

## **Married to a Non-Christian**

by Dr. Clyde M. Narramore

A slender, dark-haired mother slipped into the last remaining seat in the back row at the morning church service. She snatched a glance at the uneven horizon of heads and shoulders around her. Her head dropped. Her eyes rested unseeingly on the black leather bag in the pew beside her.

Why can't my husband be at my side? she wondered. He often came with me before we were married. A tinge of defense welled up within her. Now he'll have no part of it.

### **How It Happened**

Today, thousands of Christian men and women stand on the threshold of loneliness and discouragement because their husband or wife is not a Christian. Every situation is a little different. But most unequally-yoked marriages fall into the following patterns:

- Both the husband and wife were non-Christians when they married. Later one of them came to know Christ personally. As this one grew in faith, he or she realized that the two were miles apart in some of the most important areas of life. The Christian spouse longs to share his or her deeply meaningful faith with a spouse but these desires fall on deaf, disinterested, or even angry ears.
- When the couple were married, one was already a Christian. He or she disregarded God's instructions, "Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers" (II Corinthians 6:14). For a while, the glow of marriage covered over a fundamentally different set of values and ways of living. But now a big spiritual chasm has been revealed.
- When they married, the wife thought (or hoped) that her groom was a Christian. But as time went on, she was disappointed to realize that he did not have a personal relationship with God and failed to share some of her most basic Christian values. Today, their differences are threatening their marriage.

### **The Real Difference**

What is the difference between a Christian, and a non-Christian? Sometimes it's hard to tell one from the other. I often think of a neighbor I once had. He was pleasant, thoughtful, and a nice guy. His childhood was non-violent, non-abusive, and in many ways, desirable. He married a kindly wife. He entered a profession for which he had talent. So his life moved along rather smoothly. But if you should ask him if he had a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, he would say no. If you should talk with him further you would see that he did not believe the Bible is the Word of God or that we can have a vital relationship with God. He was rather well adjusted emotionally, but not a born-again believer.

Actually, there is a world of difference between a committed Christian and a non-Christian. For one thing, Christians are very much aware of the fact that we are all sinners and need a Savior, and that we will struggle with our sin nature until we go to heaven. Unfortunately, many non-Christians, no matter how well adjusted emotionally they may be, don't acknowledge the fact of their sinful nature, and that we all struggle with this problem. Denial of this can and does contribute to marriage conflicts.

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## **world-view and values than a spouse who is not a christian.”**

But God in His mercy has provided a way whereby we can obtain forgiveness of sin. Romans 10:13 reads, "For whoever calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved."

When a person genuinely commits his life to Christ, God's Holy Spirit invades his being and resides there. I John 4:13 says, "By this we know that we abide in Him, and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit." God's Holy Spirit brings great changes in one's life. Priorities and values change. As he develops meaningful relationships with other Christians (fellowship), and studies God's Word and applies it to his life, he gradually becomes more mature. This is spoken of in the Bible as being made "conformed to the image of His Son [Jesus]" (Romans 8:29).

The non-Christian, on the other hand, cannot understand spiritual values, experiences and beliefs. To him, they are wishful thinking, unnecessary and/or figments of one's imagination.

In summary, the committed believer has a very different life experience, direction, world-view and values than a spouse who is not a Christian. And their commitments are at their very core of life, not the periphery.

### **Can My Mate Change?**

God can truly change your mate! He "is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us" (Ephesians 3:20). Fortunately, many unbelieving mates have come to know Christ, and many are being saved just now!

Through cooperation with God, and a spouse's effective witness, an unbelieving wife or husband can be brought more readily to the only place of safety and peace—Christ Jesus!

Actually, God is more eager to see unsaved loved ones come to know Him than we are. It may take time and patience, but God will reward us if we remain faithful and call upon Him. "The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some men count slackness; but is long-suffering to us, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (II Peter 3:9). No one is beyond God's reach.

### **Is It Spiritual or Emotional?**

Some spouses believe their mate's problems stem entirely from a lack of spiritual life. Sometimes this is true. But very often conflicts between Christian mates and non-Christian spouses are also rooted in emotional or personality problems. Let me explain.

When psychologists study individuals, they usually identify about 18 or so personality traits. These may be thought of as usual ways of acting and behaving. Desirable traits combine to make a person well adjusted. Such a person is pleasant and fun to be around—to be married to. But men and women who have negative personality traits are considered maladjusted and are difficult to work and live with. Such hang-ups cause marital problems. They form roadblocks to good marriage relationships.

And they may be mistaken for spiritual deficits. Let's consider a few.

The first has to do with anger, or, on the other hand, the absence of anger. Some people have a high level of anger. Others do not. A person who harbors a great deal of anger may be overly

aggressive, critical, abusive, negative, crabby, highly opinionated, sulky, vindictive, demanding, unloving, judgmental, non-cooperative, non-talkative, complaining, and the like.

On the other hand, a person who has little anger in his personality tends to be optimistic, happy, complimentary, encouraging, non-abusive, cooperative, and respectful. We all know non-Christians who are quite well adjusted in many ways, especially if, as children, they were raised in a loving home.

So what do these personality traits have to do with relating to a non-Christian spouse? A great deal.

A wife, for example, may be concerned about her husband being a non-Christian. And well she might. But if her husband is a man with a high degree of anger and hostility, he may be unusually difficult to live with. Furthermore, she may be attributing his negative behavior to the fact that he is not a Christian. This may be partially true. But even if he were, he may well still have a good deal of anger.

Why? Because there is not just one, but several causes of behavior. For example, he may have had a disastrous childhood that left him extremely frustrated, angry and negative. In such a case, a wife should try to understand these personality factors and encourage him to get professional counseling. This will avoid mistakenly turning the mate's problem into a spiritual one, which only creates further resentment.

Another important factor in being married to a non-Christian mate concerns the personality adjustment of the Christian.

Take Sheri, for example. She has been a Christian for a number of years. Her husband still hasn't trusted in Christ as his personal Savior. But Sheri has personality problems that prevent her from relating well to her husband whether he is a Christian or not. For example, if she took a personality test it might reveal that she is basically insecure as well as manipulative. Raised in a rigid, overly strict home, her parents were unloving and paid little attention to her. By the time she was five or six years of age she learned that if she were to exist, she would have to manipulate people and situations at almost every turn. She wasn't aware of this as a child, but it was taking place in her life just the same. By the time she was a teenager she was quite skilled in arranging things to her advantage, without due regard for the other person. In a sense, her manipulation was a mechanism for survival.

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In her last year of high school, she met some Christian young people who invited her to a Christian camp. At that time she gave her heart to the Lord. A few years later she married and she and her husband have been married now for a number of years. But her insecurity and manipulation still exist to some degree. Living for the Lord, reading God's Word, and associating with Christian people have helped her markedly. But it is impossible to have an excellent relationship with her unsaved husband because her insecurity shows up in a number of ways every day. Her manipulation, too, is sometimes evident in her daily living.

Sheri is quite unaware of her own emotional problems and blames her husband's lack of spiritual life for their poor marriage. She believes that if only he were to get saved they would have a happy home. True, if he were to trust in Christ, God would work in his heart and cause him to be a better person. The Bible says, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new" (II Corinthians 5:17). But even if he should become a Christian, they would still have problems because of her tendency toward insecurity and manipulation. There is also a strong possibility that Sheri's manipulateness actually pushes her husband away from God. Since he resents his wife's pushiness, moving toward God would feel like giving in to her manipulation.

If a husband or a wife is concerned about an unsaved mate, he or she should seriously consider whether personality problems need to be resolved in his or her own life. It's much easier to live with a non-Christian mate if both partners are emotionally well adjusted. And, it is difficult to lead a spouse to Christ if either of them has unresolved personality hang-ups. They both may be frustrated and be rubbing the other the wrong way and this clouds and distorts the spiritual message.

### **A Good Testimony**

Some Christians who are married to unbelievers seem to have more concern for those who are outside the circle of faith, in their community or in other countries, than for those in their own homes. And yet, if our testimony is according to God's standards, it should be effective with the one to whom we are married. In the opening verses of the third chapter of I Peter, we read: "Wives, likewise, be submissive to your own husbands; that, if some do not obey the word, they, without a word, may be won by the conduct of their wives, when they observe your chaste conduct accompanied by fear."

This verse might be interpreted in a single statement by saying something like this: "Wives, be cooperative with your non-Christian husband, that through your exemplary life, your husband may become interested in having a personal relationship with Christ." The same is true of husbands married to a non-Christian wife. They need to be the most loving, wonderful advertisement their mate will ever see for God!

### **Church Attendance**

Nearly every Christian who is married to a non-Christian encounters the problem of church attendance. The unsaved mate may not attend church at all, or he may refuse to attend a good Bible centered church where his wife is a member. He may feel uncomfortable at a service where the minister speaks of sin and salvation.

A Christian cannot afford to stay away from Christian fellowship and worship merely because the unsaved mate refuses to go. But neither should he or she nag or pressure a spouse who chooses not to go. That only creates resentment. Instead, worship regularly for your own spiritual nurture and look for an occasional special meeting or informal group meeting where your non-Christian mate might feel more comfortable.

### **Family Devotions**

In a home where only one parent knows Christ as his personal Savior, family devotions are usually difficult, if not impossible.

One day, an outstanding attorney told me of conditions in his home since he had accepted Christ about two years earlier. His wife was so bitter against every aspect of Christianity that he had to devise means of getting the gospel to his own children. He purposely takes them to school in the

car each morning. Then, as he drives slowly along, he helps them memorize scripture verses. His wife will allow no Bible study in the home.

But God would not have us abandon family worship and daily Bible study, even if one parent is not cooperative. The saved parent may need to adjust to less favorable situations. But if he is faithful and tactful, God will enable him to pray, read, and talk with the children, even under the most trying conditions.

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### **Church Activities**

Neither Jennie nor Ted were Christians when they married. But after several years Jennie became a Christian and eagerly took part in church activities. She loved to sing, so she joined the choir. However, after leaving Ted a few evenings to go to choir rehearsal, she realized there must be another way.

The Lord laid it upon her heart to drop out of choir and to spend the time with Ted. She found that it took several years of love to accomplish what she had hoped to do in a month. But there came the time when Jennie and Ted joined the choir together, to sing praises to Him, whom they both knew as Lord and Savior!

### **Conflicting Viewpoints**

Those who have been spiritually born again and those who haven't live in two different worlds: Which friends shall we invite to our home? Will it be those who abuse alcohol and enjoy off-color stories? Or will it be those with positive morals and spiritual interests? Shall we send our children to Christian schools? What television programs shall we watch? How will we spend our free time? Where will we invest our financial resources? What about tithing?

Since there is little of the eternal in the thinking of the unbeliever, nearly every value-based decision can be a point of difference. The Bible says, "But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (I Corinthians 2: 14).

The Christian who is married to an unbeliever may feel at times that the burden is too great, that he is unable to go on. If that has been your experience, you will undoubtedly be moved by the testimony of a woman of God who wrote this letter:

"For a time, I felt sorry for myself. I thought that I was experiencing the most terrible thing that could come into a Christian's life—being married to an unbeliever! Then God began to speak to my heart, and things began to change. I have been saved five years, but my husband is still unsaved. And from the depth of my heart I can still say, 'Thank you, Lord.' No, it's not an easy life, and in case you think I can say 'thank you' because I've not had to go through what others have, let me say briefly that my husband, angered over 'religion,' demanded I go to a psychologist. Our home was almost broken, and I nearly lost our little girl. He ridiculed me in front of friends. He cursed and swore. These are only as few of the experiences I have had.

But the Lord becomes more precious to me day by day. He also uses me to help others who are contemplating marrying unbelievers.

"I love my husband and am anxious for him to be saved, and I believe he will be, in God's appointed time. In the meantime, I can rejoice because I'm learning to live closer to the Lord.

"I am not alone in my experience. I've been in a prayer group with about ten ladies and our experiences are somewhat the same. The Lord has undertaken in a wonderful way—praise His Holy Name."

This lady is not merely surviving. She is rejoicing in spite of her difficult situation.

### **Removing Difficulties**

One of the wisest things a person married to an unbeliever can do is this: Identify the barriers to your spouse coming to faith and remove as many as you can.

**Health:** For example, a health condition might seriously aggravate a relational problem. When a person is not well, he is unable to take some of the rougher spots of everyday living. Each problem in the marriage can seem exaggerated. If you have a health problem that makes you irritable, impatient or difficult to live with, get medical help and if your mate has a similar problem encourage him or her to also get medical help. Many marriages have been enhanced by improved health.

**In-Law Problems:** Another important factor which can create serious tension is in-laws. The Bible says we are to "leave" our parents and "cleave" to our mates. If a partner disobeys God by sticking to his parents at the expense of his spouse, the couple is almost certainly headed for trouble. So keep one eye on your relationship with your parents and in-laws. That may be unknowingly keeping you from leading your mate to Christ. Some wives and husbands are being manipulated by a mother or father, and do not realize it. Others are overly involved with their parents.

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**Children:** Children are a blessing and a challenge. Discipline problems in a home where only one parent is a Christian can have the added burden of the parents' differences of opinion.

I know one couple that is experiencing a tragic situation. The young mother cares deeply for the things of the Lord. But the unsaved father is drawn to parties and places of amusement which the mother feels she cannot attend. He feels rejected in the home, so he is attempting to draw the children to himself by refusing to correct them.

Another situation that may create a family problem has to do with an exceptional child, for instance, a slow learning, hyperactive, or neurologically impaired youngster. The mother feels that the father is impatient, while the father believes that the boy is lazy and overprotected by his mother. Naturally, this results in constant friction and unhappiness.

My suggestion to these parents is to seek professional help. A Christian psychologist, by means of interviews and tests followed by counseling sessions, could help the parents gain a mutual understanding of their child's condition and learn better ways of working with him. Almost without exception, when such conditions are remedied, a more even keel of balance is established in the home. Then the unsaved parent has an atmosphere that is more conducive to the working of the Holy Spirit.

**Time Together:** When only one mate is saved, the two are likely to spend less and less time together. But deep love and understanding is nurtured when a couple spends much time working and playing together.

Betty, a Christian wife who tends to talk a lot, would do well to listen to her unsaved husband's opinions, to reflect his ideas, and to draw out his convictions and feelings. With wisdom, tempered with gentleness, she could guide the conversation into compatible channels. True, she could stand up and fight for what she thinks is right, but ten years from now she might still be fighting (if they remained under one roof). But with spiritual wisdom she could be one step closer to the day when her husband's name, too, could be written in the Lamb's Book of Life!

**Living and Loving:** The athlete throws off every weight that will impede. The Christian mate has an even greater preparation for the contest in which he is engaged. His is a spiritual enterprise. His strength must come from on high. "And my God shall be my strength" (Isaiah 49:5). Daily feeding upon the Word of God and a constant lifeline of prayer, combined with Christian fellowship, will keep the believer strong and conditioned.

**Louder than Words:** No greater factor enters into the winning of a mate than love. The unbeliever has an eagle eye. He often knows what the Christian should do and is quick to see the inconsistencies in the Christian mate's life.

Mrs. Blake, for example, saw her pastor about her husband's unsaved condition. Not long after, the pastor visited the husband and found that although unsaved, he was a quiet, likeable person. The pastor presented the claims of Christ and asked if it might not be possible for the husband and wife to take their stand together and be one in the Lord. The pastor received for an answer; "There's not room in any house for two people like her."

Although saved, that wife had become careless about her attitudes, and lovemaking. Unconsciously she had become nagging, jumpy, cold and ill-tempered. When the pastor explained the husband's appraisal of the situation, she began to recognize her shortcomings. She prayed that her life would radiate God's testimony and that she might be used to lead her loved one to the Lord.

290 A few weeks later, Mr. Blake accidentally broke a beautiful vase in the living room. This time his "explosive" wife calmly went about her tasks, seemingly not even aware that anything unusual had happened. In amazement the husband turned to his wife and asked, "Well, aren't you going to yell at me?" She stepped over to his side and looked tenderly into his eyes. She explained to him how God had convicted her of the criticism in her life.

The husband was deeply impressed. Soon after he decided to go to church with her. In time he accepted Christ as his Savior. Later, the wife told the pastor, "It all started when I got right and got patient!"

## **The Holy Spirit**

300 Today, you may be at a crossroads! You may stand bewildered at your non-Christian companion's indifference to God. But remember, "The Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear" (Isaiah 59:1). God who created the universe promises this.

When problems overwhelm and you feel unable to formulate a prayer, remember, "The Spirit also helps our infirmities: for we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God" (Romans 8:26, 27).

An outstanding engineer in a large industrial company told me of his experience after a man in the same organization had led him to the Lord. "After I trusted Christ, things at home got worse. My teenage daughter and my wife, both unsaved, got together and decided to put a stop to this Christian nonsense," he said. "First they stayed away from the dining table until I said grace. So I prayed for guidance and for kindness to them, even though it seemed I was being persecuted. This first strategy was followed by the 'silent' treatment. They would come to the table and wouldn't utter one word to me. This went on for a month or two. Finally, they resorted to coming to the table when I did, but they would strike their glasses and plates with their spoons while I bowed my head and prayed. Through it all, God kept me reasonably kind and sweet, even though I was heartbroken and discouraged.

"After about a year, I was at my rope's end when one Sunday evening my wife went to a special meeting with me. As the invitation for salvation was given at the close of the service, that one for whom I prayed so earnestly stepped forward and accepted the Lord.

"Together we are now praying for our daughter. I shudder every time I think what might have happened if I had given up. True, it may seem hard to hold out one day longer for the unsaved mate to find Christ. But one day's delay in taking drastic action may be the day for which God is waiting."

## **Patience and Trust**

One who finds himself the Christian mate of an unbeliever finds a problem that somewhere has a solution: Man's way or God's way.

**“But if he would only realize how long it took the Lord to work with him until he was saved, he would likely be more patient and understanding.”**

The one new in the Lord would have his companion come into the same fellowship immediately. Here is a man, for instance, who accepts Christ as his personal Savior. It is his desire that his wife be saved just as quickly as possible. But if he would only realize how long it took the Lord to work with him until he was saved, he would likely be more patient and understanding.

A wife in Canada was converted in a revival meeting. Her husband was an alcoholic who ridiculed every mention of God. Years of hardship prevailed, and the children in the home often said, "Why don't you leave him, Mom? He's no good!" But her answer was always the same. "He is our Daddy." She was determined to win him to the Lord.

340 Her faithfulness was rewarded when he, one night while watching a religious program on television, surrendered his life to Christ. One of the sons, who saw the miracle-working power of God, later prepared for the ministry and spent years as a missionary in Africa. Reflecting on his boyhood, the son said, "I knew what God could do. I saw it with my own eyes."

Perhaps the natural, logical thing for that mother would have been a separation or a divorce. But hers was a wisdom that led her to realize that a temporary deliverance was not a solution. What a blessing that she waited upon God! She could not see around life's corner. She did not realize God was using hardship and delay to mold a spiritual giant for Africa!

350 You, too, can choose the path of God's blessing. He has shown you in His Word what to do. Committing every way unto Him, He will be your strength. "Delight yourself also in the Lord; and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way unto the Lord; trust also in him; and he will bring it to pass" (Psalm 37:4, 5). We don't know when, but God in His wisdom and sovereignty will bring your mate to faith in His timing. And in the meantime he can provide you the faith, patience and sensitivity to be a supportive mate that makes the gospel even more appealing. "And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19).

As you walk steadily toward life's sunset, may you go hand in hand with the one you have loved into the Kingdom!

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