



## Courtship vs Dating: the Biblical Model

The Lord has given my wife and I *two beautiful girls*. Don't get me wrong, I love my boys with all my heart (all 6 of them), but there is something very special about my daughters that delights me like nothing else. Their smile, their sweet innocence (relatively speaking), their desire to please me in most things that they do. Yet lately, as I kiss them goodnight and tuck them into bed, there comes to my mind a very critical question, "what will happen to them in the years to come as they discover boys?" Thankfully my youngest girl is only 5 and she thinks boys are pests and only slightly above the worms they chase her with. I love this age! But my 10 year old is only a few years away from what the world calls the "dating scene", and my heart trembles with what I see as an example within the Reformed Church.

For some reason, much of the Reformed community scratches their heads in bewilderment when you bring up the subject of dating. As if the Word is silent on the subject and all we can do is hope for the best.

Yet, the text quoted above seems to indicate that according to the divine power of God, we have been given "*all things that pertain unto life and godliness*". Does this include the subject of dating? It must! For our youth, dating and the opposite sex is a huge part of their life no matter what we as parents would like to think. So there must be a biblical response to this thorny subject or else the Word has failed us. Impossible.

### Current trends

Dating itself is quite new. Only a few generations ago dating was almost unheard of in North America. Ellen K. Rothman, a secular humanist in her thesis, 'Intimate acquaintance': courtship and the transition to marriage in America, 1770-1900: A Finding Aid, writes,

*A first-class revolt against the accepted American order took place among American youth in the 1920's. This was not a sudden eruption, but rather a series of seismic tremors that occurred with increasing intensity and frequency through the 1910's and 1920's. By 1930, the terrain through which young Americans passed en route to marriage would be almost unrecognizable to their parents. In 1900, middle-class courtship was more carefully supervised; by 1930, the supervision and formality had given way, like a poorly designed dam, and many of the familiar landmarks were swept aside.*

There was a time, if a young man's fancy was struck by a young woman, the first place he would go was to *her father*. With sweaty palms, and quivering lips he would ask permission to court his daughter. Often the father would say no the first time, watching this lad to see his reaction. Only after repeated attempts, and many visits, would he even consider this proposal. "What Church do you go to?", "Who are your parents?", "Where do you work?", "What are your future plans?" would be only a *sampling* of the bombardment of questions asked of the boy. This is healthy, and right. All relationships in the home should pass through the covenant head as the gate-keeper of the family. He alone will be responsible before God for the relationships fostered under his care. He has the right and duty to put up such a barricade, that only the most worthy of suitors gains entrance into the life of his cherished daughters.

Sadly this is not the case in modern society. In our day the parent is often the last to find out that one of their children has a boyfriend or girlfriend (usually over dinner or on the way out the door). Somehow, over the years, we have adopted the world's mentality that dating is simply a part of

growing up, and hopefully we have taught our young people enough of the Bible to govern their actions. But we haven't. Obviously if we let them out that door, we have failed them and our Lord on a rather large scale. It is the father's job to protect our daughters, in the face of tears, arguments, and fainting fits. We are not given to them to be popular, or to be their friends, *but to be their fathers* who will one day stand and give an account for our children.

The Lord never intended for covenant children to "date". *Dating is the romantic equivalent of a buffet, where you sample this dish and that until you find exactly what you want.*

More harm comes to many of us through dating than in any other way. According to the world, dating is a way for singles to enjoy the comforts and pleasures of the opposite sex. If marriage is in the picture at all, then dating is a tryout for a potential partner. The idea is to start living as if you were married and see how things go. If one isn't finding fulfillment in the other person, then you can simply break up and move on. It's not much different from finding the right pair of shoes. At least you can have some fun along the way, or so it goes. The problem is that the heart doesn't work that way. The intimacy of romance – both physical and emotional intimacy – is one that binds two people tightly together. If we don't treat our own and others' hearts carefully, there will be a lot of pain and bleeding. A broken heart is no small matter, as so many of us know from experience. This is the cause of untold pain in our world today, and Christians need to respond to affairs of the heart with respect, with care, and with the wisdom that God is able to give. (Richard D. Phillips & Sharon L. Phillips, *Holding Hands, Holding Hearts*).

Not only does this system teach our youth to give themselves emotionally to someone whom they will *never marry*, it sets the groundwork for divorce by cultivating a dissatisfaction for what has been given to them, longing to try *something different* or "better". Contemporary society had fostered this with the rise of feminism, Hollywood's romantic expressions of "love", the accessibility of transportation (cars, trucks, vans), couple-oriented dances, and the deterioration of the father's role in both family and culture. In absence of the father, a *peer-directed* accountability has taken his place, becoming a self regulating body. Kind of like the fox guarding the hen house! But the scriptures say,

*"Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it."*

Courtship is the biblical model we are to follow. The difference between dating and courtship is striking. Where dating is done much earlier, courtship is done later. Dating usually begins in the mid to late teens, whereas courtship begins at the time just prior to marriage. Dating is "having fun" with the opposite sex with no strings attached. It allows the teen to "play" grownup and imbibe in some of the fruits of a committed marriage – with no commitment. Courtship is an event in which the man seeks for a marriage partner. Dating is left by and large to the discretion of the teen, whereas courtship has the oversight of the parents, and more specifically the father.

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