

The Way It Was

The goal of every Christian should be to guide his or her life by the Bible. However, there are some daunting problems that a Christian faces when he or she tries to discover what the Bible says about dating.

One problem is the hordes of conflicting opinions on how to handle dating. Normally, a plethora of useless and conflicting information doesn't concern a Christian. All we have to do to silence the babble of opinions is open the word of God and let it speak.

However, the Bible seems to have lost its voice when it comes to dating. Dating as we practice it simply isn't found in the scripture. Our current western culture differs dramatically from the biblical culture in its approach to obtaining a husband or wife.

For example, when Isaac wanted to find a wife, he didn't borrow Dad's camel and take a girl to the drive-in. You remember what happened (Genesis 24). Dad thought it was time for Isaac to get married. But Abraham didn't like the looks of the local, Canaanite girls. Therefore, he sent one of his servants back to Mesopotamia to find Isaac a wife from among his own people.

By God's providence the servant picked Rebekah out of the crowd. Will she return with him to Canaan to marry a man she has never met? Yes, of course, she will.

The servant and Rebekah got back on the camels and travelled all the way to the southern tip of Canaan. As they were riding up to Abraham's camp, Isaac walked out to meet them.

"Who is that?" asked Rebekah.

"Your new husband," answered the servant.

So Rebekah put on her veil, and she and Isaac were married. That's dating made easy, isn't it! Dad and Mom chose when and whom you would marry (by the way, you might recall that Isaac was *forty years old* when this took place!).

As a parent, I am beginning to think Abraham's method is not such a bad system. In fact, when I was *single*, I didn't think it was such a bad system. I was willing to risk my parents' choice in order to skip the dating scene altogether.

The point is, however, arranged marriages were the order of the day in the biblical world. Dating as we know it would have been a foreign concept to them.

The first question

Perhaps, then, the first question we need to answer when considering dating is this: Is dating as we practice it legitimate at all? We just reviewed an example of the practice of arranged marriages. Is that the biblical approach to finding a husband or wife?

While the parental appointment method is *described* in the narrative sections of scripture, it is never *prescribed* or commanded. It is impossible to assert that arranged marriages are *the* biblical method. If nothing else, the interaction between Ruth and Boaz shows that there was a certain amount of freedom in this area.

I do not believe parental arrangement is wrong (gasp!), but we can't say it is *the* biblical practice either. That means "dating" in and of itself is not unbiblical. The Bible does not define *the* method for finding a husband or a wife. Considering that, we have two options. We can return to the practice of arranged marriages or we can reshape our current cultural practice with biblical thinking. I will assume that the vote goes to reshaping our current cultural practice.

Summary

So far we have established that a Christian does not have the luxury of turning to *the* biblical passage on dating and reading ten verses of God's final word on the issue. But, in spite of that, we do know that God's word is sufficient for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3). Therefore, we can be sure as parents or singles that all we need to guide us regarding dating is in God's word. We just need to find it.

When we do, then we can apply biblical wisdom to dating. To do that we must avoid mere opinion, experience, or commonly accepted standards. Scripture must guide us to the real issues and give us God's answers.

Over the course of these pages I would like to give you some principles which will bring biblical sanity to the insanity of what the world calls *dating*. Let's begin by looking at an example that highlights the importance of dating in a biblical manner.

Samson's Dating Don'ts

One of the ways to learn how to do something is to watch someone else do it poorly. When I swam in triathlons, I had a friend who worked out in the same pool. He had a habit of putting his hand in the water too far toward or even across the centre of his body in his freestyle stroke. This turned his body slightly sideways with every arm stroke. Instead of gliding arrow-straight through the water, he "snow-ploughed" water by being slightly diagonal in the water.

I learned a lot by watching him. I learned how *not* to swim. His mistake helped me correct a similar error in my own stroke.

Perhaps we can use that same learning technique as we begin to discover how the Bible can re-shape our understanding of dating. Although there are no direct teaching sections in the Bible on "dating," the Bible does contain examples of seeking a spouse.

One such example is Samson. I once heard of a dating talk entitled "The do's and don'ts of dating." Unfortunately, Judges 14-16 can only be called "the *don'ts* of dating." There are no "do's" in the account of Samson. He didn't do anything correctly in his search for a wife. We can learn from Samson in the same way I learned from my friend's freestyle stroke: watch it, and then make good and sure you don't ever do it yourself!

Samson, you recall, was a special man. His birth was announced by the angel of the Lord in Judges 13:3. The angel promised that God would use the child to deliver his people from their perennial oppressors, the Philistines.

One day the young man Samson was out visiting and he saw a girl.

Then Samson went down to Timnah and saw a woman in Timnah, one of the daughters of the Philistines. So he came back and told his father and mother, "I saw a woman in Timnah, one of the daughters of the Philistines; now therefore, get her for me as a wife.

(Judges 14:1-2)

Samson had seen girls before, but this one was a real knock-out, so much so, he decided he wanted to marry her. What's wrong with that? Boy meets girl. Boy flips his lid. Boy asks girl to marry him. Love at first sight. How romantic...sigh.

What was wrong with Samson's approach to dating? Everything. In three verses (vv. 1-3) Samson made three disastrous mistakes.

Don't 1

Verse one says that Samson was visiting Timnah and saw "one of the daughters of the Philistines." What was the problem with that? Israel had been commanded by God not to marry the daughters of the idolatrous, demon-worshipping peoples around them (Deut 7:3-4). God didn't want His chosen people being led astray by the perverted worship and occult practices of the Canaanites.

Samson had no business going to Timnah with a roving eye. Every girl there was off limits. Unfortunately, Samson never learned his lesson. If it wasn't a sweetheart in Timnah, it was a prostitute in Gaza (16:1). When he grew tired of her, it was delectable Delilah, another Philistine cupcake (16:4). If you wanted to summarise Samson's life with a theme song, it would be "Looking for love in all the wrong places."

The land of the Philistines was a place of wicked and immoral people. Every time Samson went there his lust pulled him into another disastrous relationship.

But Samson was too self-willed to back down even in the face of God's word.

Then his father and his mother said to him, "Is there no woman among the daughters of your relatives, or among all our people, that you go to take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?: But Samson said to his father, "Get her for me, for she looks good to me."

(Judges 14:3)

The translation "for she looks good to me" significantly understates the Hebrew original. It actually says, "she is righteous" or "she is upright to me." The Hebrew word *yshr* was the word "straight." It meant something was according to the accepted standard.

Now, what was the standard in Israel supposed to be? God's law, right? And Deuteronomy 7:3 commanded Israel not to marry idol worshipers. This pagan Philistine girl definitely was *not righteous* according to God's standard. But Samson was adamant: "She meets the standard." When the girl Samson wanted did not measure up, Samson changed the rules. Not even God's commands stopped him from pursuing the girl he wanted.

Don't 2

Besides looking for love in all the wrong places, Samson had another major problem in his dating technique. How did Samson determine that a girl would be a good partner for him? "I *saw* a woman in Timnah... get her for me as a wife" [emphasis added] (14:2). Samson's measure of a woman was her profile. Always the human hormone, Samson thought only of sexual appeal when he searched for a wife. Her faith and character were inconsequential. If the curve of her face and the cut of her hair were right, then it was full steam ahead.

Don't 3

Samson's third don't is in verse three of Judges 14.

Then his father and his mother said to him, "Is there no woman among the daughters of your relatives, or among all our people, that you go to take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?: But Samson said to his father, "Get her for me, for she looks good to me."

(Judges 14:3)

Proverbs says, "Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child" (Prov 22:15). Certainly that was true of Samson. His parents tried to warn him. They strongly encouraged him to reconsider his course of action. Samson's response? "Dad, Mom, you're idiots. I know better than you do."

Blinded by infatuation, Samson rejected his parents' biblical counsel. In so doing, he trampled one of God's most important lines of defence protecting us against foolish decisions. Samson's third classic blunder was refusing to consider counsel (especially from his parents) in regard to his relationship.

It's a sad scene. It is not unlike the drunk at a party arguing that he is sober enough to drive when his friends can plainly see he can hardly stand up. Samson, befuddled by infatuation and lust, was in no condition to make a fair evaluation of his "relationship" with the Philistine girl. But he stubbornly refused the help of those concerned for him.

Pride goes before destruction

You know the rest of the story. Before the wedding feast was over, Samson's beautiful bride had manipulated and betrayed him. She nagged and whined out of him the answer to the riddle he had invented to stump his wedding guests.

And Samson's wife wept before him and said, "You only hate me, and you do not love me; you have propounded a riddle to the sons of my people, and have not told it to me." And he said to her, "Behold, I have not told it to my father or mother, so should I tell you?" However, she wept before him seven days while their feast lasted. And it came about on the seventh day that he told her because she pressed him so hard. She then told the riddle to the sons of her people.

(Judges 14:16-17)

Samson was furiously angry and stormed out of town. Eventually, after revenge and counter-revenge, Judges 15:8 tells us that Samson ended up living in a cave like an outlaw. His wrong approach to dating didn't bring him the happiness and pleasure he thought it would. It only brought manipulation, distrust, faithlessness, in-law squabbles, anger, vengeance, and loneliness. In fact, Samson obtained nothing out of marriage that he wanted.

The Bible may not speak to the issue of dating specifically, but we can certainly learn something from Samson's example. He did everything wrong, and the results were disastrous.

Summary

Samson was looking for love in all the wrong places. That was his *first* mistake. He continually put himself in situations where he could become emotionally and physically entangled with an unbeliever. And, inevitably, he did.

In the case of his marriage, only when they were at the wedding feast did the wickedness of his fiancée, her father, and her friends become apparent. But Samson should have known. She did not serve the true God. He should have avoided her from the beginning.

Samson also measured a prospective companion by her physical attractiveness, rather than her commitment to the Lord and her godly character. That was his *second* mistake. And when his parents tried to shine the light of wisdom on the situation, Samson turned a blind eye to their counsel. That was his *third* mistake.

The Companionship Principle

The wreckage of Samson's marriage illustrates for us the importance of pursuing a husband or wife in a biblical manner. However, having seen how *not* to do it, we must now consider *how* to do it. How can we bring biblical sanity to the insanity of dating? Where should we begin?

Simply defined, dating is a relationship between a man and a woman, regardless of age. They might be sixteen. They might be sixty. It doesn't matter. Dating is still a relationship between a man and a woman. There is, then, an obvious place to begin biblically. What is *the* defining verse in the Bible regarding a relationship between a man and woman?

Then the Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him."

(Genesis 2:18)

That is probably the most important verse in the whole Bible explaining human relationships. Think about it. How much of human behaviour is shaped by the reality of this verse? Dating certainly is, isn't it. Therefore, to bring biblical wisdom to dating we must understand the implications of this verse.

The first implication of this verse is this: God designed incompleteness into Adam. "It is not good for the man to be alone." There was a God-designed loneliness and a need for help in Adam that none of the animals could satisfy. Adam was in need of a companion suitable to him as a human being and a man.

Therefore, God created Eve as the suitable helper, the necessary companion for the man. Although some men and women have been given a gift for being single and satisfied (1 Cor 7:7), the vast majority of men and women on the face of the earth have Genesis 2:18 resident within them.

This immediately tells us something important about dating. People, regardless of age, "date" because they desire a marriage-kind-of-relationship. That doesn't mean people always date because they want to get married. That's not necessarily the case. But they do spend time together because God has built into them a desire for intimacy and companionship in a unique man/woman relationship.

That definition of dating is significant. It tells us the goal of a legitimate dating relationship is Genesis 2:18: companionship. Those involved in the relationship may not want to get married. However, their desire for a marriage-kind-of-relationship is what motivates them to spend time together.

This is an enlightening thought. Marriage, according to God, is a relationship of friendship or companionship. Dating is pursuing a marriage-kind-of-relationship - unique companionship with a member of the opposite sex. Therefore, biblically speaking, where do you think the emphasis should be placed in the dating process? That's right, on friendship or companionship.

When I was at varsity, there was a girl in our church who was bright, attractive, and genuinely loved Christ. As you can imagine, she was like a car radiator - the bugs were all over her.

The pastor of our group made an interesting private comment about her once. "Poor Jill," he said, "everybody wants to marry her, but nobody wants to take the time to be her friend first." That was an insightful comment from a man who understood what "dating" should be.

The basis of a good marriage is first a right relationship with God, and then, a strong *friendship* with your spouse. If you take away the romance, sex, children, and anything else we associate with marriage - if you still have a friendship - you still have a strong marriage. If that is what a Genesis 2:18 relationship is about, then that is what dating should be about.

The companionship principle of Genesis 2:18 is the critical starting point for bringing biblical sanity to the practice of dating. Understanding what motivates dating makes us realise what dating should be like. A desire for *companionship* is the legitimate, God-designed reason for spending time with a person of the opposite sex. Therefore, everything we do in "dating" should be guided by the companionship principle.

The pressure's off

That biblical concept of dating takes a lot of the pressure out of the whole concept of dating. I know how it is with the singles in our church. They are afraid to sit next to a guy or girl at church because we will have them married off by the end of the announcements.

Starting with a friendship relieves the pressure. Both the well-meaning pressure applied by others, and the emotional and sexual pressure a dating couple can put on each other are negated by the companionship principle.

People date for prestige, the sense of being wanted, sex, and so on. However, the biblical reason to spend time with a girl or guy is to build a lasting friendship. That might turn into a marriage commitment one day. It might not. There is absolutely no need to worry about that at the start. Eventually, if marriage does not appeal to one or the other, nothing has been lost. A valuable friendship has been forged. That, and the experience of building it, will be beneficial for a lifetime.

Playing games

As I look back at my single days, outside of a love for Christ, there was one common characteristic in the few girls I was ever really interested in. It was not their looks, hair colour, education, talents, or anything of that nature. Besides their love for Christ, the common factor was this: I found it easy to talk with them. We had an easy, natural friendship.

A Genesis 2:18, friendship approach removes a lot of the game playing that often goes with dating. Nobody has to pretend or be someone they aren't. You don't have to play the does-he-like-me game. The guy doesn't have to do the knight in shining armour routine. She doesn't have to worry about how much she will have to give away physically in order to keep his attention.

So much of dating is just game-playing. Consider the average date. You spend three hours with a person doing your absolute best to be someone you aren't. The girl sits there pretending she always looks like she stepped out of a fashion magazine. And the guy - when's the last time he went three hours without belching out loud?

On our first "date," Ruty (my wife) and I rode bicycles and ate fried chicken - sweaty faces and greasy fingers. How could any relationship survive that? Simple. We had been friends already for a year. We didn't have to play games to impress each other.

Do not be conformed to this world...

A "dating" relationship guided by the companionship principle of Genesis 2:18 is radically different than what the world promotes. To our shame we have conformed to the world's practices. Paul said, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind..." (Romans 12:2).

Our culture feeds us a standard view of dating and, unfortunately, most Christians swallow it without a second thought. The world tells young people that dating is about romantic emotions and the kissy-huggy game. That has totally obscured the biblical concept of pursuing a mutually beneficial friendship.

Been there, done that?

You know how the typical dating scenario goes. Boy meets girl. Boy asks girl to a movie. They sit in a dark theatre for two hours and don't say a word to each other. During the week boy sends girl roses with a note saying her eyes are "sapphire blue."

The next weekend they see another movie. They sit silently for two hours in the dark. This time he holds her hand and steals a kiss on her front steps. The next week it's a necklace instead of flowers and a romantic moonlight walk in the park. They spend half their time trying to suffocate each other (if you know what I mean).

And there you have it. They are *dating*. But how is their *friendship*? A mist of emotions and a cloud of lust obscure the lack of any real commitment, sharing, and friendship.

Of course, you know what usually happens in those dating relationships. In six months their "love" has fallen apart, and they break up, only to start all over again with someone else a month later.

Or worse yet, they actually get married. A year or two into their marriage they look around and think, "I don't even know this person. And I don't really enjoy spending time with him or her now that the novelty of the romance and the physical relationship has worn off."

To bring biblical sanity to that type of dating scenario, we need to transform our thinking about dating. It starts with Genesis 2:18. Dating is a marriage-kind-of-relationship. God defined that kind of relationship as *companionship*. So must we.

Application of the companionship principle

The companionship principle has many applications. We will see some of them worked out in the coming pages. For now, consider one important example. Apply the companionship principle to the issue of physical involvement. A biblical definition of dating immediately calls into question the usual practice of getting all romantic or physical in dating. Why would a guy and a girl do that in a *friendship*? Those things are marriage activities, not friendship activities.

Based on the companionship principle of Genesis 2:18, I would venture to suggest that most dating relationships, even in the church, should be backed down to the friendship level, and stay there. Permanently. The incorporation of romantic distractions and physical temptations into dating is merely conforming to the world.

Romance and physical affection (of a carefully limited nature) should not come until friendship, commitment, and trust are already well established and marriage is just around the corner. Why take a dating relationship up to the point romantically and physically where marriage is the next step when you cannot or have no intention of getting married soon? That kind of pressure is a forked road. One path leads to a painful break-up, the other to sexual sin.

Summary

I believe the key to handling dating in a godly way is to let Genesis 2:18 shape your concept of dating rather than the world. If there is someone you are interested in, go out and bury all those romantic images you have been fed by the world, and just work on being friends with the person. If that doesn't "click," then there is no reason to bother clouding the issue with the frills and thrills of romance and playing around

physically. All that will do is deceive you into thinking you have a meaningful friendship when you really don't.

Instead, practice developing godly friendships with members of the opposite sex. Who knows, without the pressure of "dating" you might even enjoy it! Then, as you practice building strong friendships, eventually you will find a friendship too good to lose. That is where a strong, God-honouring marriages starts.

Do Nothing from Selfishness

Many dating couples want practical advice on where to go and what to do to have fun together. To be honest, you probably don't want my help with that. Most people don't consider browsing through theological books at a used bookstore a cool date.

However, on the practical level, there is one piece of counsel I would like to give you about dating: *do nothing from selfishness*. That is the most practical and helpful advice I can give you regarding a dating friendship.

The biblical basis for that counsel is found in the book of Philippians. Next to Genesis 2:18, I believe Philippians 2:3-4 is the most important biblical guideline for dating. It says this:

Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not *merely* look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.

That's a great guideline for a Genesis 2:18 friendship. Too often what singles do in dating is controlled by just the opposite. Their motives are self-centred and vain. They think only of themselves and not the concerns, interests, and feelings of their "friend."

Public humiliation

I remember a situation from high school which illustrates this perfectly. Jeff was the best athlete in our school. Jana was the prettiest girl. It was the classic high school dating relationship. They had been dating seriously for about a year when Jeff decided they should break up.

Jeff told Jana at her locker during lunch break. Naturally she was devastated. She cried her way through the next three class periods until school was done for the day.

That's a sad example of unbiblical dating. The timing of Jeff's announcement was thoughtless and inconsiderate. He didn't regard his girlfriend and her feelings as more important than his. Had his first thought been for her, he would have told her his decision at a time when her disappointment would not have been a public spectacle.

So many things done in dating are selfish. They are un-Christlike. Verse five of Philippians 2 says "Have this attitude [i.e., of self/essness] in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus."

Paul wrote this opening section of Chapter 2 to the Philippian church in order to bring peace and unity to their church. However, verses 3-4 can be applied equally effectively in bringing peace and unity to dating relationships.

If you are wondering exactly how to handle any situation in a dating friendship, this is the best counsel I can give you: *do nothing from selfishness*. It might be scaling back the relationship as in the case of Jeff and Jana. It might be asking someone out for the first time. It might be planning activities to do together. It doesn't matter. If you do nothing from selfishness, you will have gone a long way towards handling that situation rightly.

Examples

Let me give you four examples of how applying Philippians 2:3-4 can help you handle any dating situation in a right manner.

1. *Do nothing from selfishness* (v. 3). Philippians 2:3-4 won't tell you what restaurant to go to on a date. But it does tell you whether you should go to a restaurant *you* like or a restaurant *she* likes.
2. *Do nothing from ...empty conceit* (v. 3). Philippians 2:3-4 won't tell you whom to date. But it does tell you that if you are dating a guy because his clothes, car, money, and profile impress your friends, you are dating with sinful motives. You're not giving to a friendship; you're constructing an image. That's empty conceit.
3. *Regard one another as more important than yourselves* (v. 3). You have probably seen dating relationships in which a girl, for example, acts as if the guy is her personal property. She tries to order his life so she is the centre of it. She manipulatively tries to influence and control all his decisions. She is not regarding him more important than herself. She clearly considers herself the most important person in the relationship.
4. *Do not merely look out for your own personal interests* (v. 4). "I need you. I love you. I can't live without you!" When a guy says things like that to keep a relationship going, is he looking out for his girlfriend's best interests? Certainly not. He doesn't love her. His words prove the only one he is concerned about is himself.

The applications of Philippians 2:3-4 to dating are endless. You can probably think of dozens of others as you consider your past. When Genesis 2:18 controls your concept of dating, *self/essness* is a lot easier. Being selfless and considerate comes naturally in a friendship.

However you can *make sure* you are doing nothing from selfishness by pouring every thought and action toward your friend through the strainer of Philippians 2:3-4. It will filter out all your selfish motives, prideful actions, and manipulative words.

It won't tell you directly whether you should go to the opera or the zoo on your first date. But indirectly, it will guide every word, decision, or action in your friendship.

That kind of universal guideline is the best practical advice you could ever receive on dating. Apply it and you will have peace and unity in all your friendships with the opposite sex.

Whom Can I Date?

Having established that dating should be based on Genesis 2:18, we need to address the question, "Whom can I date?" Of course, the world emphasises what she looks like, how prestigious the person is in the eyes of your friends, how much money he has, and so on. Those are the standard considerations.

Applying the companionship principle of Genesis 2:18 allows us to throw out all those peripheral things. Instead, we ask, "Can I be a good friend to him or her? Will our friendship be mutually profitable and enjoyable?"

Spiritual companionship (part one)

Naturally, the first consideration is the other person's spiritual condition. It is impossible to have a spiritually profitable relationship with someone who is not a Christian. 1 Corinthians 7:39 helps us by laying down an absolute guideline.

A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, *only in the Lord* [emphasis added].

Paul's principle is clear: a Christian is to marry *only in the Lord*. But, you say, "That is talking about marriage, not dating." Yes, but think of the application. Why would you even consider pursuing a *marriage-kind-of-relationship* with someone God's word says you *can't* marry?

Why start down that disastrous path? All you will have to do is suffer through the emotional agony of extracting yourself from that relationship later on. Or, worse, you might never come to your senses. Then you will be enslaved to a lifetime of spiritual solitaire. There is nothing more lonely than a spiritually unequal marriage.

1 Corinthians 7:39 and the companionship principle of Genesis 2:18 (not to mention Samson) team up to voice a pretty clear message: don't even consider dating a person who is not a Christian.

Spiritual companionship (part two)

Let me add a second consideration under spiritual companionship. Dating unbelievers is clearly off limits. However, the companionship principle warns us against something else as well.

Beware of dating a professing Christian whose level of spiritual interest is markedly less than it should be. Companionship means shared interests, especially a mutual love for Jesus Christ. If the person you are interested in professes Christ but lingers behind in

actual spiritual interest and activity, reconsider. You will never find true spiritual companionship with him or her.

A friend of mine named Michelle sat me down once and explained to me with tears in her eyes that this was exactly her situation. She said, "I love Jim and I want to marry him, but he just doesn't lead our relationship spiritually. I think he is saved, but he just doesn't have the same desire for Christ, the word, and serving in the church that I do. I can't take the lead for him," she said. "But if I marry him I will end up growing backwards spiritually."

They were very serious in their relationship, but she was willing to call it off completely. She was a very wise girl. Marrying someone who has little spiritual interest will suck your own spiritual vitality dry.

What we did was this. Michelle and I set a time frame within which Jim had to show discernible spiritual growth. If by the end of that time he had not started to grow, Michelle committed to breaking the relationship.

Some of us also started to spend time with Jim, specifically challenging him in key spiritual areas. Jim's spiritual progress soared. He became the spiritual leader Michelle hoped he could be. Less than a year later they were married.

But, if Jim had not changed, Michelle would have called the whole thing off. Whatever else was desirable in their relationship, she was not willing to sacrifice the spiritual companionship implied in Genesis 2:18.

Don't date a fool

So, the first answer to the question, "Whom can I date?" is *spiritual equals*. The second answer to that question is *don't date a fool*. Proverbs 13:20 wisely points out that,

He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm.

According to Solomon, if you choose to pursue a marriage-kind-of-relationship with a fool, you are dooming yourself to misery and harm. How, then, can you know a fool and avoid him or her? Let me give you a list which will dramatically narrow the dating field for you.

Proverbs 10:18

He who conceals hatred has lying lips, and he who spreads slander is a fool.

A fool spreads slander. He or she speaks evilly of other people, saying hurtful things intended to strike at others or their reputation. If the person you are interested in has a sinful habit of speaking harshly or hurtfully, scratch them off your list immediately.

Proverbs 12:15

The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man is he who listens to counsel.

The fool always thinks he or she is right. They refuse to be corrected, receive reproof, or counsel.

Proverbs 15:20

A wise son makes a father glad, but a foolish man despises his mother.

A fool will often have a bad relationship with his or her parents. If someone speaks disrespectfully of his parents or treats them poorly, stay away. How he treats his family is how he will probably treat you, once he drops the facade of dating politeness.

Proverbs 18:6

A fool's lips bring strife, and his mouth calls for blows.

A fool brings strife between people. His or her mouth is a weapon skilfully used to produce conflict with and between other people. Have you noticed an increased level of conflict with your friends and family since you started dating someone? Is the person you are seeing often the centre of those conflicts? He or she might be a fool. Get out while you can.

Proverbs 20:3

Keeping away from strife is an honor for a man, but any fool will quarrel.

A fool often quarrels. Why would you want that in a companion?

Proverbs 26:6

He cuts off his own feet, and drinks violence who sends a message by the hand of a fool.

A fool is untrustworthy. You can never quite be certain whether he will do what he is supposed to do (in this case, deliver a message).

Proverbs 29:11

A fool always loses his temper, but a wise man holds it back.

Don't let some good points blind your eyes to the person's true character. If you continually have to excuse your boyfriend or girlfriend's behaviour to your parents or

your Christian friends, it could be they are a fool. Call their sin "sin" and call off the relationship. The example here is anger. Don't kid yourself, eventually you will be the target of that person's temper. The companion of fools *will* suffer harm.

Ecclesiastes 4:5

The fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh.

The "folding of the hands" terminology connects this verse to the sluggard of Proverbs (6:6-11; 24:30-34). If a person has never held down a job, doesn't carry through on responsibilities, or doesn't work consistently before marriage, then he will not afterwards either. Walking up an aisle, mumbling "I do," and walking back down the aisle doesn't transform a person's character.

Summary

If the person you are considering a marriage-kind-of-friendship with is exhibiting a number of these characteristics, or even one very prominently, then Proverbs 14:7 says, "leave the presence of a fool." Don't let some good points blind your eyes to who the person really is.

When Can I Start Dating?

Here is a question that should spark some controversy! We will obviously have to consider this from both the child's perspective and the parents' perspective. Depending on which one you speak to, the answer will be either thirteen or thirty-nine.

Let's start with the young adults. You may not know it, but there is a verse in the Bible which tells you exactly when you can start dating. It pinpoints it down to the *day*. Well, that relieves a lot of the pressure, doesn't it. No arguments with Dad and Mom - just let the Bible tell us. Are you ready? Here is the verse:

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother...

(Ephesians 6:1-2)

Okay, so you hate me. I know. But that's what it says. For the young adult, this issue is easy: honour whatever your father and mother decide. They are your God-given protectors to rescue you from the foolishness bound up in your heart. You can be glad they and God are looking out for you. It's a full time job. Trust me.

Now, for the parents, the issue is a little more complex. There is no Bible verse that says when your young adult should be allowed to date. You are going to have to decide that leaning on prayer and biblical wisdom.

But, don't despair. There is some biblical direction. When in doubt about dating, go back to the Genesis 2:18 companionship principle. Friendship with another spiritually vital person is the key issue in the kind of relationship we are talking about.

If you take the huggy-kissy thing and the emotional bunjee-jumping out of it, is there any problem with your child having friendships with members of the opposite sex? I don't think so.

However, you are going to have to help your young adult understand what a friendship is. You will need to help them avoid drowning in an emotional flood. You need to help provide an environment where there will be no temptation to get physically involved.

Parents need to help their young adults build the skill of having a friendship with members of the opposite sex. The parents' task is to train their child to be ready to "leave father and mother" in a marriage relationship (Gen 2:24). Therefore, parents, be diligent to teach your children about friendship. You may choose never to let them "date" (as the world conceives of it) while they are in your home. But teach them to value companionship and to avoid emotional and physical traps in their friendships with the opposite sex.

You can't live on love

How many young couples who want to get married have heard that? It makes the perspective couple grind their teeth, but finances are a legitimate concern. The Bible says this about a man's responsibility to provide for his family:

But if one does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

(1 Timothy 5:8)

The context has to do with caring for elderly widows in your family. However, Paul also makes a general principle clear. Under all normal circumstances it is the man's responsibility to provide for his household.

That affects the timing of progress towards a serious dating relationship, doesn't it. It pains me to see fifteen or sixteen year olds hanging on each other like newly-weds. There is very little chance a sixteen year old will be able to provide a living for a family. Therefore, there is no place for that relationship to go. Marriage is probably not a realistic option for them for three or four years. It is foolish to pursue a relationship to a level where marriage is the next step when marriage is not a financially realistic option.

I don't mean by that what many people in our culture seem to mean: you have to have a car, a house, and your career all sorted out before you even start to think about marriage.

However, I do believe that if you are pursuing a serious marriage-kind-of-relationship, the guy had better be able to provide a realistic minimum income should things work out. Otherwise a young couple is left in a relationship that is at a very high level of intimacy, but with no outlet. Who wants to live with that kind of frustration?

It is much wiser to keep that relationship at the friendship level until marriage is an option financially. If you are at varsity, that might mean working on a friendship until graduation. Or, it might mean re-ordering life and priorities so you can get married, work full time to meet your family's financial needs, and go to school part time.

That probably runs against the thinking of our culture, but I find nothing especially biblical about interminably delaying marriage to pile up educational and career achievements. Genesis 2:18 doesn't say anything about a degree or a career. But, it does make it clear that those whom God has gifted to be married will do a lot better if they are married.

Summary

Under the question, "When can one start to date?" we have several principles. If you are a young adult under your parents' authority, then the decision is easy: honour your parents. Parents are free to set their own guidelines regarding when their children can

"date." But whatever they decide, they must be diligent to train their children to have meaningful friendships with members of the opposite sex. We also noted that marriage should be a realistic option financially before you start to pursue a serious marriage-kind-of-relationship.

Purity and Dating

I once had a friend who was part of a large, well-known evangelical church in the United States. She was at varsity at the time and attended their youth meetings. She told me once that she was shocked to find that virtually all of her friends in that group were or had been sleeping with their boyfriends.

Unfortunately that is a story that is all too common. You have heard all the excuses: "We are going to get married anyway," or "We thought we could stop before it went this far." Christians, however, are supposed to live differently. Paul said to the Thessalonians:

This is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality.

(1 Thessalonians 4:3)

To be sanctified meant to be set apart from common use for special service. It was the word used of the bowls and implements employed in the worship of God in the tabernacle and temple of the Old Testament. Those bowls were not used for common tasks. The priests didn't eat their oatmeal out of them in the morning. They were set apart to God for special service.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:3, when Paul said believers are to be set apart or sanctified, he was not just speaking generally. He told them that they were to be sanctified or set apart *sexually*. They were to be set apart from the defiling practice of sexual immorality.

The word translated "sexual immorality" meant *any* sexual activity outside of marriage. It is used in Hebrews 13:4 in that manner.

Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled; for *fornicators* and adulterers God will judge [emphasis added].

Sexual relations within marriage are pure. They are a gift from God. However, any sexual activity before marriage or outside of marriage after the wedding is a perversion of God's good gift. Therefore, Paul's command to abstain from sexual immorality tells us that purity is a goal that every Christian dating couple needs to set and achieve.

It is a difficult standard to maintain these days. The pattern of the world is to become very physical in dating relationships. It is the expected thing. I had an unbelieving friend complain to me once that a girl was "cold" because she would not give him a "good-night kiss" on their first date!

It is not surprising that such an attitude toward dating prevails. Our culture furiously promotes sexual immorality. By the time he or she is twenty, the average person in our culture has probably seen immorality sensually acted out on a television or movie screen hundreds, if not thousands, of times.

Battling against external pressures and even stronger internal desires, how can dating couples maintain their purity? How can they avoid the temptation and trap of playing around physically?

There is a book in the Bible that is deeply concerned with sexual purity. It is the book of Proverbs. Chapters 5-7 are the focal point of this concern. In those chapters, we find **four principles** which will help Christian singles maintain dating purity.

Principle 1

The first way that a dating couple can maintain purity is to remember their *divine accountability*.

For why should you, my son, be exhilarated with an adulteress, and embrace the bosom of a foreigner? For the ways of a man are before the eyes of the Lord and He watches all his paths.

(Proverbs 5:20-21)¹

Why was Solomon's son to avoid (literally) "*going astray* with an adulteress"? Why was sexual sin of any kind to be completely avoided? Because "The ways of a man are before the eyes of the Lord..." (v. 21). The Hebrew could be translated, "God is continually weighing the habitual patterns of a person's life."

The guy and girl who mess around when their parents are out or when they are alone in their flats might think no one knows. But their sin is done in the full light, right in front of the throne of God.

The greatest motivation for purity is accountability to God. Remembering that God always knows exactly what you are doing is a compelling motivation to keep your dating relationships pure.

Principle 2

The second way to maintain purity is, logically, *human accountability*. If you fail to restrain yourself sexually, here is what you will end up saying.

¹ Speaking to his son who was or would one day be married, Solomon naturally personified sexual temptation as a woman or an adulteress. However, the application of these principles is broad enough to include those single or married, male or female.

And you say, "How I have hated instruction! And my heart spurned reproof! And I have not listened to the voice of my teachers, nor inclined my ear to my instructors."

(Proverbs 5:12-13)

The person here has failed to listen to counsel and instruction. The consequences of his sin are great. He cries out, wishing he had listened to those who told him not to play with sexual pleasure. Had he listened to his instructors, he would have been spared.

One of the God-given ways to avoid sexual temptation is to have human accountability and counsel (i.e., instructors). We are accountable to God, but sometimes a hormone-seared conscience is deaf to God's promptings. We can also be helped by having someone who can look us in the eye and say, "Don't do that... Avoid that situation... Stop seeing him or her."

Such accountability can be a saving restraint if you are gradually succumbing to temptation. If you know that you are going to have to go back and tell your mom or dad or some spiritual advisor the nature of your physical relationship with your boyfriend or girlfriend that week, you will be much more likely to exercise self-control.

I would strongly suggest you make this kind of arrangement with someone if you are wrestling with purity in a dating relationship. Humble your pride and stay pure.

Principle 3

A third encouragement to maintain purity in these chapters of Proverbs is *considering the consequences* of not exercising self-control. Personifying sexual lust as an evil temptress, Solomon wrote this:

Do not desire her beauty in your heart, nor let her catch you with her eyelids. For on account of a harlot one is reduced to a loaf of bread, and an adulteress hunts for the precious life. Can a man take fire in his bosom, and his clothes not be burned? Or can a man walk on hot coals, and his feet not be scorched? So is the one who goes in to his neighbor's wife; whoever touches her will not go unpunished.

(Proverbs 6:25-29)

Although the exact meaning of the Hebrew idiom "reduced to a loaf of bread" escapes us, but it is certainly not positive. And the closing statement sums it up perfectly: the one who strays into sexual sin *will not go unpunished*.

When a dating couple is getting hot and heavy on the couch, they aren't thinking about the consequences of their sin: the shame of being caught, the guilt if they are not. But that is typical of all sin, especially sexual lust. The temptress who personifies lust in these chapters of Proverbs is pictured as heedless to consequences.

She does not ponder the path of life; her ways are unstable, she does not know it.

(Proverbs 5:6)

The physical excitement of the kissing and touching which is typical in many dating relationships, starts a physiological process in the couple's bodies that is not intended to be stopped. Once a couple has chosen to give themselves over to those physiological forces, thoughts of the consequences of their actions are not even a distant cloud on their mental horizon. The urge to satisfy their desire for pleasure takes over completely.

These chapters of Proverbs, however, warn of the devastating results of a lack of self-control. Hidden behind the language of 5:7-14 are consequences which range from enslavement to lust, a seared conscience, blackmail, pregnancy, the financial drain of child-support, sexually transmitted diseases, public shame, bitterness, anger, and incapacitating guilt.

The powerful temptation and hidden consequences of sexual sin in dating are expressed perfectly by Solomon in 5:3-5.

For the lips of an adulteress drip honey, and smoother than oil is her speech; but in the end she is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword. Her feet go down to death, her steps lay hold of Sheol [i.e., the grave].

Paul warned the Thessalonians that Christ Himself takes vengeance on the man or woman who steals the purity of another.

[Let] no man transgress and defraud his brother in the matter because the Lord is the avenger in all these things...

(1 Thessalonians 4:6)

Although pleasing God is the most important reason to stay pure, the consequences also provide a significant motivation to abstain completely from any form of sexual immorality.

Principle 4

After divine accountability, human accountability, and considering the consequences, a fourth principle of maintaining dating purity is summarised in Proverbs 5:7-8. Again, sexual temptation is personified as woman of loose morals.

Now then, my sons, listen to me, and do not depart from the words of my mouth. Keep your way far from her, and do not go near the door of her house...

The principle is pretty clear. The way to stay pure sexually is *not to go near the door of sexual temptation*. Do a Joseph (Gen 39:7-12). When sexual temptation reaches out a hand to grab you, put on your athletic spikes and get out of there. Flee youthful lusts. Or *far better*, don't even allow yourself to become entangled in a situation where you and your date will have opportunity to play around.

The Seduction

To illustrate the importance of not going near the door of sexual temptation, or "making no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts" (Rom 13:14), Solomon did a very interesting thing in Proverbs 7. He left us a movie script, a one act play if you will. The title of this play could be *The Seduction*. It is a model exemplifying how one can fall into, or walk open-eyed into sexual sin. It will be profitable to analyse Solomon's model of how someone can stray into sexual sin. From its negative example, we can learn how to stay pure.

There are two characters in this play, *The Seduction*: a foolish young man and a loose-living woman (Solomon's personification of sexual temptation). We meet the foolish young man first.

And I saw among the naive, I discerned among the youths, a young man lacking sense, passing through the street near her corner; and he takes the way to her house, in the twilight, in the evening, in the middle of the night and in the darkness.

(Proverbs 7:7-9)

A young man passing through the streets at evening seems innocent enough, but the narrator informs us that there is an underlying motive. The Hebrew verb which Solomon used indicated this young man had an aim to his walking. It means he "stepped with a cadence." He was marching quickly, with a purposeful stride. His goal was to pass by the house of the woman who personified sexual temptation.

Notice how ingeniously Solomon portrayed the process of sexual seduction. The young man was not *planning* to stop at the adulteress's house. In verse 13 and following, one finds he had to be persuaded to enter. So, at this point in verse 8, he was going to walk by just to see what would happen.

Like many dating couples who struggle with sexual temptation, this young man was not *planning* to sin. But, he was not planning *not to sin* either. He didn't go straight to the adulteress's house and bang on her door. He was just going to walk by. What that really meant is he was *making himself available* for immoral activity if the opportunity arose. The nervous excitement in his step gave him away.

And notice *when* he "innocently" walked by: after dark, in the late evening (v. 9). He was going at a time when he knew no one would see him. His activity would be hidden. He would not be interrupted (notice how heavily that is emphasised in vv. 18-20). He

was not directly *planning* to sin, but he was building a situation in which he would have every opportunity to do so.

Sound familiar? Christian dating couples rarely *plan* to commit sexual sin. But how often do they put themselves in situations where the opportunity to fool around is eminently available? That is what the young fool of Proverbs 7 was doing. He was not quite ready to sin. But he was knowingly putting himself in a situation where he might have opportunity to live out his fantasies. That way later he could say, "I never planned for this. I never expected it to go this far."

Dating couples often plan situations where temptation is virtually impossible to avoid. A dating or engaged couple comes to me for counselling. They say, "We are struggling to maintain purity in our relationship." I ask, "When do you most struggle with this?" "Oh, when we are watching romantic movies on the couch late at night when our parents aren't home."

I think we found the problem! That is a couple that isn't necessarily *planning* to sin, but they aren't exactly planning *to avoid sin* either.

Solomon warned of the danger of allowing your "heart" (your thinking and planning) to be controlled by sexual temptation.

Do not let your heart turn aside to her ways, do not stray into her paths.

(Proverbs 7:25)

Dating couples that want to be pure will plan time together in places where they will have accountability. If they want to be alone at times, that's fine. They should, however, plan to be alone in a public place - a park, a restaurant, or something like that. A distant bedroom with the door closed or his or her flat is not the place to spend time together. That is a recipe for disaster.

Unfortunately, like so many dating couples, the leading character of *The Seduction* had succumbed. He had stopped planning to avoid sin. His downfall was virtually determined.

Dressed to kill

There is another very important point in this text regarding "not going near" the door of sexual temptation.

And behold, a woman comes to meet him, *dressed as a harlot...* [emphasis added]

(Proverbs 7:10)

This principle has to do especially with the ladies. It can apply to the guys as well, but probably its most obvious application is for the women. The girl in a dating relationship can contribute significantly to the on-going purity of that friendship by taking care in how she dresses. Verse ten literally says the temptress wears a "garment of adultery." How she dressed expressed her availability.

Every young woman wants to look attractive; there is nothing inherently wrong with that. But, our culture, through magazines and movies, bombards her with this thinking: the more of your body you show, the better you look.

Many Christian women fall for that line, having no idea how their clothing (or lack thereof) can affect men. What they as women think is "fashionable" or "sharp," is sending a message to men: "My body is available. See, just look at it."

I had a friend at varsity who said when she was in high school her brothers acted as her inspectors each morning. When she came down the stairs for school in a new outfit, sometimes they just shook their heads and pointed back up the stairs. They wouldn't let her out the door until she changed. As you can imagine, it used to frustrate her immensely. But as she looked back several years later, she valued their policing. She began to understand they were protecting her and her reputation. They understood, even if she didn't. Her clothes sent a message: my body is available, just look and see.

I knew her for three years at varsity. She was a very good looking girl who received a lot of attention from the guys. And you know what? I can't recall one time seeing her dressed in something questionable. Her brothers had taught her well. As young men, we all respected that about her. She was a godly young lady and was to be treated as such. The way she dressed made that clear.

I have nothing to wear!

Right now, you girls are asking, "Do I have to throw out my whole wardrobe? What is 'appropriate' dress? I don't want to lead men to think sinful thoughts!"

Knowing how men think, the legalist in me would like to say "Ankles, wrists, and earlobes - everything else must be covered."

Seriously, here is the test I use for my wife. It doesn't even require a tape measure. I call it the "preposition test." If you can see *up* it, *down* it, or *through* it, then dump it. No matter how "stylish" the world says it is, get rid of it.

If you have to pull it down or super-glue your knees together to keep someone from seeing up it, if you have to pull it closed to keep someone from looking down it, if it has to be at least 40 degrees in the shade to wear it, or if it looks like it was put on with a paint brush, then I can guarantee it is out of line.

Some women's fashions look as if the seamstress ran out of material halfway through the pattern. Others are so tight that while they cover everything, they still reveal everything. Don't capitulate to the world when it comes to fashion.

The question is not "How much can I show?" The question is, "How far will I go to make sure I am not wearing what might be considered an advertisement for the availability of my body?" Save your body for your husband's eyes. That is the attitude toward dressing that God values and men respect. It will also help your date keep his mind on your friendship and not on averting his eyes every time you cross your legs or lean forward.

Frogs and princes

We're still working on our fourth principle of dating purity: *don't go near the door of sexual temptation*. To live this out, we must plan to avoid situations where we might have opportunity to play around. And we must, as highlighted through the negative example of the seductress, take care in how we dress.

We find another point of application in verses 10-13.

And behold, a woman comes to meet him, dressed as a harlot and cunning of heart. She is boisterous and rebellious; her feet do not remain at home; she is now in the streets, now in the squares, and lurks by every corner. She seizes him and kisses him...

(Proverbs 7:10-13a)

Did you notice how the actual enticement of the young fool began? With a kiss. Now, a kiss can be a relatively harmless thing. In many cultures it is a standard form of greeting. That's not what this text was speaking of. Verse 13 says she "seized" him. She grabbed him and kissed him. That's a passionate embrace.

We have already developed this under the companionship principle. If friendship is the biblical concept of dating, then where does kissing and passionate embracing come in? Does the girl hope the frog she is dating will turn into a prince if she kisses him? Does the guy have such a dull personality that he has to kiss her to wake his sleeping beauty?

Seriously, here is how the seductress of Proverbs 7 used her kiss: it was a promise of greater pleasure to come. It was a tool in her bag of alluring tricks.

Now, probably most Christian dating relationships are not typified by such cold-blooded manipulation. However, Solomon's warning must be heeded. Kissing and embracing are a promise of greater pleasure to come. They set off physiological processes in one's body that are extremely difficult to suppress or stop.

If you are doing that to your date, you are betraying him or her. If your expressions of physical affection are making it difficult for your "friend" to restrain the progress of his or her natural physical desires, then you are acting just like the seductress of Proverbs 7. Regardless of your intentions, you are enticing another to sexual sin. You are promising what you can not (or at least should not) deliver until marriage.

Summary

God's standard for sexual purity is plainly evident: "This is the will of God, your sanctification; that is that you abstain from sexual immorality" (1 Thess 4:3). The pursuit of sexual pleasure outside of its God-ordained place in the marriage relationship typifies dating in the world.

However, understanding the priority of companionship or friendship in dating helps the Christian overcome that temptation. Proverbs 5-7 also gave us **four principles** to help maintain purity in dating:

1. Remember your *divine accountability*.
2. Establish *human accountability* to help you stay pure.
3. Remember the *consequences* of sexual sin.
4. *Keep far from any opportunity* for sexual sin by...
 - planning to avoid tempting situations
 - taking care in how you dress
 - not tempting the person you care for through your expressions of physical affection.

Is This the One?

When I saw my wife for the first time I was dumbstruck. A classic example of infatuation at first sight. She didn't walk, she floated down the steps from her second floor office and passed me with a dazzling smile. I choked out a greeting of some sort and then collapsed weakly against a convenient wall after she had passed.

A few days later I told my best friend I had met the girl I was going to marry. Being the objective type, he asked me "What do you mean by that?"

I said, "I mean by that she is gorgeous, *and* if I find out her name, *and* if we get to know each other, *and* she loves the Lord, *and* we develop a godly friendship, *and* our parents and spiritual leaders approve..." Well, you get the point.

My friend was concerned that I might be swept away in a rush of infatuation. Rightly so, I was using that kind of language. My response to his question assured him that I had not completely lost my mind (only mostly). There is a little more to determining the person you want to marry than sparkling eyes and a quick smile.

Therefore, the last question I want to deal with in this booklet is this: how do I know if he or she is the right one for me to marry? Oh, the *agony* of that question. How it torments the young and in love. "How can I be sure???"

She loves me, she loves me not

I think there has perhaps been more nonsense propagated about this than about anything else in dating. "You'll just know she is the right one," people say. But what does that mean? What if I know she's the right one, but she doesn't?

"Make sure she is the right one," people counsel. But how do you know that? Do you lift a tag at the back and see if your name is on it?

"If you *really* love him, then he's the one." But what is the difference between kind-of-love and real love? Does a flaming heart descend from heaven and touch you both on the forehead? Do you glow in the dark? Do you hear violin music whenever you are together?

The mystical ways people have of determining whom to marry is one of the things that adds "insanity" to the dating process. In their place, let me give you six basic questions to ask yourself as you determine whether the person you are spending time with is "the right one."

Question 1

What do your parents say? Don't pull a Samson and ignore your parents' counsel. They are your God-given protectors. Believers or not, their perspective on your relationship is of critical importance. Parents usually have a way of bringing a young couple back to earth with questions about finances and other items of a practical nature.

Question 2

What do your spiritual leaders think of your relationship? Hebrews 13:17 says that the spiritual leaders of the church are there to "keep watch over your souls." Their counsel needs to be sought and heeded. As spiritual leaders, they should be wise and insightful. Therefore, they may discern spiritual issues you are overlooking. They may have doubts about the spiritual condition of your prospective partner which you are refusing to acknowledge. It is your responsibility to make sure they have an opportunity to shepherd you in regard to choosing a lifetime partner.

Question 3

What do your spiritually-minded friends think? When I pose that question, I sadly think of a friend of mine. He was seeing a girl who was the personification of the contentious woman of Proverbs (21:9, 19; 25:24; 27:15-16). She was the queen of contention. In public she was polite and refined. In private she was bitter and bossy.

When they started to talk about marriage, my friend's roommates (all Christians) sat down with him and encouraged him from the scripture not to marry this girl. My friend chose to ignore their biblical counsel. Three years later he had to drop out of seminary because his marriage was such a disaster.

As a couple, they had fooled their parents and spiritual leaders because they saw the two of them only in public. But my friend's roommates saw them together every day. They knew what the relationship was really like.

Although spiritually-minded friends don't have the same implicit authority as parents and spiritual leaders, they might know your relationship better. Therefore, their honest, biblical appraisal of your relationship is valuable. However, beware of friends who just tell you what you want to hear or do not have biblical standards. They might do more harm than good if you seek their counsel.

When I was dating my wife, it was critical to me that my parents, spiritual leaders, and spiritually-minded friends give me an honest evaluation of our relationship. I specifically sought their counsel. I knew what I wanted to do, but I also knew that my eyes might be totally blinded by emotional intoxication. To put it bluntly, I didn't trust myself to think straight. Had any of those three groups of people had a problem with our relationship, I would have put the brakes on immediately.

Question 4

Are the basic biblical commands regarding marriage in Ephesians 5 working relatively smoothly in your relationship? As the man, am I leading the relationship and loving her sacrificially (Eph 5:23, 25)? As the woman, am I submitting to him and respecting him (Eph 5:22, 33)? Can I see myself doing that for a lifetime?

Dating is not marriage. A girl is not required to "submit" to her boyfriend's authority. However, if leadership and submission are not being developed as the relationship proceeds, then a couple should be very wary of getting married. Sacrificial love and submission are *the* biblical commands regarding marriage. If they are not functioning relatively smoothly, then marriage is going to be a very rough haul indeed. That is exactly what happened to my friend (mentioned above) who stubbornly chose to pursue marriage with a woman who refused to submit to him.

Don't marry someone for what you hope they will be. Get married on the basis of who the person currently is and what your relationship currently is. Marrying hopes is a dangerous proposition.

Question 5

Is the other person interested in marrying you? That's kind of important, isn't it! I can hear you moaning right now, "But how do I know if they are interested in marrying me?" It's more simple than you might expect. Discuss it with them.

"Oh," says the guy, "but how can I talk to her about *that*?"

You're friends, aren't you? If you can't talk openly about serious matters concerning your relationship, then maybe you don't have the kind of friendship you thought you did.

As we said earlier in this booklet, friendship takes all the game-playing out of dating. Just be honest. "I really enjoy our relationship. If things continue to go this way, I would like to think about the possibility of marriage some day. What do you think?" She might say, "I'm not sure I'm ready to think about that yet." Then you say, "Okay, I won't pressure you about it. Let's just continue to enjoy being friends."

If, however, she says "I'm interested, keep talking," then go have pizza and talk about marriage and see if your ideas are similar.

By not "popping the question" out of the blue, you are considering the other person more important than yourself. Patience, honesty, and openness have always been the hallmarks of a godly friendship. I have no idea why that is set aside when we contemplate marriage.

Sometimes I hear girls say, "I never expected him to ask me to marry him." When I hear that, I think: "And you said *yes*? You are going to order your whole future based on an emotional whim? Don't you think you should talk about it with him before you give your word to marry him?"

When considering whether you want to marry someone you are dating, it is important to know if they want to marry you. Be open. Talk about it. If your friendship can't bear that, then it is not strong enough to be the basis of a marriage anyway.

Question 6

Do you want to marry this person? If all the other questions have been asked and answered satisfactorily, and you want to marry the person, then my counsel is *go for it*. "But what if it's not God's will?" you wail.

I suspect that if all the other factors we have just discussed are lined up *and* you want to marry the person, then God has no problem if you marry him or her. Don't get caught up in all kinds of mystical and emotional methods of decision-making when it comes to marriage.

The six questions we have listed will make deciding whom to marry a lot more objective. It forces you to see your relationship with the person as it really is. That kind of straight, biblical thinking is always the basis of good decision-making. It should be when you consider marriage, too.

Conclusion

As with everything in life, the Bible must guide our practice of dating. Starting with Genesis 2:18 will remove the worldly insanity that has infected many Christians regarding how to seek a husband or wife. Develop selfless friendships with Christian singles of the opposite sex. Find a companion too good to lose. Once your friendship has progressed, ask and answer the questions we just listed. Then enjoy his or her companionship for a lifetime.

In the meantime, I'm sure things will go better for you than they did on my first date. How could it get worse than that? Well, actually it can get worse. Some day I'll tell you about my *second* date. But until then, don't worry. Dating can be biblical. It can be pure. It can be enjoyable. If you work hard at applying the word of God, it will be all those things and more.