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Separated to Integrated: Insights on Interracial Marriage

November 4, 2010

by KENDRA STANTON LEE

Adam and Eve.

Isaac and Rebecca.

Mary and Joseph.

The Bible recognizes God's work in bringing together in marriage men and women whom He deems compatible. Sometimes He sends His messengers to ensure this match is made. God in His almighty wisdom sees that by joining two lives as one, He can bring a bit of Heaven to Earth.

But how can we be sure a match is of God? That is, are there clear guidelines for marriages that God will bless and for those He will not?

I asked this question myself well over five years ago when I was preparing to marry my now-husband John. I had recently been baptized in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Now John and I were preparing to unite our lives as one, joining my life as an American Caucasian female raised by devout Catholics with that of a Canadian-born Asian male raised by Seventh-day Adventists. Many issues arose as we planned our wedding. Some issues were cultural misunderstandings, some spiritual, but most were just personal issues that surfaced as we learned what it meant to truly work together to plan a day and a life thereafter.

The most helpful experience during our engagement was premarital counseling with the pastor who would celebrate our marriage ceremony. We explored the many aspects of marriage that will or will not please the Lord. As we studied the Bible, I recognized the heavy emphasis God's Word places on unity in marriage.

In Exodus 34, God exhorts the Hebrews not to partner in business or in marriage with the Canaanites who were an idolatrous people. In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul says, "Do not be mismatched with unbelievers. For what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness? Or what fellowship is there between light and darkness?" (II Corinthians 6:14, CSB). The verb "mismatched" is incredibly interesting. By my own definition, to mismatch anything is to pair it with another thing **one already knows** does not belong.

Today, we place a high premium on celebrating diversity. Perhaps most would agree, though, that sharing a similar faith in God is important in a marriage, if not the cornerstone of the relationship. The struggles that couples may face today in 2010 are astoundingly similar to the ones they may have faced in the times of the Hebrews or the early Christians. It is difficult for partners to encourage each other in their relationships with the Lord if one partner simply does not believe. Not to mention the difficulties of conveying a consistent message if children are involved, and only one parent practices his/her faith, or if parents practice different faiths.

If a difference in faith poses such a tremendous threat to marriage and family unity, what other difference between husband and wife pose a similar threat?

As I hearken back to our premarital counseling sessions, I realize that many of the discussions we had with our pastor echo some of the sentiments of Ellen G. White on godly marriage. Mrs. White encourages men and women to consider what unnecessary burdens they are bringing on a sacred union. She counsels against an older widow marrying a much younger man because of the disrespect she might suffer from her children, now grown to manhood.[1]

She counsels against having so many children that it compromises the family's ability to nurture children's souls in Christ.

She counsels against the overbearing influence of in-laws.

In short, Mrs. White saw the marriage unit as the major lifeline to the family and to the church and hence to the world. In health counsel, she writes that our bodies are not meant to be stifled or cut off from a rich supply of nutrients and oxygen; the same goes for marriage. Whatever hindrances we recognize that would stifle our purpose as a couple united as one for God, we must evaluate cautiously their potential to cut us off from our spouse, future children, the church, the world.

This brings me to the question of interracial marriage. Mrs. White's writings have come under fire for alleged prejudice, particularly against whites and blacks intermarrying. I found that Mrs. White does answer inquiries regarding this matter with counsel against it. When taken out of context, one could easily interpret Mrs. White's counsel as harsh and prejudicial. But Mrs. White had reason to be concerned about the hazards of integration.

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Her son Edson was involved in ministry alongside and to blacks. He had written to his mother about the violence that such ministry sparked in certain locations where racial tensions ran high. He reported that churches had been looted and church members had been whipped within inches of their lives because of their involvement in racially integrated ministries.[2] In light of these events, one can well understand the concern for her fellow church members that informed Mrs. White's counsel:



In reply to inquiries regarding the advisability of intermarriage between Christian young people of the white and black races, I will say that in my earlier experience this question was brought before me, and the light given me of the Lord was that this step should not be taken; for it is sure to create controversy and confusion. I have always had the same counsel to give. No encouragement to marriages of this character should be given among our people. Let the colored brother enter into marriage with a colored sister who is worthy, one who loves God, and keeps His commandments. Let the white sister who contemplates uniting in marriage with the colored brother refuse to take this step, for the Lord is not leading in this direction.[3]

Again, we must remember the context for Mrs. White's message, however. Mrs. White wrote the following in 1896:

But there is an objection to the marriage of the white race with the black. All should consider that they have no right to entail upon their offspring that which will place them at a disadvantage; they have no right to give them as a birthright a condition which would subject them to a life of humiliation... For this reason, if there were no other, there should be no intermarriage between the white and the colored race.[4]

In the historical backdrop of Mrs. White's words, Jim Crow segregation laws had banned interracial marriage in 1875, followed by the construction of separate schools for whites and blacks in 1885. By the time Mrs. White wrote the statement above, Jim Crow laws sought to keep black people separate from whites on trains, on streetcars, in employment, and in hospitals. It is also important to note that Mrs. White recognized all races as equal and was disgusted by the oppression faced by blacks in her country.[5]

Over one hundred years later, I married outside of my race. I will attest that my husband and I have certainly struggled with our collective identity as a biracial couple. Raising our two biracial children is a task without an instruction manual and we pray for mentorship by those who have walked a similar walk. But compared to the hostility faced by Edson White and our early church members, we have experienced very little. We live in a politically liberal part of the country. We belong to a fairly integrated church. Of course, there are plenty of cross-cultural conundrums that make life interesting, but they also present opportunities from which we can learn and grow as a couple and as a family.

John and I chose not to allow our racial differences to keep us from marrying, but Mrs. White's words still ring true. It is easy to become so entangled in fighting prejudice, in contending with rude comments or ignorant questions from others, that we sometimes lose focus on our chief ministry: our family.

In my experience, the enemy works hard to attack our relationships, and to make more pronounced the differences between us. It is not an easy task to be a united front with one's mate. There are a thousand obstacles that can impede unity, including selfish pride, culture clashes, miscommunication, and even intrusions from third parties. But God is bigger than our differences and He loves unity. I have found that if we make God the cornerstone of our marriage, we will do well to please Him as Lord of our marriage, our family, our ministry. "What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder" (Mark 10:9, KJV).

Kendra Stanton Lee is an adjunct lecturer and a freelance writer. She lives in Boston with her husband John and their two children, Madigan and Tatum.

[1] 20 Manuscript Releases 59-60

[2] Branson, Roy. "The Crisis of the Nineties" Article found at <http://www.oakwood.edu/goldmine/hdoc/blacksda/champ/champ3.htm>

[3] 2 Selected Messages 344

[4] *ibid*, 343

[5] Branson, Roy. "The Crisis of the Nineties" Article found at <http://www.oakwood.edu/goldmine/hdoc/blacksda/champ/champ3.htm>



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1. Sorochi on November 7, 2010 at 6:42 PM

Sometimes I wish Ellen White was still alive. I would want her opinion on certain things. I wonder whether if asked today about black vs. white interracial marriage, whether she would still say that the Lord is not leading in that direction. Although I understand that such an interracial marriage would certainly make some things harder, I wonder whether we can blanket the entire prospect as one way or another.

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