

QUESTION 3: **DATING**

How does a Christian date righteously, and what are the physical, emotional, and mentally connecting boundaries a Christian must set while developing an intimate relationship prior to marriage?

The past one hundred years have seen an incredible upheaval in male-female dating relationships.¹ In 1896 the word *dating* was introduced as lower-class slang in reference to prostitution. “Going on a date” was a euphemism for paying for sex. By the early 1900s, “calling” was the primary means of marrying. Calling involved a young man, a potential suitor, scheduling a time to meet a young lady in the parlor of her parents’ home in the presence of her parents. These meetings were carefully overseen by the parents. Expectations for everything from formality of dress to food served and length of the meeting were spelled out in various books that defined proper courting.

Such a process protected young people from danger (e.g., abuse, rape), ensured the involvement of the entire family in the courtship of a young woman, allowed her father to keep away the wrong kinds of young men, minimized opportunity for fornication, and kept marriage as the goal of such relationships rather than such things as cohabitation. The major downside of calling was the expense, which made it impossible for many people in the middle and lower classes. They simply could not afford a sitting room or parlor designated for calling, complete with a piano, along with formal attire to wear and specific food to eat.

In the early 1900s young women were discouraged from going out alone with any male, even relatives, for fear of getting a bad reputation.

That kind of cultural conservatism began to wane as women's magazines hit the shelf (e.g., *Ladies' Home Journal* had over 1 million subscribers by 1900). These women's magazines began to inform women about men, and an entire industry of beauty products, clothing styles, and social norms was birthed, thereby weakening the influence of parents over young women.

By the 1920s, urbanization provided social outlets for meeting outside the home. Rather than calling at the woman's home, singles were now able to go out together at places such as restaurants, movie theaters, and dance halls. This began to create new social networks for single people away from their homes and parents and opened up greater opportunities for such things as casual dating and inappropriate sexual contact.

Everything changed dramatically in the 1930s. At that time the automobile became widely available, thereby providing a new freedom for younger people to gather away from their parents' home. This transition took the woman out of the home of her parents and into the world, where she was driven around by the man to places where temptations to sin from drunkenness to fornication were stronger than ever. Not surprisingly, by the 1930s dating overtook calling in prevalence, and money became the means by which a man could pursue a woman, taking her out on expensive dates. This altered the nature of male-female pursuit so that the best men were those with the most money (symbolized by which kind of car they drove) and therefore the most able to afford the nicest dates, and the most prized women were the most outwardly beautiful and sexual who could serve as the best trophy.

By the 1940s the prevalence of dating caused an economic view of male and female dating relationships that was, in principle, akin to prostitution in some ways. Since men were required to make good money, purchase a car, and treat a woman for a date, men began expecting sexual favors in return for spending money on her. Men often pressured women for sexual favors in exchange for an expensive date. Those women who refused such requests were often no longer asked out on dates, and looser women became more popular dates.

The 1960s saw one of the greatest social upheavals in the history of singleness in the Western world. The feminist and sexual revolutions of the day pushed for sexual anarchy of every kind (e.g., orgies, casual sex,

homosexuality, lesbianism, bisexuality) in conjunction with a widespread drug culture that only fueled recklessness, resulting in increased perversion and disease. In the 1960s *Playboy* was the first pornographic magazine widely published and was kept behind the counter at select stores. Also in the 1960s the birth control pill was made widely available, thereby encouraging even more sexual sin without the same levels of fear about out-of-wedlock pregnancy.

By the 1970s *Playboy* was taken from behind the counter at selected stores and displayed on the shelf alongside *Penthouse*, which was an even harder version of pornography. In 1973, abortion was legalized so that those not wanting to assume the responsibility that came with their sexual activity could legally murder their child. In 1974, no-fault divorce was legalized so that some of the legal difficulties and social stigmas associated with divorce were diminished.

The result? A cataclysmic alteration of sex, dating, marriage, and children. No longer were these seen as connected, or even related, issues.

COHABITATION

The sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s radically altered the sexual landscape of our nation:

One of the most important consequences of this revolution in sexual behavior and beliefs is that the institution of marriage is much less likely to govern and guide the expression of sexual intimacy between adolescents and adults. More specifically, abstinence before marriage is now the exception to the behavioral and attitudinal norm when it comes to sex.²

For the first time in America's history, there are more single adults than married adults, and the number is expected only to rise. Still, more than nine out of ten people will eventually marry. In our culture of hook up, shack up, and break up, the expectation is that they will cohabit prior to marriage. From 1978 to 2008, the number of cohabitators in the U.S. rose from 1 million couples to 5 million couples. By simple definition, living together—or unmarried cohabitation—is the status of couples who are sexual partners, not married to each other, and shar-

ing a household.³ Others who are not cohabiting by definition because they have two residences still sleep over enough to qualify, even if the statistics do not count them.

It is estimated that about a quarter of unmarried women between the ages of 25 and 39 are currently living with a partner, and about half have lived at some time with an unmarried partner (the data are typically reported for women but not for men).⁴ Over half of all first marriages are now preceded by cohabitation, compared to virtually none earlier in the century. The most likely to cohabit are people aged 20 to 24.⁵

However, the evidence actually challenges the popular idea that cohabiting ensures greater marital compatibility and thereby promotes stronger and more enduring marriages: "Cohabitation does not reduce the likelihood of eventual divorce; in fact, it is associated with a higher divorce risk."⁶ Virtually all research on the topic has determined that the chances of divorce ending a marriage that was preceded by cohabitation are significantly greater than for a marriage that was not preceded by cohabitation.⁷ Studies almost always find that cohabitation is associated with an increased divorce risk, with estimates ranging from as low as a 33 percent increased divorce risk to a 151 percent increased risk of dissolution.⁸

In addition to missing out on many of the benefits of marriage, cohabitators may face more serious difficulties.⁹ Annual rates of depression among cohabiting couples are more than three times what they are among married couples.¹⁰ Women in cohabiting relationships are twice as likely as married women to suffer physical abuse.¹¹ Two studies found that women in cohabiting relationships are about nine times more likely to be killed by their partner than are women in marital relationships.¹²

Furthermore, couples who have sex before marriage, especially couples who cohabit, are more likely to experience difficulties in their marriage.¹³ For instance, a study of 2,034 married adults found that those who had cohabited prior to marriage reported less marital happiness and more marital conflict, compared to similar couples who did not cohabit.¹⁴

Conversely, abstinence before marriage is linked to greater marital stability.¹⁵ Studies indicate that men and women who marry as virgins are significantly less likely to divorce.¹⁶ For instance, men who marry as

virgins are 37 percent less likely to divorce than other men, and women who marry as virgins are 24 percent less likely to divorce than other women.¹⁷ Thus, adults who remain abstinent until marriage are more likely to enjoy a satisfying and stable marriage.¹⁸

Adults who waited to have sex until they married, and who have remained faithful to their spouses since they married, report higher levels of life satisfaction, compared to adults who engaged in premarital sex or adulterous sex.¹⁹ Furthermore, “Those [adults] who have ever had sex outside their marriage also report notably low happiness scores.”²⁰

The reason why all of this is important is that people are prone to think their experience is normative. Singles today were born into a world that is unlike any other time in history, and it is peculiarly perverted. It seems normal to them because it is all they have ever known, but it must be evaluated in light of history and Scripture for perspective.

The bottom line? Satan is still a liar, and God’s plan is still the best. That plan is chastity before marriage and fidelity in marriage.

I pastor a church where about half the people are single, and most of them are walking as Christians with Jesus for the first time in their lives. I am deeply sympathetic to the pressures and temptations that single Christians face. In a culture where people have “friends with benefits,” where men are into scoring and not marrying, where the entire singles’ scene from clubs to bars is built to oppose a life modeled after Jesus’ singleness, and where Craig’s List and other online portals in cities like mine have fifteen hundred people posting daily for a “casual encounter” (which is code for free sex), those wanting to honor Jesus in their singleness have nothing short of a war on their hands. Add to this the fact that both men and women are waiting later than ever to marry (men around twenty-six to twenty-seven and women around twenty-four to twenty-five), and the opportunities for sexual sin multiply.

When you consider that there are between eleven and thirteen million more women in church than men and acknowledge that the average man wants to attract the youngest and hottest wife he can afford, then Christian women—particularly older singles, divorcées, widows, and single moms—are at a distinct disadvantage and are tempted to settle and sin. My wife, Grace, has a particular heart for women in these situations and, as a result, a quiet aspect of our ministry is trying to help

serve these women. I will spend the rest of this chapter sharing with you what my wife and I tell single men and women whom we love and minister to.

THE GIFT OF SINGLENES?

First, there must be a biblical understanding of marriage. Biblically, singleness is not ideal,¹ marriage should be honored by all,² and it is demonic to teach against marriage.³ Practically, however, there are seasons and reasons that provide exceptions to the rule of marriage for some people, as Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 7. This section of Scripture is widely misunderstood and has been throughout the history of the church. Indeed, singleness is not bad, as exemplified by Jeremiah, Jesus, and Paul.

Still, singleness is neither normative nor superior to marriage. The too-often popular misconception that singleness is ideal and superior to marriage is in fact rooted in worldly wisdom and not in Scripture. Ancient non-Christian Greek philosophers such as Plato and the Stoics taught that the physical part of existence is innately evil so our immaterial spirit is purer. The result was a disdain for the body and its pleasures, along with a bizarre asceticism, so that sex was seen as only for procreation, and celibacy was preferred.

The early church fathers and mothers were greatly steeped in this kind of thinking. Examples include Tertullian and Ambrose, who preferred extinction of the human race to ongoing sexual intercourse. Origen not only allegorized the Song of Solomon but also castrated himself. Chrysostom taught that Adam and Eve had no sexual relations until sin entered the world. Gregory of Nyssa taught that until sin entered the world, Adam and Eve did not have sex; rather, she was able to conceive through a special kind of vegetation that grew in Eden.

By the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church forbade priests to marry and regulated not only the sexual positions of married couples but also the days on which they could be intimate; eventually half of the year was forbidden for married sex. In the Victorian age, modesty became so extreme that long tablecloths were put over tables to hide the table

¹Gen. 2:18; Matt. 19:4–6.

²Heb. 13:4.

³1 Tim. 4:1–3.

legs for fear that men would see them and think of women's legs and then lust.

My point? In our day of sinful sexuality, there are still many Christians overly influenced by pagan Greek thought who somehow think that only less holy Christians capitulate to marriage and sex rather than live a varsity life as a celibate single. To justify themselves and their viewpoint, such thinkers often take Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 7 out of context.

Be Holy

"To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion."⁴ Here Paul speaks to singles who were already in sexual sin. Besides, Paul urges them to marry rather than burn in their lust and burn in hell.

Today, the consequences of the sexual revolution can be seen in changes in sexual behavior and beliefs about sexual behavior among adults and teens. We have seen almost a complete reversal in sexual behavior and morals. Therefore, Paul's words are as true and timely as ever. For those called to singleness for a season, or for a lifetime (desires can and do change), their calling will be accompanied by a diminished sexual appetite so that remaining pure and chaste is not as difficult for them as for the person not called to singleness. Further, since most people are failing to remain chaste and holy in their singleness, most people should put their energies toward the goal of one day being married. I was one of these people, which explains why I married at the age of twenty-one, between my junior and senior years of college.

Be Wise

Now concerning the betrothed [virgins], I have no command from the Lord, but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is. Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a betrothed woman marries, she has not sinned. Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would

⁴1 Cor. 7:8-9.

spare you that. This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.⁵

Chaste, single virgins were encouraged to remain single because of the “present distress,” which may have included the coming bloody persecution at the hands of Nero and/or a deadly famine that had been prophesied in Acts 11:28. Singleness is often preferable in some seasons (e.g., persecution, famine, grave illness, war). Those who are able to refrain from marriage until a crisis has ended will save themselves and any children they might have birthed many heartaches and hardships. But if someone is married, Paul says, such a crisis is no excuse for a divorce, and if someone is married, he or she has not sinned. It is important to remember that Paul is not elevating singleness as generally preferable, but preferable only for some people and some circumstances. In this way, some people are called to remain single to serve Jesus in ministry; still others are called to be married, and their marriage is their ministry for Jesus. Anyone who is married will tell you that while it does restrict some ministry opportunities, it is in itself among the most difficult and important ministries.

Good reasons for remaining single in our day include living in a season of life when pursuing a potential spouse is unwise, such as experiencing personal illness, unemployment or underemployment, suffering through a traumatic life event such as the death of a parent, or undertaking education, work, or ministry in which the demands upon one’s time are so severe that a relationship is not practically possible.

Be Devoted

I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and

⁵1 Cor. 7:25–31.

spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband. I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.⁶

In typical times, when there is not a major crisis, many of the issues in a church are best dealt with by married leaders.⁷ This is because many of people's issues are related to marriage and parenting, and people with experience in those areas are generally best suited to serve as models and mentors. But in times of crisis or when ministry results in danger, single people are able to do more ministry work because their time and possessions are more easily freed up. Ministry is, in comparison, more complicating for, say, a pregnant woman or a man who is the sole provider for a large family. Therefore, in the circumstances Paul is addressing, singles are being called upon for vital ministry, though this call is not a restriction.

Obviously, Jesus Christ is the perfect example of someone who remained single for the purposes of living in poverty and suffering for the cause of ministry in a way that he could not have if he were a husband and father. In this way, those gifted with singleness, like Paul and Jesus, also often have a particular ministry calling that requires poverty or danger. A friend of mine who is working as a quiet evangelist in a closed Muslim country believes he will die for his faith and has not married as a result. Those who are simply selfish or irresponsible and therefore choose not to marry are not whom Paul is speaking of in the context of his words and life's example.

Be Considerate

If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed, if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry—it is no sin. But whoever is firmly established in his heart, being under no necessity but having his desire under control, and has determined this in his heart, to keep her as his betrothed, he will do well. So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better.⁸

⁶1 Cor. 7:32–35.

⁷1 Tim. 3:4–5; Titus 1:6; 2:3–5.

⁸1 Cor. 7:36–38.

With the “distress” of that day, men who were engaged to older virgins were considering backing out of their wedding. Paul counseled that men are free to do as they wish but must consider all the theological and practical variables surrounding their potential marriage.

IDOLS IN SINGLENESS

Having now cleared up some of the confusion around Paul’s words, we can establish a biblical foundation for marriage.

The first thing God called “not good,” even before sin entered the world, was Adam’s solitary state.⁹ God’s answer was to create Eve as his wife, lover, fellow worshiper, helper, and friend. In so doing, God established that a marriage is one man and one woman¹⁰ in a covenant¹¹ that is sexually consummated¹² and is intended to last a lifetime.¹³

There are two opposite errors about marriage into which a Christian single can fall. Idols that serve as functional saviors underlie these errors. The first idol is independence. When the idol of independence is worshiped, committed relationships, in general, and marriage, in particular, are dismissed or even disdained. Underlying this idol can be fear from a past hurt, the unhealed trauma of suffering through a parental divorce, or simply good old-fashioned selfishness, whereby someone does not want to make any life adjustments to accommodate another person. When heaven is conceived of as independence, and hell is conceived of as interdependence, then singleness is worshiped as a functional savior.

The second idol is dependence. When the idol of dependence is worshiped, then having someone to date is essential, being single is a crisis to be averted, and marriage is worshiped as the central guiding principle of life in which the longings for identity, joy, and relationship are to be satisfied. Underlying this idol can be a fear of being alone, a codependence that needs someone to lean on to an unhealthy degree, or a weak relationship with God so that it is not the primary defining and satisfying relationship in one’s life. When heaven is conceived of as a couple, and hell is conceived of as being single, then a dating partner

⁹Gen. 2:18.

¹⁰Matt. 19:4–6.

¹¹Prov. 2:17.

¹²Gen. 2:24–25; 1 Cor. 7:3–4.

¹³Mal. 2:16a.

or spouse invariably becomes the functional savior that is worshiped to get us out of our hell and into our heaven.

A FEW THINGS TO PONDER

Before we discuss the various ways in which a Christian can date, it is important for us first to repent of any sins and idols that are guiding our desires. In this way we can then be open to what God has for us, which is always best. Therefore, a few questions are worthy of pondering here.

First, how is your relationship with Jesus? Is that relationship strong, maturing, and growing, and is it your first priority above all other relationships? Do you need to wait to date someone until a time when your relationship with Jesus is stronger? Is your goal to meet someone with whom you can grow in your relationship with Jesus?

Second, are you believing cultural lies? Are you taking your cues not from Scripture, the Holy Spirit, and godly friends but from magazines, talk shows, the media, pornography, and godless acquaintances? Are you feeding sinful thoughts and desires that need to be repented of fully before you are fit for any serious Christian relationship?

Third, do you accept that marriage is for holiness before happiness? People who believe that marriage is meant to complete them or make them happy are invariably depressed in marriage. Why? Because when two sinners marry there will be struggles and pain. Those who rightly understand that marriage does have happiness but is first for our sanctification and holiness are in a much better theological frame of mind to marry and be able to lovingly serve their spouse and think more about *we* than *me*.

Once our relationship with Jesus is healthy and our view of marriage is biblical, we are ready to consider principles that are intended to guide Christian dating relationships.

SIXTEEN CHRISTIAN DATING PRINCIPLES FOR BOTH MEN AND WOMEN

1) Maximize your singleness for God.

While you are single, accept that you are in a season of life that affords some freedoms and benefits you will not have if and when you marry. It is a good season to finish your education, increase your theological

knowledge, travel to serve in missions, give time to your church, work long hours to establish your career, and pay off any debt you may have accrued. In short, invest your single years in a way that they later pay a great return. Do not waste them.

2) Do not pursue a serious relationship until you are ready to marry.

There are many reasons why people should, for a season, devote their energies to something other than finding a spouse. Getting biblical counseling to overcome a habitual sin such as pornography or substance abuse, maturing as a Christian if they are a new or immature convert, or simply moving out of their parents' home and taking on adult responsibilities are all good reasons to delay a serious relationship until a better season of life. Basically, until people are mature enough to marry, they should not be in a serious romantic relationship but should use their energies to mature.

3) Be reasonable.

Do not set your expectations too high or too low. If you set your expectations too low, you may marry and be miserable, having made the biggest mistake of your life. If you set your expectations too high, you may never marry, or you may marry the person you think you want but who may not be the one God would consider best for you. As a practical matter, I discourage Christian singles from having too long a list of what they are looking for in a spouse. The truth is that most of these lists are simply idolatrous because they are comprised of the seekers' resume and what they like and do, as if the goal of marriage is to find someone just like them rather than someone different from them so that together they can learn to love and serve one another.

Few men are looking for a widowed, broke, and homeless gal from a family noted for incest who is a recent convert with a bitter mother-in-law in tow. But her name is Ruth, and Boaz was blessed to marry her, and through her came Jesus.

4) Do not be legalistic about dating.

There is a difference between a date and dating. A date can be two people spending time together, going out for a meal or coffee after church to

get to know one another in a non-sexual manner. Dating as is practiced by non-Christians is not acceptable for Christians. Still, the word *dating* is not worth quibbling over, as Paul tells us not to quarrel over words.¹⁴ Whether we call it “a date” or something else, time together does not need to be considered a dating relationship. In 1 Timothy 5:1–2, Paul tells Christian single men to treat Christian single women like sisters. Thus, since adult brothers and sisters talk to one another, enjoy one another’s company, and occasionally enjoy a meal together, it is not a sin for two single Christians to enjoy time together, getting to know one another, so that they can see if there is the possibility of a more serious relationship that leads to courtship and marriage.

5) Do not have any romantic relationship with someone who is a non-Christian.¹⁵

The reasons here are almost limitless. Since you cannot marry a non-Christian, getting emotionally involved is pointless and only leads to sin and/or heartache. Since Jesus is at the center of your life, a non-Christian will not even understand who you are. Because you submit to Scripture and unbelievers do not, your relationship with one has no court of arbitration in which to resolve your differences. An unbeliever is not in covenant with Jesus, so he or she has no covenantal framework for any relationship with you. If he or she is not a Christian, you have no means of dealing with sin that will come between the two of you, because you do not both believe in the gospel of Jesus’ death for sin. Indeed, you can have non-romantic evangelistic relationships with non-Christians, but if the parties involved are single, the odds of attraction are high, and it is usually best to introduce the non-Christians to your Christian friends of the opposite gender so that an evangelistic relationship can form.

6) You should be in a romantic relationship with only one person at a time.

Ultimately, the goal of a Christian not called to singleness is not to have a boyfriend or girlfriend but to have a spouse. It is cruel to date multiple people at one time, having them compete for your affections.

¹⁴1 Tim. 6:4.

¹⁵2 Cor. 6:14.

Furthermore, it is better preparation for adultery than it is for covenant marriage.

7) He should initiate and she should respond.

Because the Bible repeatedly states that the husband is to be the loving and leading head of the family,¹⁶ any romantic relationship should begin with the man taking initiative to kindly and respectfully request an opportunity to get to know the woman better. Too many Christian men are too timid and need to have more courage to risk rejection in their pursuit of a wife. Any woman who is not interested in, say, a group outing or a cup of coffee need simply say no, and the man should respect that answer.

8) You need to look at who God puts in front of you.

Too many singles are looking over people in their church and life who do love God in pursuit of a mythical person, who does not exist. Yet, in God's providence, good potential spouses are right in front of them. Furthermore, while a woman should not chase a man, she can wisely put herself in front of him. This is precisely what happened in the story of Ruth and Boaz. Although God providentially put Ruth at work gleaning for food in the field of Boaz, Boaz did not consider her a potential wife until Ruth took the counsel of the older woman Naomi and got dressed up and went to the same big party as Boaz, where she did not chase him but did get in his way. The result? One of the greatest love stories in the Bible.

9) Feel free to use technology wisely.

While a Christian single should be careful not to troll Web sites and chat rooms where sexual sin is encouraged, there is nothing wrong with using online dating services. In the world of social networking, it is simply a new way for God's providence to bring people together. Some Christians retain a stigma about compatibility surveys and Internet Christian-dating sites, but they should not. Many singles attend churches where there are few possible spouses, and with the confusion and perversion that persists in the greater culture, they should not feel

¹⁶Eph. 5:22–32; Col. 3:18–21; 1 Pet. 3:1–7.

bad for using technology to find someone who loves Jesus and with whom they are compatible. As a pastor, I could tell you of dozens and dozens of wonderful marriages that began online at a Christian dating Web site.

10) Invest in a romantic relationship only with someone you are entirely attracted to.

This means more than the usual goal of finding someone rich and hot; attraction must be to the whole person. Are you sufficiently physically attracted to envision marriage to that person? Are you mentally attracted to him and enjoy talking with and learning from him? Are you spiritually attracted to her and her love for Jesus? Are you financially attracted to him so that you both agree on what lifestyle you will have? Are you “integrity attracted” to her and can see the Holy Spirit at work through her character? Are you “ministry attracted” to him and appreciate how he serves God in his ministry?

11) Only date someone who agrees with you on primary theological issues.

It is not enough simply to marry a Christian; for the sake of peace and unity in your home, you need to have the same theological convictions on primary issues. For Grace and me, this means we agree on the Bible as God’s Word and our highest authority; we agree that God is Trinity and that Jesus died as our sinless God in our place for our sins; we agree on a Reformed Protestant view of the gospel. Our agreement extends to gender and family roles, and without this we would have an acrimonious marriage. We both believe that the husband is called to lovingly and sacrificially lead the family, that children are a blessing, that the wife should stay home with the children when they are young, and that solely qualified male elders should govern a church. If we disagreed on these things, even though we are Christians, we would not be able to build a life together, because we would disagree on the blueprint and spend our time fighting over which one of us is right. As it is, there is great peace, unity, and cooperation in our home because we agree on primary and secondary theological issues, and as a result we are allies, not enemies.

12) Guard your heart.¹⁷

Getting to know someone takes time. If you give your heart away too quickly, you will find yourself either pushing to make the relationship work or being heartbroken when it falls apart. It is good to want to give your whole heart away. However, you must wait until you are in the covenant of marriage to do so, or you risk lots of heartache and trouble.

13) Be careful of legalism and libertinism.

Legalists love to make lots of rules in addition to what's found in Scripture to govern male-female relationships, but they are simply man-made and unnecessary. I know a dating legalist, a woman, who would date only in groups, and as a result no man ever got to speak with her one-on-one, which explains, in part, why she is still single. I know a man who considers the purpose of every conversation with every Christian woman to be courtship, so that he comes off way too strong way too early and likewise remains single.

Libertines love to make themselves the exception to God's rules that govern male-female relationships, and in so doing act like their own god. Examples of dating libertines include those who cross physical boundaries, those who will date anyone who believes in some nebulous "god," those who fail to care about finding evidences of spiritual maturity, such as regular church attendance and Bible study participation, in a potential mate, and those who have snuggle sleepovers that they swear include no sexual activity but are beyond the scriptural bounds of the Song of Solomon, which repeatedly tells us not to arouse or awaken love until the time of marriage.

14) Marry someone who will be a fit for every season of the life that awaits you together.

As I've mentioned before, Grace and I met in high school, married in college, and then graduated to start Mars Hill Church together a few years later. She then quit work to stay at home and be a mother to our now five children, and we recently celebrated our sixteenth wedding anniversary and a total of over twenty years together including dating. So far, together we have been through high school, college, ministry,

¹⁷Prov. 4:23.

and parenting. One day our five children will be grown, and we will grow old together.

Grace does not get to travel with me often, but when she does, we talk frequently about how great our current season of life is but also how fun it will be when the kids are grown and we can travel together for ministry and also enjoy our grandkids. Marriage is about getting old and serving one another in every season of life. So marry someone with every season in mind. Too often, Christians marry only with children in mind and do not consider that one day the kids will be gone, but the couple will be together all the time; as a result, when the kids leave home, crisis hits the marriage because the kids were the glue that held things together. We love our children, but we also love being together and growing old together.

15) Pursue only someone you love.

The Bible says that husbands should love their wives¹⁸ and that wives should love their husbands.¹⁹ It is grievous when people marry who are not truly in love or willing to work on safeguarding and growing their love. Proverbs 30:21–23 says that the world cannot hold up under the weight of despair that is wrought by a married woman who is unloved. If a man and woman do not love one another and are not radically devoted to that love lasting a lifetime, then they should not marry.

16) Do not have any sexual contact until marriage.

As noted earlier, single Christians are prone to ask where the line is. That question is sinful because it is asking how to get closer to sin rather than closer to Jesus. The Bible says, “Among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality.”²⁰ Paul says elsewhere that a single man should not touch any woman in any sexual way.²¹ The issue is not where the line is, but, as Song of Solomon often says, when the time is. That time is the covenant of marriage. Until then, the New Testament repeatedly says to avoid *porneia*, that junk-drawer term for all kinds of sexual sin. As my friend John Piper often says, by God’s grace and the Spirit’s power, “theology can conquer biology.” A marriage must be built on the

¹⁸Eph. 5:25.

¹⁹Titus 2:3–4.

²⁰Eph. 5:3 (NIV).

²¹1 Cor. 7:1.

worship of God so that spiritual intimacy can enable all other intimacy, such as mental, emotional, physical, and sexual, without shame and without sin.

SEVEN CHRISTIAN DATING QUESTIONS FOR MEN

1) Are you overlooking good women?

Examples include single mothers, widows, shy women, and those divorced on biblical grounds. Sometimes a woman's character is so sanctified and shaped through hardship that she is, in fact, more prepared than the average woman to be a devoted, faithful, resilient, and thankful wife.

2) Do you enjoy her?

Ecclesiastes 9:9 says, "Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun." Much of your life will be spent working your job, cutting your grass, paying your bills, and dealing with sin and the curse. But if you have a wife you enjoy, life is better. I praise God that I enjoy my wife. I enjoy being at home with her, I enjoy traveling with her, and more than anyone else she is the friend with whom I enjoy having fun. This one fact has made my life satisfying.

3) Is she modest?²²

An immodest woman may be fun to look at, but do you really want a wife who dresses immodestly so that everyone else can lust after her? Do you really want your daughters to grow up and be immodest? Sometimes a single man is attracted to a woman because she is immodest; meanwhile, more godly and modest women do not catch his eye as readily. A wise man knows that there is a difference between a good time and a good life with a good wife and patiently waits for the latter.

4) Will she follow your leadership?

Since the Bible calls you to lovingly and sacrificially lead your family, you need to have a wife who follows your leadership. This means she agrees with your theology, trusts your decision-making, appreciates the

²²1 Tim. 2:9.

other men you surround yourself with for counsel, and also respects the way you seek her input and invite her counsel as you make decisions. If she does not naturally follow your leadership, you can be sure that if you marry, there will be frequent conflict.

5) Does she have noble character?²³

Is she a woman whom you want your daughters to be like (because they will be)? Is she the kind of woman you want your sons to marry (because they will)? Would you consider yourself honored to be with her because of how she speaks, carries herself, prays, worships God, makes decisions, serves others, works, and interacts with other men?

6) Can you provide for the lifestyle she expects?²⁴

If you meet a woman who will not be satisfied with the level of income and lifestyle that you can provide, then she is not the woman for you. Since it is your responsibility to provide for the material and financial needs of your family, you must have a woman who will not grudgingly live at the level of provision you can give. So long as you work hard, tithe well, invest smartly, and save prudently, you need not feel guilty for not making a great deal of money. You will want a wife who appreciates how you can provide rather than one who is continually dissatisfied and, therefore, discouraging.

7) As you stand back and objectively consider her, is she like any of the women that Proverbs warns against?

Is she a nagging woman, likened to a dripping faucet?²⁵ Is she a loud and overbearing woman who would be exhausting at home and embarrassing in public?²⁶ Is she the kind of temperamental and quarrelsome woman that makes it better for you to camp on the roof alone than share a home with her?²⁷ Is she a gossip?²⁸ Is she an unfaithful woman prone to flirt with other men and likely to be an adulteress?²⁹ Is she disgraceful?³⁰

²³Prov. 31:10–31.

²⁴1 Tim. 5:8.

²⁵Prov. 27:15.

²⁶Prov. 7:11; 9:13.

²⁷Prov. 21:9; 25:24.

²⁸Prov. 11:13; 16:28.

²⁹Prov. 2:16–19; 5; 7; 11:22.

³⁰Prov. 12:4.

If so, quickly but graciously extricate yourself from any relationship with her.

SEVEN CHRISTIAN DATING QUESTIONS FOR WOMEN

1) Do you want to help him and join his course of life?³¹

Since you are made to be the equal and complementing helper to your husband, you must share the direction in life he is going and be willing to join it if he is to be your husband. If he wants a career in sales or the military, where he is gone much or most of the time, and you are not okay with that, then he needs another career or you need another man to marry. Any woman who marries a man hoping to fix him, change him, or redirect his life course is with the wrong man. If she likes who he is and where he is going and wants to be a good life partner helping him to be and do what God has for him, then she may have found a man she is suited for.

2) Is he tough enough to remain strong in tough times?³²

I am talking about a man who is tender with you, but tough for you. If you marry him and have children, will he be the kind of steady rock the family needs when times are tough? If hard economic times come, will he, for example, work two jobs to care for his family? If you have a hard pregnancy and find yourself bedridden, will he step up to do what is needed to care for his family? Too many men wilt under pressure or cave under crisis, and if you marry a man and entrust yourself and your children to him, you need to be certain that he will be there to lovingly lead the family in God's purposes, no matter what.

3) Will he take responsibility for you and your children?³³

As the head of the home, a man must take responsibility for his family. This is what Jesus does by involving himself to help us in our life and with our sin. Any man who does not want to take responsibility to ensure that his wife and children are well loved, encouraged, and served is not going to be a good husband and father. In particular, if you are

³¹Gen. 2:18; 1 Cor. 11:9.

³²2 Tim. 2:3.

³³1 Cor. 11:3.

dating a man and you have to push him to take responsibility for himself or look after him as if you were his mother, he is nowhere near ready for marriage, and you should move on from being serious with him.

4) Is he considerate and gentle with you? ³⁴

Any man who does not consult with you, make decisions with you, ask what you think, and inquire how you feel is a selfish and inconsiderate man. Furthermore, any man who is harsh or in any way abusive (verbally, emotionally, sexually, physically), will only get worse once you are married. Do not kid yourself—when you are dating a man, he is on his best behavior, and if he is inconsiderate or harsh with you then, any future with him will be very painful.

5) Will he be a good father? ³⁵

A man might look at you as more than just a baby machine, but does he love children? Does he consider children a blessing, as Scripture says? The only way a man can be a good father is by being unselfish. If he is into his buddies, his hobbies, his activities, and the like, he will be a terrible father. Why? Because once a man decides to walk with Jesus as a faithful church member, to love his wife as Christ loves the church, to raise his kids as pastor-dad, and to work his job wholeheartedly unto the Lord, he will have little time for much of anything else. Yet he will be happy if the deepest desires of his heart are the things that are taking his time and energy. If you want to be a mom who stays home with the children, then you must have a man who will be a great daddy and longs for that role. Further, since your daughters will marry men like their daddy, and your sons will grow up to be men like their daddy, make sure to marry a man whom you want imitated for generations.

6) Is he a one-woman man? ³⁶

Church elders are to set the pattern as one-woman men for all God's men. Therefore, he should not be the porn guy, the flirt guy, the has-lots-of-female-friends-he-calls-buddies guy, the cheats-on-you-when-

³⁴1 Pet. 3:7.

³⁵Ps. 127:3-5; Eph. 6:4.

³⁶1 Tim. 3:2.

you-are-dating guy, the dates-multiple-women-at-a-time guy, or the compares-you-to-other-women guy. If he is to be your husband, his heart, hands, mind, eyes, wallet, and life need to be solely devoted to you. If you have to keep trying to make him faithful or if you question his loyalty, he is not fit for marriage.

7) How valuable are you to him?

As a pastor I often see men who want to marry called to overcome some obstacle that, in God's providence, separates them from union with the woman they love. I believe God does this to test the man's devotion and to reveal to the woman how devoted he is to her. Too many women make it too easy for a man to catch them and, while not playing hard-to-get, a woman should not go out of her way to make it easy for a man to have her; he needs to earn her hand.

I had to work two jobs from 5 PM to 9 AM nearly every day for the entire summer before I married Grace. I often slept in my truck just to make enough money so that we could finish college without her having to work and go to school at the same time. One friend of mine had to wait a few years for his wife to be able to move legally to the U.S., and he faithfully waited for her because he treasured her. In Genesis 29:20 we read that Jacob worked fourteen long years (seven for Leah and another seven for Rachel) for the cruel and crooked Laban for the right to marry Rachel, "and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her." A woman needs to know that she is valuable, cherished, and treasured, and if a man does not labor to marry her, it is doubtless he will labor to keep her.

DATING METHODS

In this final section, we will examine two dating methods that Scripture permits for Christians. Some people will find it curious that I speak of *methods* instead of *a* method. There is quite a conflict between various Christians on this issue, and I find that each position has biblical merit for certain people. There is simply no one correct way for people to work toward marriage, although, as I have tried to explain in this chapter, there are principles that guide all Christians in their romantic relationships prior to marriage.

1) Prearranged Marriage

Many of the marriages in the Old Testament were prearranged by the parents. It was not uncommon in Old Testament times for women to marry in their early to mid teens. This process is described but never prescribed in the Old Testament as the way all God's people for all time in all cultures should be married.

Today in the Western world this form of marriage is not likely to catch on for a multitude of reasons. However, in some parts of the world it remains a common means of marriage. To be honest, I was incredibly skeptical of this method until I developed a close friendship with a very godly pastor from India. He and his wife were in a prearranged marriage that had been established by their parents with their approval. Having spent time in their home in India and knowing them for over a decade, I can attest to the fact that they are one of the most loving and beautiful Christian couples I have ever known. When I asked my friend why his prearranged marriage worked, he said that in our culture we choose our love, but in his culture they love their choice.

Admittedly, I am not arguing for a movement of prearranged marriages. Still, with the devastating statistics in our own culture regarding adultery, abuse, and divorce, we certainly have no moral high ground to criticize parents in other cultures who know and love their children well and, as a result, help to direct their spousal choice.

2) Courtship

Courtship is similar to calling in that a man pursues a woman under the oversight of her family. Biblically, the repeated refrain is that a man takes a wife, and a woman is given in marriage.³⁷ This principle of a man pursuing a wife under the loving oversight of the woman's father and family is illustrated in the traditional marriage custom where a father walks his daughter down the aisle and gives her in marriage.

This is illustrated in the Old Testament. One example is given in Deuteronomy 22:13–21 where a father is held legally responsible for the chastity of his daughter until marriage. If she was found guilty of being sexually active prior to marriage and lying to her husband about it, she was to be put to death on the doorsteps of her father's home because he

³⁷Num. 10:30; 13:25; Judg. 21:1, 2, 7; 1 Sam. 18:17, 20, 27; 25:44; 1 Chron. 2:34–35; Ezra 9:2, 12; Ps. 78:63; Prov. 18:22; Jer. 16:2; 29:6; Dan. 11:17; Matt. 24:38; Luke 20:34.

was held legally responsible for her virginity. While this was rarely practiced, it illustrates the importance of a daddy taking responsibility for the life of his single daughter in that culture. Another example is given in Numbers 30:3–5. There we see that if a young woman tells her suitor that she will marry him but her father does not approve, the father has the legal right to nullify the engagement and protect his daughter from a marriage he does not believe is good for her.

In addition to the oversight of the father and mother, the Old Testament also speaks of the role of other family members in overseeing the courtship of a young woman. In the Song of Solomon the woman's father is never mentioned, which might indicate that she was raised by a single mother.

In Song of Solomon 8:8–10 we discover that there are two kinds of young women. Some are “doors” that welcome boys in, and others are “walls” that keep them away. The woman in that book was a wall, and her brothers said that because she was a wall, they would help to preserve her chastity, but had she been a door they would have stepped in to be proverbial walls and keep the wrong guys away from her. The principle is that even brothers can be helpful in looking out for their sister(s) and should help ensure she is not romantically ensnared with the wrong guy. Similarly, there is an extreme example in Genesis 34 in which Dinah is raped by her boyfriend, and in response her brothers murder not only him but also the entire city of men of which he is a part and plunder everything.

Fathers and Daughters

I am the very happy father of two beautiful daughters and three sons. In our home there will be courtship. Any male wanting to spend time pursuing my daughters will do so only with my approval, under my oversight, by my rules, and most often in my home. I adore my daughters and, as the pastor of maybe a few thousand women who were sexually abused, I want to do all I can to ensure the safety and sanctity of my lovely daughters.

I began taking my daughters on daddy dates when they were little. I get lots of time one-on-one to love and cherish them. I snuggle with them. I read the Bible with them. I pray with them. I escort them to the car. I open doors for them. I treat them as priceless treasures because

they are. Grace and I often talk with them about boys, men, marriage, and what we and Jesus want for their future.

As I write this chapter, God brings to mind two memorable experiences with my oldest daughter, Ashley. The first happened when she was perhaps three or four years old. We were at Disney World, and although it was her bedtime she wanted me to take her swimming in the Mickey Mouse pool. So we went swimming. When we returned to our hotel room, I stood her up on the bed to dry her hair with a white towel. She took the ends of the towel in her tiny hands and held it like a white veil, looked me in the eye, and asked me if I would marry her. I lost it and started tearing up at the thought of the day when I would officiate the wedding of my little girl. I vowed to her that day that one day she would marry a man who loves Jesus and her, and I prayed over her and her future husband.

The second memory concerns an event that occurred some years later when I was in another pool during a summer vacation having fun with my five children. A teenage girl showed up at the pool with two boys. She jumped in the pool and shared a passionate kiss with one of the boys, and then swam to the other end of the pool where she passionately kissed the other boy. Ashley was perhaps ten years old, and Alexie was perhaps three years old, and they both saw what happened, made eye contact with me, and swam over to discuss it with me. Ashley asked me, “Daddy, did you see that girl kiss two boys?” I said, “Yes. What do you think of that?” She said, “I think she has a very bad daddy.”

Too many daddies take too little responsibility to lovingly remain connected to their daughters as they mature into women. Too many ill-intentioned young men have access to such young women because daddies, as well as mommies, are not doing all they can to lovingly walk with their children through the rough waters of hormones, dating, and marriage.

So at our home my daughters will be courted. My sons will court by respectfully pursuing their future wives in the context of honoring their families, particularly the women’s fathers.

I have seen some families become extreme and legalistic in their application of this principle. I am not advocating that kind of abusive application, where a father rules over his daughter at a distance rather than lovingly leading her through a close relationship built over years

in which she trusts him and speaks to him from her heart because he has won her affection by being what my girls call a “poppa-daddy.”

Of course, this kind of arrangement works only when both the courting man and woman are from godly Christian homes that agree on how marriage should be pursued. In my church, where there are a few thousand singles, very few have Christian families with any wisdom to offer. Tragically, I have often seen women who desire godly oversight of their dating relationships be counseled by their so-called Christian father to just live with the guy and not be so worried about getting married.

There is hope for those couples in which one or both lack godly families. They can lean on biblical wisdom for counsel and support. First, in a practical way, the church is a sort of additional family by new birth in which older men are to be like fathers and older women like mothers. This means that a healthy and biblical church should have godly older Christians, including pastors and their wives, who can lovingly help younger couples wisely make the important decision of whether to marry. For example, we now have a thorough premarital process for the few hundred couples who marry each year at Mars Hill Church, and our goal is to help ensure people are marrying the right person in the right way at the right time for the right reasons and then help them keep their covenant vows after the marriage.

I need to stress that courtship becomes abusive and legalistic when it is imposed on people apart from loving relationship, such as when some system is put in place so that spiritual mothers and fathers are forcibly assigned over adult couples. Grace and I have served many young couples at their request simply by giving them ongoing, specific counsel regarding their courtship and have greatly enjoyed serving in this way. In the end, this is all I’m advocating.

Second, throughout the Song of Solomon the woman’s friends repeatedly give their opinion of her relationship.³⁸ Likewise, in the book of Ruth it is Ruth’s older godly friend, Naomi, who gives her counsel regarding her relationship with Boaz and also gives her approval of their love. Therefore, godly friends should be involved in the courtship process. Any time a dating relationship causes one of the two involved to disappear from godly fellowship, there is reason for concern. If a

³⁸Song 1:4b, 8; 5:1a, 9; 6:1, 13; 8:5, 8–9.

dating person has godly friends, those friends have every right to get to know the person their friend is dating and give their opinion of him or her out of love for their friend. Too many Christians say too little until it's too late.

OLDER SINGLES

The first two methods of Christian dating are generally designed to serve younger women. What about a godly older woman, established in her career, who has lived on her own for many years and has family that lives far away or is not Christian or is deceased? Does she need to be courted in her father's home or in the home of some man assigned to her in a fatherly role? No.

Speaking of an older single woman, 1 Corinthians 7:39 says, "She is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord." The principle here is that the circumstances of some older women are exceptions to the guidelines given to younger women. The basic requirement is that if a man who loves Jesus also loves a woman and wants to marry her, she can marry him if she wants to; the decision is hers to make.

One of my wife's dear friends, a godly virgin woman in her forties, was successful in her career. She served others in ministry and deeply loved Jesus, and she had always wanted to be married but was never pursued by a godly man. Then she met a godly man through a Christian Internet dating service. Wisely, she had him meet her friends and family and sought counsel, but in the end she chose to marry him, and they are doing great, by God's grace.

Ultimately, it is the heart and the principles that matter. The methods are important, but without hearts that are devoted to Jesus above all and lives that follow the principles of Scripture, it does not matter which method is used for dating; things will not go as well as God would desire.