



Holding Hands, Holding Hearts

Biblical principles make better encounters – and marriages

Richard Phillips talks to Peter Hastie

There's a real need in the church today for biblically informed teaching about how men and women should date. Living in a culture where the ideas behind sinful practices create all sorts of unhelpful expectations and practices, we need a vision of how young Christian men and women can form healthy relationships that will ultimately lead them to a fulfilling marriage. Rev. Richard D. Phillips and his wife, Sharon, have written a helpful book, *Holding Hands, Holding Hearts* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 2006) which sets out from the Bible how believers can approach this difficult but exhilarating time in their lives.

Since the terms “dating,” “boyfriend” and “girlfriend” can’t be found in the Bible, is it possible to have a Christian approach to dating?

Well, although the modern social convention of “dating” doesn't appear in the Bible, that doesn't mean the Bible has nothing to say about it. Indeed, the approach that my wife and I took when we wrote the book, *Holding Hands, Holding Hearts*, is that we need to look at dating in the light of what the Bible says about the institution of marriage. We believe that the best way to consider dating is to begin by thinking about the purpose of marriage and the nature of the marital relationship.

Once you have done that, you are then in a position to consider whether present dating practices are consistent with the kind of relationship to which they are meant to lead. As far as I can see, dating is a social phenomenon which is a well-established part of our culture. We are stuck with it whether we like it or not. So, it seems to me that Christians need to consider it in a way that's biblically wise and appropriate to the Bible's teaching on marriage.

Okay, but if dating is a relatively recent social convention and the Bible doesn't deal with it specifically, why is it such an important subject for you to write about?

Well, I am not convinced that saying, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, is a sufficient response in today's world where dating is a well-established practice. I can understand the book itself and agree with its basic thrust, which is aimed mainly at teenagers. However, I am really writing for young adults, not teenagers.

The problem for young adults today is that they are living in an entirely different world from the one of only a generation or so ago. When I was serving as a pastor in Philadelphia, few of our urban singles were from Christian families, and for the most part they were unable to look to their fathers for Christian counsel on this subject. That's why I argue in my book that I believe that the church needs to step in at this point and provide the social network that families used to offer in the past.

Further, it explains why I'm not prepared to say to young adults that they should abandon dating as some Christian authors suggest. If the social context in the US was quite different, then it would be another story. However, dating is the social convention that exists today and so my aim has been to help young adults to reflect biblically upon it. What we want to do is reform the practice of dating so that it will be biblically fruitful. So that's our approach.

Why did you call your book Holding Hands, Holding Hearts?

When I was studying at Westminster Theological Seminary I was on the staff of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. I was the singles pastor and we had 200 to 300 single young adults in their twenties to early forties in our church. We had a Friday night meeting where I would preach as well as coordinate small group Bible studies. From that experience I found that we had the need to present biblical teaching on marriage and dating. The book arose out of the seminars that we put together to help our singles.

How we arrived at the name of the book is interesting. We had a good friend, in fact my wife's room-mate when we were dating, and we were talking about the whole concept of a man wanting to hold a woman's hand. We realized that men view this quite differently from women. And she made the comment, "When he asks to hold my hand, I want to know what that means." So we would say, "When you're holding a woman's hand, you're really holding her heart." And that was one of our catchphrases to help men understand what was really going on in a relationship with a woman. So the title became quite a natural introduction to our whole approach. Men are not just holding women's hands; they are also holding their hearts.

What do you actually mean when you say that a guy is holding the heart of a young woman?

What men want in dating is the warmth of feminine feeling and companionship. This is the way that God has made us. It's not sexually sinful to desire feminine warmth. It's a natural, wholesome thing for a man to hold his girlfriend's hand.

However, for the woman, holding a man's hand is not about a fleeting fulfillment of existential needs; it goes far deeper than the pure physical sensation. This means that Christian men need to think very carefully about their obligations to the woman they are dating. One of the themes I major on when I am speaking about dating is the man's spiritual responsibility. The biblical idea of headship means that a man must accept the responsibility for the effects on a woman of the time she may spend with him. So, rather than just taking hold of her hand because he enjoys it, he must take the responsibility for the emotional and spiritual experience that a woman has when she's with him.

Sometimes, those who write on this subject have a particular agenda. Do you have one? Is your aim to get all singles married or to consider marriage?

Yes, I definitely have an agenda. My agenda is to get Christians to think and act biblically about their relationships. In this particular case, I am concerned about the romantic relationships between unmarried men and women. I want Christians to consider how they should conduct themselves in this situation and reform their attitudes and behavior in the light of Scripture.

My agenda is to focus on God's agenda and that means that I need to remind people that marriage is God's regular ordinance for the blessing of men and women. I am not saying that adult singleness is abnormal, not at all. But I do want to say that God's regular pattern is marriage. I know Christians often talk about the gift of singleness, but the reality is that most single adults don't regard it as a gift at all. For most of them it is a trial... After all, the Lord did say, "*It is not good for the man to be alone.*" God wasn't joking; adult men should desire marriage. I like to say that dating should be with an eye to marriage. Naturally, this doesn't mean that you show up on your first date in a wedding dress or a tuxedo; that's hardly appropriate. Nevertheless, Christians should definitely date with an eye towards marriage, and that's the emphasis in our book.

And so I say to guys, "If you are not seriously interested in marriage, then don't date. And please don't take out the women in my church because I know that they're looking for a husband. And, well they should be."

I know some people think it's rather odd for a woman to be dating with an eye to marriage. I've sometimes heard them say, "Oh, you know, Suzy's only here because she's looking for a husband." And I would say, "Well, I don't think that's the only reason, but what do you expect of a

twenty-five-year-old Christian woman? From a biblical point of view it's perfectly reasonable for her to want to be married." So rather than this embarrassment over ulterior motives in dating, I want to put it all out on the table and de-embarrass the whole situation by reminding everyone that it's a godly thing for young adult Christians to be seeking marriage. It may not be for everyone; nevertheless, it's God's regular provision and men should be dating with an eye to marriage.

At the moment there are some prominent evangelical leaders in the United States who are encouraging young people to get married as soon as possible. Do you have any advice on that score?

I think we have to be responsible in giving this sort of advice. However, I can understand why some may be giving it. In the US today we have a problem with Christian men. We have plenty of women who really want to get married; it's the men who are the problem. Women are maturing more quickly than men today and they are looking for a husband.

So I want to challenge young Christian men in their twenties or older, "Why are you not stepping up to the plate to be married? Why aren't you ready? Why is your life in a holding pattern? Why are you forestalling what God says is 'good'?" Too often I hear the lame excuse, "Richard, I'm just not ready for commitment." Well, I want to ask guys in their twenties, "Why not? Why are you not developing your Christian character?" Now notice, I am not saying that guys should get married to overcome their immaturity. The immaturity itself is a problem and they need to get to work on that immediately. Obviously, part of their immaturity is their attitude to marriage.

So what is the main issue that concerns you with young adults at the moment?

It's people who say to me, "I want to date, but I'm just not interested in marriage." When they let me know what they're thinking, I usually say something like, "Well, don't ask out any woman in our church; or if you do, make it clear where you stand. The likelihood is that she will say, "No."

Men today need to realize that the women in our churches are not just there for their emotional "feel good" experience or their convenience. That's selfish. Our men need to embrace biblical manhood which involves nurturing and protecting women. One of Adam's tasks when he was placed in the garden was to tend and protect the things in his care – and that included his wife. If a man is living biblically, then he should make sure that those around him feel cared for and safe. No Christian woman should feel vulnerable in a relationship. She must never feel exploited or uncertain of a man's intentions. She must feel secure.

When I went out on a date with my wife, I was up-front with her from the beginning. After we had been out together for a while and things looked promising, I said to her, "Would you mind if we talked about our relationship?" Actually, she really appreciated that I took this initiative. I said, "Sharon, I want you to know that I really admire you and find you very attractive. If you are willing, I would be happy to continue our relationship in the hope that it would lead to something more. We're not there now, and it's only early days, but I would like to continue our relationship because I believe it could lead to something permanent. Is it okay if I continue to date you with an eye towards marriage?" How do you think she felt about that? Well, I can tell you; she was thrilled!

So tell me, how did you develop a doctrine of dating? You said you worked back from the institution of marriage. Why did you do that?

We started with marriage and worked back because marriage is God's design for the exclusive love relationship between men and women. Our aim was to identify the biblical dynamics of that relationship and then back-track them into dating.

For instance, marriage involves a lifelong relationship that is bound by a covenant. Therefore a dating relationship needs to progressively build commitment and trust. When you're on a first date, the level of commitment is low and needs to be explicitly so. But then as you develop a more exclusive relationship there needs to be greater clarity and definition. For instance, as the relationship deepens I need to tell my girlfriend that from now on I don't intend to take out other women

and that I am trying to get to know her better and build more trust between ourselves. I think men need to lead in this regard.

However, the problem men face is that they want intimacy – another dynamic in the relationship – and they tend to give only as much commitment as necessary to get the intimacy they crave. Obviously, this is terribly destructive for women.

Women, on the other hand, want the commitment, and they give the intimacy to the extent that they have to gain commitment. Now the Bible teaches that the intimacy level needs to be appropriate to the commitment level. I really believe there should be no real sexual intimacy short of marriage. I cannot see a biblical case for what Americans call “making out.” It’s a desire for intimacy in ways that are entirely inappropriate to the level of commitment.

When dating couples become sexually intimate they short-circuit the process of their emotional and intellectual growth together. They become less concerned about communicating with each other because they have physical intimacy on their minds all the time.

When my wife and I were dating, we would go from the restaurant to the park and sit there and talk about all kinds of things. We’d even talk about people walking past us, you know, and say things like, “Look at those shoes!,” and laugh about it. We would also talk a lot about the Bible and our attitudes to a large number of issues. We used to memorize Scripture together, talk about Dr. Boice’s sermons, laugh together, and tell our stories. It was a wonderful way to grow together intellectually and emotionally.

A man needs to lead in this process. Women have such a great desire to secure commitment that they can be tempted to sell intimacy to get it. However, if a woman does this it changes everything; it certainly affects the way she relates to the man from then on. When a Christian man says to a woman, “You know what, you are a precious child of God and I am going to bring out the very best in you and develop our commitment. We are going to wait for the intimacy,” the woman feels completely secure and loved. This is a thrilling and blessed way to date; and it’s biblical.

What are the key ideas of marriage that should establish the parameters for the dating relationship?

Genesis 2 sets out three fundamental dynamics for marriage – commitment, intimacy, and interdependence – which will necessarily have some bearing on the dating relationship.

First, marriage is a relationship that is defined by its covenant commitment. This means that in a dating relationship the level of commitment that leads to marriage needs to be proactively managed as the couple move forward in their friendship. I believe that there should be clearly defined levels of commitment as you are dating. A first date is a first date. That is what it is. We are at dinner getting to know each other. The man needs to specify that. There should be no intimacy. A woman who goes out to dinner with a man twice should not be making meals for him, right? She should not be sewing for him. She should not be coming over to his apartment to clean it. This is completely inappropriate. She is being exploited by her God-given desire and God-given right for commitment from a man. The level of commitment needs to be properly managed during the dating process so that it is not exploited.

The second dynamic is intimacy. Intimacy should correspond to the level of commitment. I don’t think that couples who have been on a date once should get together for intimate prayer and open up their hearts to one another. I don’t think it’s wise to share your inmost thoughts with someone who has not yet made a deep commitment to you. As the commitment in a dating relationship increases, there will be more open sharing of past history, heart attitudes, and hopes for the future, along with an increased amount of time spent in shared interests.

The third dynamic is interdependence; the building of a shared life. For instance, when my wife and I were dating, and we had a fairly long engagement, I would come and stay with her and her parents. She also began to take an interest in my life. She started following the interests I have and I started to develop an interest in the things in which she was involved. I got to know her circle of

friends, and our lives began to overlap. So, there needs to be a development of commitment, intimacy, and sharing of interests. And one of the things that I point out in our book is that the man has to take the initiative in opening the way for progress in each of these areas.

Why is the man meant to be the initiator?

He's the initiator because that's the pattern that God established when He created the man and the woman for each other. It all goes back to the blueprint in Genesis 2. Adam is given responsibility to care for everything. Eve is his helper, but the primary responsibility is his. Now it's important to realize that while a man has a certain authority in the marriage relationship, this does not extend to dating. The Bible does not command girlfriends to submit to their boyfriends. If a woman says to me, "I went on a date last night with a guy and he told me to submit to him, what should I do?" my advice would be, "Run! It's totally inappropriate in a dating relationship." To me, male headship in dating is spelled "responsibility." A man must place his girlfriend's wellbeing above his own. He must ask himself at all times: "Am I acting in this woman's physical, spiritual, and emotional best interests at all times?" His job is to care for her; not command her.

How does a guy do that on a date?

In Ephesians 5 Paul says that Jesus purifies and perfects His church through His Word. This means that Christian men must speak to their girlfriends (and their wives) in ways that build them up. I am always troubled when I hear of men who are dating women and they are critical of the way a woman looks and dresses. My immediate reaction is: "What is this guy going to be like in marriage?" Again, some men are demanding or demeaning of women. That doesn't fit in with the biblical image of marriage, where the man is supposed to minister to the woman's heart.

Women have a special role in dating too. The woman was made to be a helper for the man. I think this means that in a dating relationship the woman should be asking herself, "How can I help him, especially if he feels awkward in social settings?" Well, here's the woman's opportunity to help him out so that he is better able to cope.

But there are limits in dating. A man does not have authority over a woman while he is dating her, although he does have responsibility for her welfare. Again, women are not called to submit in dating, but they do have a responsibility to help their boyfriends in ways that will encourage them. The point is that when a couple is dating there will come a time when it will be appropriate to look forward to marriage. And when that happens, the dynamics of the marriage relationship will have more and more influence in the way their relationship develops.

Should a Christian man ever date a girl who doesn't share his faith?

No; when a Christian man dates he should have an end in view, which is marriage. If a man has no intention of marrying a woman, he shouldn't be dating her. Dating is a modern social construct that is meant to lead to marriage. Men should not be having exclusive emotional relationships with women who are not their wives or with women who they are not seeking to make their wives. If you don't want to marry a non-Christian, then do not date one. Women, particularly, should not date non-Christian men. I know non-Christian men are sometimes more attractive and appealing, but it's a matter of faithfulness to the Lord.

In what ways does the reality of sin make it difficult for a man and a woman to have a helpful dating experience?

The fall of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3 has had different effects on men and women. When they fell into sin they suffered alienation from God and alienation between themselves. God cursed them both in different ways.

The curse on the woman took the form of a wrongful desire towards men. God said, "*Your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you.*" That curse, which God has imposed on women, has the effect of them having an unwholesome infatuation with men. The actual word, "desire," is also found in the Song of Solomon, and there it means infatuation. However, the same word is used in Genesis 4:7 where God says to Cain, "*sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his*

desire.” In this case it refers to a desire to control or master. I think what this means is that sin affects women in such a way that they become unwholesomely infatuated with men and possess a desire to control them. This is one of the reasons why the New Testament tells women to submit to and respect their husbands. Submission in Christ is the remedy for this pattern of feminine sinfulness.

Now the man has a different set of problems due to the curse. God curses the ground because of his disobedience. This means that men’s struggles are directed outside of themselves to the world around them. They have an infatuation with things in the world external to their relationship with a woman.

Let me give you an example: what is every woman’s magazine about? That’s right, men! They are all about how to have better sex, how to look more beautiful, how to be thinner, how to make better food, etc. And what is the subtext of all these magazines? How to catch and control a man!

Now, think about men’s magazines. What are they about? Almost every men’s magazine is about stuff out in the world: computers, money, cars, mountain biking, sailing, and business. If women feature in these magazines, it’s almost always as possessions or objects. So, the effect of God’s curse because of sin is that the male-female relationship has been corrupted terribly. God has designed marriage from the fall so that marriage is absolutely impossible without Him. My heart goes out to non-Christian people who are desperately trying to stay married. They can’t pull it off truly successfully without being reconciled to God and asking Him to overcome these tendencies in their hearts.

How does idolatry affect the dating relationship?

It only intensifies the tremendous struggles that are already taking place between the man and the woman. We all have this tendency. Pastors see it a thousand times over – a husband who is neglecting his wife’s emotional needs who, in turn, is nagging and trying to control him. He then pulls away from her because of her desire to manipulate him. I call it the death spiral of a relationship. It is God’s curse on the sinful patterns in both their lives. The only solution to the conflict is for both of them to submit to Christ and fulfill His desires for them both within marriage.

Now idolatry puts this solution beyond them both because, instead of yielding to Christ and living for His glory, the idolater says to the other party, “You have to serve my god!” Now let’s say a man worships prestige. How will this play out in the relationship? Well, the man is going to do whatever it takes to get the woman to follow his god. He will pressure her, cajole her, even threaten her so that she will follow his desires.

Again, what happens if the woman worships the idol of pleasure? Well, she is going to insist that he has to make more money to keep her happy. She needs amusements, better clothes, and more expensive holidays to feel fulfilled. And this spells trouble down the road.

What are you going to say to your two sons about whom to date?

When Sharon and I were doing the book, we did a chapter on attraction from Proverbs. And you know what we discovered? Men are attracted by a woman’s beauty and sensual appeal. But a man needs to be wise and realize that marriage is more than having an outwardly beautiful woman to whom he can make love. The character of the woman is the chief thing. She should have the inner beauty of godliness. So, she needs to be a growing Christian who manifests many of the biblical virtues such as kindness and generosity. Proverbs talks about these qualities a lot. Watch out for the sharp-tongued woman, right?

What else would you suggest?

I would tell him to check out whether she works hard and has a heart for ministry. Does she have a well-controlled tongue? Does she carry herself well – is she a noble woman? If she is physically beautiful, that’s fine. I have to tell you, though, that American women who are beauty queens are often quite selfish because they have been treated like queens their whole lives. So being attracted to one as a future spouse could have a serious downside.

Christian men often get themselves into trouble when looking for a wife because they approach the issue the wrong way. They say, "Here are the women that I am most attracted to physically," and then they start to look for Christian virtues. I say reverse that. Take the pool of women who have the most Christian virtues, and then ask, "Of these women, which one am I most attracted to?" I am not denying the physical chemistry; I'm just saying let's get everything in the right order. Does she have integrity? Is she godly? Is she industrious? Is she kind? Does she relate well to people? Do you trust her to raise your children well? Will she handle your finances faithfully? Then I'd tell my son, "You'd better prioritize these things. Look for the group of women who are the most virtuous and then ask out the prettiest one."

What are you going to say to your daughters?

I will tell them that this man's spiritual leadership is going to be the key thing in their family life so they need to know about his life and doctrine. Is he a committed, doctrinally sound Christian? Is he growing in the Lord? Or is he someone who makes a profession of faith, goes to a worldly mega-church, and whose life shows no real difference from unbelievers?

If they say, "But Dad, he's a Christian," I'll say, "Unless he is showing real biblical commitment and is growing in Christ-likeness, don't marry him!" I regularly say to the women in our church, "Don't date someone who is not doctrinally sound. If you date someone who doesn't believe in God's sovereignty and our absolute need for grace, that's going to affect the way you raise your family." I mean that. It is also important to make sure that the man you date has biblical virtues like self-control, kindness, and industry. The problem is that women are usually attracted to confident men. That's fine, but let's start with men who are committed Christians, who are doctrinally sound and who manifest the fruits of the Holy Spirit. Once you have established that he is a man with all these characteristics, then you can pick the most handsome or confident one among them.

I would tell my girls that the reason why they need to choose a godly man is that he is the husband to whom they will have to submit. If they marry a man who is an inconsistent Christian (even though I have cautioned them about this), they need to understand that after they are married I am going to tell them that they need to submit to him. There are Christian women who make this mistake all the time. They are so keen to get married that they start dating a guy who has made a false profession of faith or is an immature Christian. Then when they are married they come to me and complain. And I have to say to them, "Now you need to submit to your husband." Remember, this man is going to be the father of your children. You need to be able to rely on him to provide for you. Whatever you do, don't marry some guy who is happy-go-lucky and a fun person who is not moving forward and doesn't have the capacity for hard work.

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