At a recent church seminar, thirty-two youths were asked to anonymously write down on a piece of paper their answer to these questions: 1) Do you believe it is OK to marry a Christian from a different church? 2) Do you believe it is OK to date a Christian from a different church? Here is a summary of their responses:

**DO YOU BELIEVE IT IS OK TO MARRY A CHRISTIAN FROM A DIFFERENT CHURCH?**

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<tr>
<td>No</td>
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<td>78%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>6</td>
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**DO YOU BELIEVE IT IS OK TO DATE A CHRISTIAN FROM A DIFFERENT CHURCH?**

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<td>59%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
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Although a majority of the youths surveyed believed one should not marry outside of the church, about one-fifth of the youths do not share this same conviction. When it came to the question of dating, only a small majority of 59% believed it improper to date someone from a different church. It is interesting to note that more sisters than brothers (70% vs. 50%) believed we should only date inside the church.

This was a small and informal survey, but it validated my perception that many young people are confused about what constitutes a proper relationship with those who have not been baptized in our church.
Let's say a dear brother (or sister) in Christ confided in you that he really likes someone at work or school they really like. He believes this may be the person of his dreams, except there is one huge problem—she is not a member of our church. Torn between his desire to serve God with a clear conscience and his attraction to this person, he asks for your trusted council. How should you guide him?

This is a sensitive topic as it not only speaks to delicate matters of the heart but also forces us to delve uncomfortably deeper into personal convictions about faith and the Truth. It is a complicated matter within the larger context of a diverse church body and an important issue that requires discussion.

The intent of this article is to candidly present biblical teachings to help guide young people in making relationship decisions that will always honor God.

In any dating or courting relationship, inside of the church or not, we must honor God and refrain from such activities that the Bible permits only married people to do.

How Did People “Date” in Biblical Times?
If we search the Scriptures, we will not find the command, “Thou Shalt not Date an Unbeliever.” In fact, the Bible does not talk about “dating” at all, because dating and courtship were viewed differently than in modern times.

The people of the Bible did not entertain the idea of having a trial and error period in their lives, where one could enter into casual relationships before finally committing oneself to matrimony. Such “loose” behavior would be shunned by the community at large, and persons conducting themselves in that way would be branded as promiscuous.

It was more typical that a young man who esteemed a young woman would discuss the matter with his parents, who in turn would approach the family of the young woman. If there was acceptance, the two were betrothed or publicly contracted to soon enter into the solemn and sacred rite of marriage. And not a few of these unions were in fact pre-arranged before the young man and young woman even met—a thought inconceivable in today’s day and age!

Although the central topic here is dating, we cannot have a meaningful discussion about dating apart from marriage because the goal of all dating and courtship activities is to be married.

FIVE BIBLE PRINCIPLES ON MARRIAGE
Although the Bible does not offer direct references to dating, it does provide a clear definition and direction on what constitutes a proper sexual and marital relationship, which we can employ to guide our actions. Here are five biblical principles that are worthy of review:

1) Sexual activity outside of God’s prescription of marriage constitutes sexual immorality and is a serious offense

Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge. (Heb 13:4)

Now the body is not for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. (1 Cor 6:13b)

Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s. (1 Cor 6:18-20)

From these verses we understand that the only circumstance in which the bed is undefiled is within the sacred union of marriage. Any sexual thought or deed outside of God’s marital parameters would constitute porneia (the Greek root from which we get “pornography”), which is translated “fornication” or “sexual immorality” in the English Bible.

This is a serious sin against the most Holy God and the body of His temple, for which the Bible forewarns no such practicing person shall inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:9, 10). Hence, the seventh commandment, “You shall not commit adultery,” can be better applied as “You shall not fornicate or commit sexual immorality” to encompass all sexual sins, including adultery, premarital sex, rape, incest, homosexuality, and even bestiality.

In today’s sexually charged environment, we see billboards, magazines, movies, television shows, music videos, and video games that glorify sexual immorality to such extremes that entire societies have become desensitized and debased from prolonged exposure. But we know that all these things are an abomination to God, regardless of how callously it is promoted by our culture. In any dating or courting relationship, inside of the church or not, we must honor God and refrain from such activities that the Bible permits only married people to do.

2) God’s prescription of marriage is that we are to marry only in the Lord

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. (1 Cor 7:39, emphasis mine)

Do we have no right to take along a believing wife, as do also the other apostles, the brothers of the Lord, and Cephas? (1 Cor 9:5, emphasis mine)

These verses provide additional
emphasize to keeping marriage “in the family” of believers. The widow can take another husband, but she is restricted to marry in the Lord. The apostles are at liberty to take along a wife, but not just any woman—she must be a believer.

“Because God said so,” should be reason enough for our faithful obedience, but the Bible also provides the following compelling explanations for why God strictly prohibits mixed marriages and demands our separation from unbelievers.

3) In God’s eyes, unbelievers are mentally, physically, spiritually, and ritually unclean. Becoming “one” with an unclean person will not only defile our body but also God’s church and temple of the Holy Spirit

This is what I often hear from brothers and sisters who are considering relationships outside of the church:

“She’s a devout Christian, just in another church, and she has better moral virtues than many other people in our church…”

“I’m thirty years old now. I’ve tried but can’t find any brothers in church…”

“Well, he’s really nice to me and respects my parents…”

“Maybe after a while, she will come to believe too…”

The problem with each of these statements, and most discussion circles about dating and marriage, is that we are starting from the wrong place—that is, we are looking at a spiritual matter from a human point of view.

Whenever we start talking about feelings, emotions, and other complicated human dynamics, we are speaking from a human perspective. If we really want to know God’s will, we do not need to look further than the Scriptures. It’s all about cleanliness. Here are some crystal clear passages that command God’s clean people to be separate from the unclean people of the world:

“The land which you are entering to possess is an unclean land, with the uncleanness of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations which have filled it from one end to another with their impurity. Now therefore, do not give your daughters as wives for their sons, nor take their daughters to your sons; and never seek their peace or prosperity.” (Deut 7:3, 4)

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. For 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. (1 Kgs 11:1-4)

Are we wiser and mightier than Solomon? Marriage is the most intimate relationship on earth, and our spouse will no doubt have the most profound influence on our spiritual growth or downfall.

5) Mixed marriages hinder our ability to raise godly children, which is an important function of marriage and the responsibility of parents

But did He not make them one, having a remnant of the Spirit? And why one? He seeks godly offspring. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously with the wife of his youth. (Mal 2:15)

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 your 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? (Neh 13:23-27)

This marital decision is not just about us and what we want for our lives. When our spouse does not esteem the Lord, it impacts our ability to bring up the child whom God had entrusted us to raise in a God-fearing manner.

So we come to this understanding—that it is not a trivial matter, but a great evil and abomination in God’s eyes, that the people He had sanctified and for whom He made such sacrifice should again defile themselves with the unclean peoples of the world in sexual immorality, mixed marriages, and rearing children that do not honor God.

The Bible teaches in unambiguous terms that, as children of God, having been sanctified by the precious blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, we should remain separate from the unclean and unsanctified. Our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit, which dwells in us, and we are not to defile this holy temple by committing sexual immorality in uniting with an unbeliever, Gentile, pagan, or unclean person.

IS DATING AN UNBELIEVER SIN?
Now that we have completed our review of the sanctity of marriage, let us return to the original question—is it morally acceptable to date an unbeliever? If we have completely followed through the logic—that dating results in deeper mutual feelings, which is the typical precursor to marriage, and that marriage to a Gentile is unacceptable in God’s eyes—then we must all agree that it would not be wise to start weaving this complicated web.

We often think about sexual immorality as the physical act of adultery or fornication, but our Lord Jesus explains that the sinful deed begins in our heart, “For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies” (Mt 15:19).

Consider the commandment prohibiting adultery. Jesus said that “whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Mt 5:28, emphasis added). The Greek word for lust is epithumeo, meaning to have a strong longing for or desire for something. It is sin to lust for that which God has already forbidden, even within...
the private confines of our heart.

For example, God has forbidden adultery; therefore it is sin to lust after your neighbor’s spouse. God has forbidden incest, so it is sin to have sexual thoughts about one’s own sibling. God has forbidden homosexual activity, so it is sin to have romantic feelings for someone of the same sex. These are all examples of sins that have not been physically acted out but still defile our heart.

And let us remember Apostle James’ warning that if these lustful thoughts are left to fester, they will lead to more regrettable actions and unfortunate consequences. Recall the tragic stories of David and Bathsheba, and of Amnon and Tamar. Consider how the narratives would have changed if David had turned away after seeing Bathsheba bathing or if Amnon had immediately repented of his impure thoughts for his sister.

We finally arrive at this central point—it is sin to desire and date an unbeliever, as it is sin to desire someone of the same sex, another person’s spouse, or your close relative. It is sin on the simple basis that God has forbidden it, and if we have learned any lesson from Adam and Eve, we ought not to long for what God has already explicitly forbidden. Let us instead keep our faith simple and minds pure and no longer entertain the idea of having a romantic relationship outside of the body of Christ.

DEALING WITH TEMPTATION

Why did God put a luscious fruit tree in the Garden of Eden and then tell Adam and Eve not to eat of it? And why was God so cruel, bringing this attractive person to me and then restricting our interaction?

James writes plainly that God does not tempt anyone (Jas 1:13). Apostle John reiterates, “For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world” (1 Jn 2:16, emphasis added).

All temptations come from the tempter himself, Satan. He uses these choice weapons of lust because they are effective in enticing humans to sin, which, if left unchecked, will accomplish Satan’s goal of our spiritual death.

But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death. (Jas 1:14, 15)

Carefully guard the heart—do not let any impure thoughts linger, but cast them out without delay, like one would a demon from his body.

Now what the devil wants a person to do in this situation is to keep the embarrassing matter a secret from his spouse so that the devil can grab him at an opportune time when he is isolated and spiritually weak.

The Bible admonishes, “Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor 10:12), and Mark Twain wrote, “There are several good protections against temptation, but the surest is cowardice.” In short, when it comes to temptation, we are to flee from it, not fight it.

That is not to say that we should run away from anyone we meet who happens to be of the opposite sex, for they may very well be a chosen child of God for whom we were sent to lead to the path of salvation. It so happens that my husband came to the True Jesus Church because a sister casually invited him to a Bible study.

WHAT ABOUT “MISSIONARY DATING”?

Let us revisit the survey results.

One has to wonder, how is it that the same people who believe it is not acceptable to marry an unbeliever feel that it may be acceptable to date one? Why would a Christian risk being romantically involved with a person that they know they cannot marry?

The primary reason is that they have already become emotionally attracted to this person and are unwilling to turn back from following after him or her. It is always painful after opening up your heart, and that is why the wisest council offered is prevention—to repent immediately from a lustful thought and not let it get to the point where one has to choose between honoring God or this significant other. But if one must choose, then let us choose the One who gave His life for us and is worthy of our adoration.

For your Maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is His name; And your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel; He is called the God of the whole earth. ( Isa 54:5)
God is our first husband, and our faithfulness should be first and foremost towards Him. If we truly love our Lord and believe that He is worthy to be worshipped, then we will be faithful to Him, even if it means sacrificing some things that are important to us. However blissful, it is still only temporary.

Even the best marriages on earth will one day dissolve, because God designed marriage to be a temporary relationship, as it is with all our relationships on earth. Whether it be with family or friends—they all end as soon as we die. The only everlasting relationship is our marriage with God and the fellowship we share with those joined in the kingdom of heaven.

A second reason members date unbelievers may reside in the hope that the unbeliever will convert in the process. The optimistic point of view is that, sooner or later, their boyfriend or girlfriend will embrace God, become baptized, and then they could lawfully be married.

We can probably point out a number of faithful brothers and sisters who happily came to the Lord after dating and marrying our church members, but it is absolutely critical in this matter that we separate and do not confuse God’s grace and mercy from His sovereign and explicit will, as expressed in His written word.

A great biblical analogy is in the story of Jacob. Was it God’s will for Jacob to receive God’s blessings? Yes. Was it God’s will for Jacob to cheat, lie, and steal in order to receive it? Of course not. Like many of us, Jacob lacked patience. Yes, it is God’s will that all men come to believe and be saved, including the unbeliever you may be dating, but it is also positively against God’s will that we should enter into a sinful relationship in the name of accomplishing His will.

**SEPARATING THE “IDEAL” FROM THE “FOR REAL”**

This may all sound very pithy and idealistic, but it is a frustrating exercise trying to reconcile the “ideal” from the “for real,” particularly when what we read in Scripture and hear from the pulpit is at odds with what is actually practiced and generally accepted at large.

The reality is that we are all sinners, and as sinners, what we know and believe is often incongruent to how we actually behave. But unlike fallen man, we can trust that the Bible will never contradict itself. So as Paul wisely admonished young Timothy,

*Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you.* (1 Tim 4:16)

God is truth, and as true worshippers, we must worship Him in undiluted truth. Faith without truth is like salt that has lost its flavor. We must hold fast to the truth that we have received as if we were holding on for dear life, for if we let go of what is true, we no longer have a foundation on which our faith and church can stand.

A final note on love—the highest kind of love is not the attraction felt between a man and a woman but the most selfless manifestation as described in 1 Corinthians chapter 13. We should thoughtfully consider the impact of our romantic interludes on the many other stakeholders besides us and the person we are in love with.

Mixed marriages anger God, negatively impact the faith of our future children, and weaken the family and church. If we have always been faithful, let us continue to be faithful to the end. If we are at the onset of developing romantic feelings for a Gentile, let us repent and ask God to help us purge this sin from our heart. If we are currently involved in a relationship with an unbeliever, let us seek godly counsel. *