

– Reformation Today Series –

Pathway
to
Christian
Marriage

John W. Thompson

PATHWAY TO *Christian* MARRIAGE

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PATHWAY TO *Christian* MARRIAGE

1. Timeless Truths

A missionary once related to our church that three ominous inroads from Western culture are destroying the morality of families in India—even families in Bible-believing churches. These pernicious intrusions are Western television, Western rock music, and Western dating and romance. We were familiar, of course, with the corrupting influences of Western television and rock music. These plagues of post-Christian culture are ruining many families in America too. But dating and romance? What could possibly be harmful in this?

Our missionary, a prominent Bible teacher and counselor in India, explained his startling observation from many years of marriage counseling. He noted that marriages in India that began pursuing a relationship for marriage, not recreation, enjoyed a near zero divorce rate. By contrast, marriages that commenced with Western dating had the same divorce rate as America—over fifty percent!

All other factors being the same, pursuing a marriage with parental oversight seems to affect its happiness, stability, and longevity dramatically. This observation has struck a responsive chord among a growing number of Christian families today. Yet if pursuing a Christ-honoring marriage with parental oversight is to become one's firm conviction, we must determine if it is the teaching of Scripture. This, of course, is the nature of a conviction:¹ it is a belief that we are persuaded is God-ordered and non-negotiable. Thus, the mission of this booklet is to present timeless Scriptural truths that will offer guidance in the pathway of Christian marriage.

The Philosophy behind Dating

Before we explore the specific passages in Scripture that deal with courtship, let us begin with the “big picture,” i.e., your life philosophy, which undergirds everything you believe and practice in life. The Bible teaches that your life philosophy is either man-centered or Christ-centered, either man-pleasing or Christ-pleasing (1Th 2:4; cf. Gal 5:16ff.). These are the only two options.

As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him: Rooted and built up in him, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving. Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ. (Col 2:6-8)

¹ **conviction** – strong belief on the ground of satisfactory reasons or evidence; settled persuasion. *Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. CD-ROM, version 3.1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

Notice what the Apostle Paul reveals about this in Colossians 2. In verses 6-7, Paul exhorts the Colossians to live their Christian life in the same way that they put their faith in Christ, namely, through the instruction of the Word of God, producing an abundantly joyous, thankful life. But is this the typical fruit we encounter in modern dating? Is it possible that we have embraced our culture and have departed from God's truth in this matter of romance, dating, and finding a spouse?

Keep that possibility in mind as you read Paul's caution in verse 8. He tells us to beware of the real danger of being carried away² from truth and into mental and spiritual error. How might we be so captured? "Through philosophy and vain deceit," answers Paul. The Greek word for philosophy³ literally means "love of wisdom,"⁴ and here it refers more specifically to the appeal of *human* wisdom⁵. Further, Paul warns us that the world's teachings are "vain deceit," i.e., empty deception. That is, although they look appealing, in reality they are barren, unfulfilling lies.

How do these barren, unfulfilling lies of the world take us captive? By two means: "after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world," rather than according to Christ. The "tradition of men" refers to *human* traditions;⁶ "the rudiments of the world" denote *elementary* or even *demonic* teachings.⁷ So, Paul is sternly warning Christians to beware of and to avoid any tradition that would displace the truths displayed in Christ's Word.

What we are hearing in Paul's admonition is the necessity of Christian discernment. In order to have a joyous, meaningful, and effective Christian life, says God, we must discern and avoid the sinful philosophies and traditions of the world. They stand against the teaching of Christ and the Apostles.

² *sulagogeo* – to gain control of by carrying off as booty, make captive of. William Arndt, et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, "Based on Walter Bauer's *Griechisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der übrigen urchristlichen Literatur*, sixth edition, ed. Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, with Viktor Reichmann and on previous English editions by W.F. Arndt, F.W. Gingrich, and F.W. Danker," 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 955. [Hereafter, BDAG]

³ *philosophia*

⁴ James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 147.

⁵ "Here it means what is merely human wisdom, as contrasted with the divine wisdom in the Christian message." Robert G. Bratcher and Eugene Albert Nida, *A Handbook on Paul's Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, originally published under the title: *A Translator's Handbook on Paul's Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon, Helps for Translators* (UBS Handbook Series; New York: United Bible Societies, 1993, c1977), 52.

⁶ "This was a human fabrication standing over against the apostolic tradition which centered on 'Christ Jesus as Lord.'" Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians-Philemon* (WBC 44; Dallas: Word, 2002), 110.

⁷ "In general two possible meanings are seen here: (1) 'elementary teachings' either of a Jewish or pagan origin, with various beliefs and ritual (Lightfoot, Moule), which were in sharp contrast to the Christian way of life...(2) Spiritual powers, 'elemental beings,' of the same species as demons and evil spirits, which were thought to rule the universe in general or the stars and planets in particular." Bratcher, Nida, *Handbook*, 54.

The Fruit of Dating

One of the most common philosophies of the world is *secular humanism*,⁸ which views man and his desires as supreme. Some of the practices embraced by secularists, such as adultery, abortion, homosexuality, are clearly wrong according to the Word of God. The world practices these sins because it views man and his desires as supreme. Most Christians recognize these sins as clearly wrong. Yet, other secularist practices are not *clearly* wrong, but are *subtly* wrong. They are just as wrong because they are rooted in the supremacy of man's desires, but their wrongness is not so obvious. Could it be that one of these subtly wrong practices of secularism is dating?

Jesus declared that you will know whether a tree is good or bad by its fruit (Luk 6:44). What is the typical fruit we encounter in modern dating? Several interviews with parents revealed these "fruits" from their teen dating experiences: 1. self-centeredness, 2. macho pride, 3. improper thoughts, 4. sensual focus, 5. immorality, 6. promiscuity, 7. fear, 8. distrust, 9. covetousness, 10. jealousy, 11. insecurity, 12. heartache, 13. bitterness, 14. revenge, 15. violence, 16. depression, 17. thoughts of suicide, 18. tense relations when others date their steadies, 19. an independent spirit, 20. hindered spiritual growth, 21. strained relationship with parents, 22. the feeling of being used.

This last fruit of dating, the feeling of being used, is more than just a feeling; it is a fact. When you move from one romantic entanglement to the next, you become used merchandise, used at least emotionally and often physically. This fact can be graphically illustrated by passing around a piece of unwrapped chewing gum from person to person until it has become grimy, possibly dropped and trampled on, maybe even chewed. *Now, who wants it?* Anyone with mature thinking will quickly reject this gum as undesirable, defiled merchandise. Young children, of course, will happily eat this dirty gum because they do not know any better. This is why God gave them parents. Likewise, God gave parents to young people to guide them in this serious area of pre-marital relationships, so they do not become like used chewing gum or pawed over merchandise on the bargain table.

This dating game looks pretty rotten! God intends for rotten fruit, the corruption we reap from "sowing to the flesh" (Gal 6:8), to drive us back to His Word for divine direction. We are to use Scripture as a mirror, James says, for carefully evaluating what needs to be changed in our life (Jam 1:23-25). What, then, has God revealed about His philosophy of romance? And how do we unearth His life-changing principles?

⁸ **secular humanism, secularism** – derived from a word that means simply "belonging to this age," or "worldly," secularism is more specifically the belief system that denies the reality of God, religion, and the supernatural order and hence maintains that reality entails only this natural world. Secular humanism in turn promotes and glorifies the human creature to the exclusion and denial of the Creator. Stanley Grenz, David Guretzki and Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 106.

Evaluating the Relevant Passages

The study of any topic in Scripture begins with locating the relevant passages by using such tools as an exhaustive concordance, a topical Bible, a Bible encyclopedia, and cross-references. A narrow search of our topic would look up such key words and phrases as *betroth, betrothed, espoused, espousals, wedding, marry, marrying, marriage, marrieth, married, covenant, bride, bridegroom, take(th) or taken a wife or wives, give(th) a daughter(s)*, etc. A broader study would include words like *dowry, touch, kiss, embrace(d) or embracing, defraud, virgin*, and so on. Once located, we must not merely read these Bible passages, but we must deeply probe them by asking *Who? What? When? Where? Why?* and *How?* in a dozen different ways. The answers to these six crucial questions will enable us to define and describe the pathway to Christian marriage.

But we must be sure to frame the questions in light of our topic. For example, *who* might be asked multiple times about the role of father, mother, son, and daughter. *What* might inquire about the outcome of the relationship. *When* might probe the proper time for physical affection. *Where* might investigate whether romance should be public or private. *Why* might question the reason something is done—is it normative or cultural? *How* might explore the way a courtship, betrothal, and wedding are carried out.

Following the above method, we can uncover over sixty relevant passages, not counting duplicates and immaterial references. Several of these are extensive; others are sketchy. Yet, even some of the brief ones yield important information.

Significant relationships to study

Adam & Eve *Gen 2:18-25*; Sons of God & daughters of men *Gen 6:1-5*;
Ishmael & wife *Gen 21:21*; Isaac & Rebekah *Gen 24:1-67, 25:20, 26:8*;
Esau & Judith, Bashemath *Gen 26:34-35*; Jacob & Leah, Rachel *Gen 28:1-9, 29:1-30*; Shechem & Dinah *Gen 34:1-31*; Er & Tamar *Gen 38:6*; Joseph & Asenath *Gen 41:45*; Moses & Zipporah *Exo 2:16-22*; Othniel & Achsah *Jos 15:16ff.*; Samson & Philistine, Delilah *Jdg 14:1-20; 15:1-6; 16:1-31*;
Boaz & Ruth *Ruth 2-4*; David & Merab, Michal *1Sa 18:17-29*; David & Abigail *1Sa 25:39-42*; David & Bathsheba *2Sa 11:1-27*; Solomon & many wives *1Ki 11:1-8*; Hadad & wife *1Ki 11:19*; Joash & wives *2Ch 24:1-3*; Ahasuerus & Esther *Est 2:7-17*; King Lemuel & virtuous wife *Pro 31*; Solomon & Shullamite woman *Sol 1:1-3:11*; God & Israel as wife *Hos 2:19-20, Eze 16:8*; Joseph & Mary *Mat 1:18-25, Luk 1:27, 2:5*; Christ & Church as bride *2Co 11:2-3, Eph 5:22-33, Rev 19:7-9*.

Significant concepts and words to study

Betrothal, Engagement: *Exo 22:16-17; Deu 22:23-29; 2Sa 3:14; Mat 1:19ff.*
Covenants: *Gen 21:27-31; 31:48 ff.; Num 30:2; Deu 23:21-23; Jos 9:18-20; Zec 8:17; Mal 3:5; Gal 3:15*
Dowry/Bride-price: *Gen 34:11-12; Exo 22:16-17; 1Sa 18:25; 2Sa 3:14*
Patriarchal Protection: *Num 30:3 ff.; Deu 22:21; Psa 36:7; 2Co 11:2*
Father Giving Bride: *1Co 7:36-38; Luk 20:34-35; Exo 22:17*

Romantic Affection/Touching: *Exo 22:16ff.; Song 1-3; Mat 5:28, 6:13; Rom 13:14; 1Ti 5:1-2.*

Wedding: *Psa 45:13 ff.; Song 3:6-11; Mal 2:14; Mat 22:2ff.; 25:1ff.; Joh 14:2ff.; Rev 19:7ff.*

Why is it that many people, even some Christians, do not earnestly want to know what the Bible says on certain subjects? It is because such an understanding would require a change in their comfort level and lifestyle. This is decidedly true for the topic we are presently studying. When young people are intertwined in sensual, fleshly relationships with the opposite sex, they will be strongly motivated to latch onto one or more of the popular excuses to avoid submission to God's truth.

For example, non-Christians avoid God's truth simply by claiming that the Bible is not *inspired* (cf. 2Ti 3:16). Since they believe that it is not really God's revelation to guide His creatures, they need not obey it. Likewise, neo-evangelicals assert that the Bible is not *infallible* (cf. Mat 5:18). They believe it is full of mistakes made by the faulty men God used to write it, so how can they know for sure what's true in it? With quite a similar outcome, many modern evangelicals argue that the Bible is not *relevant* (cf. Mat 28:19-20). They claim that many of its truths are "culturally bound," and therefore not applicable to our present society.

In his enlightening book *The Sufficiency of Scripture*, Dr. Noel Weeks puts this last excuse in perspective: "Those who charge that the teaching of Biblical authors was culturally bound generally make such selective use [of it]. They find something in Scripture which challenges contemporary ideas or institutions, and they try to find a way to set aside that element of Scripture."⁹ God's unalterable truths are eternal, even though certain applications of them may change culturally. What, then, must we know in order to accurately extract God's timeless truths about Scriptural romance, and then effectively apply these principles to our lives?

God's Four Truth Forms

First, we must recognize the four forms of Biblical truth by which God has communicated to us: *principle*, *precept*, *practice*, and *prudence*. We might parallel these four truth forms to four food groups: if we are missing any from our spiritual diet, we will not be properly nourished. Our spiritual health is dependent upon our feeding regularly from each of these four truth forms. To omit any from our spiritual diet will promote malformed and diseased spiritual lives.

Principle is the first truth form and is defined as a general truth by which God has ordered His creation. Our responsibility, of course, is to discover and apply God's principles because they are an expression of His very character. Don't let that last statement escape you: as an expression of the very character of God, His principles are by nature applicable to all cultures. It sounds like the Bible is very relevant after all!

⁹ Noel Weeks, *The Sufficiency of Scripture* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1988), 79-80.

A second truth form is *precept*, a direct command of God that is rooted in principle, such as “Pray without ceasing” (1Th 5:17). To uncover the underlying principle behind a command, simply ask the question “Why?” Why are you to pray without ceasing? Because you are in a dependent, loving relationship with God—that is the intrinsic principle. And unless there is clear evidence to the contrary, you should normally assume that a Biblical command is applicable to you and your culture.

The third truth form, *practice*, is a Biblically defined exercise of a principle. Many Christians wrongly assume that the practices in Scripture are generally “culturally bound,” yet Paul declares just the opposite when he explains, “[Timothy] shall bring you into remembrance of my ways [*practices*] which be in Christ [*principles*], as I teach every where in every church” (1Co 4:17; cf. Phi 3:17; 4:9). Old Testament scholar Dr. Richard Pratt, in his interpretational guide entitled *He Gave Us Stories*, puts it this way: “In many cases a sharp distinction between form [*practice*] and meaning [*principle*] cannot be justified. The New Testament does not merely insist that believers affirm abstract theological principles; it also requires us to follow forms and structures in the church. In many cases, the forms and the principles are largely inseparable. We do not need to contextualize the Biblical teaching; we need to teach and explain the requirements of Scripture.”¹⁰ Thus, we should usually understand that a Biblical practice is relevant to all cultures unless there are sound reasons to the contrary.

Prudence is the fourth truth form by which God has communicated to us in His Word. It is the wise personal application of a principle. Does this make prudence optional? No, Solomon tells us that to ignore prudence rashly is sin: “He that sinneth against me [*Wisdom*] wrongeth his own soul: all they that hate me love death” (Pro 8:36). Once you have concluded that a particular path would be prudent, to do otherwise would be sinful since the motive could only be to please *self* rather than *Christ*.

Interpreting Culturally Related Scripture

In addition to embracing all four forms of Biblical truth, we must next understand how to interpret “culturally related” truth, if we are to unearth God’s essential elements about courtship. All Scripture is “culturally related” because it was written to a specific people and culture. But that does *not* mean all Scripture is “culturally bound.” Indeed, some precepts and practices are exclusive to a culture, while others are normative¹¹ for all time. How do we know which is which? To determine if it is cultural, we must ask whether the precept or practice is

- 1) *Chronologically limited?* E.g., a mode of transportation, such as donkey power, changes as civilizations progress.
- 2) *Theologically limited?* E.g., Old Testament animal sacrifices were fulfilled by Christ at Calvary (Mat 5:17).

¹⁰ Richard Pratt, *He Gave Us Stories* (Brentwood: Wolgemuth and Hyatt, 1990), 373.

¹¹ **normative** – establishing a standard.

- 3) *Culturally limited?* E.g., the “holy kiss” (same gender on the cheek) is a custom of greeting like the handshake of Western cultures.
- 4) *Historically limited?* E.g., urging singleness “in view of the present distress” (1Co 7:26) is confined to times of adversity.
- 5) *Personally limited?* E.g., Paul making tents rather than accepting financial support for his ministry is described as a personal preference (1Co 9:12).

Likewise, there are some ways to evaluate if a precept or practice is trans-cultural, i.e., normative for all time. For example, we must ask if it is

- 1) *A departure from cultural practice?* E.g., for a woman to “learn anything” was contrary to first century culture (1Co 14:35). Paul’s command for women to “ask their husband at home,” therefore, is a departure from a cultural practice.¹²
- 2) *A creation ordinance?* Both Jesus and Paul pointed to God’s original design in creation for normative truths (Mat 19:4-6; 1Ti 2:13-14).
- 3) *An appeal to a timeless principle?* E.g., Christians have the wisdom to judge the future world (1Co 6:1-3). How much more, then, matters of this life?
- 4) *An appeal to a different culture?* E.g., Paul appeals to Israelite culture for the Corinthians [*Greeks*] to follow (1Co 9:9).
- 5) *Repeated in different cultures?* E.g., betrothal is found in many ancient cultures of the Bible (2Co 11:2).

Christian Courtship Is Built on Biblical Principles

By Christian courtship,¹³ we mean a man-woman relationship that begins and proceeds with a commitment to marriage in view. This relationship is under the careful oversight of parents versus the freewheeling, recreational approach of dating. Scriptural examples abound, in which the father or a legitimate substitute for the father oversaw the romantic relationship, such as Adam/Eve, Isaac/Rebecca, and Joseph/Mary. God blessed these. On the other hand, examples in which parents did *not* oversee the relationship, such as Esau/wives, Shechem/Dinah, and Samson/Delilah, had mixed results or were disastrous!

In Scripture, I have observed at least five reasons why Bible-believing Christians ought to consider that courtship is normative for all people in all cultures.

1) THE PRE-CULTURE CREATION MODEL: In Matthew 19:4-6, Christ appeals to the pre-culture creation account of Genesis 1-2 as abiding justification for a Biblical view of marriage. Paul appeals to the creation model as well when citing reasons for male church leadership in 1 Timothy 2:13-14. Following Christ’s example, Christian scholars throughout church history have likewise based marriage on what they call “the creation ordinance.” So, what exactly was this original prototype? The Father (God), through wise and loving oversight,

¹² The author therefore views this as transcultural, not culturally bound.

¹³ This work draws a distinction between courtship in general, which has undergone numerous changes in definition through the ages, and “Christian courtship,” i.e., seeking marriage following Biblical principles.

brought together the bride (Eve) and the groom (Adam) for the sole purpose of marriage. God did not create a dozen men and a dozen women to play the dating game and then marry whomever they wished. Instead, He wanted Adam to be a “one-woman man” (1Ti 3:2) and Eve to be a “one-man woman” (1Ti 5:9). Prior to the Fall, Adam and Eve were the ideal couple, the norm for marriage throughout time.

2) THE COMMON PRACTICE AMONG THE JEWS AND OTHER CULTURES: Biblical and historical evidence reveals that the practice of parental oversight of their children’s marriages was common, not only for Israel but also for many civilizations throughout history until the twentieth century. Not only various forms of courtship, but also the practice of betrothal has been a common feature of many ancient and modern cultures and societies. We may define betrothal as “the recognition by both parties of their intent to marry. It implies a mutual obligation to marry, and it sometimes involves a formal contract between the respective families of the couple.”¹⁴ This was clearly a practice of the Jews and of many ancient Near Eastern cultures.

3) AN AGELESS PRINCIPLE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT: The Apostle Paul explains in Romans 15:4, written primarily to Gentile Christians, that “whatsoever things were written aforetime [*in the Old Testament*] were written for our learning [*New Testament believers*], that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope” (also cf. 1Co 10:11; 2Ti 3:16). *Whatsoever* was written? Yes, the entire Old Testament continues to instruct us through its ageless principles, including courtship, a principle of self-denial about which Paul is exhorting in this very context. When everyone around us is yielding to fleshly dating, our patience and the encouragement of the Scriptures will give us hope, a confident expectation that God will provide for those who are faithful. About this verse, Donald Grey Barnhouse remarked in his inimitable commentary on Romans, “Between the lines of the former revelation are great eternal principles.”¹⁵

4) APPEARANCE IN A DIFFERENT CULTURE: Again, the Apostle Paul advises predominantly Gentile Christians—indeed, “all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord” (1Co 1:2)—regarding the father’s responsibility towards his daughter: “But if any man think that he behaveth himself uncomely toward his virgin, if she pass the flower of [her] age, and need so require, let him do what he will, he sinneth not: let them marry” (1Co 7:36ff.).¹⁶ Notice that even to Gentile believers Paul’s marital advice is grounded in the father’s Biblical au-

¹⁴ “family.” Encyclopædia Britannica. *Encyclopædia Britannica 2007 Ultimate Reference Suite* (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 2007).

¹⁵ Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Expositions of Bible Doctrines Taking the Epistle to the Romans As a Point of Departure*, (4 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952).

¹⁶ It must be conceded that 1Co 7:36-38 is an extremely difficult passage to interpret. Nevertheless, the position of this booklet has solid support and is usually referred to as the “traditional” view held by Theodore of Mopsuestia, Chrysostom, Theodoret, Augustine, Ambrosiaster; and modern scholars Edwards 1885: 200–202; Godet 1886: 388; Lightfoot 1895: 234; Findlay 1910: 836–37; Robertson and Plummer 1914: 158–60; Parry 1926: 121–24; Ketter 1947; Grosheide 1953: 184; Morris 1958: 120–22; Snyder 1992: 115–16. David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 336 n.27.

thority to “do what he will” concerning his daughter, even if she is getting beyond marriageable age.

5) CHRIST’S MARRIAGE TO THE CHURCH: Perhaps the most compelling reason for recognizing courtship as legitimate for God’s people is our Lord’s use of this standard for His relationship with His own “multicultural” bride, the church. As the spiritual father of the Corinthians, Paul declares, “...for I have espoused¹⁷ you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ” (2Co 11:2). Why would the Holy Spirit inspire Paul to choose the word *espoused*, i.e., *betrothed*, if it were not blessed of God for pre-marital fidelity? Indeed, Paul suggests that its primary purpose is to “present you as a chaste [*pure*] virgin.” Just as Christ does not want us “dating around” in the spiritual realm because it leads to physical and spiritual impurity, so likewise in the natural realm.

How did Christ betroth Himself to His bride? Notice that it parallels the betrothal model found in our relevant passages above. First, the Heavenly Father and Son together chose the bride (Eph 1:4; Joh 15:16). The Son was then sent to seek His bride (Luk 19:10). During this time, He was in continuous communication with and submission to His Father (Joh 5:30). At the time of betrothal, Christ paid the greatest bride-price¹⁸ in history, His own precious blood (1Pe 1:18, 19). During betrothal, Christ the Bridegroom demonstrates His love for us through words, acts and gifts; and we grow to know and love Him more and more each day (Eph 3:17-19). Christ’s love for His betrothed is a secure, permanent relationship, unlike “dating around” (Heb 13:5; Rom 8:37-39). After our processional to heaven, our marriage to Christ will be celebrated with a great wedding feast (Rev 19:7-9).

Identifying Biblical Principles for Christian Courtship

What are the essential, unchanging principles that will guide one on the pathway to Christian marriage? Carefully studying the *who, what, when, where, why, and how* of the sixty or so relevant passages listed above reveals at least five fundamental principles of Scriptural romance: piety,¹⁹ patricentrism,²⁰ pu-

¹⁷ **espoused** – the Gk *harmozo* means “to bring into close association,” therefore, “Of betrothal and marriage, join or give in marriage, betroth.” BDAG.

¹⁸ **bride-price** – an amount of money equal to several years wages paid by the man at the time of betrothal to his virgin, as a seal of the betrothal covenant, for her protection and security.

¹⁹ **piety** – in principle...a compound of veneration or reverence of the Supreme Being and love of His character, or veneration accompanied with love; and *piety* in practice is the exercise of these affections in obedience. Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (Springfield, Mass.: G. & C. Merriam, 1828; repr., San Francisco: Foundation for American Christian Education, 2000).

²⁰ **patricentrism** – the word *patriarchy* is a perfectly good word that means “a form of social organization in which the father or eldest male is the head of the family and descent is reckoned through the male line.” Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson, *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (11th ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). The Bible applies the term *patriarch* to the progenitors of the Israelites, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the Sons of Jacob, or to the heads of families before the flood, such as the antediluvian patriarchs. However, patriarchy is presently subject to much abuse and misunderstanding. OT scholar Daniel Block suggests, “*Patricentrism* reflects the normative biblical disposition toward the role of the head of a household in Israel more accurately than does

rity, preparedness, and patience. Let us see from where these timeless truths originate.

PIETY: In a sentence, piety is a general godliness or righteousness in attitude and conduct that imitates Christ's relationship with His bride, the church. Piety is the quality that undergirds and permeates the other four principles of courtship. It is a pure devotion to Christ that seeks to please Him rather than self in all our relationships, focusing on inward character rather than outward beauty. Apart from true piety, applying the other principles will be hypocritical at best. Illustrations of this quality abound among the godly couples in Scripture (Gen 24:63; Mat 1:19; Rev 19:7-8).

PATRICENTRISM: On the pathway to Christian marriage, a father's gracious, wise, and loving oversight and authority are crucial in courtship. A father must lovingly prepare and protect his children, while prayerfully guiding and overseeing them in the courtship process.

As God made Eve for Adam, a daughter's father must prepare her to be a suitable helper through training in spiritual maturity, academics, fine arts, and life skills (Gen 2:18, 22). He must protect her purity until she marries, while never exposing her to unprotected situations (Deu 22:21; Num 30:3ff.; cf. Gen 34:1ff.). Indeed, he is "jealous over [her] with godly jealousy" to protect her purity so that she is betrothed to only one husband (2Co 11:2). A father and his daughter must have a relationship of deep trust and respect as the father investigates, oversees, and approves his daughter's future husband. He can then lovingly give his daughter to him.

Correspondingly, a son's father *prepares* him to be a godly leader and a generous provider (Gen 2:15-17; Pro 1-7). Protecting a son is usually less stringent than protecting a daughter since he is less vulnerable. Nevertheless, a son's purity is still a moral concern, which is why Solomon candidly counseled his son regarding immoral women in Proverbs chapters 2, 5, 6, and 7.

Finally, the father guides his son in taking a wife. Historically, a Jewish father considered it his responsibility before God to train his son in a trade, to teach him the Law, and to bring him into wedlock. Because he was instructed not to forsake the instruction of his mother and father (Pro 1:8; 4:1), a godly young man did not marry a wife without the oversight and blessing of his father. Moreover, unblessed marriages in Scripture, such as Esau's, Shechem's, and Samson's, resulted in disaster.

the word *patriarchy*...like the spokes of a wheel family life radiated outward from him...Biblical genealogies trace descent through the male line; a married couple resided within the household of the groom; in references to man and his wife or a man and his children, the man is generally named first (Gen 7:7); children were born to the father (Gen 21:1-7); fathers negotiated family disputes (Gen 13:1-13; 31:1-55); God generally addressed heads of the household; when families worshipped, the head of the household took the initiative; and when men died without descendants their 'name' died. In short, the community was built around the father; in every respect it bore his stamp." Daniel I. Block, "Marriage and Family in Ancient Israel," in *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World* (ed. Ken M. Campbell; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 33-102.

The mother of the bride or groom must support, not supplant, her husband's role, giving wise counsel to her husband and children as King Lemuel's mother did (Pro 31). But what if the father is physically absent from the family through death, desertion, or divorce? Then the mother assumes the role of overseeing the courtship and marriage process. We know that Hagar found a bride for Ishmael (Gen 21:21). By analogy, if the father is *spiritually* absent from the family, the mother may assume the duties of oversight if he does not disallow it (Act 16:1; 2Ti 1:5; 1Co 7:14).

PURITY: The third fundamental principle is purity, which means no physical affection prior to God's approval. Men and women of any age must also avoid sinful, sensual *thoughts* and *feelings* as well (Mat 5:28; Pro 4:23). In the choice of a mate, physical attraction clearly must be secondary to inner character and spiritual maturity. Seek "a virtuous woman" (Pro 31:10ff.; Ruth 3:11) and a man of character (Ruth 2:9,15ff.). Jesus taught us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation" (Mat 6:13; 26:41). Romantic touching—holding hands, hugging, kissing, etc.—are appropriate within marriage (Gen 26:8; Pro 5:18ff.; 6:29; Song 4-8; Mat 1:24ff.; 2Co 11:2; Heb 13:4), but the Scriptures give no evidence of any level of romantic touching prior to marriage. While it may seem innocent, romantic touching can put one on the "slippery slope" of temptation. James describes how temptation leads to sin: "But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death" (Jam 1:14-15). By God's design for procreation, one touch can lead to the next. Consequently, in Scripture couples were generally in the company of their families or chaperoned (Gen 2:22-24; Song 1-3, by "the daughters of Jerusalem"). When there is no chaperone, moral disasters can occur, such as Shechem's violation of Dinah, Samson's fornication with Delilah, and David's adultery with Bathsheba. "Make not provision [*opportunity*] for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof," warns the Apostle Paul (Rom 13:14). A man and woman together alone is an opportunity for the flesh, even being alone in a public place away from one's family. "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall" (1Co 10:12; *cf.* Pro 28:26).

But *physical* morality isn't all that is included under the purity principle. Unrestrained and undisciplined sensual, romantic feelings can lead to mental impurity: "Whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart" (Mat 5:28). Romantic looks, language, and touching can easily cause emotional fraud. Therefore, by prayer and love for Christ, a couple must commit themselves to strict patience and self-control.

PREPAREDNESS: Preparedness, the fourth fundamental principle on the Scriptural pathway, is a readiness for marriage both spiritually and vocationally. For example, before Adam was married, God prepared him both *spiritually*—God gave Adam His Law—and *vocationally*—God gave Adam a vocation, i.e., taking care of the Garden (Gen 2:15-17). Likewise, fathers in Biblical Jewish culture usually gave their sons adequate spiritual and vocational training to avoid slavery and debt before they entered into wedlock. If a young man was not leading spiritually before marriage, there was little hope that he would lead spiritually after marriage. Similarly, a young man who had not saved up a bride-price (three years' wages) was considered unprepared to support a wife and fam-

ily. What every husband-to-be needs is not merely a job, which can easily be lost, but a well-trained, marketable skill.

Before marriage, a young woman should be spiritually prepared according to the pattern of Sarah, Mary, and the Proverbs 31 woman (cf. Titus 2:3-5; 1Pe 3:1-6; 1Ti 3:11, 5:10). Vocationally, a young woman must develop her domestic skills to care for a home and children (Titus 2:5). But this is only *half* the preparation. She is to be her husband's helper not only in "fruitfulness," but also in "dominion" (Gen 1:28). So, the second half of her vocational preparation is to develop her God-given talents in anticipation of the husband for whom God has "fashioned" her (Gen 2:18, 22). Some parents downplay developing their daughters' talents for fear of encouraging an attitude of "careerism." Yet with proper heart instruction, developing their gifts will not cultivate careerism, but a Biblical "dominion helper," i.e., a wife who will truly strengthen her husband in his chosen life work. A family business is a wonderful context in which to develop this: a daughter can train under her father, so that she can serve alongside her husband as his helper.

PATIENCE: The fifth fundamental principle is patience, an attitude of trusting our sovereign God to accomplish His perfect plan in His perfect time. Isaac remained under his father's authority and roof, serving God and family until age forty, when Abraham secured a wife for him (Gen 24). And Paul's reference to a daughter "past the flower of her age" suggests no haste on the part of her father (1Co 7:36ff.). On the other hand, a man is to "rejoice with the wife of [his] youth" (Pro 5:18), not his old age.

Thus, a father must be diligent in preparing his sons and daughters for marriage, and then be *equally* diligent in overseeing their courtships until they exchange their wedding vows. This requires careful praying, searching, and investigating as a priority so that sons and daughters will not lose confidence in their father. The rule of thumb is this: "Patience without procrastination."

Your faith must be in a sovereign God, who, since the Fall of man, has used imperfect fathers and mothers to accomplish His perfect plan for mankind. Young person, God can and will use your father on the pathway to Christian marriage—trust Him!

Taking Every Thought Captive

Have we really departed from God's truth in this matter of romance, dating, and finding a spouse? After carefully examining God's Word, I hope we are well on the way to understanding our conflict with modern culture. Paul warned believers not to be taken captive through the philosophies of this world, but rather to bring "into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ" (2Co 10:5). In the warfare of Christian living, it is either "take captive" or "be taken captive." There is no neutral ground this side of heaven. The battle we wage is a clash of ideas—ideas with very practical ramifications. These timeless truths will positively transform the relationships within your family, though the process may be challenging. But take heart, for the battle has already been won, and the prize is yours to claim!

2. The Dating Dilemma

A marriage begun through dating is like a “house built of cards”—it is structurally weak and vulnerable to the winds of adversity.²¹ Some reports claim that more than half the marriages begun with dating end in divorce. But does this prove that we should scrap dating? Though we already noted the “bad fruit” of dating (remember the used chewing gum), this may still be a recurring question, especially among teens exposed to the world. It is difficult to dismiss what is familiar. Nevertheless, dating is a threat to physical purity, a sense of security, and spiritual growth. Yet society continues to glorify dating on television, in movies, in classrooms, in romance novels, in magazines, and on billboards. And Christians have thoughtlessly followed the Pied Pipers of our culture.

Dating Defined

Many Christians have begun to wake up to the dangers of dating and are wisely asking, “Is dating consistent with the principles of Scriptural romance?” To answer that question, let us first define dating. Commonly, we think of a date as “an appointment to meet at a specified time, especially a social engagement between two persons that often has a romantic character.”²² Combining this with human experience, we can conclude that dating is “a temporary romantic relationship focused on current enjoyment.”²³ It is usually temporary rather than permanent; it is romantic—often only slightly at first—rather than platonic;²⁴ and it is focused on current enjoyment rather than future matrimony.

The following chart shows the distinguishing characteristics of dating in contrast to Biblical courtship. By this fuller description, some Christians may realize that they are actually involved in dating or a dating/courtship hybrid, while calling it courtship. A rose by any other name smells the same—and grows the same sharp and piercing thorns!

Distinguishing Characteristics of Dating and Biblical Courtship

Dating	Courtship
1. Typically started at an age too young to marry.	1. Entered into <i>only</i> after preparation for marriage: spiritual, financial, etc.
2. Meet one another on their own in classroom, workplace, etc.	2. Meet one another through family/church gatherings and through parental investigation/approval.
3. Purpose is personal pleasure, fun, and recreation. No strings attached.	3. Purpose is to lead to marriage. Courtship pursues the commitment of marriage.

²¹ Much credit for this section goes to other godly men who have written on this subject, e.g., Paul Jehle, Jim West, Reb Bradley, Jonathan Lindvall, and Dr. S. M. Davis.

²² *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (11th ed.; Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, 2003).

²³ Author's definition.

²⁴ **platonic** – free from physical desire.

4. Date is usually planned by the youths themselves.	4. Courtship is overseen by parents with cooperation of son/daughter.
5. Oversight by parents is resented as an intrusion.	5. Oversight by parents is required and welcomed for moral protection.
6. Complete privacy is expected by the youths and permitted by parents.	6. Privacy is disallowed/avoided. Chaperoned time together, usually at family home, church, or approved events.
7. Physical affection is expected and allowed	7. Physical affection is reserved entirely for marriage.
8. Romantic feelings for multiple partners causes wounded feelings.	8. Pure, whole-hearted romantic feelings saved for future spouse.
9. Dating is rooted in selfish, feeling-oriented love: "falling in love."	9. Courtship is rooted in a selfless, commitment-oriented love: "growing in love."
10. Disagreements or loss of romantic feelings produces "breaking up."	10. Feelings/disagreements worked out by Biblical problem solving, not "divorce."
11. Wounded heart produces scars, bitterness, and insecurity.	11. Heart is protected by one romance for life.
12. Conscience is generally defiled and seared by impurity.	12. Conscience is kept clear through a pure relationship.
13. Future marriage is troubled by past emotional bonds, unrealistic comparison, and appetite for variety.	13. Future marriage is free from the "baggage" of dating.

The History of Dating

How did such a destructive activity ever develop? And worse, how did Christians become so duped by it? Let us briefly review the history of dating.

To begin with, pursuing man-woman relationships without parental oversight was an exception to the norm in Scripture. Samson is a sad example of a man who pursued a woman improperly and reaped disastrous consequences (Jdg 14-16). In Biblical times, betrothal was the customary practice. Most cultures have practiced some form of courtship and betrothal until the modern age. Dating, however, became the norm in Western culture only in the twentieth century, particularly during "the roaring 20s." In *Hands and Hearts: A History of Courtship in America*, secular historian Ellen Rothman has noted, "A first-class revolt against the accepted American order took place among American youth in the 1920s. This was not a sudden eruption, but rather a series of seismic tremors that occurred with increasing intensity and frequency through the 1910s and 1920s. By 1930, the terrain through which young Americans passed en route to marriage would be almost unrecognizable to their parents."²⁵

In his penetrating book *Christian Courtship vs. The Dating Game*, Pastor Jim West concurs, "The phenomenon of dating is a relatively new institution in

²⁵ Ellen K. Rothman, *Hands and Hearts: A History of Courtship in America* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1987), 289.

the United States. Prior to 1920, courtship laws included rigid supervision of the female. Courtship was not entered upon unless parents were first consulted and their approval secured.”²⁶

But how did dating take root as a new cultural practice? The attitudes that undergird modern dating arose out of the eighteenth century philosophical movement called Romanticism,²⁷ which emphasized making decisions based on feelings rather than on reason and commitment. This movement influenced not only literature, music, and art, but ultimately relationships as well. In contrast to the Biblical mandate to love the one you marry (Eph. 5:25), the Romantics taught the reverse—to marry the one you love.²⁸ Thus, they concluded couples must cultivate love-feelings for one who was not yet their spouse.

With this flawed philosophical base, several innovations of twentieth-century culture contributed to the moral carnage wrought by dating:

- 1) The rise of feminism encouraged young women to leave the loving protection of their fathers and, for the first time in history, enter the work force where they would meet young men.
- 2) The Industrial Revolution and World War I drew young men away from the restraining oversight of parents, church, and community.
- 3) Increasing urbanization crowded more people into closer living situations with inadequate parental supervision.
- 4) Co-ed universities permitted young women to live on the same campus (and eventually in the same dormitory) with young men, which was a major shift.
- 5) The accessibility of the automobile to young people gave uninhibited freedom from the watchful eye of parents.
- 6) The movie theater gave opportunity for Hollywood’s romantic expression of love to influence millions of young viewers.
- 7) New dances were no longer group-oriented but couple-oriented, and couples romantically danced cheek-to-cheek.
- 8) New dress styles were immodest, provoking lustful dating rather than courtships pursued in purity.
- 9) Most significantly, fathers abdicated their God-ordained responsibility to teach the practices of the Biblical steps that lead to marriage, and to oversee their children in male-female relationships. With their primary focus on a job out-

²⁶ Jim West, *Christian Courtship vs. The Dating Game* (3rd ed.; Palo Cedro: Christian Worldview Ministries, 1993), 10.

²⁷ **Romanticism** – because of its immensity, general definitions of Romanticism tend to be imprecise. Romanticism was an artistic and intellectual movement in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries characterized by a heightened appreciation for nature as opposed to civilization, emphasis on the individual’s expression of emotion and imagination, rebellion against established rules and norms, and viewing feeling as more important than reason.

²⁸ Secular historian Stephanie Coontz makes this remarkable observation: “For most of history it was inconceivable that people would choose their mates on the basis of something as fragile and irrational as love...only rarely in history has love been seen as the main reason for getting married. When someone did advocate such a strange belief, it was no laughing matter. Instead, it was considered a serious threat to social order.” Excerpted from “The Radical Idea of Marrying for Love” in Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, A History: How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Penguin Group, 2005), 15.

side the home, they were blindsided by the subtle encroachments of cultural change. And they failed to ask the question that every father must now address: *Does dating fit the principles of a Scriptural pathway to marriage?*

Comparing Dating with Scripture

Think it through as a Berean (Act 17:11). Compare dating with the five fundamental principles of Scriptural romance: piety, patricentrism, purity, preparedness, and patience. Ask yourself if dating fosters general ***piety*** and godliness in both attitudes and conduct, imitating Christ's relationship with His bride, the church. Or does it encourage wrong goals, wrong motives, and wrong behavior in male-female relationships?

Concerning ***patricentrism***, does dating fit with a father's protection of his son or daughter? Or does dating promote the release of a young person to an unprotected situation? Does dating enable a father to provide his son or daughter with a godly spouse? Or do dating partners meet on their own, plan their dates for personal pleasure, and generally avoid parental oversight?

With respect to ***purity***, does dating nurture physical morality, treating the younger women "as sisters, with all purity" (1Ti 5:2)? Does dating tempt one toward physical affection through unchaperoned meetings, often at night? Does dating cultivate feelings of purity, preserving one's heart for his/her spouse ("for I have espoused you to one husband," 2Co 11:2)? Does dating result in broken hearts, bitterness, and insecurity?

Concerning ***preparation***, does dating prepare a young person for marriage, both spiritually and vocationally? Or does it actually distract a young person from commitment to God and completion of his or her vocational training, creating short-lived and immature attachments that interrupt God's plan for his or her life? One pastor has observed, "Most young people in the dating culture are nowhere near ready to get married. Mentally, they have not completed an adequate education. Spiritually, they have not developed deep convictions necessary for a successful marriage. Financially, they have not become sufficiently stable to support a new household."

Finally, pertaining to ***patience***, does dating promote a patient attitude of walking "by faith, not by sight" (2Co 5:7), trusting in our sovereign God to work through imperfect fathers and mothers to accomplish His perfect plan? Or does it prematurely awaken a young person's affections, resulting in hasty, ill-advised marriages? The answer to each of these questions should be obvious and indisputable to any honest, God-fearing parent or teen.

Dating is a dangerous threat to young people's physical purity and spiritual growth. This is because dating opposes every fundamental principle that God has given us for Scriptural romance. It is a game of Russian roulette that puts a pistol to the head with five of the six cylinders loaded. And knowing that God allows us to reap what we sow (Gal 6:7), countless young people are going to be seriously harmed by it.

Victory over the Desire to Date

But what if a young person is having a tough time resisting the desire to date? How might he gain victory over it? A "dating spirit" is the yearning to

enjoy the romantic appeal, glamour, and allurement of dating, even though you know in your conscience that it dishonors God's principles and distracts you from a single-minded devotion to Christ (1Co 7:32, 35). Do you have a desire for romance before Biblically seeking a spouse? See how you fare in this "Quiz for a Dating Spirit." Answer YES or NO to the following questions and be honest with yourself:

- 1) Do you desire a non-committal relationship for recreation rather than one that leads to marriage?
- 2) Do you excitedly look forward to meeting the opposite sex at recreational events, in the classroom, or at your workplace?
- 3) Do you desire romantic feelings before you are both ready to marry?
- 4) Do you desire physical affection in a pre-marital relationship?
- 5) Do you resent the thought of your father overseeing your romantic relationship?
Do you want control, freedom from your parents' authority, and privacy in your relationship?

If you answer "yes" to any of these five questions, then you probably have a dating spirit, that is, a desire for the appeal and glamour of dating. What can you do about it? How can you preserve your whole heart for your future spouse? You must "be renewed in the spirit of your mind" (Eph 4:23) in the way you think about dating, both spiritually and practically.

Spiritually Renewing Your Mind

But how exactly do you "renew your mind"? The writer of Hebrews gives us great insight into the mind/heart when he explains, "For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword...a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Heb 4:12). Our thoughts, of course, are our beliefs. Our intentions are spoken of elsewhere in Scripture as our desires, motives, lusts, cravings, passions, and yearnings. Although there are many ways our desires manifest themselves—laziness, sensuality, materialism, approval, control, pride, etc.—there are actually only two fundamental motives that underlie all of our attitudes, words, and deeds. Either the desire to please Jesus Christ will control us or the desire to please ourselves will. Christ vs. self—these two conflicting roots will produce either the fruit of the Spirit (growing from love for Christ) or the deeds of the flesh (growing from love for self).

Discarding the Myths of Dating

Some very practical reasons can motivate us to resist dating. We can categorize them under two topics: the *myths* of dating and the *dangers* of dating. In Proverbs chapters 2, 5, 6 and 7, God cautions young men not to be ignorant about their relationship with young women (*cf.* Pro 7:6-10). Young men who fall into immoral relationships are lacking good sense because they have believed several worldly myths about dating. We must Biblically expose the following myths—gleaned from Paul Jehle's book *Dating Vs. Courtship*—in order to understand the faulty foundation of modern dating.

MYTH 1: *I need a boyfriend/girlfriend to overcome my loneliness and fulfill my social needs.* But 1 John 1:6-7 says, "If we walk in the light as he [God] is in

the light, we have fellowship one with another..." God has designed fellowship with Himself and within the church to fulfill our loneliness and social needs. Dating actually works against true fellowship because it creates a relationship that focuses on one and excludes others.

MYTH 2: *A necessary part of maturing is having someone with whom you can share your affections and trust (True). Dating fulfills this need (False).* Here is a myth that denies Romans 12:9-10, "Let love be without dissimulation [*hypocrisy*]...Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love..." The dating game is the worst atmosphere to honestly share your affections since "love" in dating is usually hypocrisy, sensuality disguised as true love.

MYTH 3: *Physical affection in dating is normal, natural, and okay; just keep it under control.* Regarding the sin of adultery, Solomon said, "Can a man take fire in his bosom, and his clothes not be burned?" (Pro 6:27). So it is with the temptation to fornication: by God's design for procreation, one touch leads to the next. God intended physical affection within marriage and not before. Ecclesiastes 3:1, 5 reminds us, "To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven...a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing."

MYTH 4: *Dating was the way we adults found our spouses, and it didn't hurt us any. So it must be okay for our kids.* This myth compromises 1 Peter 1:15, "But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of [behavior]" The error here is that the standard must be the very holiness of Christ, not our own experience. And we must make God's revealed will for holiness the standard for our children.

MYTH 5: *If you don't date, you will lose out to others who are dating and marrying the best ones.* The issue here is whether we will trust God with the provision of our marriage partner or whether we will view finding a spouse as a competitive market, in which we depend on our own strength. Do we truly believe Psalm 84:11? "No good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly."

Discerning the Dangers of Dating

Seeing these myths Biblically exposed will help young people to combat the false arguments of the dating culture. Nevertheless, there are other practical reasons to oppose dating. Pastor Reb Bradley discusses the following dangers of dating:²⁹

LUST: Dating usually promotes inappropriate desires. God commands us to flee youthful lusts (2Ti 2:22) and to make no provision to fulfill the lusts of the flesh (Rom 13:14). Countless young men and women who have dated enter marriage robbed of purity, robbed of self-discipline, robbed of spiritual strength.

SELF-CENTERED, "FEELING" LOVE: Dating develops a self-centered, "feeling" concept of love, based on liking how the other person makes one feel. Selflessness, not feelings, is the key to a great marriage.

LONG-LASTING BONDS: Prolonged dating creates a long-lasting, emotional bond between two people who will not necessarily marry one another. The bond

²⁹ Reb Bradley, *Dating: Is It Worth the Risk?* (Family Ministries Publishing, 1996).

may fade somewhat over time, but most married people will testify to its longevity. In fact, it has been said, “Nothing can be sweeter than first love.” Young people, you will only have *one* first love—don’t risk defiling it by dating!

UNREALISTIC STANDARDS OF COMPARISON: After the newness of marriage wears off, marriage partners often mentally compare their spouse to someone they knew in the past. This is disastrous for any marriage.

SCARS OF REJECTION: Dating generally results in “breaking up,” causing scars of rejection, callused hearts, insecurity, fear of commitment, lack of trust, and less ability to give of our love. God designed us to become spiritually and physically attached to just one person “til death do us part.” Therefore, the pain of breaking up is, in seed form, the same as divorce. It is harder to give love the second time around. The human heart was not designed for multiple joinings and tearings!

PREPARATION FOR DIVORCE: Dating literally trains young people to break off difficult relationships rather than to work through their problems, conditioning them more for divorce than for marriage. They learn that when the going gets tough they can bail out of relationships.

APPETITE FOR VARIETY: Dating helps promote an appetite for variety and change, creating dissatisfaction in marriage.

DESTROYS FELLOWSHIP: Dating often destroys fellowship, leaving Christians alienated in their relationships with each other. Christ places a high premium on unity among His people. But dating and breaking up promote alienation, hurt, and bitterness among believers, just as divorce does.

LACKS PROTECTION: Dating lacks the protection afforded by parental involvement.

WARPS “REALITY”: Advocates of dating claim that courtship does not prepare young people for life’s realities, like rejection, temptation, and abuse. In truth, however, dating itself creates these difficulties by warping the reality that God wonderfully created for a warm, stable marriage through courtship. Which “reality” is your “cultural norm”?

What Can Parents Do?

S. M. Davis suggests several crucial things that parents can do to guide their children when they desire to date. First, *capture the heart of your teen*. Make this a primary goal of your parenting. Godly fathers plead the words of Solomon, “My son, give me thine heart...” (Pro 23:26). A young person’s heart prior to marriage is to be committed to Christ and his family.

Next, *pray daily with your children for their future spouses*. Pray for their spouses’ growth in godliness, wisdom, purity, and skillfulness.

Always be teaching your children self-discipline, which is necessary for their learning to control their passions and desires. They must learn to do what is right regardless of their feelings. Believe it or not, this begins at the dinner table by training them to eat what they do not like!

Teach the truths of courtship regularly and diligently to your children, “when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when

thou liest down, and when thou risest up” (Deu 6:7). The world’s philosophy of dating is constantly bombarding them and requires your continual correction.

Keep your protection level high. You cannot overprotect a young person from ungodliness. Be alert to the dating spirit coming into your home through ungodly friendships, television, magazines, “Christian” romance novels, movies, music, etc. Remember that the media is aggressively opposed to Biblical fatherhood. Even the movie *The Sound of Music* portrayed Captain von Trapp as overbearing and intrusive upon his 17-year-old daughter’s affections for a young man who turned out later to be a Nazi. Parents, you must be alert to what is influencing your children.

Beware when you let your sons³⁰ take jobs in the secular work force, where the flirtations of worldly co-workers have swept many Christians off their feet. College campuses are even worse! Prayerfully consider developing a family business and encourage your children to pursue “college at home.”³¹

Finally, *do not yield to fear.* Many parents fear conflict with their children. They fear that their children will hate them or that they will run away from home if life is too strict. Nevertheless, if we are to expect God’s blessing in our home, we must rear our children out of faith, not fear.

What Can Young People Do?

Young people, you can overcome the desire to date in practical ways. First, *trust the Lord Jesus Christ and by His grace trust your parents.* Parents do not have to be perfect for God to use them in helping to find your spouse. He has been using imperfect parents since the fall of Adam with amazing success! Start thinking of you and your parents as a team that works *against* the devil’s dating scheme and *for* a pure pathway to marriage.

Next, *look to future blessings,* not present pleasures. Imagine the blessing of whole-heartedly giving your affections to your future spouse, instead of tearing away “pieces of your heart” throughout your youth and giving them to others—not even in your imagination. Think how incredibly strong the bond will be with the man or woman God has chosen to be your mate.

Be careful about defrauding other young people. Defrauding means cheating someone by offering something you cannot righteously fulfill. Girls, selfishly, pridefully attracting boys with your eyes, walk, or dress is defrauding! Boys, treat every young lady with respect and purity, the way you want other men presently to be treating the woman you will one day marry.

When you are tempted to flirt, even in your imagination, *pray for your future spouse:* Pray that God will keep him or her pure in heart just as He is helping *you* to resist temptation. Think of your future spouse rather than the person to whom your heart is currently drawn.

Get a bigger vision than just your own life. The decision you make regarding a mate will affect not merely you, but your children, your grandchildren,

³⁰ The author does not recommend putting daughters into the common work place.

³¹ See the author’s article, “College at Home for the Glory of God,” available at www.FamilyShepherd.org.

and many generations (Isa 58:12)—either for good or for bad. Commit your life to a multigenerational vision.

Delight in God's protection through your parents just as you would a large, strong umbrella during a torrential downpour. Be glad you have parents who keep the umbrella of protection over you and will not allow boy after boy or girl after girl to toy with your affections or your purity.

Be willing to let those who do not understand your Biblical convictions laugh at you. Be ready to give them a godly answer. Every great person in the Bible who took a stand for holy living was ridiculed.

Maintain a 1 Corinthians 7 focus of undistracted devotion to Christ (1Co 7:32, 35). People that date often act like married people by focusing exclusively on one another. But Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 7 that single people are to focus on their devotion to Christ, how to please and serve Christ during this special period of life.

Finally, young people, by God's grace, *exercise self-discipline and control your feelings.* Wait for God to awaken you through the provision of a spouse with your parents' oversight. You must not arouse your passions prematurely through impatience (Song 2:7).³² Instead, follow the advice of "attention toward all; intentions toward none."

3. Preparing for Courtship

Effectively dealing with the dating dilemma is only half the needed equation, the "put off" of Ephesians 4:22-24. The other half, the "put on," involves understanding the concepts and practicalities of Christian courtship.

Preparing for courtship begins with an accurate understanding of what it is. Until the twentieth century, most children knew what courtship was because they grew up in homes and churches that practiced it. But today, regrettably, it is an enigma that requires explanation.

The Meaning of Courtship

Like the word *trinity*, the word *courtship* is not found in the Bible, but the idea is. Modern dictionaries give us definitions such as the following: "to seek the affections of especially, to seek to win a pledge of marriage from"³³ or "prel-

³² Song of Solomon 2:7 is a difficult verse to interpret, as a survey of numerous ancient and recent commentaries reveals. However, the context is physical intimacy between husband and wife. Yet the wife's warning still has general implications, even for those who are not yet married: "In speaking to the daughters of Jerusalem, she is speaking to herself. She is basically telling herself to cool it, to wait for the appropriate time. For the Christian, the appropriate time is always within marriage, never outside it...not that those desires are in any way wrong in themselves. What is wrong is when those desires run away with us, and spiral totally out of control, and find their fulfillment in illegitimate ways." Tom Gledhill, *The Message of the Song of Songs: The Lyrics of Love* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 129.

³³ *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (11th ed.; Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, 2003).

ude to marriage: the period of a romantic relationship before marriage.”³⁴ However, *Christian* courtship is the process of getting to know a person in purity with marriage in mind. It is the time, after a suitor has completed his spiritual and vocational preparation for marriage, to evaluate his spiritual character, values, interests, beliefs, practices, and life purpose—for making a godly match. The word *courtship* derives from the words *court* and *ship*. Court means “a trial of law for evaluating evidence.” *Ship* refers to boundaries, e.g., the word *township*, which means “boundaries of a town.” So, the term *courtship* speaks of the boundaries, or proper approach, for evaluating evidence of a person’s true character, just as in a court of law.

Today children have virtually no knowledge or understanding of Biblical courtship. In times past, boys and girls observed godly romance in their home, church, and community. It was the common experience of their brothers, sisters, cousins, friends, and neighbors. They learned it practically by osmosis. But all that has changed. Now to offset the strong allurements of worldly dating, young people need deliberate and thorough training for courtship. What are the necessary steps for such preparation? There are three: 1) example, 2) encouragement, and 3) equipping.

Example of Parents

First, the parents’ own marriage is the children’s best model for understanding the five fundamental principles of Scriptural romance: *piety*, *patricentrism*, *purity*, *preparedness*, and *patience*. As they observe your marriage, how will your children envision their own future relationship with a spouse? Ask yourself these questions:

1. Parents, does *piety* in your marriage—imitating Christ’s relationship with His bride, the church—give your children a healthy appetite for a godly marriage? Or does sinfulness between you and your spouse suppress their natural hunger for a life companion?

2. Fathers, through your vigilant care for your wife, are you giving your children a thirst for *patricentrism*—a husband who spiritually leads, morally protects, and sacrificially provides for his bride? And wives, through your respectful submission to your husband, do your children eagerly look to their father for oversight? Or do your children witness self-centeredness by the husband and disrespect by the wife, which tear down patricentrism?

3. Dads and Moms, through your *purity* and faithfulness toward your mate, have you given your children a single eye of devotion and affection to one spouse for a lifetime? Or, do your children observe a cold heart within the home and a wandering eye outside it, an attitude of sensuality?

4. Fathers, are you exemplifying *preparedness* through your own spiritual leadership in your family? Are you active in preparing your children for responsibility? Or is slothfulness in your own life begetting slothfulness in your children—the sins of the fathers passing on to their children?

³⁴ “court.” *Encarta Dictionaries*, Microsoft® Encarta® 2007 [DVD] (Redmond, Wash.: Microsoft Corporation, 2006).

5. Finally, Dads and Moms, is your marriage one of confident *patience* mixed with diligence? Or are you often anxious and intolerant toward one another and toward your circumstances? In short, is your example teaching your children to be persistent or impatient?

Be assured, parents, how you practice these five fundamental principles in your own romance will significantly influence your children's attitude toward Christian courtship. In addition to your marriage being their example or model, there is another way that your children are prepared.

Encouragement by Parents

Your relationship to your children should encourage them to embrace Christian courtship. The most essential ingredient is mutual love between father and child. Why is this so? Because a child who sincerely loves his father will be motivated to obey and follow him. Jesus explained the motivating power of love when He declared, "If ye love Me, [*you will*] keep my commandments" (Joh 14:15).

For this reason, some fathers choose to formalize and symbolize the loving commitment that exists between them and their children concerning courtship. They do this through a verbal or written "covenant" expressing one another's promise before God to follow a Biblical pathway to Christian marriage and to avoid worldly dating and romance. Their covenant, signed, framed, and hung somewhere in the home, serves as a regular reminder of the solemn promises they have made.

In Scripture, a covenant was ratified with a sign or symbol. For instance, God sealed His covenant with Noah with a rainbow, which affirmed that He would never destroy the earth by flood again. Therefore, some fathers sign a covenant with their daughters and give them a token to symbolize their agreement, such as a ring or necklace.

Equipping by Parents

Equipping children comes through training. What Christian parent is not thoroughly familiar with the classic child training passage: "Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it" (Pro 22:6)? Equipping includes two types of training for embedding truth in children's hearts.

1. *Developing a godly appetite*: Based on the Old Testament word for *train* (Hebrew *chanak*) in Proverbs 22:6, we understand that training involves "starting or beginning" our children early with right thinking and desires, rather than allowing them to develop wrong ideas and passions. This Hebrew word was used for starting a building with a level foundation so that its walls would not later be crooked.

The world lies in the lap of the Wicked One who uses its attractions to tempt our flesh and our children's flesh to sin. We can and should shelter our children from many of the world's ungodly influences, such as worldly friends or activities that encourage a hunger for dating, as well as television, movies, videos, magazines, music, and novels that glorify Hollywood romance.

But what do you do about the influences you can't control, such as billboards, romantic couples on the street, remarks by relatives, advertisements in stores, etc.? Hollywood romance *will* influence your children, unless you teach them the truth. If you notice your children observing these influences, do not simply ignore it: expose the error by bringing it into the light of God's Word (Eph 5:11ff.).

2. *Daily exercise*: In addition to the Old Testament word *train*, signifying early development, there is also the New Testament Greek word *gymnazo*, from which we get our English words *gymnastics* and *gymnasium*. It is normally translated "train," "discipline," or "exercise." Simply put, *gymnazo* refers to "daily sustained exercise of mind and body"—years of hard practice like a gymnast or other athlete. The writer of Hebrews explains: "But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised [*gymnazo*] to discern both good and evil" (Heb 5:14).

Do you want your sons or daughters to discern rightly between good and evil in the area of romance? Then you must exercise them in godly thinking about courtship, which by God's grace and the Holy Spirit's power will produce godly living. Study the principles and practices of courtship with them, and pray patiently until they form personal convictions about it.

But training occurs at all times, either for good or for bad. If we are not training our children in godliness, then we are training them in ungodliness. Peter speaks about persons whose hearts were "exercised (*gymnazo*) with covetous practices" (2Pe 2:14) because they were allowed to practice covetousness. Are we inadvertently training our children in worldly romance by allowing them to practice it in thought (movies, magazines, music, romance novels, etc.) or action (dating)? Instead, parents, through daily effort and years of hard practice, we must teach them to say "yes" to Biblical principles and "no" to self as they "exercise (again, *gymnazo*)...unto godliness" (1Ti 4:7; cf. Luk 9:23).

Essential training topics

As we have already implied, we must thoroughly train our children from Scripture regarding this practice, praying that the Lord Jesus will bring them to the point of personal conviction. In addition to this, we must study several other corollary topics, if courtship is to take root in our children's hearts. Here is a list of some that have proven vital.

- 1) The sufficiency and authority of Scripture for the entire Christian life.
- 2) The sovereignty, goodness, and wisdom of God as a trustworthy Father.
- 3) Pleasing Christ, not self, as our motivation in all we do.
- 4) Self-disciplined, not feelings-driven, choices and actions.
- 5) Knowing the will of God based on Scripture, not feelings.
- 6) Biblical love, which is *selfless* vs. Hollywood love, which is *lustful*.
- 7) The purposes, procedures (roles), and permanence of marriage.
- 8) Parental guidance, not peer grouping.
- 9) A multi-generational vision, not "It's my life."
- 10) Scriptural and practical qualifications for a godly husband or wife.

Does all this sound a bit overwhelming? Then let us recognize two fundamental facts that affect not only the topic of courtship but also all of the Christian life. First, the bad news. With every new truth we learn, most of us start with great disadvantage, that is, we have been doing what is wrong all our life until we learn from God's Word what is right. We therefore have unbiblical thinking and ungodly habits from our past that must be discarded. To use the vernacular, we come into courtship with a lot of "baggage." And the older our children are, the more we have given them "baggage" to discard as well.

Nevertheless, God has some wonderfully good news for us too. God not only commands but also blesses our loving obedience whenever we understand new truth. God's truth is like a shield of protection from serious harm. When we are standing out from under it, we are prone to be struck by the temptations and errors the devil throws at us. So no matter where we are in the path toward marriage, God wants us to come underneath His protective shield of truth, repent of unbiblical thinking and ungodly behavior, and begin practicing Biblical principles for marriage with our children. God sternly warns us, "To him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin" (Jam 4:17). Yet God also lovingly beckons us, "For them that honour me I will honour" (1Sa 2:30). Repentance is the path of protection, honor, and rich blessing—both for us and for our children.

Guidance by Faith, not Feelings

The details of our lives are part of God's sovereign will (Deu 29:29), which He often purposely keeps secret because He wants us to learn to "trust and obey," as the hymn writer so aptly put it. Trusting is our response to His sovereign will in all of Providence; obeying is our response to His moral will revealed in the Bible. But how do the two work together in our choosing of a spouse?³⁵

God's sovereign will has four primary characteristics, each of which has a crucial application in the choosing of a spouse. *First, God's sovereign will is secret or hidden until it happens.* Would you like to know whom you will marry? Just wait until the day after the wedding! Why, you might wonder, does God not tell us His sovereign will in advance? It is because He wants to build in us a character of trusting Him for our future, to "walk by faith, not by sight" (2Co 5:7). Moreover, He is protecting us from information we are not equipped to handle. Jesus teaches that we are "wired" to handle only one day's anxiety at a time—and no more (Mat 6:34).

Second, God's sovereign will is exhaustive. As "the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords" (1Ti 6:15), God is the ultimate Determiner of everything that happens, including our choice of a mate. In a word, God "worketh all things after the counsel of his own will" (Eph 1:11). Even the sinful acts of men are included in God's sovereign will, as Peter divulged that Jesus was "delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain" (Act 2:23; cf. Luk 22:22). Yet, God accomplishes this without being the author of sin, without

³⁵ Much of the content in this section comes from Dr. Garry Friesen and Dr. Jay Adams. Others who have written supportively of this view include J.I. Packer, John Frame, Sinclair Ferguson, James Boice, and John MacArthur.

violating the will of man, and without destroying the reality and responsibility of decision-making. He simply uses man's nature to bring about His predetermined end.

The third characteristic of God's sovereign will is that it is certain. Daniel 4:35 declares that God's sovereign will cannot be frustrated by men, by angels, or by anyone else. Thus, it is not blind chance, human manipulation, or satanic trickery, but rather God Himself, Who brings a man and a woman together in marriage. And nothing—including someone marrying the “wrong” person—can thwart God's sovereign will. Did Mr. or Miss Right pass you by and marry someone else? God's sovereign will makes no mistakes—He knows better who is ideal for us. Perhaps there was some hidden flaw in that person which God was protecting you from. Or maybe God was protecting that person from *you* as He continues conforming you to the character of Christ.

Finally, God's sovereign will is perfect, bringing the highest glory to God and the greatest good to man. God causes “all things [to] work together for good to them that love God” (Rom 8:28). God does not say all things are good because they are not. He says all things “work together for good” to make us conformed to Christ. Even a difficult marriage can “work together for good” to conform us to Christ's qualities of endurance, forbearance, and forgiveness as we learn to love a less-than-perfect mate. So in the perfect sovereign will of God, there is no such thing as being stuck with “God's second best” spouse. And whether we become bitter or better in marriage simply depends on how much we are trusting in the sovereign will and Word of God.

But trusting God's sovereign will is only half the equation for our choosing a spouse. Remember “Trust *and Obey*.” The second half is obeying God's moral will. And the substance of God's moral will is the Bible, pure and simple (Rom 2:18). It is our perfect and complete guide for all faith and practice (2Pe 1:3-4; 2Ti 3:17), encompassing not only *what* we do, but also *why* we do it and *how* we do it. Speaking of this truth, Jesus tells us, “If ye know these things, happy [blessed] are ye if ye do them” (Joh 13:17). So our two responses to God's moral will are 1) to know it and 2) to do it. The Holy Spirit does not guide us apart from God's Word; rather He guides us through God's Word as we diligently study to know it. Then He blesses us with spiritual success as we faithfully obey it (Jos 1:8; Psa 1:1-3).

The purpose of this booklet is to search out the principles, precepts, and practices of God that relate to choosing a spouse. This process relies on faith, not feelings—faith in the sovereign will of God to overshadow our feeble efforts, and faith in the moral will of God to direct our uncertain steps. God has given us His completed revelation as our all-sufficient guide. When we make our decisions based on the objective truth of Scripture, our feelings can find their God-ordained place in responding to that truth with love, hope, rejoicing, and thankfulness!

4. Friendship

Understanding Friendship

We may define *friendship* as “a cordial relationship of mutual esteem.”³⁶ The friendship stage of Scriptural romance may be viewed as building a beautiful house, laying its foundation on the solid rock of Jesus Christ.

The friendship stage should begin even with young children, whenever possible. Since we attain a God-honoring Christian walk by believing God’s Word and applying its principles to the issues of life, we should exercise the five fundamental principles on the pathway to Christian marriage—piety, patricentrism, purity, preparedness, and patience—during each of the relational stages leading to marriage.

Applying Piety

Piety in our friendships refers to godliness in attitudes and conduct, founded upon our personal faith in Jesus Christ, the Rock and Cornerstone of our life. Therefore, piety begins in us with salvation, hopefully at a young age. Children must then learn to desire Christ’s will more than self-will. This occurs over time as we grow to understand and appreciate all that He is and all that He has done for us. As we enter the teen years, godly piety calls us to trust Jesus Christ with this intriguing, new area of relationships with the opposite sex.

How do you know if you have trusted your relationships to Christ, young people? Answer these questions:

1. Am I willing, if God so chooses, to remain *single*, with Christ alone as my spouse?
2. Am I willing, if God so chooses, to marry after He does the *matchmaking*?
3. Am I willing, if God so chooses, to marry after He determines the *timetable*?

Only when you can answer “yes” to each of these three questions can you say that you have surrendered your relationships to Christ. Psalm 37:5 encourages our wholehearted commitment with these words: “Commit thy way unto the LORD; trust also in him; and he shall bring it to pass.”

Applying Patricentrism

Young ladies, are you learning to trust your father to protect you physically, morally, and spiritually and to oversee the choice of a spouse? The key to trusting your earthly father rests in trusting your Heavenly Father to work His principles of Scriptural romance through your earthly father.

Now, fathers, God expects you to be faithful even more so than your children, since you are their example. So during this early friendship stage of preparation for marriage, are you physically, morally, and spiritually protecting and providing for your children in such a way that you earn their trust? Are you teaching them to trust in Christ by your example? This is your primary task during the friendship stage of relationships. This is the season when you lay the foundation for later years when your children’s trust in you will be essential.

³⁶ Author’s definition.

You can demonstrate your faithfulness in this area by preparing your daughter to be a “help meet”³⁷ for her future husband. Help develop her skills in the areas of academics, fine arts, life skills, and spiritual life, praying for her and with her about her future husband. Further, you must give her oversight by not giving her over to an unprotected situation—physically, morally, or emotionally. For your sons, you must likewise build trust by preparing them to be godly leaders, both vocationally and spiritually, and by counseling them against the vices of ungodly women (as in Proverbs 2, 5, 6, 7).

Mothers, during this friendship stage, you can aid your husband in being a trustworthy protector and provider of the family, building up your children’s trust in their father to oversee the choice of an excellent spouse for them. Take to heart Solomon’s wise counsel: “Every wise woman buildeth her house: but the foolish plucketh it down with her hands” (Pro 14:1).

Applying Purity

Preserving purity means refraining from physical affection and controlling your passions prior to your wedding vows. Young men, treat younger women as sisters, with all purity (1Ti 5:2). Relating during the friendship stage should be exercised primarily through family-centered or church-centered gatherings rather than through one-on-one dating or through youth groups.

Paralleling the warning that “bad company corrupts good morals,” Paul likewise exhorts us: “Flee also youthful lusts” (2Ti 2:22). But, practically speaking, *how* are young people to flee from youthful lusts? Paul answers in the second half of the same verse: “...but follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart.” The Bible cautions about the dangers of youthful peers. We would be wise, therefore, to have our children and youth pursue friendships primarily in the context of family-centered gatherings where dads and moms are always present to carry out their Biblical role of guarding their children’s hearts.

Assuming that God would have you married, you already know that somewhere out there He has specially created for you a young man or woman whom He is providentially preparing to be your spouse. So young men, don’t you want your bride to be “doing you good and not evil *all* the days of her life” (Pro 31:11, 12)³⁸ by being morally faithful to you even now?

Young people, you should live by this purity test. Always imagine that your spouse-to-be is watching you. Then ask yourself, “If she could see me now, what would she think? Would she be hurt, jealous, disappointed in me?” If so, then something is not right in the way you are presently relating to the opposite sex. Now take that purity test one step further—imagine that your spouse-to-be can read your thoughts at all times. Will a pure young lady want to be spiritually one with a mind that has been exposed to R-rated movies? Most of us never

³⁷ Prior to God creating Eve for Adam, God said, “I will make him an help meet for him.” The word *help* means “a helper” (TWOT; Holladay), while *meet* means “opposite, that which corresponds” (HALOT; Holladay). Together they mean “a suitable helper” or “a helper matching him” Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, (WBC 1; Dallas: Word, 2002), 68.

³⁸ Emphasis added.

consider that if our thought life were recorded for our future spouse to read, he or she would be horrified. But from God's timeless point of view, you have a love life with your spouse-to-be even before you ever meet her. Now take it one step even further: realize that God knows all your thoughts completely even now. Let us not grieve Him!

Applying Preparedness

"Preparedness" may be the best single word to describe our focus during the friendship stage of relationships. It is the lengthy time of becoming ready for marriage spiritually, vocationally, and financially. Solomon explained it this way, "Prepare thy work without, and make it fit for thyself in the field [*vocational preparation*]; and afterwards build thine house [*household*, i.e., dwelling place, marriage, and children]" (Pro 24:27). Vocational preparation, young men, is not merely a "job," which can easily be lost, but marketable skills that you must take time now to develop, before seriously considering marriage. And spiritually, it is the season for developing leadership and self-discipline—leadership in worship, prayer, teaching, and witnessing; and self-discipline in spending, eating, orderliness, working, and studying.

A young woman must also be spiritually preparing during the friendship stage by following the examples of Sarah, Mary, and the Proverbs 31 woman. Vocationally, she must develop her domestic skills and gifts as well as the talents God has given her for assisting in her future husband's life purpose.

Applying Patience

Patience is necessary in an attitude of humble submission, patiently trusting a sovereign God to accomplish His perfect plan in His perfect time. In Scripture, true waiting involves an active focus, with energetic expectancy as you continue to serve God. But you must stay focused and avoid the world's temptations by keeping your eyes on God's best.

Patience involves not only watching out for distractions but also praying: "Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Mat 26:41). Pray for daily strength to be faithful, pray for your future spouse to be faithful, and pray that God will mold both you and your mate-to-be into one perfect match that will glorify Him. "I waited patiently for the LORD; and he inclined unto me, and heard my cry" (Psa 40:1).

5. Courtship

A father should not even consider courtship until he is convinced that his son or daughter has fulfilled the goals in the friendship stage of marriage preparation. This includes the development of selfless devotion to Christ, trust in the protection and provision of their father, physical and spiritual faithfulness to their future spouse, spiritual and vocational preparation for adulthood, and prayerful confidence in God's wise, loving, and sovereign rule. Otherwise, so much unfinished work will make a future marriage unfit and Biblically inappropriate.

Wisdom Guidance for Courtship

What should spiritually-minded Christians desire in a spouse? God has added three provisions for wisdom in choosing a spouse: the Scriptures, research, and wise counselors.

Wisdom, of course, begins with the *Scriptures*, which give God's job description for husbands and wives. Just as you would be grossly unwise to consider a job without first studying the job description, so it is with marriage. So be sure to understand God's reasons and responsibilities for wedlock, namely 1) to partner together for productive service, 2) to propagate a godly seed, and 3) to portray Christ's relationship with His church: loving leadership by the husband as family pastor, provider, and protector; and reverent submission by the wife as devoted helper and worker at home.

It would be wise, for instance, for a man to select a spouse with whom he could most easily and completely fulfill his unique life purpose and his responsibilities as a husband (Gen 2:18). This would surely begin with like-mindedness in Biblical beliefs and lifestyle convictions. And he would want to choose a woman whose chief desire is the fulfillment of her God-ordained functions as a Christian, a wife, and a mother (Titus 2:5).

A woman, observing that Scripture requires her to respect and submit to her husband (Eph 5:22), should ask in advance: "To what kind of man would I most easily submit?" In the most general terms, that would be one who is spiritually mature. This principle is repeatedly underscored in the Old Testament. For example, when Boaz told Ruth he wanted her for a wife, he explained why: "For all the city of my people doth know that thou art a virtuous woman" (Ruth 3:11).

A second area for wisdom is to study *research*, just as Nehemiah did, when he planned to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem (Neh 2:11-16). Research related to marriage might include such areas as age, finances, employment, education, personality traits, health, hobbies, family background, cultural background, and much more. The fewer the potholes in the pathway of adjustment, the smoother will be the journey to marital unity.

The third source of wisdom is *wise counselors*. In our day, we have been blessed with an abundance of wise counsel through books, audios, videos, and seminars. Still, nothing can substitute for the personal counsel of godly men and women who know you best, especially your own parents. How very sad when Christian young people and even Christian adults neglect the counsel of their spiritual family. Proverbs tells us they do so to their own great peril!

Applying Piety

Piety refers to our general godliness and righteousness in attitudes and conduct. How are we to apply piety in the evaluation of a potential spouse?

Inward character and convictions

We must have our focus on inward character, not on outward beauty, wealth, or popularity. Here we are looking for "direction, not perfection." If a young man is not acceptable in any of these areas, do not dismiss him right away because he may be teachable, especially if he shows a submissive spirit to

his parents and elders. The same applies to a young woman. Note also that in courtship we are concerned about issues of “conviction,” not “preference.” A conviction is something you are “convinced” from the Bible is God-ordered, and that to ignore it would be sin. Thus, to marry someone with different convictions would pose grave conflicts. Most matters of “preference,” except those that are very significant to you, should await discussion until you are committed to marriage since these issues can create affectionate bonding, something that would be premature. The following lists some of the most important areas of inward character to consider and evaluate.

General spiritual maturity: a genuine love for Christ and His church, as evidenced by a life of joyful obedience; an honoring attitude toward parents and siblings; self-discipline in spending, eating, orderliness, work, study, and spiritual life; decision-making and problem solving with open communication and an open Bible, seeking God’s answer; is he a kind, selfless leader, pursuing the character of an elder (1Ti 3:1-7; Tit 1:5-9); is she a cheerful, submissive helper, pursuing the qualities of a virtuous woman (Pro 31:10-31; Tit 2:3-5)?

Personal convictions about major theological understanding: liberal leanings versus conservative beliefs; Calvinism versus Arminianism; Reformed versus Dispensationalism; Creation versus evolution.

Personal convictions about church life: denominations, house churches, church organization, role of men and women, significance of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, issues of Sunday school and youth groups, family segregation vs. family integration; Sabbatarianism (what day to worship and how to honor the Lord on that day).

Personal convictions about family life: roles of husband and wife, view of Biblical submission, wife working outside the home, importance of family worship, celebration or rejection of certain holidays (Christmas, Easter), birth control, number of children, schooling of children, discipline of children (especially use of the rod), relationship to in-laws and friends, abortion, divorce, etc. Don’t assume anything!

Personal convictions about personal life: the sufficiency of Scripture vs. psychology for solving problems, Scripture vs. feelings for discerning God’s will, food issues (overeating, nutrition, vegetarianism), dress issues (modesty, gender-distinct, cost, jewelry), recreation issues (sports, movies, TV, rock music), medicine (traditional, alternative), money attitudes (tithing, giving, spending, saving, debt, gambling), use of alcohol or tobacco, personal morality (all areas, be specific: how much time spent on the internet alone? Ever involved with pornography, any sexual activity, homosexuality or other perversions?), civil disobedience, anger or violence, lying or deception, past romantic relationships, past arrests or crimes. Once again, don’t assume anything—ask! These can often bring serious trouble to a marriage.

Significant preferences: strong attitudes about where they want to live (north vs. south, city vs. country), pets, hygiene, etc. These too can be problematic to a marriage.

Inward direction

In addition to inward character, a marriage is best founded on common inward direction, life goal, or life purpose—where the partners complete one

another in Christ's kingdom work. A man should seek a spouse who is a suitable helper for him (Gen 2:18), that is, her talents, abilities, interests, and direction ought to correspond to his so that she completes him in his life purpose. Otherwise, he will be missing his "other half" and will be less able to accomplish God's goals for him. The following lists areas for evaluating inward direction.

His intended life work: Is he vocationally prepared with a family-centered occupation, one that can include his wife as his helper? By God's design, unless a man is to be single, his life work is intended to involve his wife. The industrial world today greatly inhibits this; thus, family business is often the best choice. Is his lifework something that you can support with your God-given talents?

Talents, abilities, and interests: How well do you fit together?

General strengths and weaknesses: Are you strong where he is weak and vice versa?

Applying Patricentrism

Who should oversee this inquiry of a potential spouse? Clearly, the principle of patricentrism indicates that fathers (particularly the young lady's father) should provide the leadership.³⁹

Even before his children are ready for marriage, a wise father will be continually building wholesome relationships with other like-minded families, not only for present fellowship but also for future spouses. Observing these young men and women in all kinds of circumstances gives the safest judgment of their character.

But where might a father find like-minded families? The starting place, of course, is in your own local church, and next at other like-minded churches, both near and far. We can also befriend other families that we meet at church conferences or Christian conferences on themes of interest to your family.

Now, if a father discovers a worthy potential spouse or a suitor makes himself known, the father should contact the potential spouse's father to begin investigating 1) character, 2) convictions, and 3) direction in life. Since God has given us a wife to be our helper, we should involve her in the investigation, for she can often perceive character flaws that we may overlook. This inquiry would also include a father's interview with the potential spouse, as well as a thorough investigation of character references, such as church elders, relatives, long-time family friends, etc. After gathering enough information, make a "Compatibility Chart," listing similarities and differences in the three areas. If there is enough mutual interest and both fathers give their approval, it is time consider the next step.

At this point, the young man and woman would likely review with each other nearly every area of character, convictions, and direction that their fathers covered, much of it in the presence of parents and some of it in family

³⁹ According to R. J. Rushdoony in *Institutes of Biblical Law*, this is reinforced by the Hebrew word for bridegroom, which means "the circumcised," and the Hebrew word for father-in-law, which means "he who performs the circumcision." This refers not to physical circumcision but to spiritual circumcision. The father-in-law is responsible for ensuring the spiritual circumcision (i.e., the spiritual condition) of the groom in order to prevent a spiritually mixed or incompatible marriage with his daughter.

gatherings, such as meals or other activities where character can “show.” One author suggests “character windows” like yard work, evangelistic activities, church work projects, and other ministry activities. Fathers could encourage mutual Bible study and the writing of position papers on important areas of difference identified in the Compatibility Chart. The purpose of consensus is not for one party to win the other to his or her views, but for both parties to study the Word of God as the sole standard for convictions. Both sides can recommend articles, tapes, and books for studying their areas of difference. Participants in study and discussion must include the parents, too, who can then guide and disciple the young people as necessary. Openness and honesty, not pressure and compromise, will move the discussions toward the ultimate goal of a better understanding God’s truth.

During the courtship stage there is nothing that should be said that is too private for parents to overhear. It is unwise to allow romantic words or private letters and phone calls, since these tend to incite the affections. Toward the end of the courtship inquiry, there may be a place for very limited private time together, say, in the family’s parlor when parents are in the next room. But even this should have an agreed-upon agenda for discussion, since Proverbs warns about the attraction of flattery in a conversation.

Applying Purity

Contrary to cultural expectations, the Bible passages bearing on purity reveal that romantic touching and lustful affections should not be permitted during courtship. Yet as the Bible and history affirm, this has always been a temptation (Jam 1:14; Mat 26:41; Rom 13:14), and even more so in today’s promiscuous culture. For this reason, a father should take oversight during courtship to protect his child’s purity. Samson, of course, was a terrible example in Judges 14, when he allowed his lust for a Philistine woman to cause him to disobey his father’s godly pleading. But physical morality is not all that’s included under the purity principle. God also requires purity of heart in our relationships. Unrestrained romantic passions lead to mental impurity, “adultery...in [the] heart,” as Jesus called it (Mat 5:28). Consequently, romantic affections, conveyed through romantic looks, acts, language, and gifts are appropriate *only* after entering engagement or betrothal. Otherwise, emotional fraud will likely occur.

Applying Preparedness and Patience

Preparedness should have been completed before courtship ever began. Now, the family must ask necessary questions of a potential spouse to ascertain his or her preparedness for marriage in the areas of vocation and finances.

Has the young man developed adequate marketable skills? A degree or a job is not necessarily enough to support a wife and family. Does he plan a family business that would allow him to achieve his God-ordained family priorities and include his wife as his suitable “help” (Gen 2:18)? Has he saved his money for marriage and avoided the slavery of debt? Has the young lady developed her skills and talents to be a “help” in his life work? If any spiritual or vocational shortcomings are discovered during courtship, they must be addressed, prayed about, and worked on before any further progress in the relationship.

Patience, an attitude of walking “by faith, not by sight,” involves trusting in our sovereign God to accomplish His perfect plan. Foolish young people often fall into lusting rather than trusting during this crucial stage of investigating a spouse. So, young men and young ladies, you must prepare yourself to say “No” to any choices which are determined to be unqualified (Mat 5:48).

6. Courtship Questions

When discussing the subject of Christian courtship, certain questions are no doubt on the minds of many Christian dads, moms, and young people today. These inquiries fall into two primary groups: 1) questions *about* courtship, and 2) questions *during* courtship.

Questions about Courtship

Questions about courtship typically address exceptions to the general pattern of courtship found in Scripture, exceptions that occur all too often due to our fallen, sinful condition and culture. So what are some of the obstacles that clutter our line-of-sight when we try to aim at the target of courtship?

QUESTION 1: *What if a non-Christian asks to court a Christian?*

Scripture tells us that a believer may marry *only* another believer. In 1 Corinthians 7, it is assumed throughout the entire chapter that Christians should marry only other Christians, especially in verses 12-16, which view “mixed” marriages as particularly troublesome. But the command is most clearly stated in verse 39: “She is at liberty to be married to whom she will; *only in the Lord.*” One needs to look only as far as verse 22 of the same chapter to find that the phrase “in the Lord” means to be a Christian: “He that is called in the Lord, being a servant, is the Lord’s freeman.”

Now, the cross reference for 1 Corinthians 7 is 2 Corinthians 6:14-16, “Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers...”⁴⁰ The phrase “unequally yoked” calls forth a mental image from Deuteronomy 22:10 of an ox and a donkey being harnessed together in a double yoke. Any farmer can tell you that these animals certainly do not pull well together; each wants to go in a different direction, making it nearly impossible to plough a straight path.

That is precisely the picture given here in 2 Corinthians 6. No believer is to be “mismatched” with an unbeliever because each will be headed in a different direction, making it impossible to follow the straight and narrow path of Christ. The passage then gives four vivid contrasts as illustrations. A believer bound together with an unbeliever is like righteousness with lawlessness, light with

⁴⁰ As to the...passage, where the Apostle commands us not to be “unequally yoked together with unbelievers” (2Co 6:14), it does not apply to marriage except by inference, but to church fellowship or rather to association and conduct in general, in reference to which professing Christians are not to [enter into union] with unbelievers. But if this be improper in regard to other matters, how much more so in that connection which has so powerful an influence over our character as well as our happiness? For a Christian, then, to marry an individual who is not decidedly and evidently a pious person is a direct opposition to the Word of God.—*John Angell James (1785-1859)*

darkness, Christ with Satan, and the temple of God with idols. The point is that not only are the believer's values, standards, goals, motivations, and methods for living incompatible with those of the unbeliever, they are *diametrically opposed* to each other! They are serving two different lords who are archenemies of one another, just as the Israelites were archenemies of the Canaanites, whom they were not to marry lest they compromise their holiness.

Marriage is even more than a double yoke; it is a joining of two individuals into a "one flesh" relationship, the most intimate of human relationships. So for a Christian to marry a non-Christian is to guarantee that marriage will never accomplish its God-ordained purposes, unless God saves the unbeliever. Yes, there will still be a witness in that home, and the one Christian parent will certainly benefit the children. But it will be a house of conflict just as surely as Satan is in conflict with Christ!

So many Christian teachers have repeated this fact that nearly every Christian knows it to be true. Yet when push comes to shove, an astounding number of Christian young people disregard this prohibition and marry unbelievers. What might possibly lure our children to rationalize this clear teaching of Scripture or blatantly disobey the revealed will of God?

The answer is called "falling in love." You see, Hollywood love is a counterfeit love. It is, in reality, one of the desires of the flesh called sensuality or lust. It pleases self rather than Christ, is desire-driven rather than self-disciplined, and makes decisions based on feelings rather than Scripture. Consequently, when Scripture conflicts with those feelings, Hollywood love will always win the heart of an immature or weak Christian. Why? Because "falling in love" Hollywood-style is like falling into quicksand—it will pull its captive down with unrelenting passion. All parents have seen this counterfeit love; most have also felt its strength.

QUESTION 2: *Are these standards for courtship realistic?*

Does God want us to use the lower benchmark of others' paltry experience as the model for our children, even if God has given us grace to live beyond it?

"As obedient children, not fashioning yourselves according to the former lusts in your ignorance: But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; Because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy" (1Pe 1:14-16). Peter does not lower the standard, but directs our hope to the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. "And every man that hath this hope in him," explains the Apostle John, "purifieth himself, even as he is pure" (1Jo 3:3). How? The author of Hebrews answers, by striving against sin, combating sin as an enemy in your life rather than coddling sin as a guest (Heb 12:4).

So, we must evaluate a suitor by God's standard, and that brings us to Christian courtship every time.

QUESTION 3: *Does courtship take romance out of the relationship?*

No, not at all. Actually, the Biblical approach to relationships puts romance in its proper place, and its proper place is not during courtship. By romance, of course, we refer to the affections and physical intimacy expressed by a couple in love with each other. Expressions of affection should be reserved for engage-

ment or betrothal after making a commitment to marry, preventing broken-hearts. Similarly, physical affection should be withheld until or after the wedding, when the chaste couple experience their first embrace and kiss. The kiss was a symbol for sealing the new marriage covenant.

QUESTION 4: *Are there different roles for sons vs. daughters?*

Christ states in Matthew 22:30 that sons marry but daughters are given in marriage. So the question arises, “Do sons, then, act independently from their father while daughters submit to their father’s oversight?” Certainly, sons do not require the same level of protection as daughters, since sons are relatively less vulnerable and properly shown in Scripture as the initiator in relationships. However, Solomon is clear in Proverbs that sons are morally threatened by loose women and, therefore, are in continuing need of a father’s counsel and oversight, especially while they are still young men, say, in their teens and twenties.

Numerous Scriptures convince us that a son is to work cooperatively under his father’s leadership in courting a spouse (Abraham/Isaac Gen 24:3; Hagar/Ishmael Gen 21:21; Judah/Er Gen 38:6; Ibzan Jdg 12:9; Amaziah/Jehoash 2Ki 14:9). “Take wives for your sons, and give your daughters to husbands” (Jer 29:6) is the Biblical norm. In fact, this is the same pattern followed by Christ Himself in His marriage to the church, His bride, which was given to Him by the Father: “All that the Father gives me shall come to me...” (Joh 6:37).

Yet the son also plays a very active role as pursuer of his bride, just as Jesus did with His bride, the church: “For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luk 19:10). Likewise, in the Old Testament examples we generally find this active, though cooperative, role exercised by the son in the pursuit of a bride. But when he is a young man, he is always to be under the wise oversight of his father. Genesis 2:24 explains that for the cause of marriage, a man shall leave his father and mother. Normally, then, a son remains under the roof of his father until he leaves and cleaves to his wife. Yet even if he is not living at home, he remains under the counsel and oversight of his father for the purpose of marriage. When he rejects this oversight, the courtship often falls into impurity and the resultant marriage is usually a disaster.

QUESTION 5: *What is the role for church elders and other advisors?*

Fathers should inquire about a prospect by questioning his relatives, friends, fellow believers, co-workers, neighbors, and—most importantly—his church elders. Because of their counseling role, elders are often in a position to know details about a person’s life far beyond what is publicly revealed. Though an elder must be careful to maintain confidences, he may be able to advise either toward or away from a potential spouse for reasons that are beyond your ability to know.

QUESTION 6: *How important is it to examine the suitor’s family?*

In our investigation of the character of a suitor, we ought likewise to evaluate the character of his family. Whatever questions you ask of the suitor, ask also of his parents regarding his maturity, convictions, and attitude. This is necessary for at least three reasons. First, a suitor’s relationship with his parents and siblings is largely what has made him who he is in character, beliefs,

personality, and much more. Second, the suitor's family has a life-long influence on the newlyweds and on the children produced by that union. If their beliefs and lifestyle are considerably different than your own, then their influence may take the form of bias, distortion, and indoctrination! Thirdly, you will be related to this family as long as you and they live. This can be either a wonderfully blissful relationship or a terribly baneful one, depending upon their maturity and attitude. Clearly, then, it is crucial to investigate the suitor's family—his parents as well as his siblings.

QUESTION 7: *What if the parents are uncooperative or unavailable?*

Since courtship is now so foreign to our culture, a Christian young person will sometimes need to introduce his parents to this topic in a careful and methodical way—one step at a time so they do not feel overwhelmed.

But what if a father is still uncooperative after sensitive efforts have been made to inform and encourage him? In the Scriptures, when a father was physically absent from the family through death, desertion, or divorce, the mother assumed his role of initiating and overseeing the courtship, just as Hagar found a bride for Ishmael. By analogy, if the father is spiritually absent from the family, the mother may assume his courtship duties if he does not disallow it. If both father and mother were unavailable or unwilling, the Scriptures reveal that an older relative or spiritual leader became the surrogate parent for this critical task (Ruth/mother-in-law Ruth 3-4; Joash/priest 2Ch 24:1-3; Esther/cousin Est 2:7, 11). Spiritually minded family members and church leaders may be called upon to help these spiritually orphaned young people by becoming surrogate parents for courtship.

QUESTION 8: *What if the person has already left home?*

This is an imperfect situation, but one which is exceedingly common in our individualistic culture. Under such historically unprecedented circumstances, how can a father fulfill his Biblical obligation to provide a spouse and oversee courtship? The honest answer is, he cannot very well and probably will not!

The best scenario would be for the adult children to come back home, if they are willing. But once they whet their appetite for the world, this may require more maturity than most young people can muster. The Biblical principle to apply in such a case is, in love, to yield all your personal preferences, but in holiness, to yield none of the principles of piety, patricentrism, purity, preparedness, patience. Be compassionate but do not compromise. Love your children more than you love yourself, but not more than you love God.

There may be some creative ways to help your children preserve at least some of God's plan for their lives, such as by having them see a suitor only when they come home during weekends or holidays, or by seeking the help of a trusted friend, relative, or pastor near where your children live. But these options are prone to moral failure or compromise. How much better to restore your children to the protection and oversight of a caring father.

QUESTION 9: *What if the families live far away from each other?*

The ideal, it seems, would be to find a spouse from nearby so that you can know him or her well. This also provides for the families on both sides to have opportunity for godly influence on the courting couple. But our transient culture today may require us to surmount several problems if courting families live far away. Let us assume that you meet a distant, like-minded family at a national conference of some sort or through a mutual acquaintance. You then begin corresponding with that family.

The challenge, of course, will be getting to know them well, which can be elusive and expensive through phone calls and traveling, though email can help some. It becomes much easier to put on a good face for a week at a distance than it does for six months when they live in the same town. So you must be very thorough to investigate by means of others who have known that family for many years.

Another difficulty with distance is discipleship. If a young man has great potential but needs some discipleship by the girl's father, this becomes clumsy at a distance. Some dads have had the young man move nearer for this very purpose, sometimes even living, say, in a small trailer on the family property. However, this can bring its own set of problems if he is living *too* close.

Overall, if Isaac and Rebekah could handle these problems, maybe we can too. Abraham knew that a good match could not be sacrificed for the sake of proximity, even though proximity is a valid concern.

QUESTION 10: *Do older singles need to court, and if so, how do they do it?*

First, the principle of headship needs to guide us here. Older singles who are the heads of their own households may court and marry under their own authority as long as they follow the Scriptural principles. According to Numbers 30, this includes most widows and divorcees unless it is a woman who has chosen to return to her father's home. In that case, she is once again under the jurisdiction of her father.

When relatively mature adults enter courtship, they often think they are above temptation and do not need oversight in this matter. However, God's principles for Biblical romance are not age-limited. We all still have a sin nature, hormones, and feelings. Even in our enlightened culture, older single women remain vulnerable and deserving of the male protection that God intended through a father or surrogate parent.

Yet even spiritual Ruth was under her mother-in-law, Naomi. And these all fell into sin when unsupervised: King David (the purest man), Samson (the strongest man), and Solomon (the wisest man). Who today is purer, stronger, and wiser than these men were? "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall" (1Co 10:12). All people, regardless of age, are in need of godly oversight in their relationship with the opposite sex. Where parents have died, godly relatives or church elders can possibly fulfill this role.

QUESTION 11: *Can I still court after being tarnished through dating?*

First, know this: The God of *grace* has saved us. Though dating is a subtle error of desire-driven humanism and usually results in sin, God is both forgiv-

ing and restoring toward those who are humbly repentant. No matter how devastating the consequences, God will bring hope and help to those who renew their ways through His principles of courtship.

Second, if you are presently in a dating relationship, have your parents as well as your friend study these courtship principles and discuss them. If he/she is unconvinced or unwilling to follow God's principles, then this is certainly not God's spouse for you, at least not at this time (Jam 4:17).

Third, if you or your suitor has baggage from current or prior relationships, the path to purity begins with both parties confessing the selfish sins of immorality. If you are serious about not sinning, then you must remove what encourages sin and replace it with what discourages sin.

QUESTION 12: *How long should a Biblical courtship last?*

Courtship is a matter of inquiry, not time. Courtship should last as long as it takes to evaluate a potential spouse thoroughly and diligently. Never should you feel rushed. This will happen only if you allow impatience and fallen human feelings to clutter the task (those of either the parents or the young couple).

On the other hand, courtship should not be drawn out longer than necessary. Perhaps from two to four months would be realistic, depending on how well the families knew each other beforehand and how distant they live from each other. Once both parties have come to the place where all their questions about character, convictions, and life purpose have been adequately answered, it is time for the young woman's father to ask, "Young man, what are your intentions for my daughter?"

Questions during Courtship

In addition to the questions above about courtship, there is a second category of questions to be asked during the courtship inquiry. These questions should be addressed to a potential spouse as well as to his/her character references. Only the candidate himself can answer some; but for completeness, they are included in a single list. Lesser matters of preference, which would not trouble a marriage, would be reviewed during the engagement or betrothal.

Your Relationship

1. In what capacity or relationship have you known him? His family?
2. How long have you known him?
3. Would you say you know him well enough to share some observations about his character, personality, strengths, and weaknesses?

His Spiritual Life

1. Would you describe what you know about his salvation and walk with God?
 - a. Evidence of salvation: What makes you believe he is born again?
 - b. Theological beliefs: Does he have any unusual or unorthodox beliefs?
 - c. Personal character: Where is he in character development, especially humility?
 - d. Lifestyle practices: Any inconsistencies with Scripture?
 - e. Faithfulness in church attendance/participation: How regular is he?

- f. Prayer and Bible study: What have you observed in these areas?
 - g. Personal witnessing: Does he share the Gospel faithfully?
 - h. Spiritual ministries: How does he exercise his spiritual gifts?
 - i. Spiritual strengths: What are his one or two areas of greatest strength?
 - j. Spiritual weaknesses: What are his areas of greatest weakness?
2. Would you describe what you know about his father's salvation and walk with God? (Now use the questions under Question 1 in reference to the father.)
 3. Would you describe for me what you know about his mother's salvation and walk with God? (Now use the questions under Question 1 in reference to the mother.)

His Relationships

1. Can you describe his relationship with his father? Is it honoring? Is it obedient?
2. Can you describe his relationship with his mother? Is it honoring? Obedient?
3. Can you describe his relationship with his siblings? Is it harmonious?
4. Can you describe his relationship with his grandparents? Is it caring?
5. Describe his relationship with his friends? Does he tend to be peer influenced?
6. Is he consistently faithful in fulfilling his commitments? Explain.
7. Has he shown a regular willingness to serve others? In what ways?
8. In what ways is self-centeredness expressed in his life?
9. In what ways is pride expressed in his life?
10. How does he relate to authority in his life?
11. In what ways is he ever controlling or manipulative of others?
12. Have you ever seen or heard of him being unkind to others?
13. What kinds of situations cause him frustration? How does he respond?
14. What circumstances make him impatient/angry? How does he handle them?
15. As far as you know, has he ever been violent or does he yell in arguments?
16. How does he deal with a broken relationship? Does he have any now?

Personal Habits Affecting Marriage

1. What is his practice regarding eating and food? Is his eating disciplined in choosing what to eat and how much? Do you know of any food oddities?
2. What is his practice regarding money? What are his habits regarding spending and giving? Do you think he would be controlling with money?
3. What is his discipline toward possessions? Is he orderly? Materialistic?
4. What are his work habits? Does he have a high standard of excellence? Does he ever tend to be slothful, or a workaholic?
5. What is his discipline in studying? Does he read regularly, and if so, what?
6. What are his habits regarding sleeping? Is he lethargic? Irregular?
7. What is his discipline with time? Regular schedule? Productive?
8. What is his practice regarding personal devotions?
9. What is his level of personal cleanliness and hygiene?
10. Does he have any personal habits that might annoy others?

Marital Roles

1. What do you know of his beliefs about courtship and betrothal?
2. Does he tend to be more of a leader or follower in life?
3. As far as you can tell, how does he go about making major decisions?
4. In making decisions, what role does God's Word play? Is he selfless in decision making?
5. What is his attitude toward women? Is it respectful? Is he possessive?
6. What is his view on the proper role of a wife? Is she to be his partner/companion or his slave? Is she to work outside the home?
7. What do you know of his views on divorce and remarriage?
8. What do you think he is looking for most in a wife?
9. How well do think he would provide for a wife and family?
10. How well do think he would protect his wife and family?
11. How do you think he will relate to his parents (and in-laws) after he is married?
Do you see potential for either rejection or dependency (apron strings)?
12. What has been his prior experience with dating and romance?
13. How does he relate to children? Is he affectionate? Irritated? Ignoring?
14. What are his views on child training, including corporal punishment?
15. Are you aware of his views on home schooling?
16. When he fails, does he take personal responsibility, repent, ask forgiveness, and change?
17. Does he ever slant the truth for his own benefit?
18. In what ways do you think he may need to grow before marriage?

Moral Standards

1. What are his standards of propriety in dress? How does he dress?
2. Have you ever heard or known of any offensive language from him?
3. What are his standards regarding TV, movies, literature, music?
4. Do you think he would ever watch an R-rated movie? PG-rated?
5. Are you aware of any pornography in his past?
6. Are you aware of any alcohol, drugs, or tobacco use in his past?
7. Do you know of any financial debts he has?
8. As far as you know, has he ever been in trouble with the law?

Miscellaneous

1. What is his attitude toward pets? Love 'em, leave 'em, or sleep with 'em?
2. What are his political leanings?
3. What is his general attitude toward civil government?
4. From your observations, what are his interests, hobbies, and talents?
5. What do you think he most highly values in life? What next?
6. Have you ever seen or heard of him spending money foolishly?
7. What two or three things does he tend to do in his spare time?
8. As far as you know, does he have any physical or mental disabilities or diseases?
Any allergies? Prior or current health problems?

9. When growing up, what temptations or weaknesses did he exhibit?
10. What tendencies does he have toward intolerance, prejudice, or racism?
11. What is his involvement in sports? Does he participate, attend games, or watch it on TV? To what extent?
12. Recognizing we are all imperfect, in what one or two areas do you think God wants him to grow most?
13. From your experience, does he have a teachable spirit?
14. If your daughter/son were marrying this person, what cautions would you have?

Additional Questions for the Potential Spouse

1. What do you understand to be the Gospel? Please tell me about your salvation and walk with God.
2. What do you understand to be the role of baptism? Lord's Supper?
3. What do you understand to be God's purposes/priorities for the church?
4. What are your views of the Sabbath and the proper use of that day?
5. What is the present-day application of the Mosaic Law?
6. What do you see as the man's role in the local church? Your own role?
7. What do you see as your wife's role in local church ministry?
8. How do you view age-segregation in the church (youth groups, Sunday school)?
9. What is your view on the celebration of Sacred Days (Christmas, Easter)?
10. What is your view of house churches?
11. Can you describe your life purpose; i.e., how you intend to use your interests, experiences, skills, and talents to serve and glorify God?
12. What role would your wife and children play in your life purpose?
13. What role would your job/career play in your life purpose?
14. What are your income producing (vocational) skills?
15. What is your attitude toward family (home) business?
16. What are your views on birth control and abortion?
17. What is your attitude toward adopting children?
18. What are your thoughts on alternative medicine? Vegetarianism?
19. What is the role of psychology in the life of a Christian?
20. Do you prefer to live in the city, suburbs, town, country, seaside, or mountains?
21. Describe a typical weekday in your life from start to finish.
22. Describe a typical Saturday in your life from start to finish.
23. What do you understand to be the Biblical purposes of marriage?
24. How does a married couple achieve the deepest level of communication? What hinders this?
25. What do you see as the woman's role/responsibilities in marriage?
26. What do you see as the man's role/responsibilities in marriage?
27. If you could change three things about yourself that would make you more Christ-like, what would they be?

28. What personal goals do you have for your life? How do you think marriage would help you achieve them? (Mat 6:32, 33)
29. In what ways do you see Christ's relationship with His bride, the church, as a pattern for marriage?
30. How important are etiquette and manners to you?

Questions to reveal possible idols of the heart

1. What do you love? What do you hate? (Mat 22:37-39; 2Ti 3:2, 4; Luk 16:13)
2. What do you wish for in this life? What desires do you serve and obey? (Gal 5:16-24; Jam 4:1-2)
3. Where are your hopes? (1Pe 1:13; 1Ti 6:17)
4. What do you *not* want to happen? What do you worry about? (Mat 6:25-32; 13:22)
5. What do you think you need? What are your "felt needs"? (Mat 6:8-15)
6. What really matters to you? Around what do you organize your life? (Isa 1:29, 30; Joh 4:32-34)
7. Where do you find comfort, escape, security, refuge? (Psa 23:4; 31:1; 46:1-3)
8. What or whom do you trust? (Pro 3:5; 11:28)
9. Whom must you please? Whose opinion counts? From whom do you desire approval and fear rejection? Whose love do you need? (Pro 29:25; Joh 12:42)
10. Who are your heroes? What kind of person do you want to be? (Rom 8:29)
11. How do you define success or failure, right or wrong? (Jdg 21:25)
12. What would make you feel rich? How do you spend your money? (Mat 6:19-21)
13. What would give you the greatest pleasure? Greatest pain? (Mat 5:3-11; Jer 17:7)
14. What do you see as your rights? What do you feel entitled to? (Rom 5:6-10; Psa 103:10)
15. What do you think about most often? Talk about? Pray for? (Col 3:1-5; Luk 6:45)
16. How do you spend your time? What are your priorities? (Pro 1:16; 10:4; 23:19-21; 24:33, 34)
17. What are the functional beliefs—God, yourself, others, right and wrong, etc—that control how you act?

7. The Pathway Ends in Christian Marriage

Once you have found Mr. or Miss Right, what do you actually *do*? Some proceed to engagement and then to the altar with the continuing oversight of their parents.

Others in our day, including the author,⁴¹ encourage returning to the ancient practice of betrothal.⁴² The different Hebrew and Greek words translated

⁴¹ *Pathway to Christian Marriage* is an edited version of the author's *God's Design for Scriptural Romance*, available at www.FamilyShepherd.org.

⁴² "Betrothal in the Bible differs considerably from modern engagements. As an act preliminary to marriage, betrothal implied a commitment almost as binding as marriage itself; its dissolution involved at least a formal divorce (Mat 1:19). The betrothed persons were referred to as "husband and wife" (Gen 29:21; Mat 1:18, 20) and were to be completely faithful to each other. Any violation of the betrothed state was treated as adultery and could

betrothed or *espousal* convey the concept of a mutual promise to marry. This betrothal promise is a pledge, a covenant, a vow to God and an oath to man. It is a commitment sought by a young man as the pursuer in the betrothal relationship, though under the counsel and guidance of his father. After a young couple and their parents complete courtship on a positive note, then the young man should seek the counsel of his father and the approval of hers before he asks the young lady to enter into betrothal. The young woman must agree to a betrothal commitment since betrothal is a binding mutual agreement⁴³—sought by a young man, agreed to by a young woman, who has the freedom to say yes or no.

After the young man has demonstrated his ability to provide for his bride, after the couple has proven their moral faithfulness, and after adequate attention has been given to plan the wedding and their new life together, then in the name of Jesus Christ, they may marry. All this, of course, calls for an attitude of patience, trusting our sovereign God to accomplish His wise plan in His perfect time.

Conclusion It is not easy being a “peculiar people” (Ti 2:14) even among those in the church. But if we desire to establish a Christian posterity among multiple generations, then our children *must* marry faithful spouses. And it will rarely, if ever happen reliably through the flesh-driven dating culture. Each generation must be a transitional generation. O God, give us Your enabling grace to be that people, for the glory of Your name and the good of Your saints, even unto the third and fourth generations.



result in death for the offender (Dt. 22:23–25). The permanency and faithfulness within the betrothal bond are pictured in God’s relation to Israel: “I will betroth you to me forever . . . I will betroth you to me in faithfulness” (Hos. 2:19ff.). Miscellaneous Jewish traditional laws concerning betrothals are found in Mish Kiddushin. . . . At the time of Mary and Joseph betrothal called for a solemn oral commitment in the presence of witnesses with an added pledge of a piece of money or a written pledge that would conclude with a benediction.” Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988; 2002), 3:263-264.

⁴³ Louw and Nida state, “It may be important to note in the margin of a text that in biblical times the act of betrothal was regarded as binding, so that the breaking of a betrothal was legally equivalent to divorce.” Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition; New York: United Bible Societies, 1996; c1989), 1:456.

A Covenant of Courtship

Preamble—This Courtship is a solemn agreement between FATHER and DAUGHTER, as witnessed by the Lord Jesus Christ: to seek God’s best concerning A FUTURE LIFE PARTNER.

Father’s Promise to His Daughter

- ~ I will carefully *prepare* you, in spirit and life skills, to be a suitable helper to the husband for whom God has specially created you (Gen 2:18).
- ~ I will diligently *protect* you physically, morally, and emotionally, keeping you under my roof until married and shielding you from vulnerable situations (Psa 36:7; Num 30:3ff).
- ~ With much prayer, I will initiate, investigate, oversee and, by God's grace, *provide* you with a husband that you approve (Exo 2:21; Gen 24:58).

Daughter’s Promise to Her Father

- ~ I will studiously *prepare* my spiritual life and God-given talents to be a fit “domestic and dominion” helper to my future husband (Gen 1:28).
- ~ I will welcome your loving *protection* over me and will keep myself pure, both physically and emotionally, for my future husband (1Co 7:1; Mat 5:28).
- ~ I will patiently commit myself to Christian courtship instead of worldly dating, trusting our sovereign God to accomplish His perfect plan in His perfect time through imperfect fathers (2Co 5:7; 1Co 7:36f).

Father’s signature: _____

Daughter’s signature: _____

Date: _____

A Covenant of Courtship

Preamble—This Courtship is a solemn agreement between FATHER and SON, as witnessed by the Lord Jesus Christ: to seek God’s best concerning A FUTURE LIFE PARTNER.

Father’s Promise to His Son

- ~ I will carefully *prepare* you, both spiritually and vocationally, to be a godly leader and skillful provider for your future family (Gen 2:15-17).
- ~ I will diligently *protect* you from the moral temptation and the emotional harm of youthful romantic relationships (Pro 2-7).
- ~ I will, with your active participation and God’s enablement, labor with you in finding the wife God has fashioned for your need (Jer 29:6; Joh 15:16).

Son’s Promise to His Father

- ~ I will studiously cultivate my spiritual life and vocational skills, *preparing* myself to lead and support my future wife and children (Pro 24:27).
- ~ I will welcome your wise *protection* over me and will keep myself pure, both physically and emotionally, for my bride-to-be (1Co 7:1; Mat 5:28).
- ~ I will patiently commit myself to Christian courtship instead of worldly dating, seeking the wisdom, oversight and blessing of my father in getting a wife (Gen 24:3; Joh 6:37).

Father’s signature: _____

Son’s signature: _____

Date: _____

PATHWAY TO CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE is a Biblical guide for the journey from singleness to marriage. It describes the dangers associated with “recreational romance,” while explaining Scriptural guidelines for establishing a Christ-honoring marriage. The timeless truths contained in this booklet will help one arrive at the altar in purity.

Prayerfully applying these principles will prove helpful for older teens and their parents, as well as for parents of toddlers and preteens, for young people before they are attracted to the opposite sex, and for Christians of every age who desire to glorify the Lord Jesus Christ in every aspect of their lives. On this pathway, families as well as individuals will prepare for entering the joy that God has designed for Christian marriage.