the relevant Biblical texts, principles and arguments. I am very aware that our life decisions, including those connected singleness and marriage, are determined more by our heart than our intellect. Rational arguments alone are very unlikely to change our behaviour. Why then this exchange? Because I am also very convinced that the Holy Spirit still uses Scripture and clear argumentation to change hearts. And once the heart is right, a God honouring behaviour will naturally - but not without difficulty - follow.

Today different cultures live side by side in our cities. You don't need to travel very far to 'fall in love' with someone from another culture. Inter-cultural romantic relationships have their unique set of joys and challenges. If you are considering one, make sure you digest chapters 5 and 6.

My wife Anneke (Dutch) and I (British) have been blessed with 4 children. They are currently aged between 18 and 26. The eldest is married and the second one is in a pre-marriage relationship. What you are about to read is no theoretic discourse. Although I devote much of my time to Bible teaching and pastoral work, I write these pages primarily as a father, out of love and concern for our children, their friends and those of you who belong to their generation. During your pre-marriage relationship phase you will be laying the moral foundation not only for your marriage but also for the generation that will follow you.

I dedicate these pages to the memory of my grandparents, Harm and Rie Wilts, who loved the Lord, honoured His Word and cherished relationships. Their words and way of life positively influenced their generation and those of us who follow.

My prayer is that something in these pages will be used by the Holy Spirit to inform and inspire those of you who seek to honour God with your pre-marriage relationship. May it also be a useful tool in the hands of parents, counsellors and youth workers as they seek to provide loving Biblical guidance to the following generation.

“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path”

Ps 119:105

Philip Nunn
Eindhoven, NL

INTRODUCTION

Every culture has its way to express marriage; it has some clear way to show that this woman and this man now belong together, that together they form a distinct and exclusive unit. It is also true that every culture has its way or 'method' whereby a couple moves towards a marriage relationship. In some societies, the parents have a dominating influence, in others the couple themselves are completely free to choose. In some cultures, love and romance are the motors that move a couple towards marriage. In others cultures love, and sometimes also romance, are discovered or learnt after getting married.



The correct Biblical method

Some Bible students have searched the Scriptures in order to determine the 'correct' method, process or relationship-path Christians should follow if they wish to marry. The books of the Bible were written during one and a half millennia and in them we find a number of marriage narratives each with its own 'method.' Adam woke up, and there was Eve – God brought her to him. Isaac came in from the fields, and there was Rebecca – Abraham's servant had brought her to him. On meeting they were considered married. King Saul offered one of his daughters in marriage to the man

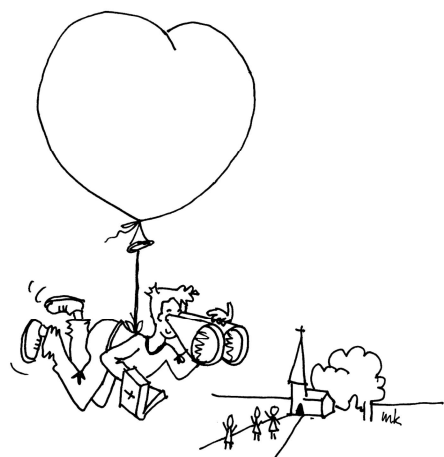
who would kill Goliath. Samson liked a girl and asked his parents to get her for him. In the New Testament we read that "Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph" (Matt. 1:18). This pledge could well be described as an exclusive, faithful and non-sexual relationship leading towards marriage. In the apostolic letters we find instructions on how to behave *within* marriage but we find no guidelines on *the process* or the 'method' Christians should follow when seeking a marriage partner.

We conclude that when it comes to the steps leading up to marriage, there is no such thing as 'the correct Biblical method'. But this does not mean that the Lord is indifferent about how we go about finding a life partner. The Bible contains godly values and principles which influence and guide all our decisions, including those leading to marriage.

Involve God in your search

The advice of king Solomon, given some 3000 years ago, is well worth taking seriously as you search for a marriage partner: “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; *in all your ways acknowledge him*, and he will make your paths straight” (Prov. 3:5-6). If you are a Christian, consciously invite the Lord Jesus to be part of your mate-hunting process. If at all possible, seek His guidance from the very start, well before you ‘fall in love’. Wherever you are right now, He has a good path for you, and He still wants to guide you. Are you willing to ‘acknowledge Him’ in this important area of your life?

Sometimes God may supernaturally intervene with some form of specific guidance or He may choose to ‘close a door’ and so eliminate a particular option in our life. But God’s usual way to guide us Christians is by making His Word alive to us. When you find in the Bible a clear command or boundary, God expects us to submit to His wise instructions – remember



that boundary rails on mountain roads are there to protect us; they limit our freedom for our own good. Although the Bible contains commands and boundaries, they are relatively few. When it comes to guidance and decision making, God’s clear preference is to work through ‘principles’, changing our behaviour through changing the way we think. He wants His sons and daughters to adopt His values and priorities, which are usually somewhat different from those which dominate the society we live in: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is, his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Rom. 12:2).

The wise and healthy principles which we find in Scripture are designed to influence every area of our life. They are given for every Christian in every culture and in every age. Those with a ‘new heart’ will also want to ‘renew their mind’; those who love God will also want to think like He does and to live to please Him. Here follow four foundational Biblical principles that will help guide all your decisions, also those decisions you make as you choose friends, search for a life-partner and move towards a possible marriage.

1. Ownership: Who owns you?

On becoming a Christian, something fundamental took place: we recognized that we were lost sinners and turned to Christ for salvation. We freely and happily gave our life, our past, but also our present and our future to the Lord Jesus. He has become our new owner and boss – and He’s a very good one! The apostle Paul explained it like this: “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? *You are not your own*; you were bought at a price” (1 Cor. 6:19-20). It is very important that you should not forget this when you begin that search for a life partner. When we come together as a church, when sung to a catchy tune, it is usually easier to sing positively about surrender and ownership. But then comes Monday. Then we face those difficult decisions. This is not a new struggle. Two thousand years ago the Lord Jesus asked his followers:

“Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?” (Luke 6:46). Reaffirming Christ’s ownership of our life makes our obedience more natural.

2. Purpose: What does God want with you?

The Lord Jesus came to earth to give His life in order to make forgiveness and eternal salvation possible. But on conversion we are not taken to heaven, we are left on earth with a purpose. We are here on a mission. What does He want to do with us? The Bible makes it clear that we have been created to glorify God, to worship and serve Him (Matt. 4:10). The gifts we have, our family background, our health condition, the experiences we’ve lived, are all used by God to fulfil His purpose for our life. In pursuing His noble goal, some are called to remain single, others to live a married life. After his conversion, the apostle Paul described the new passion in his life: “For to me, to live is Christ” (Phil. 1:21). The driving purpose that affected every decision of his life was to please Christ: “Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of *that* for which Christ Jesus took hold of me” (Phil. 3:12). If you are not going anywhere, any bus will do! But if you have a destination, the choice of bus becomes very important. The choice of partner will strongly affect the direction of your life. Seek to live your calling. Ask the Lord for a partner who will form with you a ‘useful team’ in the Kingdom of God.

3. Different: How does God see you?

We Christians are seen by God as a new creation, a chosen people, a holy nation, as His people. The Lord Jesus prayed for you and me saying, “My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. *They are not of the world*, even as I am not of it” (John 17:15,16). We live on earth and we participate in society, but we don’t belong here. We are not normal human beings with an added bit of faith or religion. We Christians have a different destiny. In God’s eyes, the difference between a Christian and a non-Christian is real and radical, we are as He is, different as light is from darkness: “For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light” (Eph. 5:8). The reason why God does not want us to be yoked together with a non-Christian is not because we are better people, but because we are so *different*. “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?” (2 Cor. 6:14,15). As Christians, we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, we are a holy (separated for a purpose) people. Our challenge is to see ourselves as God sees us – and live accordingly.

4. Obedience: Can God be trusted?

The basis of our relationship with God is love. We love God because He first loved us. But love is more than a feeling. The Bible links love to obedience. The Lord Jesus explained, “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. *If you obey my commands*, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that *your joy may be complete*” (John 15:9-11). Christian obedience is neither a mindless subordination to church leaders nor a mechanical compliance to a set of religious rules. Christian obedience is a willing submission to a loving and wise God, to Someone who has created us for a purpose, to Someone who has given His life to redeem us, to Someone who has adopted us into His family and Who desires that we spend eternity with Him! Surely He has shown Himself to be worthy of our trust. Who else can be so good, so kind and so faithful? You have trusted the eternal destiny of your soul into God’s hands. Are you also willing to trust Him with your life

on earth? Will you also trust Him with the choice of marriage partner, or even the decision of whether to marry at all?

As you have noticed, this first chapter deals with issues of the heart. We all know that rules, guidelines and suggestions have a limited effect on our behaviour. It is mainly our heart that controls our actions.

Stop & consider

Before you read further, take some time to reflect on these four Biblical principles. Do I feel comfortable with them? Do I sense that the Holy Spirit is encouraging me to make a deeper commitment to Christ? If you are aware that some serious heart decision needs to be made, I suggest you put this booklet down and take time to respond to the Lord. When your heart is right, you will benefit so much more from what follows.

Learn to enjoy other people

Most languages have different words to describe stages in the development of the relationship between a man and a woman. Usually the relationship between the couple moves between three distinguishable stages: (1) a general friendship relationship, (2) a romantic-temporal-exclusive relationship, and then (3) a marriage relationship. Are you a young Christian man or woman who desires to enjoy these stages but in a way that pleases God? The Psalmist asked, "How can a young man keep his way pure?" And then answered, "By living according to your word" (Ps. 119:9). Our challenge is to allow the God given Biblical principles discussed above to influence our thinking and behaviour during each of these three stages. If you are to marry, your marriage partner must first enter your circle of friends. It is important, therefore, to be open to friendships, to be a good friend and to be selective in your choice of close friends.

Developing a circle of friends

This is part of normal social interaction. Our circle of friends may include a wide spectrum of relationships, from occasional acquaintances all the way to close comradeship. In the Bible we read of loose friends, those who want to be with us because they want something from us: "Wealth brings many friends" (Prov. 19:4), and of genuine friends, those who accept, love and value us for who we are: "A friend loves at all times" (Prov. 17:17). A true friend will confront us with truth, even when it hurts: "Wounds from a friend can be trusted" (Prov. 27:6). Have you noticed the powerful and beneficial influence your good friends have on your values, tastes, priorities and the way you live?



Being aware of the power of friendships, the Bible also contains some words of caution, such as "Do not be misled: Bad company corrupts good character" (1 Cor. 15:33). There is such a thing as 'good company' and 'bad company'. We can recognize good and bad company not by how much fun we have together, but by what it does to our character – to the way we think and the way we treat others. The godless social

current we live in is very strong. Unless we consciously stand firm, we shall slowly absorb its values and moral standards, we shall feel comfortable where Christ is rejected, we shall - as the Bible puts it - begin to 'love the world' (1 John 2:16). And here Scripture is very clear: "Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God" (James 4:4). If our goal is to become more and more like the Lord Jesus, we shall benefit greatly from time spent with like minded people. What effect is your current set of friends having on your character? Should something change? Here are some tips for healthy friend-making:

- (a) Initiate and nurture friendships: A good friendship is not a relationship in which we only receive or only give. It requires desire and initiative from both sides. If it is to last, it will require continued sacrifice and investment. For some, this comes naturally; for others, it is something that must be learnt.
- (b) Be cautious with your inner circle: In time, some of our friends become very special to us, we know a lot about each other and we care for each other. Among the many friends, we

develop a circle of *close friends*. Remember that if you are to marry, your future husband or wife will first come into your circle of general friends and then move into your circle of special friends. Be purposeful and careful about whom you allow into your inner circle of close friends. Don't let it just happen. Decide!

- (c) Smart fishing: Trout is mostly a river fish. If you want trout, you don't rent a boat and go fishing in high sea. You won't find many trout in the sea. If you want some good Christian friends, and maybe also a life partner, where should you 'fish'? If you want to 'be fished' by a trout lover, where should you swim? It makes good natural sense to consciously seek and go to events and get involved in projects that allow you to meet and interact with fellow Christians.
- (d) Learn to enjoy different people: We have been created social beings, and it is not good for us humans to be alone. Friendships are a gift from God that add joy and pleasure to life. By being a friend, you will sow joy in the hearts of others and enrich your own life. There is fun and enjoyment among many friends, both men and women. Don't focus too soon on only one person.

Some tips

Do your best to avoid making 'finding of a partner' an obsession. Those who give the impression that they are always in fishing-mode can be irritating to those around them. Learn to relax and just enjoy those around you. You should also avoid the opposite obsession, thinking that others are always out to fish you. Be cautious but not arrogant. Remember that others won't be able to know you and enjoy a friendship with you unless you make a point of making yourself known. You will miss out on your social development and much joy in life if you are only willing to invest time and energy to befriend potential life partners.

Free to marry in the Lord

If you are considering marriage, you should take careful note that Scripture consistently encourages believers to marry within the faith and consistently opposes marriages with those who do not belong to 'the family of God'. When God's people, Israel, entered the Promised Land, God gave them clear instructions against marrying those of another nation: "Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons..." Why? Commandments like these were not given to promote the superiority of the Hebrew race but for spiritual reasons, to protect the Israelite, his relatives and possible descendants from being led astray from faith in the true God, "for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods" (Deut. 7:3-4). Non Christians can also be moral and kind. A non Christian can be a 'really great girl', a 'caring and responsible young man'.

In the New Testament, we find the same message: "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?" (2 Cor. 6:14-15). The Christian widow is free to marry again, but under one condition, that the new spouse "must belong to the Lord" (1 Cor. 7:39). These guidelines are given for our own benefit and for that of our possible descendants. As always, God blesses those who trust Him and obey them.

Stop & consider

Has finding a life-partner become an obsession? Is there something I should change in order to better enjoy other people? Am I a good friend? Who belong to my inner circle of friends?

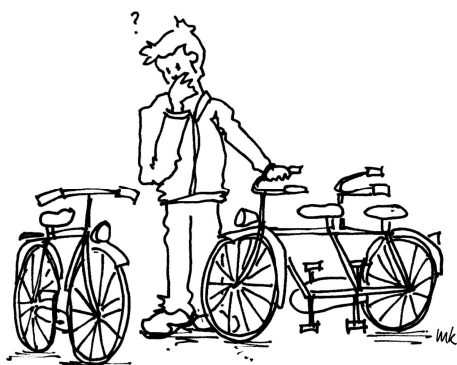
Singleness, marriage and purity

We are all called to live at least some of our life 'single'. All of us experience singleness before marriage, some after or between marriages, and some for a lifetime. As a general rule, we read that "it is not good for a man to be alone" (Gen 2:18). How should we Christians view singleness?

Singleness, marriage and dignity

Many within the Jewish tradition have a very high view of marriage and family life, and consider singleness a second class state - that life without marrying is a less holy, less complete and a less Jewish life. Christianity also has a high view of marriage and family life, but it differs from this Jewish tradition, giving singleness and marriage an equally high status. For a long time, many Christians considered singleness even more honourable than marriage. They built monasteries around the world in which celibacy was a standard requirement. The word 'monastery' includes the root Greek word 'monos' which means 'alone'. But the Bible presents marriage and singleness as equally honourable lifestyle options.

The Lord Jesus was perfect in His humanity, He was everything a human was meant to be while choosing not to get married. We conclude that marriage is not necessary to our complete experience of being human. Teaching on singleness and marriage, the Lord Jesus pointed out that for some a single lifestyle is their own choice but for others it is a lifestyle imposed on them – by others or by circumstances. There are also others for whom, due to genetics, marriage will never be an option. He explained it like this: "For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it" (Matt. 19:12). And yet, each of these single lifestyles can be lived fully, 'for the kingdom of God', and to the glory of God.



The apostle Paul spoke well of single life, and encouraged it as a fully valid and dignified way of life. He experienced his own singleness as a 'gift from God' and encouraged others to also see it that way: "I wish that all men were as I am. But each man has his own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that... But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion" (1 Cor. 7:7-9).

Single but not alone

Some men and women choose for a single life. Others live a single life but not out of personal choice. They would clearly prefer to share their life with a loving partner, to have children. To live in a family setting... but the Lord has not provided. In such situations it is worth remembering that both 'being single' and 'being married' are *both* referred to in Scripture as a "gift from God" (1 Cor. 7:7). Gifts are not always things we choose ourselves. Gifts are things we receive from a giver. Our heavenly Father is a good God and so are all

His gifts (James 1:17). Trusting in the love, wisdom and the goodness of the Giver will steer us away from destructive thought patterns that can lead to anger, self-pity or depression.

If you are living a time of singleness, learn to enjoy some of the benefits it provides. Develop friendships and use your additional energy and resources to serve God and others. There is joy and fulfilment in service. The apostle Paul pointed out that the non-married believer can “live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord” (1 Cor. 7:32-35). It is good and correct to seek a marriage partner, but, as mentioned earlier, don’t let ‘getting married’ become an all consuming passion. Enjoy your single years. Remember also that a happy person is more attractive than a desperate one!

Marriage as a covenant

Different people groups have different ways to initiate a marriage, but they have in common that at some point everyone knows that this woman and this man belong together. If an outsider tries to interfere in that relationship, he will encounter serious problems. Marriage is a gift of God to humanity and not just to the Church, therefore non-Christians are just as married as Christians! The Christian derives his or her understanding of marriage from Scripture. In the Bible marriage is explained as a covenant (Mal. 2:14-15). A covenant is the most durable and binding type of agreement known in Scripture. The act of getting marriage is clearly more than a piece of paper or a useful social convention.

Cohabitation before marriage?

When the Lord Jesus was asked a question about divorce, he replied by quoting those well known words from the book of Genesis: “Haven’t you read, he replied, that at the beginning the Creator made them male and female, and said, for this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what *God has joined together*, let man not separate” (Matt. 19:4-6).

At the moment of marriage, God Himself intervenes and ‘joins’ a man and a woman, you to your partner. From that decisive and public moment, in the eyes of God and society you “are no longer two, but one” – with all its implied joys and responsibilities. Marriage, like the other covenants mentioned in Scripture, usually requires witnesses and should be formally sealed. Marriage, as a covenant, is more than something private and personal. Covenants also have a social dimension, they are frequently enacted through some form of ceremony or ritual. We are told that God Himself is a witness in this marriage covenant (Prov. 2:17).

Before marriage, sexual intimacy is unwholesome because it lacks the framework of commitment expressed through a public covenant, and is therefore strongly disapproved of by God. Within the safety and stability of a marriage relationship the sexual enjoyment of each other’s bodies and sexual intercourse are considered something healthy and beautiful - it is even encouraged! The clear boundaries on sexual intimacy are placed there by God to protect something delicate and beautiful. It is in our best interest to take them seriously.

Marriage and pornography

Pornography has its attraction to both men and women. Among men however, it has reached epidemic proportions - affecting men of all ages, single and married - also among Christians. With the increase in technology, availability and addiction will surely increase. At least three facts make this problem a relevant issue in a pre-marriage relationship: (1) Statistics indicate that marriage does not usually solve an addiction to pornography. In other words, sexual

addictions are more than about sexual fulfillment. (2) A second statistic increasingly coming to the fore among Christian marriage counselors is that addiction to pornography is one of the major causes of marriage breakups among believers. (3) The Lord Jesus said, "But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt.5:28). According to the Lord Jesus, what you allow yourself to see and imagine really matters.

Given this serious status of pornography and its damaging effect on a marriage relationship, those who find themselves addicted are strongly advised to seek help to free themselves from this addiction *before* marriage. Some Christian counselors would strongly recommend that if one of the persons is involved with a sexual addition, they should break off their pre-marriage relationship - even if they have plans to get married - until that person has experienced freedom from their sexual addition.

Stop & consider

Could it be possible that the Lord is calling me to spend some years or even a lifetime as a single person? What could I do in order to make the most of the time I am single? We have seen that God approves marriage and disapproves of cohabitation. Does something have to change in order to make my way of life more pleasing to the Lord?
--

The 'fishing-pond' model

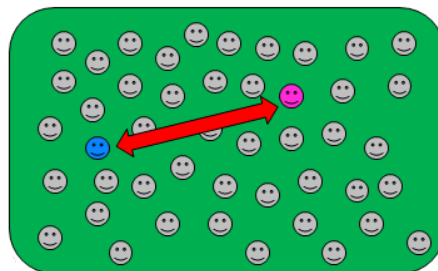


As quoted earlier, "A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord" (1 Cor. 7:39). This widow, like every other non-married Christian, is "free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord". How can we exercise this freedom to marry today? How can someone go about finding their life partner?

The 'Right-One' model

Knowing that the Lord God has a plan for our life, some Christians conclude that such a plan includes the name of the man or woman you should marry. Your task, with the Lord's help, is to find the 'right-one' among the millions of partner possibilities spread around the world.

Personally I find this model unnecessarily complicated and rather stressful. It is based on the idea that the plan of God for my life is like a line, and I am called to walk on that line. Any deviation, however small, is a departure from God's will, a failure. And each failure has serious consequences for the rest of my life. What if I buy the 'wrong' car? What if I study nursing when God's plan for me was physiotherapy? What if I accept the 'wrong' job or sign up to the 'wrong' health insurance company? How can I be sure that I have moved to the 'right' town or am engaged to the 'right' girl? What will happen if I marry the girl God intended for someone else? Will I lose her later? Will my actions leave someone else without their 'correct' wife?

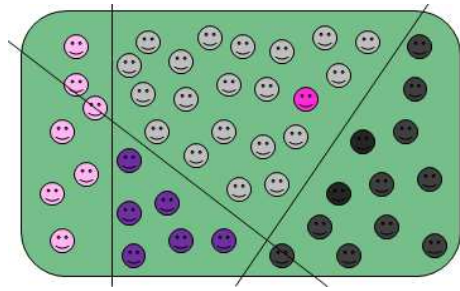


Perhaps it is easier to visualize God's will for my life more like moving on a surface with boundaries than moving along a narrow line. Some boundaries are clearly stated in Scripture, others are based on Biblical principles and others are simply sensible boundaries. Within these boundaries, the Lord allows us freedom to choose. From Scriptures we learn that our heavenly Father is not only interested in our choices but also in how we reach our decisions, our values and motivations. Do we take Him into account in our decision processes? Are we seeking His guidance? Are we seeking to promote His kingdom? Perhaps the Lord doesn't really mind if I buy a Toyota or a Fiat. But He would be disappointed if I purchased a car to 'show off' or if I irresponsibly put myself in debt.

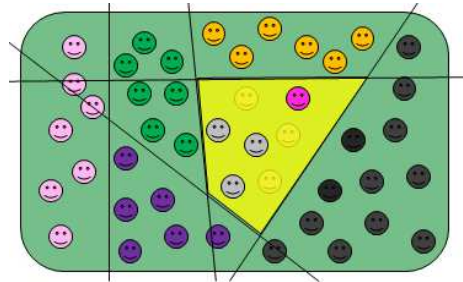
The 'Fishing-Pond' model

Visualizing God's will for our lives as a surface encourages us to seek the borders of the surface and then *enjoy* the freedom to move and choose within these borders. For example, when considering a marriage partner, Scripture provides some clear boundaries: (1) he must be a Christian – therefore all non-Christians will be excluded from your surface; (2) he must not be married to another person - therefore all people in a marriage relationship will be excluded from your surface. And (3) he must be a man if you are a woman, and vice-versa – therefore all those of your own gender will be excluded from your surface.

The borders of our surface may also be influenced or determined by principles such as: (4) if you already sense a specific calling of God on your life, you will seek someone who also has that calling or is sympathetic towards it. You will want to place the border of your surface to exclude the possibility a person who opposes such a calling. Furthermore, some orders may be connected with simple common sense.

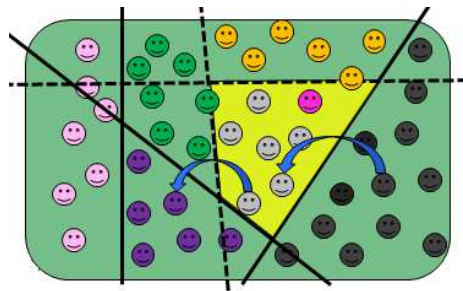


For example, (5) you may also want to exclude from your surface some persons on account of their age, temperament or level of education. After considering a number of boundaries, you will be left with a surface of non-excluded candidates, a possible group of people which I refer to as your 'fishing-pond'. There may be 3 or 4 fish in your fishing-pond, or it may be empty at present. In time, fish come in and out of your fishing-pond, and you are free to fish any one of them. As the apostle Paul explained, you are free to marry *any one you wish* but he or she "must belong to the Lord" (1 Cor. 7:39).



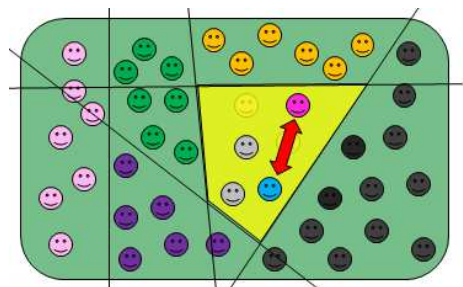
Important observations

(a) Fixed and flexible boundaries: Some of the boundaries are fixed and we have no authority to move them. For example, a non-Christian should never be considered as a potential marriage partner. That boundary is fixed. Only if he or she becomes a Christian may they become a fish in your pond. As people grow and change, they may enter or leave your fishing-pond. With other boundaries, such as age, maturity, education, cultural background and the like, you may be cautiously flexible.



(b) Love and realism: Don't forget that you are not perfect and that the perfect life partner doesn't exist. God designed marriage for humans, and every human has its faults. Look at happy marriages around you: It is possible to be happily married without being perfect! In looking for a life partner, it is sometimes easy to miss the obvious. Be warned, sometimes a fish can swim in your fishing-pond for so long that you no longer notice it!

(c) Taking initiative: Sometimes fish may unexpectedly drift into your fishing-pond. Sometimes initiative on your part will be necessary to populate your fishing-pond. It makes good natural sense to consciously seek and go to events and get involved in projects that allow you to meet and interact with fellow Christians. If you would like to study, you will need to investigate college possibilities. If you want to buy a bike, you will have to visit various shops and websites. If you want an interesting holiday, you will also ask and explore possibilities. You will need to take some initiative. You need to take action. You will eventually need the courage to decide. Why should it be different when seeking a marriage partner?



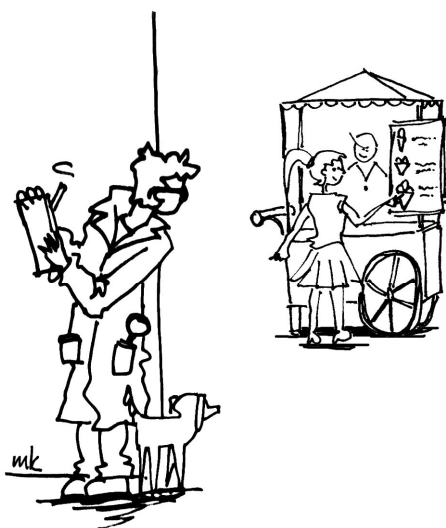
- (d) Meeting mature Christian singles online: Developments in technology have ensured that there are now new places where Christians can meet. Some organizations have developed websites where, usually for a fee, serious Christians may first come into contact with potential marriage partners. They help you make the 'first contact'. From what I have seen, this website method has a number of dangers, especially when the reliability of the profiles is not conscientiously controlled and monitored by the website owners. I have seen from close up a number of sad and painful situations where secretive young people have fallen in love with contacts made in unsupervised virtual chat rooms. I would not recommend such. But for mature Christian singles, a Christian website may well be a practical way to open their fish pond. A clear advantage of a website is that it allows Christian participants to narrow down their search along 20 or 30 coordinates, including age, Christian convictions, education and geography. In some countries and regions, such quality websites do not exist.
- (e) When a fish in your 'fishing-pond' becomes the 'right one': The Lord can lead you to your life partner using the 'Right-One' model or the 'Fishing-Pond' model. What I am trying to say is that I find the 'Fishing-Pond' model more practical, realistic and in harmony with the way the Lord guides us in other areas of our life. But one thing must be clear, once you have married one of the fish in your fishing-pond, the difference between the two models disappears: you might have had 3 or 4 fishes in your fishing-pond, but once you choose and marry one of them, that becomes the 'right-one' for you. On your wedding day, the two search models become one. The one you marry becomes the 'right one'. Love that marriage partner and be faithful to him or her for the rest of your life. Don't entertain 'what if' thoughts about fish that used to be in your fishing-pond – that phase has past. Exclusively build up the relationship with the one the Lord God has united you to, until death breaks you apart.

Stop & consider

Do I sometimes feel stressed about finding 'the right-one'? How can the Fishing-Pond model help me? You may find it helpful to take a sheet of paper and write for yourself the boundaries of your fishing-pond. Does someone I know fit into my pond? Is there anything I could do to help populate my fishing-pond?

Becoming romantic and exclusive

We shall now consider that very special period which moves a couple from friendship to marriage. At some point a man and a woman become aware that something more than a good friendship has been awakened between them. It is 'romantic' since they feel strongly attracted to each other. This phase begins once this mutually agreeable sentiment has been expressed and responded to. It is an emotionally charged moment, and from then on certain expectations are awakened: this new phase in the relationship is 'exclusive' since there is only room for the two of you. You will find yourself restricted, and you will feel betrayed if you discover that your partner was simultaneously romantically involved with another.



But this phase is also 'temporal' because there is commitment but not yet lifelong commitment. This is a beautiful exploratory phase, where the exclusiveness of the relationship keeps others at a distance while you get to know each other better. During this phase the couple grows together, they feel they need each other, their souls begin to bond together and they become aware that they experience pain when separated for any length of time.

Preliminary research

Since ending a romantic relationship is usually very painful for one or both of you, it is very wise to do some preliminary research *before* you say 'I love you' or say 'yes' to a romantic relationship. If you are in considering an inter-cultural relationship you will find some *additional* tips in the next chapter. Here follow some important areas for your consideration:

- (a) Family: This is an important area of exploration because unconsciously we carry a great deal of our family background into our new relationships. How does he or she behave at home? Does he respect the authority of his parents? Does he help around the house? Is she negative or critical towards her brothers or sisters? Does it look like she wants to use you to 'escape' from a difficult situation? Does she love her family?
- (b) Character: What is the person really like? Is she open and honest? Does she take her responsibilities seriously? Does he finish what he has begun? Does he have or has he had some addiction? Is he kind? Is she forgiving? Is he generous? Is he selfish? Is she proud? Does he show sensitivity towards the needs of others? Does he volunteer to help? Usually, it is difficult times that reveal someone's true character. How does he behave under stress, pain or disappointment?
- (c) Relationships: How does he relate to other people? What kind of friends does she have? Has he or she had a romantic relationship before? Has it really ended? Why and how did it end? Is he courteous and respectful towards people of the opposite sex? Does she flirt with others? Does she let other men touch her? Does he have enemies? Does she make

an effort to mend broken relationships? Does he seek to dominate or manipulate others? How does she function as a team player? Is he responsible? Do others consider him or her a good and loyal friend?

- (d) Maturity: Is she emotionally stable? Does she depend emotionally on her parents or on some of her friends? Does he take his studies and work seriously? Is she afraid of hard work? Does he easily drop his commitments? Is she disciplined in her use of time and finances? Does he have debts? Is he easily offended? What does he do with his free time? Do others who know him/her, consider him/her prepared (or nearly so) to enter a marriage relationship?
- (e) Spirituality: Do those who know him consider him a genuine born again Christian? Is the congregation she goes to considered one of 'sound Biblical doctrine'? Does he show evidence of being a *growing* Christian? Would he make a good 'spiritual head' for your home? Does she have Scriptural convictions? Does she have a faith of her own? Does he enjoy his walk with Jesus? Is he using his gifts to serve the Lord in his local church? What attitude does she have towards the leadership of her church? Does he take some initiatives in spiritual matters?

Sources of information

You may find the answers to some of these questions by asking the person directly. But don't limit yourself to the answers he or she gives. There are many other fruitful sources of information. Where possible, visit the home of your friend and sense for yourself the atmosphere and see for yourself how he or she relates to other family members. Ask discreet questions to his/her friends, youth worker, elder or others that know him better and over a longer period of time.

What about the parents?

As long as you are in some way dependent on your parents, they will feel responsible for you. That holds also for the person you feel attracted to. There may be some exceptions, but generally speaking it is very wise to seek the opinion and the blessing of your parents. It is also true that it is *your* life, that you are living a life that God has given *you*. Eventually *you yourself* will be responsible for deciding whether or not to marry, and who to marry. But to choose to ignore parents and their life experience on this important matter is usually not a clever thing to do. Your parents probably know you fairly well and for many years. Their suggestions, words of caution or approval can be very valuable to you.

Parents usually love their children dearly. Your parents are deeply concerned about your future. Your friend's parents are also deeply concerned about his or her future. By being open, by seeking their approval of parents, by keeping parents informed of important developments, you will win their trust and respect. When a young man approaches the parents of a girl and asks their permission to pursue a special friendship with her, he will have a good start. If the parents have some 'terms & conditions' the sooner you know them the better. Winning to respect, trust and the affection of your partner's parents is definitely a worthwhile investment! Be smart!

When does a romantic relationship become unhealthy?

Sometimes a romantic relationship may start very well but in time it may turn unhealthy and even harmful. Here are some signs that a relationship is heading the wrong way:

- (a) Ignoring the family: You are not alone. You will always remain part of your family. It is unhealthy when your partner is only interested in you and shows very little interest in your brothers, sisters and parents.
- (b) Seeking sexual pleasure: Of course you feel a sense of excitement when being together, but your relationship is becoming unhealthy when physical contact becomes central. Sexual pleasure, including sexual intercourse, is a beautiful packet that should be opened only after you are married. Love is patient and not self-seeking. True love waits.
- (c) Excessive restrictions: Jealousy is a good and strong emotion which helps protect unique relationships. God also experiences this when something takes the place in our heart that only He should have: "Do not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God" (Ex. 34:14). A romantic relationship becomes unhealthy when one or both *demand* such attention that normal friendships and responsibilities are abandoned or forbidden.
- (d) Spiritual decline: What effect does your relationship have on your ministry and your communion with Christ? Can you pray and discuss God's Word together? Do you encourage each other to develop your gifts and grow spiritually? The relationship is becoming unhealthy if it is reducing your desire to worship and serve the Lord.
- (e) Selfish motives: Some people desperately *need* a romantic partner in order to feel normal. They are in love with romance rather than with you. A relationship becomes unhealthy when it is not focused on both of you but on meeting the needs of one of you. The interest in *you* may be replaced by interest in what *you have*, such as a nice car, a well-paid job, a sexy body or your family may have certain status which the other desires. You will want to marry someone who cares, accepts and respects you as a person, someone who loves *you*!

It is unrealistic to seek a perfect partner, but if you notice that your relationship is becoming unhealthy, take action! A healthy pre-marriage relationship is the necessary foundation for a healthy marriage, so take any warning sign seriously. Discuss your concern together. Agree on some new action plan or a new set of physical boundaries. If the other is unwilling to discuss the matter and persists in the wrong direction seek advice from some mature Christian friend, preferably a married one. Be open to the possibility of terminating the relationship. Sometimes stopping, closing or bringing something to an end is simply the right thing to do.

Stop & consider

How well do I know that person I feel attracted to? What areas should I explore further? Have we involved our parents in a satisfactory way? Does our relationship have the blessing of our parents? Is there something unhealthy about our relationship? Can we talk about it? Is it improving? Should I seriously consider ending this relationship?

Culture, expectations and communication

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?

Seven FAQ's

We shall explore the romantic-temporal-exclusive relationship further by answering seven Frequently Asked Questions among Christians:

1. Can I enter into a romantic relationship without any thought of marriage?

Romance belongs to the temporal-exclusive relationship and to marriage. The temporal-exclusive relationship is a natural preparatory phase for a possible marriage. To seek the joys of romance without any thought of consummation can be:

- (a) Socially unhealthy: The exclusive element of the romantic relationship restricts your broader social development and interaction. Through our diverse social contacts we develop and learn a great deal about life and ourselves. Therefore, early social restriction can be unhealthy.
- (b) Naturally unrealistic: Romance awakens something deep and powerful within us which is intended to move us in the direction of marriage. It awakens deep desires and expectations which if terminated, will cause deep pain for the abandoned party.
- (c) Morally dangerous: Seeking personal pleasure with no marriage goal in mind will make sexual sin increasingly difficult to resist.

Due to your age, study commitments, travel plans or other reasons, marriage may not be possible in the foreseeable future. If you are a long way away from the practical necessities to get married, it may well be unwise to enter into the preparatory relationship.

2. Can I enter into a romantic relationship with a non-Christian?

We have seen that when God provides a marriage partner, He will always match a Christian with a Christian. To consider a romantic-temporal-exclusive relationship with a non-Christian is to explore possibilities outside the will of God. The choice of marriage partner is one of the most important and influential decisions you will ever make. If you know that the Lord does not want you to marry a non-Christian, why embark on the preparation phase? It is much wiser to refrain.

3. Can I enter into a romantic relationship with a non-Christian if I am seriously committed not to marry him unless he becomes a Christian?

Christians who propose or agree to a romantic relationship with a non-Christian with this hidden agenda are being dishonest and unkind towards the non-Christian. It is a dangerous and also a dishonest strategy. Consider the following:

- (a) Dishonest: If Jesus is the passion of your heart, if your desire is to live for Him, how can you build an honest loving relationship with another person while hiding the consequences of this important fact? Being a Christian is your identity, it is who you are! A healthy friendship is built on openness and transparency, interaction without hidden agendas.

- (b) Unkind: The non-Christian is not violating any Scripture by seeking a relationship with you. The Biblical prohibitions apply to you, not to the non-Christian. From his or her perspective, there is no good reason to abstain from a romantic relationship. If the non-Christian does not want to follow Christ, why should he or she be made to suffer for your experiment?
- (c) Unrealistic: The growth in love and respect, the bonding of souls that takes place during this romantic-exclusive phase is not something that can be easily 'switched off'. How long will you wait for his or her conversion? When we are 'madly in love', we are willing to do nearly anything to keep the relationship going, including doing religious things like going to church, getting baptized or reading the Bible. How will you know if your partner is agreeing to some religious practices in order to marry you? It can be confusing for the unbeliever to understand his or her own heart, to distinguish between interest in their lover and interest in God and His word.
- (d) Dangerous: We all have moments of weakness. We may set out not to marry until the other converts, but we may not be as strong as we think we are. Non Christians can also be very nice people. The romantic-temporal-exclusive relationship may well take its natural course and you may end up marrying that person. In time, when in love, your resolve may well weaken. If you know that the Lord does not want you to marry a non-Christian, it is unwise and dangerous to embark on the preparation phase.
- (e) Disobedient: We have already quoted from 2 Corinthians 6:14-15, "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For... what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?" When does this 'yoke with an unbeliever' begin? A yoke is a wooden bar



which is fastened over the necks of two animals, especially cattle, and connected to the load or vehicle that they are pulling. The apostle Paul uses 'yoke' as a figure of speech to illustrate that which binds two people together, a relationship where the behaviour of one inevitably affects the direction of the other. It is a clear warning to avoid marriage and also *other relationships* which fasten a believer with an unbeliever. Romantic relationships bind souls together. Although no papers are signed, it is very obvious that the behaviour of one lover inevitably influences the behaviour of the other. Romance with a non-Christian is also a 'yoke' that every Christian should avoid in order to freely follow Christ.

4. Can God use a romantic relationship to lead a non-Christian to Christ?

Yes, God can do it, and sometimes He does. But what we often see is that the unconverted partner remains unconverted and his or her superficial interest in your church and your faith slowly evaporates after marriage. Those who are already married to an unbeliever, are encouraged to remain married and be a blessing to the unbelieving partner (1 Cor. 7:12-16). But it is fundamentally wrong to ask and expect God's blessing when we are choosing a path of disobedience. Some have said, 'I will just do it and later I will repent and be forgiven'. It is true that God always forgives a repentant and contrite heart, but scars and some painful limitations may stay with us for the rest of our life: "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows" (Gal. 6:7). We should never presume on God's grace:

"What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning, so that grace may increase? By no means!" (Rom. 6:1,2). The Lord only forbids that which is bad for us. He forbids something because He loves us and has something better in mind. The determining question is: do you trust Him? This may well be the person the Lord has for you, but until he or she has truly converted to Christ, he or she remains a 'forbidden fruit', he or she remains outside of your 'fishing-pond'. Quite often the Lord will speak to unbelievers through their Christian friends. Remain a friend. Keep your distance. A romantic relationship should not be seen as a mode of evangelism. It is not!

5. I am in a romantic relationship with a non-Christian. What should I do?

A Christian may find him or herself in this situation for many different reasons. The reason and the current status of the relationship may be determinant on what the next step should be. There are complex situations where, before taking any radical action, it would be wise to seek the guidance of your church leadership or some mature Christian, preferably a married one. Consider the following three situations:

- (1) A relationship with 'marriage responsibilities': Some, married or not-married, may have children and share 'marriage responsibilities' with a non-Christian. There may be exceptions, but generally Christians in such a situation will be encouraged to formalize their marriage and be a loving, faithful and godly influence at home. The apostolic instruction is: "...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... 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. 7:13-16).
- (2) A relationship where one has recently become a Christian: Here is a situation where two non-Christians have a romantic-temporal-exclusive relationship and then one of them becomes a Christian. The fact is that *you* have changed, *you* are no longer the same person you were when you began the relationship. You will probably need some time to explain these fundamental changes to your partner. You will need to be patient. It may well be wise to put any marriage plans on hold, to give the Lord time to work in his or her heart. Your prayer will be for his or her conversion. If after some time you see no spiritual progress or awakening, you may need to reconsider the relationship. Actively seek the Lord's guidance. In time He will make clear what your next step should be.
- (3) A relationship where a Christian has chosen to enter a romantic relationship with a non-Christian: In this situation a Christian has consciously chosen to initiate or accept a romantic relationship with a non-Christian – contrary to the advice of Scripture. Such a person should be encouraged to seek the Lord's presence and in His presence reflect on the four biblical principles we considered at the beginning: (1) Who owns me? – have I really given my life to the Lord Jesus? (2) What does God want with me? – In pursuing this relationship, am I moving away from what I sense is God's calling on my life? (3) How does God see me? – Do I see my soul as essentially incompatible with that of a non-Christian? And (4) Can God be trusted? – Do I trust my heavenly Father enough to submit to His loving and wise directives and put an end to this romantic relationship? Following Christ is a radical choice. The Lord Jesus Himself explained, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). Obedience to God is always the pathway to blessing and long term happiness. The

longer the Christian in this situation waits, the more difficult it will be to see clearly. With time, the souls of those in love bond more and more strongly together. In time, separation will only become more painful. Genuine Christianity is a radical faith, and sometimes obedience will require some form of radical action.

6. Can I be sure he or she is the right person for me? What must one feel?

Could there be a better one just round the corner?

We all experience things in a different way. And that makes comparisons difficult and sometimes even unhelpful. It seems that some people are 100% sure of nearly everything. Others live with a sense of doubt, even after making decisions. You are not perfect, and no fish in your pond will ever be perfect. Furthermore, in time we are all changing. If you wait long enough, it is possible that a fish with extra desirable features may swim into your pond. But then, maybe not. There is also no guarantee that you will fit into his or her fishing pond. When deciding about a fish in your pond, the key question is: do you love this person enough to commit yourself to share the rest of your life with him or her? If your answer is 'probably yes', you may consider starting an exclusive relationship. If in time your tentative conclusion is not affirmed, your soul does not come to rest, you do not deeply long to spend your life together... then it may be wise to leave that 'fish' for someone else. Maybe the Lord has something else or someone else for you.

Every choice has risks and natural consequences. Also the choice of life partner. In choosing a life-partner you accept to live with some natural consequences. These may involve things like moving to another city, limitations due to a lower level of income, some restrictions due to health or family responsibilities. In choosing a life-partner you are taking on a risk. You both are. It can be seen as a step of faith to be taken while trusting the Lord. It is not possible to live without taking risks. Life has many unpredictable surprises (Isaiah 26:3,4).

7. Why should something be 'wrong' if we both agree with it, we both choose for it and we are both happy with it?

Is it 'morally wrong' for a wife to agree that her husband find a mistress? Is it 'morally wrong' if two men agree to live together as 'husband and wife'? When society shared a notion of God, most agreed that some acts were 'wrong' and others 'right'. Right and wrong were more than social conventions, more than mutual agreements. They were considered in the same category as reality, as truth, as the way things are. Right and wrong, like mountains, rain and animals, are part of God's creation. Our task was to recognize them, accept them and enjoy their freedoms and limitations. Today morality has become something personal. It is viewed more as an optional software package than a necessary piece of hardware. The current common moral ground of today's society is very elementary: We agree that something is 'morally wrong' *only* if it can be shown to 'hurt' another or the environment.

During the Second World War, C. S. Lewis was invited by the BBC to give a series of broadcasts on Christian faith. In explaining morality, he compared the human race with a fleet of ships. To call the voyage a success, (1) the ships should not collide with each other. We should not 'hurt' each other. Furthermore, (2) each ship must also be in good condition, it must float, have a functioning motor and rudder. And (3) the fleet must have a destination. We cannot talk of a successful voyage if the fleet arrives safely in New York when it was sent to Rotterdam.

Christian morality is more than the avoidance of collisions. I fear that we Christians are in danger of forgetting this. Secondly, the Lord sees and cares about what happens within us,

even those thoughts, actions and motives that have no direct impact on others. Thirdly, the destination of the fleet is not determined by what is currently socially acceptable in our godless society, neither by what most Christian communities allow themselves to practice at any point in time, or by what two lovers agree among themselves. It is our heavenly Father who determines and reveals the correct human destination, what is morally right and wrong. We deceive ourselves if we accept the popular philosophy that all is 'morally right' if there is love, mutual agreement, and we don't hurt others.

Stop & consider

Do I submit to what God says is 'right' and 'wrong' or do I try to live by my own standard of 'right' and 'wrong'? What is the goal of our relationship? Have I some hidden agenda in our relationship? Is the Holy Spirit prompting me to start, stop or do something in order to make my life more harmonious with God's will?
--

How to end a romantic relationship

As stated earlier, the romantic-temporal-exclusive relationship is considered 'temporal' because there is a degree of commitment but not yet *life-long* commitment. While in this phase, you may come to the conclusion that this is *not* the right person for you. Bringing a romantic relationship to an end is no easy task – especially if you, the other or both still feel in some way attracted to each other. You will need the Lord's strength. You will need a strong conviction that what you are doing is in line with His will; you will need enough honesty to recognize your share of blame, if any, and courage to face the other person and act. If you feel cheated or betrayed by the other, or *you* have changed in such a way that the relationship should now stop, you will need God's tender heart, not only to stop the relationship, but to bring it to an end *in a way* that honours Christ.



Terminating a romantic relationship with a non-Christian

If the Lord has touched your heart so that you are now willing to put an end to a romantic relationship with a non-Christian, humility, tact and firmness will be required. It is very unlikely that he or she will agree with you, but you owe it to him or her to explain, and if appropriate, apologize. Here are some suggestions that you may find useful:

- (a) Don't blame the other: Explain carefully that *you* are the cause for terminating the relationship and not him or her. If you have become a Christian, you are the one that has changed. If you entered into the unequal-yoke relationship as a Christian, it was *your* mistake to begin with that romantic relationship.
- (b) Explain the reason: Show him or her one or two of the Bible texts that the Lord has used to touch your heart. Explain the importance of spiritual compatibility in marriage. Explain that following Christ is your primary passion. I would not recommend you use simplistic statements like 'my parents don't agree' or 'my church forbids our relationship'. You have freely given your life to Christ, and it is He who is now asking you to stop that relationship.
- (c) Truly terminate: You are not to remain on standby. Truly break with the relationship. Allow God freely to work in his or her life. If later there is evidence of true conversion, there is the possibility of a new 'God approved' relationship! But give him or her the necessary freedom and time.
- (d) Connect him or her with other Christians: If during the development of your friendship your partner has shown interest in Christ or God's word, put him in contact with fellow believers. Remember that a romantic relationship is no evangelist project. God loves that unbeliever more than you can ever love him or her. Don't think that you are indispensable for his or her conversion. We believe in a Sovereign God who reveals Himself to all who truly seek Him, and He may do so through many different channels.

Terminating a romantic relationship with a Christian

There are different very valid reasons why a Christian couple may decide to end their romantic-temporal-exclusive relationship. In chapter 5 we explored some signs of an unhealthy relationship. Every real relationship is going to involve forgiveness, reformation and change on both sides. But if a grave concern persists, if serious doubts remain, or if in some way the Lord makes it clear to you that the relationship should end, you should act. But remember that *the way* you end a relationship is also very important. The first three suggestions discussed above are also applicable here: (a) Humbly recognize your own contribution to the failure of the relationship. Sincerely apologize. (b) Take the necessary time to calmly explain the reasons why you have decided to terminate the relationship, and (c) Truly terminate.

Sometimes a couple will benefit from a period where their relationship is 'on hold' – it will be a time to reflect, to heal, seek counsel and the Lord's guidance. This rest period, if chosen, should be mutually agreed. But if a relationship has been terminated it is not honourable to expect the other person to 'wait for you'. After it becomes known that you have terminated, both you and the other person are free to seek God's guidance and explore other relationships. Both the romantic and the exclusive element of the relationship have ended.

Stop & consider

Is the Spirit of God prompting me to put on 'pause' or end a romantic relationship? To what extent am I the cause of the problem? What should I now do? How can I do this <i>in a way</i> that honours Christ?
--

CONCLUSION



In your search for a life partner, the Holy Scriptures do not provide a standard approved method. But they do provide values and guidelines to help the Christian make decisions in life. Marriage may be God's plan for most, but singleness is an honourable alternative for those who choose or are called to live non-married lives. The Lord Jesus showed that marriage is not necessary in order to live a complete and fulfilled human experience.

If a pre-marriage relationship is or has become unhealthy, action should be taken. If the problem persists, courage will be required to either put the relationship temporally on 'pause' – in order to provide some distance and time to see more clearly and objectively - or to bring the relationship to a clear and definite end. This must be done *in a way* that shows due respect for the other person and honours the Lord.

The choice of life-partner is one of the most important decisions you make on earth. But essentially, the decision process is the same as for the other decisions you make as a Christian. We considered the 'fishing-pond' model, where a Christian consciously excludes people from being possible marriage partners based on Scriptural and other criteria. Those who fit the criteria may be considered fish in their fishing-pond - possible marriage partners. The Christian enjoys freedom to remain single or to marry anyone of those fish that enter his or her fishing-pond.



What to do now?

You have spent some time thinking through the relevant Biblical texts, principles and arguments which have bearing on pre-marriage relationships. I hope you have found it interesting and instructive. Your challenge now, a challenge every Christian faces, is how to bring your life in harmony with God's Word. Does something need changing? Should you correct some unhealthy attitude or practice? Should you take bold initiative somewhere?

We well know that our life decisions are determined more by our heart than our intellect. Although helpful, rational argumentation alone is unlikely to change our behaviour. Choose to surrender your heart to the Lord. Reaffirm Christ's ownership rights on your life. Choose to trust your heavenly Father's wisdom and love for you. Once the heart is right, a God honouring behaviour will naturally - but not without difficulty - follow.

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy,
to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God
- this is your spiritual act of worship.

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world,
but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is
- His good, pleasing and perfect will”

Romans 12:1,2