The following was first an email to a young church planter seeking counsel. He is planting a church in a rough area, and one of those who are getting converted have been living together, sometimes with children, sometimes for years, without getting married. His question, then, is what should be said to couples where one of the pair gets converted, and the other, so far, does not. Should the advice be to get married? Or is that encouraging people to be unequally yoked?

The question you’re facing is really about what marriage is, according to the Bible. At various times, I’ve faced the same questions you are now facing. The following is some guidance. Some of these depend directly on what the Bible says, and some belong in the domain of prudential wisdom that is itself shaped by the Bible.

More than sexual union

(1) In the Bible, marriage is more than a sexual union between a man and a woman, but it is not less. It also includes public commitment to each other, a legal, and cultural acknowledgment way that sets this pair apart as husband and wife. In the normal course of Abraham’s day, a part of the ceremony was for the groom to take his bride ‘into his mother’s tent’ (so Isaac) — that was the equivalent of the wedding night. Under the law of Moses, if A and B sleep together, and if it is clearly not rape, the law does not say ‘Oh, well, we have to undo what they married’. No, the dowry must still be paid (that was part of the public declaration of marriage under that culture), the two families are involved, etc. So today, if A and B have been living together in sexual intimacy for some time, but without benefit of public attestation (whether in a church or before, say, a justice of the peace), they are not really ‘married’ in the full sense of that term (the sexual union is there, but not the public mutual commitment according to the laws of our day), but equally, if A and B take vows of marriage and then don’t sleep together, this is not fully ‘marriage’. (2) The right thing to do, in both cases, is usually (I can think of one or two difficult exceptions that should be finalised by the other party. It is not to try to undo what has already been done! One cannot ‘undo’ this sustained sexual, common-law union. Thus, to demand that a couple tear themselves apart after they’ve been living together for, say, five years, with perhaps a child or two, simply won’t do. What needs to be urged upon them is that they get ‘married’ legally — not only for the sake of the cultural standards of the state.

Unequally yoked?

(3) But, someone asks, suppose that B has become a Christian, and A is still an unbeliever: isn’t going ahead with (the legal part of) marriage in danger of making a mess out of a relationship that is not yet a true marriage? In response: (a) if A and B were fully married (i.e. legally, and in sexual commitments), then the two are both unbelievers, and then one of them became a Christian, we would not say that this marriage should break up. In fact, in 1 Corinthians 7 Paul explicitly tells the Christian couple to stay married, as not to leave. Indeed, the Christian spouse is to be exemplary in conduct and grace, in that the unbeliever is not to become his or her family. The prohibition of being unequally yoked together, when applied to marriage, endorses two people who are not married in any sense. But, if one person

Yemen: girls rescued

Saudi Arabian and Yemeni security forces rescued two German girls on May 17, 11 months after the two young sisters, their parents, brother and four other Christians were taken hostage in Yemen.

Reported to be between three and six years old, the two girls, Lydia Hentrich and her younger sister Anna, were part of a group of nine Christian foreigners who were kidnapped on June 16, 2009. Three of the hostages, a Korean and two German women, were murdered shortly after they were taken hostage in a hospital near the city of Saada. No group has claimed responsibility for the kidnapping. Although the German family, a British man, and the three murdered women were Christians, it was not clear if they were kidnapped because of their faith.

There was no indication as to the whereabouts of the girls’ parents, Johannes and Sabine Hentrich, the girls’ two-year-old brother Simon, and the Briton, identified only as Anthony. The two girls were found in a disputed border region between Yemen and Saudi Arabia.

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