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Marrying Outside the Faith *Administrative Policy Statement*

Approved by the Council of Elders
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All scriptures are quoted from *The Holy Bible, New King James Version* (© 1988 Thomas Nelson, Inc., Nashville, Tennessee) unless otherwise noted.

“It is not good that a man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him. Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (Genesis 2:18, 24).

With these words the institution of marriage was created by God. Marriage is so unique, that of all creation only humans enter this special arrangement God designed. For a Christian who understands God’s purpose for marriage, and who wants to live as God intended, it is a major area of life that deserves focused attention and study.

One of the questions that arises in the Church of God concerns choosing the person one marries, and specifically, the question of whether a Christian may marry someone outside the faith. In 1 Corinthians 7, the Apostle Paul, in answer to questions being asked of him by the members in Corinth, states in verses 1-2, “*Now concerning the things of which you wrote to me. . . let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband.*” He then proceeds to address various issues about marriage.

Over the years the Church has addressed many other questions relative to this issue. Questions such as: Should a minister perform a marriage between a member and a non-member? Should punitive action be taken against someone who does marry an unbeliever? Any response to questions of such a personal nature requires a responsible, caring and biblically based policy.

Part of our ministerial duty is to adequately counsel a couple, advising them on topics such as communication, finances, etc. We often administer the *Prepare*¹ tests as part of this process so that both the couple and the minister can feel confident about the couple embarking on a life-long journey together. That journey ought to be filled with joy and the couple should be able to meet challenges on that journey with knowledge, wisdom and strength. Success comes as the result of what the couple does, based on their

¹*Prepare and Enrich* is a marriage counseling program which has been used in the Church for a number of years. It is provided by an organization based in Minneapolis, MN.

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maturity and conversion. Their compatibility in religious beliefs is one of the most critical keys to this success, although it is certainly not a guarantee.

Our approach to this subject is one of great concern. We do not want to be offensive to any of our members whose mates are not members of the Church. Some of these members have wonderful and fulfilling relationships in spite of the difference in faith (1 Corinthians 7:12-14). The purpose of this paper is to address those in our fellowship who are single. We begin our paper by analyzing the scriptural instructions on this matter.

Scriptural and Historical Background

We find instructions in the Old Testament in which God warned Israel not to marry people of other nations and cultures because they would likely lead them into idolatrous beliefs and practices.

Exodus 34:11-16

Observe what I command you this day. Behold, I am driving out from before you the Amorite and the Canaanite and the Hittite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite. Take heed to yourself, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land where you are going, lest it be a snare in your midst. But you shall destroy their altars, break their *sacred* pillars, and cut down their *wooden* images (for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name *is* Jealous, *is* a jealous God), lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and they play the harlot with their gods and make sacrifice to their gods, and *one of them* invites you and you eat of his sacrifice, and you take of his daughters for your sons, and his daughters play the harlot with their gods and make your sons play the harlot with their gods.

Deuteronomy 7:1-6

When the LORD your God brings you into the land which you go to possess, and has cast out many nations before you, the Hittites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and mightier than you, and when the LORD your God delivers them over to you, you shall conquer them *and* utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them nor show mercy to them. Nor shall you make marriages with them. You shall not give your daughter to their son, nor take their daughter for your son. For they will turn your sons away from following Me, to serve other gods; so the anger of the LORD will be aroused against you and destroy you suddenly. But thus you shall deal with them: you shall destroy their altars, and break down their *sacred* pillars, and cut down their wooden images, and burn their carved images with fire. For you *are* a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth.

Solomon, king of Israel, sinned by marrying wives from other nations who over time led him into worshipping other gods in accordance with their idolatrous practices.

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Wise as he was, Solomon is cited as having been unable to withstand the enticing influence of wives whose religious practices and standards were different from his own.

1 Kings 11:1-5

But King Solomon loved many foreign women, as well as the daughter of Pharaoh: women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians, *and* Hittites— from the nations of whom the LORD had said to the children of Israel, You shall not intermarry with them, nor they with you. Surely they will turn away your hearts after their gods. Solomon clung to these in love. And he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines; and his wives turned away his heart. For it was so, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned his heart after other gods; and his heart was not loyal to the LORD his God, as *was* the heart of his father David.

Ezra had to address this problem after the exile, and Israelites were commanded to put away their foreign wives.

Ezra 9:1-6

When these things were done, the leaders came to me, saying, The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands, with respect to the abominations of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. For they have taken some of their daughters *as wives* for themselves and their sons, so that the holy seed is mixed with the peoples of *those* lands. Indeed, the hand of the leaders and rulers has been foremost in this trespass. So when I heard this thing, I tore my garment and my robe, and plucked out some of the hair of my head and beard, and sat down astonished. Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel assembled to me, because of the transgression of those who had been carried away captive, and I sat astonished until the evening sacrifice.

In Nehemiah we find a similar admonition. Mixed marriages often lead to one spouse compromising his beliefs and convictions in order to keep peace in the family.

Nehemiah 13:23-27

In those days I also saw Jews *who* had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, *and* Moab. And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and could not speak the language of Judah, but spoke according to the language of one or the other people. So I contended with them and cursed them, struck some of them and pulled out their hair, and made them swear by God, *saying*, You shall not give your daughters as wives to their sons, nor take their daughters for your sons or yourselves. Did not Solomon king of Israel sin by these things? Yet among many nations there was no king like him, who was beloved of his God; and God made him king over all Israel. Nevertheless pagan women caused even him to sin. Should we then hear of your doing all this great evil, transgressing against our God by marrying pagan women?

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1 Corinthians 7:39 states that after a woman's husband dies, she is free to remarry, but that her spouse should be "in the Lord" (a believer). While these instructions are clearly written to a widow, it follows that the same principle would apply to someone who is single and seeking to be married for the first time. Paul confirms God's desire that those who are converted and possess God's Holy Spirit should only seek to marry someone who is also converted and possesses God's Holy Spirit.

1 Corinthians 7:39

A wife is bound by law as long as her husband lives; but if her husband dies, she is at liberty to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.

In 2 Corinthians 6:14 we see that a believer should not bind himself/herself to a relationship which would adversely affect his covenant relationship with God. This passage has a broader application than just marriage, but we should not ignore the implications for a marriage agreement.

2 Corinthians 6:14

Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness?

There is no question but that the scriptures teach us to marry within the faith. We should clearly preach this and teach this to our children. Yet we must not be naïve. Even marriages within the faith require a high level of compatibility especially in the area of religion. Differences between people where both are in the faith can create marriage difficulties as well. For example, people can place a different priority on how they keep the Sabbath. This could cause unnecessary distress. It is simply a fact that the more compatible two people are the greater their chance of having a successful marriage.

Believer and Unbeliever

To establish a policy in the United Church of God on this subject, we must have some level of agreement on what is meant by the terms "believer" and "unbeliever." The term "believer" is only found in one verse in the New King James—2 Corinthians 6:15. The term "unbeliever" or "unbelievers" can be found in a total of nine verses (*Luke 12:46; 1 Corinthians 6:6; 1 Corinthians 7:15; 1 Corinthians 14:22,23,24; 2 Corinthians 6:14,15; 1 Timothy 5:8*).

The Greek word which is translated "believer" in the NKJV is *pistos* and it is the same word translated "faith" in a number of verses in the New Testament. Here is what Vines has to say about the word *pistos*:

pistos [*pistov*" , (4103)], (a) in the Active sense means believing, trusting; (b) in the Passive sense, trusty, faithful, trustworthy. It is translated "believer" in 2 Cor. 6:15;

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“them that believe” in 1 Tim. 4:12, R.V. (A.V., “believers”); in 1 Tim. 5:16, “if any woman that believeth,” lit., ‘if any believing woman.’ So in 6:2, “believing masters.” In 1 Pet. 1:21 the R.V., following the most authentic mss., gives the noun form, “are believers in God” (A.V., “do believe in God”). In John 20:27 it is translated “believing.” It is best understood with significance (a), above, e.g., in Gal. 3:9; Acts 16:1; 2 Cor. 6:15; Tit. 1:6; it has significance (b), e.g., in 1 Thess. 5:24; 2 Thess. 3:3 (see Notes on Thess. p. 211, and Gal. p. 126, by Hogg and Vine).²

When the Bible speaks of a believer it is speaking of someone who has been called and converted, who now possesses God’s Holy Spirit. A believer is a member of the Church, the body of Christ.³ He is a Christian, one who follows Christ. For the sake of clarity, we often refer to a member as one who has been baptized into the body of Christ. One is not baptized into a sect or denomination, but into a spiritual organism (the body of Christ). Whenever a person repents and is baptized, he receives the promise of God’s Holy Spirit (*Acts 2:38-39*). Paul tells us that if we don’t have God’s spirit then we are none of His (*Romans 8:9*).

Logically, an unbeliever would be the opposite of a believer, that is, one who is not converted, and does not have God’s Holy Spirit. The following verses give us insight into the understanding of an “unbeliever.”

Luke 12:46

The master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for *him*, and at an hour when he is not aware, and will cut him in two and appoint *him* his portion with the unbelievers.

1 Corinthians 6:6

But brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers.

1 Corinthians 7:15

But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such *cases*. But God has called us to peace.

1 Corinthians 14:22-24

Therefore tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers; but prophesying is not for unbelievers but for those who believe. Therefore if the whole church comes together in one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in *those who are* uninformed or unbelievers, will they not say that you are out of your mind? But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an uninformed person comes in, he is convinced by all, he is convicted by all.

² Vine, W. E., *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell) 1981.

³ In the Constitution of the United Church of God, an *International Association*, under Article 2.1.17 the term “Church” is defined. Please refer to this article for an understanding of this belief.

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2 Corinthians 6:15

And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever?

1 Timothy 5:8

But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

We can reach certain conclusions from the above verses. We conclude that an unbeliever is either someone who was never called and converted and does not possess God's Holy Spirit or someone who has ceased being a "believer." Paul addresses this in 1 Timothy when he speaks of someone who has become "worse than an unbeliever." In 1 Corinthians 14:22-24, we read of an "unbeliever" as equivalent to people who are "uninformed" (NKJV), "unlearned" (KJV), or "outsiders" (RSV). This sheds some light on the admonition for a believer not to marry an unbeliever. Essentially, we can conclude from the above verses that Paul is making a distinction between believers and unbelievers with regard to covenant relationships.

Personal Choices

While there may be differences in religious practice between two people who are both in the faith, the differences become greater when you go outside the faith. Before an individual makes the decision to marry outside the faith, thought needs to be given to how he will live with those differences. How will a family work out the keeping of God's festivals versus the holidays? How will the finances be managed in relationship to tithing? What will the children be taught? Can a member continue to worship God in the manner to which he or she has been called, without opposition and argument?

All these issues of compatibility are important and ought to be satisfactorily addressed, because they will become magnified after marriage. Our ministerial duty is to advise an individual who may be seeking to marry outside the faith of the potential difficulties he will face should he make such a decision. While marriages between members and nonmembers have worked out, this is not the usual outcome and one should not enter marriage with any illusions about the real and potential difficulties that must be faced.

After careful examination of the scriptural instructions given by God, it is clear that the chosen and called of God are expected by Him to seek to marry only within the faith. While we do not deny that there are cases where interfaith marriages have succeeded, the weight of experience down through the years points out the wisdom of the biblical instructions, and the many pitfalls for ignoring them. Therefore, it is the stand and teaching of the United Church of God that members seek to marry only within their faith.

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We also need to remember that each individual is responsible and accountable for his own actions. Inasmuch as we do not find the early Church expelling members for marrying outside the faith, neither will we. Rather, if after counsel and caution from the ministry an individual still desires to marry outside the faith, the Church will take no punitive action, unless other problematic circumstances are present.

A minister is not required to perform any marriage ceremony for which he has a strong objection. We should never feel as though we are justices of the peace who perform marriages because it's convenient for couples to have a minister or other official sign a document making the marriage legal. In order to maintain unity in the Church, and prevent members from “shopping around” for a minister, the Church requests that a minister seek counsel from his regional pastor (or international equivalent) before agreeing to perform a marriage which would unite a believer with an unbeliever.

It is important, when a member marries someone who is not presently worshipping with us, that we extend a cordial invitation welcoming that person into our fellowship, unless there are other problematic circumstances. Issues of division or immorality would be sufficient reasons for us to refuse fellowship until the matters are resolved satisfactorily.

As ministers, we should encourage members to consider all the relevant issues and obtain competent counseling in making one of life's most important decisions.

It is, of course, best for an individual who is a member of the body of Christ to marry someone who is also a member of that same body. As ministers of Jesus Christ, we should carefully—and with great love—explain the biblical teachings related to marriage, being cautious not to mingle our own feelings and preferences with those teachings.

We must encourage all those whom God has given us in their quest for eternal life. In the area of marriage we are making the decision to teach what God's word says, but not to force people into compliance. We must at all times be “fellow workers for your joy” (2 Corinthians 1:24).

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Summary

The following summarizes the policy of the United Church of God, *an International Association*:

- We should teach clearly what the scriptures state—one should marry within the faith. A converted person (baptized, possessing God’s Holy Spirit) should marry another converted person.
- We should counsel those who are seeking to be married. In counseling a couple for marriage, we should advise them about the pitfalls of a believer marrying an unbeliever.
- A minister is not required to perform any marriage which violates his conscience.
- Any minister who either feels strongly that he should perform the wedding, or who feels it is the appropriate thing to do given the fact the couple will marry anyway, should seek advice from his regional pastor (or international equivalent). The purpose in this is to prevent a person from “shopping around” until he finds a minister who will perform the wedding. As ministers of Jesus Christ we should strive to work together in these matters.
- If a member (believer) chooses to marry a non-member (unbeliever), no punitive action should be taken unless there are other problematic circumstances. Each person must make his own decision in these matters and he will have to live with his choices. This should clearly be pointed out in the counseling.