

Open Letter to a Friend about Dating a Non-Christian

...So I want you to have my thoughts about dating non-Christians in written form to reflect on. I don't feel certain that I expressed all that I wanted to when we met. Please bear with me as I restate to you the three points I'd like you to consider.

1. Jesus wants everyone to come to him.

This is a basic point you said you agreed with. The practical implication is that you need to care about ***** coming to Jesus first and foremost. In general, we are to put Jesus' desire for others ahead of whatever else we desire from others.

2. Dating is a discernment process for marriage.

This is a basic posture that you already agreed with. Although there is 'casual dating' where there's not a commitment to any one person, and you're getting to know people, 'serious dating' involves more emotional investment in one person. I think it's important in principle to link serious dating to marriage in at least one basic way: if you know that you can't marry her, you should break up with her immediately and explain why. Prolonging the relationship only allows time for more attachment (emotional, physical, spiritual) to happen. The more time goes on, the deeper the hurt when the breakup finally does happen. It makes absolutely no sense at all to keep dating someone if you know you can't marry them. This is important, considering point #3:

3. Marrying a non-Christian is a failure to love Jesus as well as a failure to truly love the other person.

There is no situation in which voluntarily marrying a non-Christian is the will of God. This can be observed with two passages of Scripture: 1 Corinthians 7 and Ephesians 5. Getting right to the point in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul says in 7:39 to Christian widows that if they'd like to remarry, they can, 'only in the Lord.' That is, Christian widows must marry those who are 'in the Lord,' i.e. other Christians. Put the other way, they are *not* to marry *non-Christians*. From this example and its context, we can see that it is never appropriate for a Christian to voluntarily marry a non-Christian. Naturally, it's important to understand why Paul says this. I want to flesh out Paul's teaching here so that we can engage it more fully.

In this passage, Paul says that Christians ought to consider singleness. Paul's reason for this is clear later in 7:32 – 35 when he says that it is 'to secure undistracted devotion to the Lord.' In other words, our dedication to Jesus is so huge that the question of who to marry is entirely subordinate to it. The principle he gives here gets applied to ambition as well, which is very relevant to your dating relationship because money and lifestyle and decision-making are parts of what every couple must do together. There is no real way for a non-Christian to understand what Christians are called to, nor are they capable of making decisions with Jesus in the way we must. Paul says that Christian marriage is permissible because it allows for legitimate sexual expression in God's sight in 7:2 – 5, although he also challenges his audience to consider singleness in 7:6 – 9.

Why? Jesus' mission and purpose are of utmost importance. In the port of Corinth, where the urban setting allowed for more social possibilities, Christians wanted to marry, Christian slaves wanted to become free, etc. Probably, Christians wondered whether about career advancing moves. What then was Paul's advice about those things? At least seven times in various ways (1 Cor.7:17, 18, 20, 21, 23, 24, 26), Paul tells us to remain as we are and not worry. 'Let each man remain with God in that condition in which he was called.' While he did say about slavery, 'If you are able also to become to free, rather do that,' (7:21) and about marriage, 'it is better to marry than to burn [with desire]', Paul simultaneously said that the second coming of Christ needs to be remembered. He repeatedly asserts that 'the time has been shortened' (7:29) and 'the form of the world is passing away' (7:31). That is what their desires were compared against.

It's not that Christians think Jesus is coming back really soon. Maybe he will, and maybe he won't – the timing is not the issue. Rather, what is important is that Jesus' return will show *what was truly valuable, what was eternally significant*. There is a present evil age and an age to come that is partially but not completely here. The age to come will unveil the true reality of what people are doing now in the present. For instance, God is working at a project

which is like a building and a field (3:6 – 15). What we do in the present will be validated or not in the future because we are either building with precious metals or perishable combustibles. The day that is to come will declare it. Works done in faithfulness to Jesus will be preserved through the judgment as if they were precious metals in a fire, while insignificant works will be burned up as irrelevant (3:6 – 15). The world to come will be a judgment on the world that is. Whether or not that event comes quickly from our perspective has very little if anything to do with it. The question has to do with what is ultimately and eternally significant.

The questions we ask about marriage, life, and work, then, are the same types of questions Paul answered for the Corinthians in chapter seven. Does it make sense to change one's social position when the entire social structure will be overturned? Does it make sense to take on more ordinary human obligations and commitments simply for their own sake or for one's own sake in light of what will happen in the second coming? Not really. There may be other considerations that enter the equation, but the default posture is inertia and even slight disengagement on these particular issues. Paul says, 'Those who have wives should be as though they had none' not to encourage Christians to abandon their marriage vows, but to limit the narcissism that can develop between two married people who think only of themselves. Their relationship can become like an ingrown toenail: turned in upon itself, sick, and festering. It takes Jesus to turn them outward in a healthy way that doesn't neglect their relationship but strengthens it. Also, 'those who buy [should be] as though they did not possess, and those who use the world, as though they did not make full use of it' (7:30 – 31). This probably refers to commercial and economic relationships. Engaging more deeply in those types of commitments and contracts is to be looked at carefully and hesitantly. Now perhaps in some cases it would make sense to change stations in life, as Paul encouraged some people to become free from slavery if the pressures of sustaining an independent life were lighter than their workload as slaves. But Paul's driving concern in light of Christ's second coming was to 'secure undistracted devotion to the Lord' (7:35). So if more worries about one's own life would be the result, then Paul's advice was to not become free.

I mentioned to you that Ming and I desire to honor Jesus in this way. Financially, we haven't saved anything because we've given a lot of money away. Relationally, we're available to a lot of people, especially those in the lower-income area we live in. Even though our house has been broken into twice and we've been witnesses to a terrible crime, we are not thinking about moving away. We want our family to be a way that God blesses others, so we want to adopt other kids at some point. We've also welcomed kids and teens in the area into our home at various times. We plan on not sending our kids to private schools, instead modeling to them how to live simply and in Christian community so they can still live responsibly but with more flexibility and impact. This allowed me the flexibility to try a startup business (bringing technology to the inner city) that failed and to later work for InterVarsity's campus ministry (at much less than a teacher's salary), and gives Ming the flexibility to have the option of being a full-time mom, available to our kids and our neighbors. We refuse to buy expensive things, and the most expensive things we have (our house and our cars) we share openly with others. With our cars, we worked out arrangements with friends who can't afford car payments and insurance: they use our cars, we pay the insurance. With our house, our church meets on the 1st floor on Sunday mornings; we built a teen-outreach room in our basement; our backyard is a place for neighborhood kids; our living room is a place for prayer meetings every weekday morning and Bible study meetings every Thursday night. Underlying everything is our personal sharing in Jesus' own passion to see other people come to him. We are unashamedly evangelistic. Ming and I have a fun, dynamic marriage, but that's because we're both committed to Jesus and Jesus' purposes in the world and *desire* the same thing. She is not just a spectator who 'permits' me to have my Christian hobbies. She is just as excited as I am to be evangelists on campus and in the city. She is a full *partner* who supports our life direction in Jesus enthusiastically and who pushes me to follow the Spirit of Jesus. There is no way this would work with a non-Christian woman; it wouldn't even work with many less mature Christian women. The woman I dated for a little while before I met Ming was a Christian, but really preferred financial security and a 'planned life' far more than me. That's why I broke up with her and why it was a good thing. Seeing marriage as a union of two people is challenging; seeing marriage as a union of three people – husband, wife, and Jesus himself – is radical. It is saying, 'I'd like to involve someone else in this marriage – Jesus – and actually make him more important than you, in that I'd like him to be our guiding voice.'

You said that maybe ***** will become a Christian one day. In fact, in 1 Cor.7:10 – 16, Paul tells us how to think about uncertainties like that. He covers the situation of mixed marriages where one spouse is a Christian and one is not. Would the non-Christian spouse become a Christian? Maybe, but then again maybe not. Does that impact anything? You need to pay special attention to this section because we use the concept of 'uncertainty' in different ways. You say, 'She might become a Christian; that's why I should continue to date her.' I say, 'She

might not become a Christian, that's why you should break up now.' What's the right way of factoring in the uncertainty? The way Paul sees it is as follows:

^{7:10}But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband ¹¹(but if she does leave, she must remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife. ¹²But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he must not divorce her. ¹³And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, she must not send her husband away. ¹⁴For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy. ¹⁵Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace. ¹⁶For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?

Invariably, situations arise where there are Christians married to non-Christians. Sometimes one spouse becomes a Christian without the other one. Sometimes marriages were arranged and not voluntarily chosen. Probably some Christians made the mistake of marrying a non-Christian voluntarily. What happens in those cases? Paul's treatment of the situation is very informative, and relevant to you: While there are some cases where the unbelieving spouse stays and agrees to raise the children in a Christian manner and under Christian teaching (v.14, 'sanctified through' the believing spouse, otherwise 'your children' would be 'unclean, but now they are holy'), this is not always the case. Verses 15 – 16 therefore mean, 'Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage to the marriage in such cases, but God has called us to peace rather than the constant tension of trying to make one life out of two totally different foundations. For why do you think that holding on to your husband or wife will cause them to become Christians? Given the conflict it causes, it seems unlikely, doesn't it? *You* are still called to obey Jesus. But will *they* come to Jesus if they are under social and legal compulsion to honor you through your marriage, and you force them from that standpoint? Jesus doesn't operate that way, and it's not likely that people would come to him under those conditions. Don't force them to stay – it'll build resentment. Let them go in peace.' I cannot imagine trying to work out the spiritual, motivational, emotional, financial, relational, and logistical issues of life with a non-Christian wife instead of Ming. It would be ridiculously impossible. If I were in a cultural situation where I could force this hypothetical non-Christian wife to stay with me against her will and live as I dictate, chances would be low that she'd get a favorable impression of Jesus. Better to let her go in peace. Chances are higher that she'd come to Jesus some other way, through some other person or people.

Paul is skeptical that unbelieving spouses married to Christians will become Christians themselves. He places the uncertainty of that after v.15 (the case where the unbelieving one leaves), and *not* after v.12 – 14 (the case where the unbelieving one stays). In other words, he could have said in v.12, 'If any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he must not divorce her, for you could, O husband, help your wife come to Jesus.' If he had placed the uncertainty there, he would be expressing his hope that the unbelieving spouse would choose Jesus, which you have argued. *But Paul doesn't say that at all.* Instead, he places the uncertainty after the situation where the unbelieving spouse has had enough and needs to leave the marriage, or is ashamed of having a Christian spouse and wants out.

Notice that this is not just Paul's personal opinion. It might sound like that at first glance because in v.12, Paul says, 'to the rest I say, not the Lord,' whereas in v.10, he says, 'I give instructions, not I, but the Lord.' Paul taught what Jesus taught and he said he was doing so. He calls those commands the 'command of the Lord' or the equivalent explicitly in 9:14 (the Lord directed); 9:21 (law of Christ); 11:2 (the traditions, just as I delivered them to you), 11:23-25 (I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you), and 14:37 (the Lord's commandment). He is saying, 'I know everything that Jesus taught. It was passed on to me. I've reflected on it, allowed it to saturate my mind and heart, and allowed it to completely inform me. Everything Jesus taught in his context, I pass on to others. Furthermore, if a situation comes up that Jesus did not address or give specific teaching about during his time on earth, I am in the position to deduce from the vast body of knowledge already there what Jesus would say. In fact, I have the Spirit of God as my authority.' In this case, Jesus did not address the situation of mixed marriages between Christian and non-Christian while he was on earth. So in v.12, Paul says, 'I say, not the Lord,' but he claims authority in the Spirit in 7:40, 'I have the Spirit of God.' Paul is not just sharing his personal take on things. He was a brilliant, trained, rabbinical theologian now serving Jesus in the power of the Spirit. So this material is just as binding as anything else Jesus taught explicitly.

The difference between what is *currently known* and what is *uncertain* is important for you to consider. In this section, what is *currently known*, and not what is *uncertain*, is the basis for decision making. In the case of a married person whose spouse is an unbeliever and wants to leave, what is *currently known* is that they want to leave. What is *uncertain* is whether they'd become a Christian in the future. Therefore the believing spouse is to let them leave. Now in your case, you claim that ***** could become a Christian – that is *uncertain*. But uncertainties do not factor into Christian decision making on this issue. What is *currently known* is that she is a non-Christian.

What about *dating* in the hope that she will come to Jesus? *Could* she become a Christian while you date, or even because you date? That posture seems inappropriate to me. In general, it is never healthy, good or wise to date a woman in order to change her in any way. You'd be in love with the potential, not the actual. For example, if I dated Ming and wanted her to become a neater person before I married her (clean your room more often and I'll marry you), that would be conditional and manipulative, especially if I sprung that on her not from the start but later on in the dating relationship. In your case, it is definitely not healthy, good, or wise to date ***** in order to help her become a Christian. In effect, you would be saying, 'I would marry you if you became a Christian,' which becomes emotionally manipulative and conditional, which is ironic given the non-manipulative and unconditional love God actually has for us. You could be friends if she remained a non-Christian, and you could have an unconditional friendship with her even if she never came to Jesus. But to involve romantic attachments in a spiritual decision is to become emotionally manipulative, gaining leverage on her that is dishonest, especially the longer you delay telling her this. Because it seems to me that you have not really thought this through, and because you have not stated up front that you cannot marry her given what is *currently known*, you will fall into this dishonest dynamic if you continue dating.

When it comes to the *uncertainty* of ***** becoming a Christian in marriage, from this passage, it's clear: To give ***** the best chance to become a Christian, marrying her is *not* the best environment for that. In fact, it is one of the worst, for you would still be called by Jesus to follow his teaching, whatever the situation, and whatever her feelings and fears. She will resent it. And if marrying her is both disobedience on your part and detrimental to her, then you should not marry her. The disobedience involved for you would be doubly so.

What makes me even more concerned is that there is something supernatural to which you are not paying attention. The classic passage on Christian marriage is Ephesians 5, the second major passage that's relevant to your situation. Paul begins with what it means to live by the Holy Spirit generally (5:18) and to jointly submit to Christ (5:21). Then he talks about the wife-husband relationship (5:22 – 33). The beautiful and radical picture of Christian marriage given there is completely dependent on a spiritual reality: the Spirit of Christ being present in *both* wife and husband. Earlier in Ephesians, Paul says that the non-Christian is influenced by 'the spirit that is now at work in the children of disobedience' (2:2). Non-Christians, while still having free will, continue to be influenced by supernatural forces that incline their hearts against Jesus at the most fundamental level. There is no way the ideal for Christian marriage can be realized without the Spirit of Christ present in both wife and husband because a mixed marriage is not just a joining of positive and neutral; it is an attempt to bring together a positive and a negative in a way that was never meant to be and is fundamentally impossible. So the issue is not just whether you have compatible lifestyle goals and values, which is hard to imagine anyway. There is, moreover, something else supernatural going on. Only the Spirit of Christ kicks out that 'spirit' from us when we come to Jesus, so Jesus can live in us and do something supernatural in that marriage. To marry a non-Christian is to invite conflict and spiritual warfare into your life because of supernatural forces we sometimes barely understand. That is probably why Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7 that mixed marriages may not work out at all, though the Christian is still called to the very challenging place of upholding Christian marital ethics even in a mixed marriage. He later said to the Corinthians, about more general life issues, 'Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness?' (2 Cor.6:14) Although much can be said about different kinds of partnerships Christians can have with non-Christians, the basic and deep incompatibility certainly applies to a mixed marriage.

If a Christian person is seriously dating a non-Christian person, at least one of the following things is happening, of all the cases that I've seen:

(1) the Christian intends to disobey the teaching of Jesus and the apostles by marrying a non-Christian – *disobedience to Jesus*

- (2) the two people are agreeing to use each other as 'crutches' for the time being – *hedonism*
- (3) the Christian is being dishonest with the non-Christian by not telling the truth: 'I can't actually marry you' – *dishonesty*
- (4) the Christian is trying to persuade the non-Christian person to commit to Jesus while dating and through dating – *manipulation*
- (5) the Christian doesn't know what the teaching of Jesus and the apostles actually is regarding choosing a marriage partner – *uninformed*

If you think there is some other possibility, I eagerly invite you to explain it to me. But as far as I understand the issues, I wanted to cover the bases so that you are no longer (#5) uninformed of the biblical teaching on marriage and its spiritual significance. At this point, either you're planning on disobeying Jesus (#1), or you're agreeing to use each other as 'crutches' for the time being (#2), or you are being dishonest with her by not telling her that you can't actually marry her (#3), or you're hoping to change her (#4), or some combination. For a Christian, all those postures are problematic. Being disobedient, dishonest, hedonistic, and/or manipulative are all not good places to be.

Therefore, I reiterate that breaking up now will be better than breaking up later, and not just for you. I am concerned not only for you, but for her. Even though I haven't met her and don't know her at all, I can still appreciate the hurt that's in store for her. One day you'll have to say, 'I can't marry you, so I think we should break up.' She will ask, 'How long have you known this?' The truthful response will have to be, 'A long time now.' And that will feel like a deep betrayal. Prolonging the relationship only allows time for more attachment (emotional, physical, spiritual) to happen. Because you've been hasty in getting together without thinking biblically about the issue and without really hearing other Christians' concerns, you've put her into a situation where she will get hurt, she may develop some negative feelings about Jesus which will only increase the longer you date, and you've put yourself into a situation where your witness is already diminished. There is always hope, of course, in that it's not too late to bring forth integrity out of this. You can explain this to her, break up, and become a better friend to her than you have been so far. For in this regard, I would say that you have not yet loved her well. Seriously dating a non-Christian is always a failure to truly love Jesus, and at the same time, a failure to truly love the other person.

That sums it up for now. If you've made it this far in this letter, thanks. It's not easy, I know, to hear critical concern about something that is of such personal importance. But I do hope for God's best for you, and for her. So I hope this letter will serve you as something to return to and ponder.

Blessings,
Mako