

Movie discussion resource **United Kingdom (2017)** *Engage with culture without disengaging your faith.*

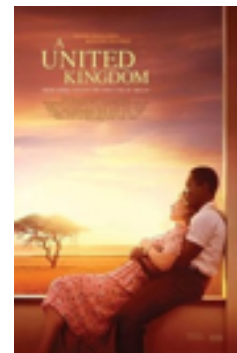
Genre: Drama/romance

Rating: PG-13 (for some language including racial epithets and a scene of sensuality)

Length: 1 hour 51 minutes

Starring: David Oyelowo (Selma, The Butler), Rosamund Pike (Gone Girl)

Director: Amma Asante



Brief synopsis

A United Kingdom is based on extraordinary true events (see the book *Colour Bar*, by Susan Williams). In 1947, Seretse Khama, the Prince of Bechuanaland and later the first democratically elected president of Botswana, met Ruth Williams, a London office worker, while he was studying law at Oxford. They were ‘a perfect match’, yet their relationship was challenged not only by their friends and families but by the British and South African governments.

Questions for discussion

Some general questions might provide enough framework for you to discuss the movie, such as:

- ❖ What stood out as the main points/highlights in the movie?
- ❖ What themes are explored?
- ❖ What assumptions were embedded in the story?
- ❖ What challenged you? What questions did it raise for you?
- ❖ Are there aspects of the story that resonated with your own experience or with the experience of others in a similar situation?
- ❖ Are there biblical or theological themes or characters that come to mind?

The following provides some particular aspects of the movie that could be explored. Feel free to use these ideas as a catalyst for further discussion and reflection.

Resistance - for the sake of love

David Oyelowo reflects: “One of the things that I took away from it is that in society we are cautioned to choose your battles. And sometimes we just give up the fight too easily. But this man was determined and he was fighting for love. For me, the question is what is that that is so sacred to you that you were not going to reason it out and give up?” - even when it means standing up to governments, empires, and opposition from family and friends.

“The key players, it turns out, are those who refuse to be curbed by traditional modes of power, who understand that the transformative power of truth is not a credible companion for consolidating modes of established power, but that truth characteristically runs beyond the confines of such power.” (*Walter Brueggemann, Truth Speaks to Power: The Countercultural Nature of Scripture*). Seretse held royal power in his homeland, and was also subject to the power of colonial rulers and the will of a neighbouring country. Power is complicated. We all have it, but may also fail to see the potential for the greater good against the power and constraints of ‘empire’. Discuss historical and contemporary examples of ‘subversion of power’ by truth.

Family honour, and the honour of a country

The romance is deemed scandalous, an affront to family honour, and the honour of a country. It angers Ruth’s close minded father who rejects her when he learns they are engaged. Seretse, poised to become ruler in his home country, angers his uncle with his determination to continue the relationship. His uncle had been like a father to him, and had been acting as Bechuanaland’s regent until Seretse was ready to assume power. Rather than allow a white British woman to become queen, the uncle demands Seretse divorce his new wife or abdicate. Seretse did end up renouncing his royal title and was exiled for long periods of time, leaving his wife behind (and later went on to become the first president of the independent state of Botswana). In the 20th century, migration and mobility and a greater emphasis on the rights of the individual rather than the community meant that people married outside their ‘tribes’ - be it religious, ethnic, racial, or socio-economic. What do you think are the positives as well as the challenges in this crossing of boundaries.

Political will

The political machinations and economic considerations at play at the time were also ‘actors’ in the unfolding drama. In the 1940’s, Bechuanaland was a British protectorate with plentiful dia-

mond mines. On its border was South Africa, the apartheid-dominated country that, for commercial and strategic reasons, Britain wished to appease. The notion of an inter-racial couple ruling a neighbouring country to South Africa was intolerable, but what really terrified the British Government was the fear of losing power, money and access to gold, uranium, diamonds and minerals in its colonies in southern Africa. Seretse is a fierce advocate for a democratically elected self-rule in his country that would exclude the colonial powers and prevent access to the country's wealth. South Africa threatened the British: either thwart the couple or be denied access to South African uranium and gold and face the risk of South Africa invading Botswana. Discuss, with reference also to contemporary examples of political interference in a country's governance.

Romance

Who doesn't love a romantic story, especially one with such drama, complicated emotions and situations. One where good trumps the forces of evil, where the will of two people triumphs over obstacles, where their deep convictions enable them to endure hardship. Seretse and Ruth's characters, apart from minor episodes, are depicted as virtuous, inspiring, and a force to be reckoned with as a couple, exuding great wisdom and courage in difficult circumstances. In what way might the story be enhanced (or undermined) by a deep understanding of the reality of the impact of separation, of the weariness of ongoing battle with the forces of power, of how tiring it is to speak truth to power and empire, of the 'dark night of the soul' where doubt and disappointment serve to disrupt and disturb and disorient, of the motivations and convictions that give them strength to continue? Does a 'hero' having 'feet of clay' encourage or distract from their legacy? Are there examples you might offer? (eg Mother Teresa lived with ongoing depression, Martin Luther King Jr had extramarital affairs including on the night he was shot etc).

Biblical narrative

Sacrificial love

David Oyelowa, speaking about the film and the connection with his Christian faith says, "when you look at *A United Kingdom*, the overlap for me with my faith is seeing the sacrificial love in action. Jesus is, to my mind, the best example of sacrificial love in relation to what He did on the cross for humanity. What you see between this man and woman is a love that isn't built on lust. It isn't built on self-service. These two people really, really care about each other and want to be with each other and are highly invested in the other person's well-being and happiness. In my mind that is a very lovely version of love and one that goes on to triumph in the context of this particular story". Discuss this reflection. Do you have any other connections with the Biblical narrative, or other examples of Christians who have been motivated by sacrificial love.

Joining forces

The love of Ruth and Seretse, people from entirely different countries and entirely different racial backgrounds, enabled them to sustain their battle against massive political establishments, two different continents, three different cultures. This went on for several years, with many obstacles, but it was the combination of their love for each other that enabled them to overcome. So it wasn't about one person triumphing it was about two people triumphing through their unity. *Deuteronomy 32:30, How could one man chase a thousand, or two put ten thousand to flight.....* One commentator says, you can do ten times as much with someone as you can by yourself. Seretse was prepared to fight for what he believed in and for who he loved, but he would never have been able to do it without Ruth's strength and her love for him. What is the importance of having others join you in prayer and practical action on issues of importance? What examples are there from your own experience or in the global community where 'joining forces' has resulted in change for the 'common good'. And, how has technology enhanced that capacity?

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