



Like-mindedness in courtship and marriage

What does your love life have to do with the Church Order? When you are looking for a life partner or when you become engaged to be married, the Church Order is probably the last thing on your mind. In fact, it's entirely possible that you will say, "Church Order? What is it anyway?"

Nonetheless, if you can locate *the Church Order of the Canadian Reformed Churches* (in the back of the *Book of Praise*), you will find in Article 63 the following words: *The consistory shall ensure that the members of the congregation marry only in the Lord, and that the ministers – as authorized by the consistory – solemnize only such marriages as are in accordance with the Word of God.*

The inclusion of an article about marriage in the *Church Order* is a reflection of the important connection between marriage and the church. For at least two reasons, the church has a vital interest in the creation of a new family unit. In the first place, the marriage of church members is to reflect the relationship between Christ and his Church (Ephesians 5:22-33). In the second place, the Scriptures reveal that God builds his Church covenantally through the birth of children to believers (Genesis 17:7; Acts 2:29). Therefore, it is no exaggeration to say that godly marriages and healthy family life are critical for the wellbeing of the church.

For these reasons, it is not surprising to see that Article 63 places courtship, romance and marriage under the oversight of the consistory of each local church. Those whom Christ has called to take heed to the flock are also to take heed to the love life of the young (and-not-so-young) people of the church.

Only in the Lord

The language of Article 63 is derived from 1 Corinthians 7:39. In this passage, the apostle indicates that a widow is free to marry whomever she wishes with only the restriction that this new marriage must be *in the Lord*. This means that a relationship may be contemplated only with one who is a Christian in profession and life. The church must teach her youth that to give your heart in love to an unbeliever is to break faith with God. Sometimes, I have heard the argument that 1 Corinthians 7:39 only forbids marriage with an unbeliever but does not forbid dating a non-Christian. This argument fails on two counts. First, the Bible does not support a concept of recreational dating which would not have as its overall goal the seeking of a life partner. Second, to begin a relationship while knowing full well that this relationship cannot progress in a natural way would be to tempt God – something believers may never do (Matthew 4:7)!

The Scriptural ban against marrying an unbeliever finds further expression in 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1. While Paul is not discussing marriage in this passage, he is warning against any entangling associations with non-Christian people. His basic principle is: *"Do not be yoked together with unbelievers."* Paul is not saying that believers need to shun the world as do the Amish and other Anabaptist groups (1 Corinthians 5:10). Contact in daily life with those who do not confess Christ is inevitable and even to be desired. How else would the glad tidings of the Gospel be spread? Paul is saying, however, that believers may not enter a compromising relationship. They ought not to be *"yoked together"* with unbelievers. This metaphor finds its origin in Deuteronomy 22:10 which states, *"Do not plow with an ox and a donkey yoked together."* Without trying here to explain this passage, we can say that for Paul, *"the Christian is a different breed from the unbeliever and is forbidden an improper relationship with him."*¹

Perhaps a person contemplating a relationship with a non-Christian takes comfort in the promise of the other person never to interfere with churchgoing or with prayer and Bible-reading. Many a

young person has fallen for the promise of a non-believing boyfriend or girlfriend that “I’ll never interfere with your beliefs.” If we think this through, however, we soon realize that a marriage based on opposing religious presuppositions can never attain to the unity of life which is what the married state is all about. How can there be a real unity when one person’s life is controlled by every word spoken by God while the other person has no regard for that same word of God? A clash of values and so of lifestyle is inevitable. One needs to think, too, of the impact of an unbelieving spouse on the upbringing of any children that might be born. Perhaps the unbelieving spouse will not stand in the way of baptism, church attendance and Catechism instruction. Nonetheless, one can expect that the lack of a positive, godly example of faith and conduct will put a stamp upon family life.

For these reasons, it is necessary for the churches to teach that God forbids intermarriage with unbelievers. Those who fail to repent of this sin need to be disciplined by the church in a loving and yet firm manner. Whether a church member is just beginning such a relationship or is already deeply involved with an unbeliever, the church must have the courage to ask him/her to give up this wrong relationship – even if it were at great emotional cost. For the sake of their relationship with their God and Saviour, believers must be willing to deny even their strongest feelings for another person. Because our God is the only true God who deserves our unrestrained love and total obedience, we are called to “*forsake all creatures rather than do **the least thing** against His will*” (Answer 94 of the Catechism).

How must the church respond if the outside party in a relationship is showing some interest in the Word of God and is willing to come for instruction in the faith? Does this initial interest make such a relationship acceptable to the Lord? The answer must be negative. Those who show interest in the Word of God and are willing to hear the Gospel are always most welcome among the people of God. However, they are not welcome as partners in a relationship with a believing person. A promise to attend church or to accept instruction is not enough. Let us be honest about this point. Romantic interest in a church member can lead an outsider² to make cheap promises. Needed for Christian courtship and marriage is not simply the *possibility* of a *future* acceptance of the Faith, but rather a *present* profession of faith adorned by a godly life in living communion with the church. Outside of this framework, the relationship stands condemned by God and needs a response of admonition.

From different denominations?

Let us now turn this discussion into a more complicated area. We have been talking about courtship and marriage involving a believer and a non-Christian. What about courtship and marriage involving a member of a faithful Reformed church and somebody who confesses Christ, lives a godly life but belongs to a different denomination? Is such a relationship permissible? How ought the church to respond?

The most significant factor involved in answering these questions is our view of the Reformed confessions. If we embrace the Reformed confessions from the heart as an accurate statement of Biblical teaching, we will not be able to enter a courting relationship with people who do not accept the Reformed confessions. To do so would be to *relativize* our own confessed faith.

Do we believe that God’s Word *alone* is our standard in doctrine and life? Do we truly believe that God is *sovereign* in salvation and not dependent on our human will? Do we believe God’s gracious *unconditional* election, Christ’s particular redemption and the Spirit’s *unfailing preservation* of God’s people? Do we believe that human beings are by nature depraved, their hearts corrupted, their minds darkened and their wills enslaved? Do we believe that we are justified by *faith alone* apart from works? Do we believe that God’s covenant is established with believers *and their seed* and that the children of believers therefore ought to be baptized? Do we believe that the Word and the sacraments are *means of grace*? Do we believe that *God’s law* is normative for the lives of God’s children? Do we believe that the church is to be governed by *elders*? Do we believe that church *discipline* is a mark of Christ’s church? Do we believe that Christ actually *communicates* Himself to us in the Lord’s Supper?

Each of the above questions highlights an aspect of the confession of the Reformed churches which is either disregarded or denied by many other denominations. Without judging these other denominations, we may ask how a young person who has become heir of the riches of the Reformed faith can make light of them by switching to a Baptist, Arminian or liberal church or even by returning to the Roman communion? To do so would be an act of unfaithfulness – an ungrateful repudiation of a God-given heritage. Instead of changing churches for the sake of a relationship, should not Reformed youth defend their faith and stand firm as living members of the church to which they have given their allegiance?

Young people should aim for *like-mindedness*³ in courtship and marriage. Like-mindedness means *agreement* in doctrine and in the application of doctrine to life. A lack of like-mindedness brings serious problems into a marriage and brings division into the church. Thus, whenever this like-mindedness of confession and life is lacking, the elders of the church should intervene with words of warning and exhortation.

What if the non-Reformed believer in a courting relationship becomes convinced of the teaching of the Reformed church and is willing to become a member of the Reformed church? In this case, too, the elders should also be involved from an early stage in order to give instruction and to test motives. Until the time that the person actually commits himself/herself to become a member of the Reformed church, the relationship should be kept on hold.

An impossible standard?

Some may respond to what I have written by saying that it establishes an impossible standard. First, they might say, it is impossible to regulate love. Second, they might add, since our own federation is so small, where does one find a spouse?

In response to the first point, we should realize that also in our love lives we are called to *self-control*. Romantic attraction is not an uncontrollable emotion. Love involves choices and decisions over which we have control and for which we therefore have responsibility. An attraction for a person who does not share our hope, our confession and our way of life can be suppressed. The world may find this approach unnatural but those who serve the living God are willing to resist all desires which conflict with his revealed will. Of course, once a person enters a wrong relationship and becomes emotionally enmeshed with an outsider, it becomes very difficult to renounce the bond. The lesson is: do not begin what you are not sure you can complete. If you do, you will suffer much pain in breaking up an impossible relationship or else risk making shipwreck of your faith by continuing a course of action which the Lord forbids.

Now what about the question of finding a spouse in a relatively small Reformed federation? In reply, it can be said that we are not so small that there are not many potential partners for people in every age group. Just ask the ministers of our churches who will tell you about a large number of single people over the age of 21. It seems that part of the problem is the failure of young men to properly initiate courtship. Many young men appear to lack the confidence or inner freedom to actively seek out a godly young woman of the church. Why this might be so could be the topic of another article. For now, I would like to urge single people to bring their heartfelt desires before the Lord in prayer, asking Him to guide them to the right person for marriage. We should not force the door of providence but when God Himself holds open the door, we ought to walk through and seize the opportunities which He gives.

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¹ Gordon Fee, quoted by Paul Barnett in *The Message of 2 Corinthians* (Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), page 130.

² I've noticed that people sometimes respond negatively to the use of the term "outsider." But see Colossians 4:5, 1 Thessalonians 4:12 and many other NT passages. Christian marriage is for "insiders" only.

³ Douglas Wilson works with this concept of "like-mindedness" in *Her Hand in Marriage: Biblical Courtship in the Modern World* (Canon Press, 1997), pages 67-69.