

Sensible Christian Dating

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I have been the father of four teenagers, and over the years I have gotten to know a lot of their friends by leading youth groups, teaching classes, directing plays, etc. I also was a teenager once myself! In all those years of interacting with teenagers and young adults, I have seen a lot of Christian people confused about the “rules of dating.” Sometimes Christian churches are divided over different views on dating, Friends stop speaking to each other; parents get mad at other parents.

A few years back, a book came out called *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*. It caught on among a lot of Christian teenagers. Perhaps part of the appeal was its radicalness. Teens everywhere like the idea of doing something radical, something that isn't the norm.

There were a lot of good points in that book. But, with all due respect, the author was a teenager. Do we want to get our ethical standards from youths? There is a joy and energy of youth, which I well remember, but I also remember that I was an emotional basket case a lot of the time. Emotional youths often swing to extremes—“If I can't borrow the car tonight, then I'll never drive again!” — “If there is any sin in dating, then I will never date again!” Of course, many adults agree with the teaching in that book, but I can't help thinking that a lot of its appeal to teenagers is its teenager-ness—its extremeness.

We have a “cult of youth” in the western world which celebrates teenagers and twenty-somethings as the height of civilization; older people try to look like youths; advertisers aim at the youth market, and this spills over into the church—we have rallies in which we tell teenagers that they are the hope of the future, that they must save the world from the failures of the parents, and we judge churches by how many young people they attract. How far from the biblical world view, which celebrated the wisdom of the aged.

Did you ever stop to think why advertisers and media celebrate youths so much? It is because they are at the optimum of the “buying curve.” Children who are younger don't have much money. Adults who are older have money, but tend to buy less impulsively. Teens and twenty-somethings have money, but are still largely impulsive, able to be manipulated by flashy advertisements that present an image they like. In other words, youths are celebrated by the media precisely because they are viewed as not very wise.

So, without apology I present this as a “Proverbs father”—someone who has the advantage of age to sort through some of the difficult issues. I also write as someone who has studied the Bible for years. I am convinced that the Bible gives us the right pattern for living. In every age, we need to work out how the principles of the Bible apply to our day. That is what is called “wisdom.” Wisdom is not just taking the traditions and practices of the past and maintaining them forever. It is understanding the eternal, universal truths of God's Word and applying them in every situation.

Models of Dating

1. The model of “the world”: “relationships”

Let me first summarize, in the fairest way I can, the model of the “world,” which we see on TV all the time or read about in advice columns. In this model, people form “relationships.” The key to understanding this model is the idea of “levels.” One starts with the pool of people who are “available”—people who are not in relationships. The first level is when guys and girls go out together on dates alone. If that works out, they go to the next level—heavy kissing and “making out.” Typically, that might begin at the end of the first date, or after just a couple more platonic dates.

The next level is to have sex (in common parlance, “hooking up”). Most authorities in the western world discourage this for teenagers under the age of 18, but also wink and nod that it will probably happen anyway, and that such “sexual exploration” is healthy and normal—as long as it happens between two teenagers. If a person over 18 has sex with a person under 18, this is a crime, and the person over age can spend years in jail as a sexual predator.

The next level is to move into the same home together. Although we live decades after the sexual revolution of the 1960’s, we still have no good terms for this. It used to be called “living in sin,” or, if it lasted long enough, a “common law marriage.” Now we talk of a “significant other” or a “committed relationship;” some people talk of their “fiancé” (this used to mean a person whom you were definitely going to marry); others talk of their “boyfriend” or “girlfriend,” even if they are adults in their 30’s and 40’s.

The next level is marriage, when people share economic arrangements. Typically, well-meaning people in the world will say that a couple should not have children until they are married, although they would not condemn adults having children who are living together in a “committed relationship.”

At any point at any of these levels, a couple may “break up.” In fact, it is generally assumed that couples will break up eventually, and that the typical duration of a relationship in all its levels is 2-3 years. Breaking up is an unfortunate but normal occurrence.

What is wrong with this model? Of course, we could say simply that the Bible says that sex outside of marriage is wrong. But is that it—it just violates an ethical code?

In my experience, this model leads to devastating emotional damage. As much as TV and movies make it seem normal to break up and move from one relationship to the next, in reality people who do this become emotional cripples.

Some people ridicule the idea of “emotional damage,” partly because it has been abused in the courts as a way to increase the amount of money awarded to a victim in a civil lawsuit.

Nevertheless, emotional damage is real. Many people suffer for years because of the feeling of helplessness, anger, and shame at being cast off by a sexual partner. Sometimes these people

resort to revenge, either legally or illegally. Legally, a spouse may try to hurt the other person by an attempt to take all the other's money in an ugly divorce proceeding. Illegally, sometimes both men and women resort to violence or even murder. Society condemns these acts of revenge, but the cast-off person can be utterly miserable.

Many people have the impression that the Christian ethic thinks of sex as a bad thing. This is far from the truth. The Bible always presents sex as a wonderful and good thing, and not only for the purpose of procreation. For example, the Song of Solomon present a beautiful, and explicit, picture of sexual love. The book of Proverbs says, "May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth. A loving doe, a graceful deer-- may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be captivated by her love." The Apostle Paul even goes so far as to say , "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church" (Ephesians 5:31-32). In other words, far from being evil, the sexual relationship is a good picture of the relationship of Christ and the church.

The joy of sex is also what makes it so painful to end a sexual relationship. As psychologist Larry Crabb has written, we all have a desire to be naked and unashamed, to be known and accepted. The great blessing of sex is that we become completely known to the other person at the deepest levels. This sense of being totally known by another person is wonderful, but it also implies terrible damage when a sexual relationship is broken. To be known intimately is to be vulnerable; to be cast off is to be rejected and betrayed at the deepest level. Some people insulate themselves against the pain by adopting a cavalier attitude toward sex, but they have only cauterized the wound by cutting off all feeling. Television sitcoms present a happy view of people with a cavalier attitude about changing sexual partners, but the reality is much different. Those who are cast off suffer deeply.

Historically, American and European society recognized the right of the "cuckold" (the cast off man) to seek revenge. When law courts stopped punishing adultery, this revenge was carried out personally by means of duels. When duels became unacceptable, victims of adultery still lashed out in violence. Because the populace still recognized the hurt done to the victim of adultery, juries often acquitted the revenge-seeker when these cases of violence were brought before the law. The legal defense of "temporary insanity," which many conservatives hate, was made a precedent in American law in the 1800's by the high-profile trial of a Senator who killed another man who stolen his wife. A jury accepted the defense of temporary insanity because they really sympathized with his desire for revenge. Instead of changing the law to view adultery as a crime, the people effectively changed the law to allow acts of rage and revenge against adultery to not be crimes. Eventually, the temporary insanity plea became allowable in other cases, and less acceptable in cases of adultery.

Some would say that the sexual revolution means we have the freedom to have sex with anyone we want. But we do not have the freedom to have sex with anyone we want—we have the freedom to have sex with anyone we can keep. Instead of creating relationships of security and trust, we have a world of tension and worry over sex, in which no one can ever be sure they can be good enough to keep their lover. If love is a home for the heart, stealing homes from the weak is no crime in our society.

As discussed above, the Bible presents sex as a good thing, beginning with the statement following the union of Adam and Eve, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” Besides the aspect of being naked and unashamed, which leads to emotional vulnerability, another blessing of sex, which also can make it damaging, is the bond of union which a sexual relationship creates. Simply put, sex is addictive. This is a good thing because it binds a man and a woman together in a relationship which mere arguments or bad hair days cannot easily break. It can be devastating, however, if a person is sexually addicted to the wrong person or a wrong pattern of sexual behavior. As with any addiction, the person cannot easily change their ways, no matter how bad they feel. The body plays tricks on the mind to convince the mind that certain sexual behavior is good and right, no matter what objective beliefs the person may have. The book *Of Human Bondage* is not a mere fantasy.

The modern sexual ethic presents a picture of sexual relationships as easily begun and ended, with little emotional or physical overhead. If the other person is restraining your individuality, you even have an obligation, according to many counselors, to leave the relationship. But breaking a sexual relationship always leads to an emotional mess.

Selling the notion that sexual relationships are easily started and ended is akin to selling the notion that cigarettes or heroin are easily taken up and then dropped. Deception is an injustice, and like other injustices, deception about addictive behaviors selectively preys on the weak and the poor, those who do not have the education or upbringing to give them the common sense to avoid these things or the family structure to pick up the pieces when a person goes astray. Some people on both the right and left have focused on disease and unwanted pregnancies as the primary evils of the sexual revolution. But if we could imagine a world in which all sexually transmitted diseases were cured, and birth control was 100% effective, would the modern sexual ethic be justified? No—the modern ethic leads to real emotional damage in a world of constant competition for sexual relationships, fear of those more powerful or more beautiful stealing one's lover, lack of anyone else feeling responsibility for my problems, and classes of people outcast as losers in the sexual free-for-all.

2. Christian dating

Christians reading the above will think, of course the model described above is wrong. But what do we replace it with? For many Christians, the model is essentially the same, but several of the intermediate levels are cut out—the ones with sex outside of marriage. Christians still form “relationships” which progress to higher levels. Typically, the highest level of dating is the “necking,” or “heavy petting” stage—passionate kissing, hugging, massaging, etc. From there they jump to being engaged as the next level (which often means sex is allowed, for many Christians), and from there to marriage. Breaking up happens at every level, just as in the world's model, including divorces.

What is wrong with this model? One obvious thing is that necking and passionate kissing are technically, by any doctor's definition, known as “foreplay”—a part of sex. Couples who neck and then do not follow through with sex are cutting off a process in mid stream. This actually leads to physical pain in many cases—I know, I've been there. One reason why many Christian

couples “fall” and have sex outside of marriage is because foreplay starts the sexual process, and it seems entirely natural to have sex, because it is the natural next step. It is like a hungry person lifting food to his lips and holding it there without eating—a trial of willpower which seems unnatural and is likely to fail.

So necking and groping ought to be out for Christians because they are really just types of sex. One is making an arbitrary, legalistic cutoff and saying it doesn't count as sex if you don't “go all the way.” (Some teenagers, including self-identified Christians, also now feel that oral sex also “doesn't count” as sex.) But what if a couple refrains from such things? Is the Christian dating model okay then?

In this model, even without the pseudo-sex, one still has a series of pseudo-marriages and pseudo-divorces. A guy and a girl are a “thing” for a while, boyfriend and girlfriend in a “relationship” until they break up. Though they may not have sex or even heavy petting, they still have their rituals of bonding, holding hands or kissing good night, etc. They don't have wedding rings, but they exchange “promise” rings, necklaces, etc.

What is wrong with that? First of all, in this model these relationships are *exclusive*, like a marriage. They are “steady dating” relationships, going out with, or “seeing,” only one other person of the opposite sex. If they go out with someone else, there will be jealousy and feelings of betrayal, eventually leading to a breakup because of this “cheating.” There are several problems with that. First, it gets people accustomed to the idea of breaking up as a normal thing. Hearts are broken repeatedly so many times that they come to expect it. What a far cry from the Bible's concept of marriage as a covenant, a vow before God. The Bible's definition of a vow is that you are inviting God to curse you if you don't keep your promise (Ecclesiastes 5:4-6). Christian marriage, according to the Bible, is a sealed bond for all life.

Therefore, either you are married, or you aren't. If you are married, you have a sealed bond, and sex literally makes you addicted to each other. If you are not married, there is no halfway marriage, or quarter-way marriage. Couples who have “steady relationships” are often basically playing at marriage, pretending to be married, convincing themselves the other person will never leave even though no public vows have been made. Because of that, they allow themselves some of the rights of marriage, such as physical intimacy, which opens them up to emotional damage when they break up.

There is also such a thing as spiritual nakedness. Couples who don't get physical at all, still can be naked in the sense of sharing all their deepest feelings and secrets, as a married couple would. In this case, just as in the case of physical intimacy, there is deep hurt when a couple breaks up. I have shared my innermost self, and that person has rejected me.

But suppose a couple did not engage in overmuch physical or spiritual intimacy, and was able to break up with no hurt feelings at all, staying friends in perfect uprightness. There still would be a problem with this dating model. The problem is that the exclusiveness of the relationship truncates your relationships with all other people of the opposite sex. In this model, you only “see” one person of the opposite sex at a time. That means that during that time, you don't really spend time with other people of the opposite sex—that would be “cheating.” But even worse, it

implies that you can't even start to spend any time with someone of the opposite sex unless they want to have a "relationship" with you.

During my teenage years, one of the most frustrating things was that I could not simply talk to a girl for more than a few seconds without her, and other people, thinking I was trying to start a "relationship." I couldn't ask a girl to go to dinner, or to hang out at my house, without her thinking it meant I wanted her to be my "girlfriend." In effect, I couldn't get to know her at all, alone, without her already being willing to enter into a pseudo-marriage with me. How could she make that decision, without knowing me? Only on the basis of looks, reputation, or brief conversations in passing during group activities.

Once I got married, it was great—I was no longer "playing the game" and could finally have normal relationships with women. Because when everyone knows you are married, you can talk to anyone you please without there being misunderstandings. How sad that before marriage people cannot get to know people of the opposite sex without the complicated dance of wondering whether to start a "relationship."

3. "Courting"

In reaction against the above model, in recent years a new view has become popular in Christian circles, called "courting." In some ways this is a hearkening back to the 1800's, except that it isn't really.

In this model, single people don't spend any time alone with someone of the opposite sex, ever, until they are married. They get to know each other in group activities, and then at some point begin to "court," which means that a guy talks to a girl in the presence of a chaperone specifically about marriage. If they get engaged, they still spend no time together unless they are with a chaperone, until they are married.

As I mentioned in the introduction, I think part of the appeal of this model is how countercultural and radical it seems in our day. And it certainly avoids the problems of pseudo-sex and pseudo-marriage in the standard Christian dating model.

But I see some big problems, ones which have already surfaced among people I know who follow this model. First, how is one ever to get to know someone of the opposite sex well enough to start courting? One goes from barely knowing a person, having seen them only in group settings, straight to talking about marriage.

Next, this model doesn't avoid the heartbreak and emotional damage of breakups. A guy starts to court a girl. He is laying his heart out to her, talking marriage. She turns him down. Perhaps she even refuses to allow him to court her. Do you think he won't be hurt? How will he know who to court, not having spent time alone with anyone, other than by trial and error, courting a bunch of girls one after the other? On the other hand, how will a girl decide who to let court her? By how he looks, or by trial and error? How easy will it be for a girl to turn down a guy courting her, even though she hardly knows him, when he is laying his heart out this way?

But most of all, this still has all the problems of exclusivity of the standard dating model. You can't spend time alone with a girl unless she is practically ready to marry you. If you pass that barrier and do start to court, you are a "thing" and better not be courting anyone else at the same time. In effect, all we have done is replace steady dating with courting, with the only difference that there must be a chaperone to stifle conversation, making it even harder to get to know each other.

As I mentioned above, I don't even think this model is an accurate description of how people got married 150 years ago. People did spend time alone together, reading poetry on a bench in the park, walking in the woods, etc. Men escorted women to balls and other events, and visited each other to talk about many other things than marriage, just to be sociable.

I greatly fear that this model will effectively lead to young girls agreeing to marry the first guy they have ever talked to alone. They will have a truncated idea of the opposite sex, never talking to any men until they are already talking marriage. It may lead to superficiality—guys courting those girls who look the best or are the most fun in groups (what else would they know about them?) and girls agreeing to be courted based on the same superficial criteria. Some Christians, indeed, might want to go further and advocate arranged marriages, in which people don't get to know anyone of the opposite sex at all.

An Alternative Model—Classic Dating

Okay, with all these problems, what is the alternative? Let me propose what I think are four sensible stages of guy-girl relationships.

Stage 1. Dating—but not exclusive dating

The classic "date" is all but dead in our society. Let me remind you what a classic date is. A guy calls up a girl, or sees her in a group setting, and asks her if she would like to go together to some activity, such as a dinner or a movie. He comes to her house to pick her up, where he meets her parents, and escorts her out. After the activity, at which they had some time to talk together, he escorts her home. No necking, no discussion of marriage, just a fun time and a chance to get to know each other. And the next week he goes out on a date with a different girl. Sometimes two or more couples go out together, each guy escorting a girl.

I wish we could return to this type of "classic dating." Consider its advantages: first, guys and girls get to know each other by spending time together, talking. Second, guys and girls get to practice being "ladies and gentlemen." In typical group activities, guys and girls are acting like children, not really talking with one other person, instead playing a part for the whole group. In a classic date, a gentleman "escorts" a lady, opening doors for her, helping her with her coat, pulling out the chair for her, paying her way, etc. The lady gives him her attention instead of chattering with other girls.

It is essential in this model that there are no *exclusive* dating relationships. In the steady dating model, couples zoom past the "date" to an exclusive relationship, so that their teen years are spent getting to know perhaps no more than one or two people of the opposite sex. The same

things happens in the courting model—no one spends time with anyone of the opposite sex until they are ready to propose marriage. In the classic dating model, people get to know lots of other people of the opposite sex.

I would encourage young people to go on lots of dates, but I would make a rule against exclusive, or “steady” dating. Steady dating, or exclusive courting, are like mini-marriages. A parent should emphasize that either you are married, or you aren’t. If you aren’t, you can’t act like you are—you have no right to demand another person’s exclusive attention or time. You have an obligation, in fact, to be friendly toward all kinds of people, which means dating people you don’t necessarily think you would ever want to marry. I loved the episodes of *Leave it to Beaver* when the parents *required* their sons to escort girls to events, as an exercise in good breeding and gentlemanliness.

Some people who favor the courting model are aghast at the idea of an unmarried couple spending time alone. The implication seems to be that we must always assume they are so uncontrolled they will jump into heavy necking or into bed together, or even worse, that all men are predators and will take advantage of a girl, given the chance. Is this what we want to teach our children? There is no doubt that spending time alone implies a level of trust. But I believe that such trust can be earned. How about simply, if the parents of the girl know the guy, that the girl simply asks them permission to go out with him? (And the same for the guy asking his parents permission to date a particular girl.) If the parents of the girl don’t know the guy, how about if he simply calls them, or drops by, to introduce himself? If the guy and girl are no longer minors, how about trusting them to make their own decisions about who they trust?

There are evil people in the world, including men who will take advantage of girls, or “bad girls” who seduce men. But we cannot live our lives in fear of evil—there are ways of gaining trust. Of course, double dating, or going with a chaperone, are just fine, if you don’t know a person well. But I think you can get to the point of trusting that some people will not manipulate you sexually, long before you know whether you want to marry them.

I would have loved it if my boys had been able to simply, frequently, been able to call up a girl and invite her to a movie or some such, without her getting into a tizzy about whether he “likes” her or whether they will be a “thing.” Instead, because of our society’s emphasis on “exclusive” dating, even among Christians, we knew that if one of them did invite a girl out, people would talk for weeks about this new “relationship.” People would practically have them married off! My brother-in-law talks about “lost America”—the time when parents told their boys that they needed to escort girls on dates, as part of their manly duty, and parents of girls told them they had to go out with certain boys, as part of being gracious and hospitable. There certainly were things wrong in those days, too, but we have lost a lot in going to the “relationship” model, or by rejecting dating altogether.

Stage 2. Declaring Affections

After young people have gotten to know each other by classic, non-exclusive dating, it is quite natural that they will start to think about who they would like to marry. How is a person to know whether the other person has the same interest in you? The only way is by declaring your

affections and taking your chances on their response.

Let me emphasize that the only “next level” after dating is marriage. When a person declares his affections, he is saying that he would like to talk about the possibility of marriage. There is no place for discussing an exclusive dating arrangement, as a sort of halfway-house to marriage, or some other quasi-committed relationship. Either you are married, or you aren’t.

Suppose that two people find that they do, indeed, like each other enough to consider marriage. Let me tell you the things they should not do: start necking and kissing, become an exclusive “thing,” stop spending time with other people of the opposite sex. Here is what they should do: talk to each other’s parents, talk about the practical matters of marriage and whether it would really work out, talk about vision for the future and whether they really have the same goals in life (e.g. kids, location, career, etc.)

It might very well be that after talking about all these details, they find that, as much as they like each other, they are just going in different directions. For example, suppose one feels strongly called to be a missionary overseas, and the other feels strongly called to be a doctor in the US. Then they just have to part friends. Think of how hard that would be if they had made a pseudo-marriage by necking, exchanging rings or necklaces, etc. It can’t ever be easy to part this way, but it is orders of magnitude easier than if you have already made pseudo-commitments.

This stage is very much like the “courting” that some Christians envision, but I would emphasize that in the model I am proposing, during this stage, there is still no exclusive relationship. Either you are married, or you aren’t. Spending time with other friends of the opposite sex is allowed, although obviously you would not “declare affections” to more than one person at the same time!

Some people have great trouble with this idea of still spending time with other people of the opposite sex even while discussing marriage with one person. I think this is because we have made every date into a ritual quasi-sex act, as the first step of many in the relationship ladder. It seems to me that it should not be too hard to distinguish between two types of dates: one kind which is just getting together to talk, and another type which clearly communicates “I am interested in you as a potential marriage partner.” The first type of date we can do even when married. I have often as a married man met with various women in public places as part of my role as a church leader, with no implication of romance, and I think all types of people, not just church leaders, should be able to do this. I also think of the old movies where married men “escorted” unmarried women to events such as formal dances or dinners without any implications of romance. I do agree, though, that if you have declared affections to one person, going on dates which involve very close time together with someone else, such as going to a movie or going on a two-hour hike alone, would violate the spirit of saying that you have declared your affections to another person. Some types of dates in our culture seem intrinsically to say “I’m interested in you as a person of the opposite sex,” and while I encourage this type of date for unattached singles in general, without any implications of commitment, I do think it would be inappropriate for those who are married, engaged, or talking about marriage to date others in this way.

There is no broken promise if the talking about marriage does not lead to marriage. A good word

of advice an older man gave me once was, “Treat every girl you date as if she will be some other man’s wife.” Until you are married, you must assume that you might not get married, and therefore you must not do things that bond you to someone else’s spouse, such as physical intimacy, or “spiritual nakedness” such as sharing your deepest feelings and secrets. There is a line you cannot cross with someone of the opposite sex, until you are married, when it comes to sharing your feelings and inner self.

I have said to my kids that there really is no way to avoid awkwardness at this stage of declaring affections. Somebody has to go first, and that is risky. We all know of various tricks to estimate the probabilities—asking a third party, dropping hints, noticing little favors being done, etc. That is part of the fun and confusion of the young years, and we shouldn’t make it into a neurosis. “It is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.”

Stage 3. Engagement

At some point, all you see are green lights, and so you ask formally to get married. I am a big fan of the traditional role of the guy formally asking the girl—and if she says yes, then asking her parents. That is another subject—the difference of the roles of guys and girls, but in general I can say that it leaves good memories to be able to say on such-and-such a day, we got engaged, as opposed to just sliding into it.

Being engaged means having definite plans to get married, including a date. If there is no wedding date, you are still really at Stage 2—will it work out? I believe in short engagements—there is too much temptation to start acting like a married couple when you are engaged, including physically. Many, many Christian couples have sex when they are engaged, reasoning that they are just as good as married. No, you are not! Either you are married, or you aren’t. If you aren’t married, you must still treat the other person as though they might become another person’s spouse. People do break engagements, and there is no shame in that—better to not make a vow than to make one which you begin to doubt is wise.

When you are engaged, you obviously are not looking to declare affections with other people. But you should still not become exclusively focused on each other when around other people. There will be plenty of time to be intimate after you are married. Build an outward focus to your marriage even at this stage, by being outward-focused even when you are engaged. A married couple who focus entirely on each other will become burned out—each person will start to need breathing space eventually.

4. Covenant Marriage

I probably don’t need to say much about marriage itself, as there have been numerous volumes written by Christians on the importance of keeping marriage vows and how God hates divorce. Let me just say that in the classic dating model, there is less temptation for someone to wonder whether they really got the right person, if they jumped too soon for the wrong person. If they have spent time with lots of people of the opposite sex, they know something about how their spouse compares to other people. On the other hand, if a girl has steady-dated only one or two people before getting married, she may wonder really what other men might be like. Or suppose,

as I know happens these days, that a girl is sheltered by homeschooling for 18 years, never dates anyone, and then marries the first guy who comes to “court” her. Of course that can work out beautifully, as can arranged marriages, but I think that classic dating, getting to know a lot of people before marriage in a noncommittal way, gives a broader view of the world and other people. I agree with Dobson and many others who say that after they are married, couples should still “date” each other—go out together, formally. Couples need to get to know each other as man and woman in ways other than having sex. Classic dating, whether before or after marriage, says “I want to not just take you for granted, but instead I want to treat you as a lady (or a gentleman), formally, being on my best behavior.”

Is There an “Age of Majority”?

In the above I have several times assumed that children of a certain age are able to make their own decisions about who to trust and who to marry. Some Christians feel there is no such thing—adult children are bound to ask their parents’ permission for everything. The Bible does not clearly speak of an “age of majority,” but it does support the idea that parents do not have authority over their children forever. Hebrews 12:10 says that “our fathers disciplined us for a little while.” This “little while” seems to imply an end—when the child is an adult, he or she is no longer under the discipline of the parents. In the analogy being made in that passage, the parental discipline represents our present sufferings, and the point is that these will end. It also stands to reason that the goal of a Christian parent should be to make adults out of their children, not keep them in an extended state of dependency. I am embarrassed for young, or not-so-young, adults who still live at home and seem to have no will independent of their parents. It is like a disease which has stunted their growth.

Of course, if adult children want the blessing of their parents, they cannot make it a habit of constantly ignoring their advice. The Bible has numerous passages talking of the importance of listening the advice of your parents, as well as other older people. It also talks about the importance of being blessed by your parents. But I can see no warrant for taking this as a blanket law that parents may run the lives of their children forever.

Conclusions

Here are my recommendations, then:

- 1) Bring back the classic, no-further-implications date. Rather than forbidding such dates, parents should be *planning and arranging* such dates. Hold dances, group movie dates, etc. Introduce singles to other singles—help them to meet people, instead of making it a random process. Teach teenagers how to be ladies and gentlemen, so that they can continue that way when they get married. They should have high expectations about how men and women treat each other, so that they don’t accept the first person who comes along, treating them rudely, but they don’t know it because they have no experience with the opposite sex.

- 2) All forms of sexual arousal before marriage are out. I don’t want to be legalistic, and say that

a kiss of 0.1 seconds is okay, but 0.2 seconds is not, etc. A person needs to ask simply: is this getting me sexually aroused? That means an erection for a guy, or “butterflies” for a girl. If so, then you need to back off and do things that are more neutral. There is no way that a person can go through life never getting aroused in the presence of an attractive person of the opposite sex, but we can avoid stoking the fires. There will be plenty of time for physical bonding after marriage—it comes naturally, there is no need to practice.

It seems to me that if this rule is followed, young Christians will be much less likely to marry another person who doesn't share their Christian faith. If you don't get physical, what is there to do but talk? And if you talk to someone very long, who doesn't share your beliefs, it can get old. Often teens in exclusive, pseudo-marriage “steady” relationships don't actually spend much time talking—they spend most of their time together kissing and getting aroused!

3) Don't allow pseudo-marriages, even if they don't involve sex or sexual arousal acts like heavy kissing. This should be the case even when a couple has declared affection and is discussing marriage. Exclusive relationships, whether they are called relationships, steady dating, or courting relationships, all cheapen marriage itself.

4) Allow time alone when trust has been earned. There is no reason to treat all singles as sex fiends who will violate all rules of morality as soon as they are alone. Trust can be earned, and for minors, this means the trust of their parents.

5) Don't forbid the “romance” of declaring affections, such as letter writing, walks in the park, and general “wooing.” If these things begin to dominate a person's life, becoming an idol, that is another story. But there is no reason why two young people cannot start to discuss the possibility of marriage, while still being outward looking to other people and not exclusive in the time they spend with others. It will help them to not fall into idolatry about these things if they have had the chance to spend time with a lot of people of the opposite sex, so that the first person that comes along acting romantic does not sweep them off their feet.

Some young people are so charged up that they will see a contradiction between my recommendations (2) and (5). Doesn't romance get people all hot and bothered? Perhaps some people fall off the boat, but it doesn't have to be that way. “Romance” in my view is precisely the state of balance between attraction and yet self control—as C.S. Lewis put it, the “sweet desire” of looking forward to something beautiful, but not having it, and not forcing it. In a sense it is a picture of our waiting for Heaven itself.

If we have practice in that, it will lead to a better marriage, as a couple spends time being “romantic” from time to time—being man and woman but not in a sexual way.

6) In declaring affections, and even when engaged, avoid “spiritual nakedness.” Discuss your views of life, visions for the future, goals and life's work, children, etc. Don't confess your deepest sins, explain the innermost workings of your heart, etc. I have seen many relationships destroyed by one or the other person “dumping” a load of inner thoughts on the other person, so that if the two decide not to pursue marriage, they can never really be friends again, as it would feel adulterous.

As I said above, there is no way to completely avoid the awkwardness in finding a mate, because we can't read each other's minds—what if the other person likes me and I don't like her? Or vice versa? But don't shun the process because of that. It can be a joy without being an idol, to get to know people as man and woman.

7) When discussing marriage, engaged, or married, keep an outward focus, and don't become exclusively focused on that one other person. Obviously you would not be discussing marriage or declaring affections with other people, but you can still be friends with numerous other people, including people of the opposite sex.

Appendix: Frequently Asked Questions

Q. This model seems all well and good if everyone is on the same page, and agrees with your model. But most people do not think this way, in our culture. So if I go on a date with someone, they are likely to think it is a big deal, a proposal for a “relationship.” How can I deal with this?

A: I agree it is certainly easier if a church or fellowship teaches on dating and sets expectations for a whole group. But I think it is still possible to tell somewhat what you mean by a date when you are asking them out, without going through a whole lesson plan in dating. You can simply say something like, “I believe in dating lots of different people to get to know them better. Would you be interested in going out on one date, just to get to know each other and to have fun?” In the same way, a girl responding to a request for a date from a guy she doesn't know well can say, “I would be happy to go out on a date with you, because I believe in getting to know lots of people. But I just want to make sure you understand that I don't believe in ‘steady dating relationships’.” I think lots of people would respond positively to that kind of honesty up front, and you would certainly have the chance to talk about your philosophy of dating when you go out.

Q. On one hand, you advocate “low-pressure, no commitment” dates, but on the other hand, you talk about “romance”, a guy “escorting” a lady, paying for her, opening doors for her, etc. Isn't that a contradiction? Wouldn't any women think that such behavior meant he was really serious about her?

A. I think this reflects a sad part of our present society, that people assume a man cannot be “gentlemanly,” i.e. polite, unless he is interested in a long-term relationship, i.e. sex. It is certainly true that many women will interpret such behavior as evidence of serious interest, and because of this, many Christians when they go out act “childish” so as to prevent any such misunderstandings—the two of them act like “pals” or “kids”. What I am advocating is that they act like man and woman—as adults, who respect that the other person's sexuality is part of who they are, but who also will restrain their emotions to not interpret every little friendliness as implying a deep commitment.

Again, if you talk about your philosophy of dating when you go out, you can avoid misunderstandings.

Q. You talk about being “man and woman” when you go out, but I frankly don’t know what that means. In our society being “man and woman” means having sex.

A. Another sad truth about our society is that this is a common feeling. By being “man and woman” I mean, essentially, 1) being polite and gracious to each other, i.e. acting like “adults” and not kids trading insults and jokes, 2) acknowledging the differences between the sexes in little ways, in other words, the man does things that the woman does not do, e.g. opening a door for her or paying her way, and vice versa, e.g. she allows him to lead and to decide things, and 3) dressing nicely (at least sometimes) in a way that says we are not interchangeable, that I want to look like a what I am, a man or a woman. In our culture this can mean a dress for a woman and a tie, jacket or slacks for a man, or less formally, simply cleaning up and not looking like you came from the gym.

Q. You mention meeting the parents. That seems really formal and antiquated in our society.

A. First of all, my inclusion of parents is primarily aimed at minors who are dating. Parents are responsible that their minor children go out with people they can trust. The best way to earn trust is to meet someone. As I discuss above, I believe in an “age of majority”, and adults who are no longer minors should be able to evaluate who they can trust, by themselves.

On the other hand, I have known adult women in their twenties who still asked men to talk to their parents. They did this not because they felt they had to, but because they trusted their parents’ judgment, and also because they wanted to convey to their male friends that their relationship with their parents was an important part of their life.

Q. Despite all you have said, I know that in some cases if I go out with someone a few times, and then decide not to pursue going out with them any more, their feelings will be hurt. Isn’t that going to happen?

A. Yes, no matter what model you choose, our heart and sexual feelings are so close to our core that there are always going to be hurt feelings and misunderstandings. If you choose the world’s model of relationships or the Christian variation of it, I think you will risk even greater hurt. But I cannot say that the approach I outline is a risk-free approach. The only way to avoid any risk is to seal yourself off and never date. But “it is not good for a man to be alone.” As I said, it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. If there is a not a lot of physical intimacy, and if you are very clear in talking about your values and philosophy of dating, the hurt will heal a lot faster.

Q. You talk about going out on lots of dates and not being exclusive. But isn’t there a place for two people who are not yet engaged or discussing marriage to spend more time dating each other than others?

A. Sure. I would not want to lay down rules about how many times a person can see another. The key is that no matter how much you meet, that you understand that there is no commitment on either side, no “relationship” which can be “betrayed” by meeting with someone else. Another key issue is to not “pair off” and become exclusive. No matter how much you like to be with one

person, you should still be spending time with the larger Christian community. This applies even after marriage—we should always have an outward face, not become involved in one other person to exclusion. Marriages are a wonderful opportunity for hospitality. That same outward face should be maintained while dating.

Q. Wouldn't it seem strange to go out with someone who was talking about marriage with someone else?

If you mean a “romantic date,” then of course you would not want to. But this question presumes that the only kind of date is a romantic one. It is possible simply to “arrange a date” to meet and talk with someone who you know to be talking about marriage with someone else, purely for the purpose of getting to know them as a friend or encouraging them on some specific topic.

There has to be a level of trust in marriage, and there also should be this level of trust in the earlier stages of discussing marriage and being engaged. One can trust that the other person is not meeting with a third party in order to look for another spouse, but instead is just being friendly and encouraging—keeping an outward face. After I was married, it was very freeing to me to know that I could meet with women in public places to discuss various issues, and my wife could meet with men in the church, without people wondering if anything was up. I was “out of the game” and so could have much more straightforward friendships with the opposite sex. It saddens me when I hear of men who won't let their wives talk with any other men. They are effectively isolating their wives from half the human population.

As I discuss in the main text, there do seem to be some types of dates in our culture that intrinsically send the message of romantic interest—usually ones which involve time spent very alone together. I don't think you can go out to the movies with someone else if you are married or discussing marriage.

Q. Do you believe in a gift of singleness?

A. Unless you think Jesus and the Apostle Paul were failures, it is clear that some people can have fulfilled, productive lives without being married. Paul goes further, in 1 Corinthians 7, to say that being single can be a better state than being married, in terms of helping the kingdom of God. Jesus makes similar statements in Matthew 19:11-12. No one is ever commanded to marry, and a person can decide that work for the kingdom of God takes precedence. In very pragmatic terms, the sex drive is not something like our need for food that needs to be fed all the time. The sex drive can become dormant if we do not inflame it continuously, and that can be a blessing. A person who “sexually fasts” can go for years without having those desires awakened, and be perfectly content.

But I would say that a person should never declare himself or herself permanently out of circulation. The Reformers (e.g. Luther and Calvin) insisted that a *vow* of singleness (as opposed to *acceptance* of singleness) is always an unwise vow. I have known several people who got married in their 40's or 50's. And I would say that a single person, no matter what age, should continue to occasionally date others of comparable age. Even if you have no plan of ever getting married, dating is not just for finding a marriage partner. It is a way of encouraging other singles,

of saying that you want to get to know them and spend time with them. Not marrying does not mean that singles have to be hermits, and you never know who the Lord might bring into your life at a late date.

Q. I want a spouse, and I want one now, badly! Is it wrong for me to do what I can to go out and get one? God says marriage is a good thing.

A. Sadly, I have known several people, usually men, who had this attitude. Two things are coupled together for a deadly combination: our natural sex drive, and the teaching of many churches that marriage is God's highest priority. Usually such people are able to manipulate someone of the opposite sex into a relationship, or engagement, but the other person typically breaks it off, feeling smothered by the pressure. I have known men who have gone from woman to woman, smothering them with sweetness in trying to pressure them to marry them. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul says "Do not seek a wife." He does not mean we are not allowed to marry (the context makes this clear) but that we should not *seek* a wife, just as we should not *seek* to be rich (1 Tim 6:9). If we make these things a priority above all else, we have made an idol, which will lead us into sin.

I can say that I want to work hard, and honestly, and if that leads to wealth, so much the better, but if not, I can be content with lack of wealth also (1 Tim 6:8, Phil 4:11). In the same way, I can say that I will seek the kingdom of God and its advance, and if in doing that I find a co-laborer walking beside me, then so much the better, but I can be content without a spouse. It takes much of the pressure off of dates if one doesn't feel it has to lead to marriage.

Since the world has downgraded marriage, starting in the 1960's, the church in many ways has reacted by promoting the value of marriage, and in many churches, it almost seems as though you are a second class citizen if you are not married. This should never be. Marriage is good, but not the only blessing in life. There should not be a pressure to get married coming from the church, just a celebration that those who do marry are doing a good thing.

Q. Is it okay to use online dating services?

A. I see nothing wrong with these services as a way of meeting people when the number of Christian people in your geographical area, church, or age group, is not very large. The same applies to arranged dates by friends and family. All the same things apply that I have said above: going on a date implies nothing more than getting to know someone, not a "relationship." Such things should be viewed as just ways of meeting new people, not a machine in which you turn the crank and get a spouse.