DON’T MARRY A CANANNITE by Nathan Combs

God cares deeply about whom His people marry. When Abraham commissioned his oldest household servant to find a mate for Isaac, he made him swear that he would not get a woman from the daughters of the Canaanites (Gen. 24:3). God then blessed the servant’s search and led him straight to Rebekah. The next generation broke family precedent, however. “When Esau was forty years old, he took Judith the daughter of Beeri the Hittite to be his wife, and Basemath the daughter of Elon the Hittite” (26:34). These family additions were not a blessing, for “they made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah” (26:35). This bitterness did not dissipate. In the only recorded conversation between Rebekah and Isaac, the distressed matriarch told her husband: “I loathe my life because of the Hittite women. If Jacob marries one of the Hittite women like these, one of the women of the land, what good will my life be to me?” (27:45-46). As Jacob prepared to flee from his brother’s murderous anger, Isaac reiterated Abraham’s firm instructions: “You must not take a wife from the Canaanite women” (28:6). After Jacob left for Paddan-aram to marry into Laban’s family, Esau took a third woman (this time from Ishmael’s family) because he “saw that the Canaanite women did not please Isaac his father” (28:8-9).

Jacob’s burgeoning family eventually moved back to the promised land, where his daughter Dinah attracted the attention of Shechem, a local Hivite lord. In the manner of a worldly prince, Shechem lay with her and enthusiastically negotiated with Jacob’s family to marry her. The family patriarch was silent and passive (34:5), but Jacob’s sons were vocal and outraged (31:7, 31). From the Hivite perspective, Dinah and Shechem’s union would lead to more marriage alliances and the eventual absorption of Abraham’s family (and their possessions) into their community (34:9-10, 21-23). Simeon and Levi, however, put a violent end to this Canaanite plan by butchering the males of the city (34:25-29). In doing so, they inadvertently foreshadowed God’s eventual plan for all the people of Canaan (Deuteronomy 7).

Unfortunately, that event was not the end of Canaanite contamination. Judah, Jacob’s fourth-born (and ancestor of the Lord) chose the path of his uncle Esau. He “*saw* the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua. He *took* her and went in to her” (38:2), echoing Eve’s choice when she *saw* the fruit and *took* it (3:6). Judah’s decision was disastrous. He fathered three sons by Shua, but two of them were executed by God because of their wickedness. After Judah’s wife died, he lustfully pursued a supposed cult prostitute, but she turned out to be his daughter-in-law—a probable Canaanite herself (38:1-30). Judah was not the only brother affected by the lure of local women: in a list of Jacob’s descendants, we are told that Simeon’s son, Shaul, was “the son of a Canaanite woman” (46:10, repeated in Ex. 6:15). This unnamed woman is especially noteworthy because she is one of only two mothers of that generation mentioned in the entire list (interestingly, the other is Asenath, the Egyptian wife of Joseph and daughter of an idolatrous priest).

What was the purpose of this persistent thread in Genesis? Why were Canaanite-Israelite relationships cast in a negative light? The first hearers of Genesis (the Exodus generation) needed to understand the necessity of religious purity in the family. They had just left a culture of idolaters (in Egypt) and were heading for a land occupied by idolaters (in Canaan). Therefore, with the stories of their ancestors laid as historical foundation, God issued clear instructions as they prepared to enter the promised land. “You shall not intermarry with them [the seven Canaanite nations], giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods” (Deut. 7:3-4). Abraham was chosen to “command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD” (Gen. 18:19), and this task depended on each generation marrying God-fearing individuals who helped, rather than hindered, the plan. Israelite families who ignored Deuteronomy faced dire spiritual consequences. Think of Ahab and his Sidonian queen (1 Kgs. 16-19). Think of Solomon, whose heart eventually turned to idols because he clung to idolatrous women (1 Kgs. 11:1-4). Think of the Jews who intermarried during Ezra and Nehemiah’s time, families in which half the children could not even speak the language of God’s law (Neh. 13:23-27). These examples were “written down for our instruction” (1 Cor. 10:11) and their application is clear. In light of these narratives, should a disciple think “I can always convert him/her later”? Isn’t it just as likely that your spouse will convert you to the world or shift your beliefs to a perverted form of the gospel? Do not underestimate the powerful influence wielded by those we love. While soft-hearted outsiders like Rahab and Ruth were rightly welcomed into God’s family, the weight of the Hebrew scriptures strongly warns against marrying unrepentant foreigners.

In the New Testament, it is taken for granted that disciples of Jesus will only marry other disciples. Paul hypothetically asks the Corinthian church: “Do we not have the right to take along a *believing* wife…?” (1 Cor. 9:5). When counseling widows earlier in the letter, Paul writes that “if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, *only in the Lord*” (1 Cor. 7:39). Clearly, marriage to a disciple was not a special standard for only apostles and gospel ministers.

Marriage is one of the closest (and strongest) partnerships that humans can form. We must not enter it with unresolved differences on foundational questions such as “What is the purpose of our new family?” or “How does someone become Jesus’ disciple?” or “What kind of local church will we work with?” Although every married couple will differ in small ways (quirks, preferences, etc.), true unity and companionship depend on working for the same goals. Loneliness may tempt us to accept an unsuitable spouse, but loneliness is not relieved by creating a divided life—it is only deepened. As Timothy Keller observes in his book *The Meaning of Marriage*, “If your partner doesn’t share your Christian faith, then he or she doesn’t truly understand it as you do, from the inside. And if Jesus is central to you, then that means that your partner doesn’t truly understand *you”* (page 209).

My purpose in writing this article is not to burden Christians who have already bound themselves to non-Christians; believing spouses should remain in their relationships as salt and light (1 Cor. 7:12-16, 1 Pet. 3:1-2). Rather, I aim to provoke thought in the unmarried and to aid those who counsel them. Marriage was designed from the beginning as a union between two image-bearers of God who work side by side to increase His blessings on earth (Gen. 1:26-28). If the good news of Jesus is deeply rooted in the life of a disciple, he or she will look for someone to help them plant that good news in the hearts of their children, community, and local church. May we look to the Lord to build our houses, so that our building is not in vain (Ps. 127).