

THE CASE
AGAINST
MISSIONARY
DATING

AN INSIDER'S REFLECTIONS

HEATHER SIGLER, J.D.

The Case Against Missionary Dating

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Recently I received the proposal of my dreams and started planning my fantasy wedding. The engagement, so far, has been the fabric that the cheesiest of romantic comedies are made of. My fiancé proposed with a 3+ karat solitaire diamond ring set in (you guessed it) platinum. He asked for my father's blessing; he got down on one knee in front of my closest friends and family; it was a total surprise; my girlfriends cried hysterically as they watched from the crowd; and, it was all caught on tape.

My fiancé is a bona fide, God-fearing Jesus freak. He is funny, kind, and generous. He loves passionately and shamelessly. I would not have even thought to pray for such an amazing husband. I don't start with all of this to make you gag. I just wanted to make it clear that I do not come from a place of frustration or bitterness. I am sublimely happy with my future husband. But I know that I did not find myself in this position by following God's plan. In short, God blessed me despite my

foolishness, not because of it. This is the story I want to share with you.

I'm the type of girl who has been thinking about her wedding for as long as she can remember. I used to go to the library with my dad and, instead of checking out the children's section with my siblings, I would go to the periodicals section and look through bridal magazines. I also had big dreams for my professional life. I finished at the top of my undergraduate class and headed to law school, perfectly content being single and climbing the proverbial corporate ladder until my ideal man came along. When I became a Christian, my nuptial fantasies turned from mere visions of topiaries and ball gowns to hopes of meeting the archetypical Christian mate, the man who would both be my fairy tale knight-in-shining-armor and my spiritual warrior. Eventually, it was inconceivable to me that I would date a non-Christian. I'd seen too many failed (and if not failed, utterly painful) relationships between

believers and unbelievers. “That will never be me,” I’d tell my friends, “I have only one non-negotiable: he must be a ‘man of God,’ or it won’t work between us.” But during the summer after my first year of law school, this began to change. I remember the moment when I started to cross the line.

I met a couple of girlfriends for drinks at a happy hour hotspot in DuPont Circle in Washington, DC. As we settled in with our martinis, I said (in typical “Heather fashion,” as they tell me), “Girls, I have something to say, but I’m kind of embarrassed about it.” I explained that I might be falling for a guy at school, but that I didn’t think it was a good idea to get involved with him because he wasn’t a Christian. On top of that (and much less importantly), he was loud and had a reputation for being slightly obnoxious and totally politically incorrect. They mostly thought it was funny, and they warned me about jumping into the fire, but didn’t push the issue.

A few months later, he and I were dating exclusively, and shortly after, we'd fallen in love. I wondered whether what I was doing was wrong. We did not have a sexual relationship and we weren't planning marriage, but was I being unwise?

Discerning this issue on my own was almost impossible by that point; I was so entangled with him that I couldn't trust myself to tell which end was up. I have a close relationship with my pastor and his wife. So I decided that I should at least disclose things to them, even if I did not ask for their counsel. My pastor quickly, yet gently, advised me to break up with my boyfriend. He explained that although I probably was not living in sin—because my boyfriend and I were neither married (i.e. technically not unequally yoked (*II Corinthians 6:14*)) nor having sex—he believed strongly that it would be best to avoid a romantic relationship with a non-Christian altogether.

To say the least, I was disappointed to hear those words. I was many months into my relationship with my boyfriend, and we were having a great time. To be sure, we had virtually no problems: he was loving, kind, funny, and completely supportive of my faith. He even went to church with me and happily discussed religion; and it seemed like he was getting closer—day by day—to opening his heart to Jesus. He never pressured me to push the boundaries I set up for our physical relationship, and my parents loved him. Yet there I was, being told to break off a perfectly good relationship.

I prayed about it, cried about it, and begged God to touch my boyfriend's heart so that he would convert and spare me the pain of having to mourn the relationship. And here's the kicker: I never felt condemned by God for what I was doing. I didn't feel like he was even disappointed in me. But I had a burning question, "Is this God's *best* for me?" Was there more blessing and peace in trusting that

if I ended the relationship in an attempt to truly follow God's best plan and fully trust Him with my future, He would work things out for my good?

Another issue that started to run laps around my mind was a promise I made to myself at the beginning of the relationship. I vowed that I would only continue with the relationship as long as I knew that *if* God asked me to walk away, I would. But now that I was faced with that possibility, and though I wasn't sure God was asking that of me, I realized I was just this side of bitter at even the thought of it. Ultimately, I knew what I needed to do. So I called my boyfriend, who was out of town at the time, and I told him that we had to end the relationship. He was completely understanding and sweet, and we decided to continue to be friends as best we could, though we needed to establish some stricter boundaries.

To my surprise, I felt relieved! In those first moments, I lived in what I absolutely believe was

the grace of God. A few days into it, however, I started to feel lonely...then sad...then angry. Why had God done this to me? Why had I done this to myself? After all the years of contented singleness, why had I chosen to fall for a man I couldn't have? I prayed harder and longer, begging God to change my ex-boyfriend's heart. I was relentless in my attempts to convert him. But to no avail. He seemed even farther away from conversion than he'd been before. I decided that I couldn't wait, and just a few weeks later, we were dating again...in secret. But this time we had a mutual understanding that our relationship was temporary: I could never marry a non-Christian, and he wasn't on the marriage track at all.

As our relationship moved into darkness, so did our interactions with each other. We began fighting more, and the fighting got ugly. He would insult me; I would nag. He would threaten to leave; I would threaten not to care. Eventually, the relationship became "unofficial." I denied being his

girlfriend to even our atheist friends, and he and I both assumed that short of a miracle, we would eventually separate.

Some months passed, and seemingly out of nowhere, my boyfriend came to me to discuss something. He told me that he'd decided to become a Christian. It might have been the best thing I'd ever heard. He explained the reasons for his conversion (none of which had anything to do with having a future with me), and he said that he was certain—no looking back. I couldn't wait to share the news. Neither could he, apparently, because he blasted his “apologetic” on his blog. Eventually, we discussed the possibility of officially getting back together again, coming out of hiding, and allowing our relationship to grow toward marriage. With all of those details worked out, things were great...until they weren't.

The problem we began to face was that we had no history of godliness between us. Up to that

point, neither of us considered Christ to be the center of our relationship. We didn't know how to disagree healthily, pray through our differences, or work through resentment. In the first phase of our relationship, things were too good, as they tend to be in those initial lovey-dovey moments. In the second phase, things weren't so great, and we had no common ground to appeal to for determining right and wrong between us (more on this later!)*

We had a steep learning curve ahead of us, and it took nothing short of a miracle to turn things around and get us on the same page. The story of how all of that happened is for another time. What I want to focus on, for now, is that we made it! But at what cost? With lots of prayer, self-reflection, and a little counseling, we are stronger than ever, and we will celebrate our third-year anniversary before we get married. But we—no doubt—took the uphill route.

I'm generally a private person. By the time you read this article, I probably will have regretted many times over sharing this in the first place. The reason I wrote this is because I don't want anyone to settle for less than God's best.

I've listed some of the major things that went through my head while I was doing that thing we call "missionary dating." And I've tried to respond to them using the wisdom God has given me through my experience. I pray you are encouraged. (Note: The discussion below is given from a woman's perspective, partly because I'm the author and partly to keep the grammar simple. However, everything is applicable to men and women alike. Also, these points are for single people. If you are married to a non-Christian, much of this is not for you.)

*I'm his only Christian friend; if I leave him,
then he will be totally lost.*

There is at least one major flaw in this thinking: it assumes entirely too much responsibility for others' conversion. God does not need—and has never needed—any individual's help speaking to the hearts of others. He knows how to get someone's attention, be it through a gentle whisper, or a brick over the head (think Paul and Jonah, for example). Certainly, one of the ways He *chooses* to speak to us is through others; and yes, we are called to evangelize. But it would be foolish to think that someone would be utterly lost if not for any one individual.

A second problem with this logic is that it assumes the only way to evangelize the individual in question is to date him. For so many (pretty obvious) reasons, this is patently false.

The last point I will mention here is this: we can never out-love God for ourselves or for anyone

else. You may think that your intentions are altruistic and that your desire to missionary date is mostly because of your strong commitment to see the person you love come to Christ. I'm sure you mean it, but your intentions are misguided. God has, and will always, love each of us far more than we can love each other. He will go to the ends of the earth, to hell and back, for any one of His lost sheep. He's proven what He's willing to go through to reconcile His beloved ones to Himself; let's trust that He's still in the reconciliation business, and that He's capable of finishing the work He started. (*Philippians 1:6*)

***But we don't have sex, and we're not married.
If I'm not living in sin, what's the problem?***

I might agree with you that there are ways to date a non-Christian and not (technically) be living in sin. This conclusion rests largely on the assumption that when the Bible tells us not to be "unequally yoked" (*II Corinthians 6:14*), it is referring exclusively to the covenant of marriage.

Even assuming that assessment of Scripture is correct, there are at least two other ways that you might be living in sin, even though you are not married and are not having sex.

First, when we agree to follow Christ, i.e. become a Christian, we are renouncing all other gods and idols in our lives, and we are making Christ our Lord. We have a duty, then, to ensure that we never place anything or anyone above Christ in our lives. Such idols / false gods can assume many forms: money, lust, and pride are three of the more obvious examples. But a relationship can also become an idol. So, I would challenge you to ask yourself this question (indeed, you might consider this regardless of whether you're dating a Christian or a non-Christian): Does this relationship draw me closer to God, or does it drag me away from Him? If you answer the latter, then you might be living in sin. Now don't let that freak you out; "living in sin" is just an overly religious—and dare I say legalistic—way of

describing a state of affairs where your priorities have gotten out of whack. It happens to all of us at some point. The key is to recognize it, repent, and purge your heart of any such idols. If, after recognizing this, you determine that you would rather have the false god than the real one, then we have a bigger issue (and we have gone beyond the scope of what I aim to address here).

Now let's assume you don't place the relationship above God, and that you actually serve God even more fervently as a result of dating this individual than you did before. And let's continue to assume that you do not have a sexual relationship with him. We still have to ask ourselves whether it is wise to continue down this road. And here's where it gets tricky. We know that God wants nothing but good things for us. He is able and willing to give us good things (Matthew 7:11 tells us that God wants to give us good gifts and will do so, if we ask). What do you think God's best would be for you? Do you think it would be a

relationship with someone who cannot relate to the most fundamental part of who you are, the thing that makes you get up in the morning and look forward to tomorrow; the thing that you cling to in the darkest moments of your life and that causes you to rejoice over your blessings? Of course, the “thing” I’m referring to in this case is Jesus Christ. And if you are a Christian, then your relationship with Christ should not just be a part of your life, rather it should *be* your life – it should define who you are and inform everything that you do.

I think God wants more for you. And I think that He wants more for the person you are dating. Imagine how much richer that person’s life will be once he knows Christ. And I’d bet that, as wonderful as you probably are, you are more of a distraction than a beacon of the light of Christ to your partner.

My second point is just the other side of the same coin as the first. The Bible is clear that God

wants good things for us, as discussed above. The Bible is equally clear that God wants us to rage against all manner of evil and sin. To emphasize this, Jesus tells us that better we chop off our right hand than let it cause us to sin. (*Matthew 5:30*)

When two people are in a relationship, decisions have to be made. There are godly ways to handle situations and ungodly ways. Likely you are responsible for placing the Godly option on the table, while your non-Christian partner, innocently enough, offers the alternative. Perhaps you manage to always choose the godly route. But I'll bet that there are at least some instances when you find yourself compromising. If so, then your relationship has caused you to sin: better that you cut it off.

But he is so respectful of my religion; if ever there was a non-Christian worth dating, my guy is the one!

I'm with you. My guy was as supportive of my faith as a non-Christian can be. But is that

really all you want: someone who will tolerate the God of your life? As amazing as it may feel to have found someone who encourages you to follow God for yourself, it pales in comparison to having someone to walk the journey with you, someone who knows the love of Christ for himself, who will say to you when things get tough, “God is in control,” and mean it!

On a related note, my fiancé and I have had to overcome many obstacles in building a healthy relationship, even now that we are both Christians. I want to take a moment to flesh out what I alluded to earlier.*

During the time when we were dating and he was an unbeliever, we had disagreements. Our arguments were over the same things that most people in relationships fight about. We argued about habits and preferences, money, leaving the toilet seat up—you know, the same old, same old. As our arguments degenerated into us being

downright horrible to one another, I tried very hard to pull us up. I wanted to convince my boyfriend that we both should treat each other with a certain level of respect. I tried to tell him that there are standards by which we should judge our behavior. But guess where I got those standards? That's right: the Bible. And guess what biblical standards mean to a non-Christian? Right again: nothing whatsoever. But what about him being respectful of my views? Well, all of that goes out of the window in the heat of a fight. And once hurtful things are said, they cannot be un-said.

I'm reluctant to do this, but I believe that a Dr. Phil quote is in order here, "You teach people how to treat you." Once you develop a pattern of interaction between you and your partner, it is hard to set a different standard, especially when your goal is to raise the bar. When my fiancé and I started to follow God together, we had a lot to learn. He had to learn what Christlikeness means; I had to learn about submission; we both had to

learn about cooperation and compassion. Of course, every couple has to learn a bit about all of this as they transition from a temporary relationship to a covenant of “till death do us part.” But we add a thick layer of complication to the mix when we have not been operating on the same trajectory from the beginning (that trajectory being a zealous walk with Christ).

I'm in too deep; I can't just walk away. Or, I'm too old to start from scratch again.

Trust me, I get it! Growing up, I thought I'd be married with two kids by the time I was 25. Imagine my surprise when I turned 30 and wasn't even engaged. But forget all of those nonsense deadlines we impose on ourselves. Think about it this way: we all want our future to be better than our past. Marrying a non-Christian is certain to bring more pain in the long run than singleness. Especially if you are a woman, as you are required to allow your husband to be the head of your household. When you marry a believer, you can do

this gladly because you know that he has the tougher job—to love you as Christ loved His Church, to be accountable to God for how he handles this responsibility, and to maintain a close relationship with God in order to guide his family down the ‘narrow road.’ (*Matthew 7:14*) If your man isn’t a believer, you are still obligated to submit to him in this way, but you have no basis for believing that he won’t lead you both down the wrong path. He does not care about being accountable to God, and you can’t appeal to biblical standards to question his decisions.

How do I know that if I let this go, God will bring him back to me?

The short answer is: you don’t. Sometimes we let things go, and we can be fairly certain that God will make every attempt to reconcile that thing with us. The example that comes to mind is that of a parent and a child or a husband and wife. If the individuals in either of those respective relationships have to separate for some reason, or

have been separated through no choice of their own, we can rest assured that God's desire is to restore the relationship. But when we separate from something that is tearing us away from God (e.g., an unhealthy relationship), even though we know that God loves both people immensely, we can't be sure that His will is to bring the two back together.

But there is good news. First, you can trust that any time you release something because you believe it is best for your relationship with God, you can absolutely expect that God will bless that decision. Perhaps you will be reconciled with that person. Perhaps there is someone else out there. Perhaps God has something so much greater for you to focus on right now, and if you would just trust God long enough, you will see it too. Perhaps God has something planned for your partner's life, and you are just getting in the way.

Second, you can trust that God wants only good things for you. (*Romans 8:28*) If you believe that, then you know that if the relationship you are in is a good thing, you can ask for God to bring it back to you—but under the right circumstances. You can trust that He is capable of doing so (I’m living proof of this!).

Third, sometimes the best way to receive the desires of your heart is to let them go, and just pray for them. This may sound strange, but let me tell you how this worked out in my life. As I mentioned, I tried everything I could think of to convert my boyfriend. I took him to church, introduced him to the “best” Christians I know, talked Christian philosophy with him, and all the rest. Nothing seemed to work! I remember praying one day in my bathroom (I do a lot of praying in the shower, probably because it’s one of the few times when I can be totally alone, and no one feels compelled to interrupt). I became emotional about the whole thing. I sat down, and as the water

washed over me, I began to sob. I told God that I was staying in the relationship, in part, because I wanted to see my boyfriend saved and that I just knew that God could use me to help him through it. God replied, in one of the few instances I recall actually hearing His swift and sovereign whisper, “I’m not asking this of you.” God really has a way of cutting right to the heart of a matter. In that moment, I felt released from the burden of trying to convert my boyfriend: God hadn’t asked me to make it my personal mission. But then I was left with the reality that I could no longer use it as an excuse to stay with him. It was only after we separated that he became a Christian. And it did not take a “Road to Damascus” (*Acts 9:3-9*) experience for him to accept Christ. God was calling to my fiancé’s heart as only He can do, and my fiancé responded to that call.

You can trust God to reconcile your relationship—at the right time—if it is worth reconciliation. God will never take things from you

just to see you suffer. He desires good things for us. And sometimes, as well-intentioned as we may be, we can just get in the way. Let God fight your battles, and amazing things will happen. A Scripture comes to mind:

Moses answered the people, “Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still.” (Exodus 14:13-14)

On a related note, many people mistake falling in love with signs from God. There is no Scriptural basis for believing that your affections for someone are an indication that this person was sent to you by God. By contrast, there is much Scriptural support for being wary of your feelings. Proverbs 16:2 tells us that “the heart is deceitful above all things.” Your love for a non-Christian is no more a sign that you should missionary date than the chemistry between you and a married coworker is a sign that the two of you should have an affair.

If God doesn't bring him back, how do I know that God will bring anyone into my life to replace him?

For all the reasons you can trust that God is willing and able to work all things for your good: because He loves you and because He is God.

How can you write this article? You of all people should know that missionary dating does work sometimes. Why shouldn't I just take my chances like you?

That is the first thing people said to me when I mentioned that I was writing this article, including my fiancé. I hear you all loud and clear: it's odd that the person warning people against missionary dating is one of those who knows that it can turn out just fine; indeed, it can result in a glorious testimony. I have no intention of convincing you that missionary dating doesn't work when I know it can. My goal is to help you take a higher road than the one I chose. The path of missionary dating is a rocky one, and there are NO guarantees. I don't know what would have become of my relationship,

had I chosen not to missionary date. What I do know is this: the best times of my life have been when I trusted God with *everything*. I never want to look back and say, “That was great, but it could have been so much more.” Surely God can make miracles out of our disasters. But do you really want to have to experience the disaster first? Why not just take the miracle? That’s what God wants for you, and so do I.

What does your fiancé have to say about this article?

Well, I’ll let him speak for himself:

I didn’t like the theme of the article at first because when Heather says that she should not have missionary dated me, it might give the impression that she regrets our relationship. As Heather acknowledged, if you break up with your non-Christian boyfriend, God might set you up with somebody else. Imagining us not being together is an upsetting thought.

Nonetheless, it is always best to trust God, especially in critical areas such as your love life. Trusting God is difficult, but that certainly does not mean that trusting God is wrong; it is great that Heather describes her relationship experience as yet another reminder of the importance of trusting God. So, because she trusts providence, Heather can confidently say, in spite of the fact that our relationship has turned out well, that she should have treated it differently. The more she trusts God, the easier it is for Heather to admit that she would have been better off without having dated her present fiancé when he was not a Christian.

Now that Heather and I are both Christians, our relationship is infinitely more meaningful. We have the same fundamental priorities, goals, and beliefs. Being Christian beliefs, these beliefs are all-encompassing guidelines for how we should treat each other and ourselves, and these beliefs apply to all aspects of our lives. Relationships without such a deep and broad foundation between partners suffer.

Three things stand out to me in all of this, and I want to emphasize them before I conclude. First, much of what I've written will be meaningless to you, if you do not fully know the love that God has for you. That is, you cannot really appreciate what I meant when I wrote that having your partner be supportive of your faith is nothing compared to having him walk with you, if you don't actually know the utter splendor of walking with Christ. If the juxtapositions in this article are not striking to you, then I suggest that your first step be to reach out to God and let Him come alive to you in a bigger way. I GUARANTEE that He is all I've said and much, much more.

Second, the person who would missionary date exhibits a bit of pride and selfishness that she would be better off purging. Please do not be offended by these words; I was one such selfish person, too. It takes a special kind of arrogance to believe that: 1) you are so important that God could not reach a person without you; and/or 2) your

feelings and desire not to be lonely should trump God's best plan for your, and your loved one's, lives.

Third, the common denominator in all of this is that you must be able to trust God, and to trust His goodness. Life can be scary and painful, but it can also be magnificent. And relationships can be largely to blame for both. Trusting God with your heart and your future is not easy, even when you know how great He is and how good He wants your life to be. I could try to convince you with words that He is trustworthy. But this kind of thing, I'm afraid, is something you have to learn on your own.

I do not intend, even for a moment, to minimize the difficulty of singleness or the temptation of missionary dating. It is tough, especially when you have been faithfully waiting on God. It's hard to maintain hope when the Christian prospects are slim-to-nonexistent, and it's harder, still, to reject an opportunity for companionship that's right in front of you, yet not

ideal. Many of my single girlfriends and I have faced just this set of circumstances. Some of us have stayed strong. Others, like me, have given in to the temptation. And I am the only one for whom things have ultimately (after many painful struggles) turned out well. If I knew then what I know now, I would say this to myself:

Being in love is wonderful. There's almost nothing that can compare. It often feels like love is what makes life worth living. But remember the Author of love; God has been preaching this message since the beginning of mankind. Remember who He is. God created you, He loves you, and He has not—and will never—forsake you. God has managed bigger feats than your love life. He is capable of coming through for you. God delights in being your provider; don't deprive Him of that privilege (*Isaiah 61:3*). Don't worry yourself with wondering *how* He will make it work. (I could never have predicted the way I would meet my fiancé or the way he would give his life to Christ.)

We will never understand the mind of God (*Isaiah 55:8*), but we can know that His thoughts toward us are as numerous as the sands of the earth (*Psalms 139:18*) and more wonderful than anything you can imagine (*Psalms 40:5*).

So what now? Try this: Let your prayer be, “God, what are you asking of me?” And be courageous and humble enough to do what He asks. I’ll bet that what He wants from you is not what you think. I’ll bet that what He really wants is more of you, and for you to desire more of Him. But that’s all I am going to say on the matter; better that I let God speak for Himself. In the meantime, my prayer is that you are encouraged and blessed.

If this article was meaningful to you in any way, I
would like to hear about it.

Please send any questions or comments to:

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