

Race and romance: A couple navigates differences

by [Enuma Okoro](#) in the [November 14, 2006](#) issue

"You two would have beautiful children!"

"What did his parents say?"

"Do you guys think it's more difficult being together in the South?"

"Have you found churches to be welcoming?"

"The fact that you guys are dating says a lot about his character."

Clark and I have been dating for two and a half years, and the comments and questions have been endless. The one that sticks with me the most came from a 15-year-old boy at the Methodist church where Clark had volunteered as a youth counselor.

We had been dating for a few weeks when I went to church with Clark one Sunday. Apparently one of the kids had seen us holding hands after the service and was bewildered. Later that evening, during youth group, he pulled the youth director aside and asked him in earnest curiosity, "Is it OK with God that Clark has a black girlfriend?"

If you haven't guessed by now, here's the scandal: I am a Christian black woman who happens to be dating a Christian white man. This is both my first interracial relationship and the first time I have seriously contemplated marrying someone.

Because of the range of comments and questions directed at Clark and me, I know some of the different opinions that people have about interracial dating. Some think that because children of mixed race are often physically attractive it must be a sign of God's blessing on interracial unions. Some people feel that the biggest compliment they can offer is to say that we are the couple being cheered for the most. Others think it is a compliment to tell me that I have found quite a catch because Clark is willing to date me without noticeable concern about what others think. Still others choose to focus on the potential problems of such a match, wondering about our personal difficulties and assuming that the root of any

problems we might have would stem from our difference in race.

All these perspectives suggest that interracial relationships definitely have their challenges. But what might surprise people is that these challenges are actually beautiful transformative gifts that in their wake can open our eyes to sin, both personal and communal: they help to refocus our spiritual vision from the standards lauded by the world to the standards revealed in Christ, standards that deepen our understanding of what it means to be created in God's image and what it could mean to be called a reconciled Christian community invested in the work necessary to continually grow into the faithful and life-giving body of Christ.

I will be the first to admit that being with Clark has been tricky at times. Our seemingly trivial differences and preferences have forced us to ask new questions about our constructed realities.

Given the choice, I would rather watch a TV sitcom about black families or go to a romantic comedy film featuring black actors and actresses. That doesn't mean I don't enjoy shows or movies with actors who are not black. I am exposed to those all the time because they constitute the majority of options for the general public. But for Clark, tuning into one of "my" shows or movies is not a regular occurrence. There is a free-floating idea that such entertainment has a "target audience."

TV and movies are not the root of our problems, but the standards of popular culture do point to a deeper reality of our individual and shared lives. Popular culture has led Clark and me to thought-provoking and confessional dialogue about how we are so easily formed by cultural norms that can blind us to the new vision Christ has for us.

One recently released movie is an excellent example. The plot centers on a black professional woman who is trying to figure out how she feels about dating a white man. Movies about interracial relationships are rare enough, let alone one filmed from the perspective of a black woman and her community. After Clark and I saw this movie together we discussed some issues of interracial relationships and cultural expectations that we had never really talked about before—about, for instance, how it feels to always be aware at some level that one is a racial minority in a gathering, and to be reminded through the media that there are cultural constructions for the standards of "blackness" and "whiteness," such as the clothes you wear, the music you listen to and even how you experience worship.

So what is the sin in all this? Adhering to the cultural norm is not always a bad thing, nor is it wrong to appreciate images that reflect one's own likeness. But when these constructed norms and personal preferences threaten to limit our imagination of what it means to be created in God's image and baptized into new life in Christ, I can only consider it sinful.

One of the largest impediments to refocusing our vision is that often we cannot even name the source of our distorted imagination. But we do know the source of our shared Christian imagination—baptism. There is no race norm for those made in God's image and baptized in Christ. Opportunities abound for us as an interracial couple to reidentify ourselves as new creations.

This is not in any way to obscure racial heritage or ethnic differences. In fact I didn't realize how important it was for me to remain rooted in my West African heritage until I started dating someone outside my race. I had to address my fears of being completely subsumed into a white world, even in marriage and family, knowing that the black person usually adapts to the majority culture better than the white person does to a minority culture—it's a result of having had more practice at it. As Christians, our struggle is to learn how baptism both trumps any other identifying characteristic and invites us to reenvision and appreciate our racial and cultural differences anew.

In order for us to live into the reconciled community God has created for us, not only our vision must be altered but also our gestures—the practices we use to locate our social and political spaces in the world. For example, Clark has helped me lead a workshop on African folktales at a local museum. He attends activities hosted by the Black Seminarians Union and intentionally seeks out books by West African and African-American authors. We make a conscious choice to see a black female counselor for pre-engagement counseling. We choose to participate in mission trips to Latin American countries and to serve as youth counselors together at a predominantly white church.

Interracial couplehood is not just about black and white race mixing. It is a beautiful gift of blending traditions and cultures and learning novel ways and opportunities to navigate and engage life.

With all these gestures comes the awareness that our friends and families are affected by our choices and actions. I might be the first black woman that Clark's

best friend, Mark, has ever formed a growing friendship with. And as a result perhaps his definition of black has been expanded.

And of course, there is always the pleading inquiry, “But what about the children?” Usually people are thinking about what children who have parents of different races might have to deal with. This question assumes that negotiating race in the sociopolitical world is more important than understanding it through Christian lenses. To the question, “What would you raise them as?” I respond, “Christian.” Nevertheless, I don’t deny that raising biracial children has its own set of challenges. No matter how amazing the parenting skills, society still will place unrealistic and unfair expectations and judgments upon mixed children. This is true for any racially blended family. As soon as there is an “other” in the family, whether by adoption or birth, the family becomes multicultural and all relevant cultures need be appreciated and embraced.

Yet I have the same nagging question in my own mind, “What about the children?” How is it that the church still raises children who ask the question, “Is it OK with God that Clark has a black girlfriend?” Perhaps instead of worrying so much over how biracial children are raised, we might rethink how children are raised in our churches.