

Sermon notes/follow-up
10-5-08, 10-12-08
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The bibliography of books and article on Christian dating/courtship is far too large to give here, but perhaps a partial list will help.

For a general overview of how Christians approach these issues, see *Five Paths to the Love of Your Life*, edited by Alex Chediak. The approach my sermons advocated is a cross between the first two essays in that book, by Lauren Winner and Doug Wilson. The former advocates a Christianized, counter-cultural form of dating, with communal, church-based accountability and oversight, focused on love of neighbor. The latter is covenantal and emphasizes the role of family, especially the father, in a marriage-oriented courtship process. See a review of this book here—

http://www.albertmohler.com/commentary_read.php?cdate=2005-10-21

On the “Christian dating” side, resources include:

Real Sex by Lauren Winner: An excellent look at sexuality, singleness, and marriage from a Christian perspective, focused on the challenges of chastity in an oversexed culture. The Christian sex ethic is much more than a message about abstinence. Winner demonstrates that *real* sex is sex within a marriage covenant. However, while focusing on the role of community (much more than family!), she fails to give many hard suggestions for the structure of a dating/courting relationship.

“Dating and the Covenant” by Les Newsom

(<http://www.ncsu.ruf.org/posts/599>): This is a very thoughtful piece (in fact, I quoted from it briefly in one of the sermons). Newsom is a veteran campus minister and his thoughts are well worth considering, especially for Christian students whose parents are not onboard with a covenantal courtship model. In this essay, Newsom seeks to explore this question: Between “just friends” and engagement/marriage, what are we? What is the nature of the guy/girl relationship in that “in between” phase where you are interested in each other but not yet ready to commit? Newsom also has an extensive sermon series on Christian dating relationships and marriage (<http://www.olemiss.ruf.org/ruf-spring-2-8-dating-marriage-and-sexuality>).

Christian Courtship in an Oversexed World by T. G. Morrow.: This book is from a Roman Catholic perspective. There is a lot here to discuss and put into practice for Christian couples in a dating relationship. Of course, there are also some significant flaws.

The Book of Romance by Tom Nelson: This book is largely unhelpful as a commentary on Song of Solomon, but it has a lot of practical counsel for dating and courting in a biblically consistent fashion. Note especially Nelson's discussion of *when* you are ready to date and marry on pages 14ff.

Making Life Work, ch. 7, by Bill Hybels: There are some good thoughts here, but Hybels is not nearly counter-cultural enough (e.g., he doesn't expect Christians to mature and prepare for marriage any more quickly than their worldly counterparts). Hybels discusses several of the factors that go into a healthy dating relationship and marriage, including the God factor, the character factor, the emotional health factor, the talk factor, and (of course!!) the magic factor. Some of the discussion is wise, some not so much. Overall, the approach Hybels takes is more of form of Christian pragmatism than anything, and pays little attention to biblical covenantalism.

He Speaks to Me Everywhere, ch. 1, Phil Ryken: This is a short and encouraging treatment of the problems with the American dating game and the need to restore a more biblical pattern.

Getting Serious About Getting Married by Debbie Maken: This book is not without its flaws, especially in that Maken seems to downplay the Bible's positive teaching on the gift of singleness. However, in her defense, she is right to point out that many Christians today are staying single for less than biblical reasons. This is inexcusable on the part of our young men, and Maken has some good solutions for both genders. This book has a lot of advice for women who would like to be married but have not yet found "the one" for whatever reason. See also *Get Married: What Women Can Do to Make It Happen* by Candice Watters for a book with similar themes. This essay is a pretty good summary of Maken's approach to Christian dating and the importance of men and women seeking (as opposed to intentionally delaying) marriage:

<http://debbiemaken.blogspot.com/2007/06/feminists-made-me-do-it-and-other-good.html>

The Ten Commandments of Dating and *The One* by Ben Young and Samuel Adams: These books have basic ethical and practical guidance for Christians trying to

wind their way through the dating maze. In the former book, there are some very helpful thoughts on gauging compatibility in ch. 3. See also—

<http://thoughtsactions.wordpress.com/2007/11/24/is-she-the-one/>

The Thrill of the Chaste by Dawn Eden: A very forthright story of one woman's rejection of the sexual revolution's "casual sex" ethic in order to pursue a faithful, biblical marriage. This book is not for everyone, and it can be criticized in various ways, but it's also a very readable, encouraging narrative of gospel transformation. The author has a website here;

<http://dawneden.blogspot.com/>

Married for God by Christopher Ash: This book is about marriage, not courtship, but in order to understand courtship, you have to know what marriage is all about. Ash's recurring theme is that marriage is not just for the married – it is for the sake of the church and the world; ultimately, it's for God. Marriage is to picture and embody Christ's love relationship with the church. Satan wants to destroy that picture and that embodiment – and what better way to do that than to make sure marriages are doomed before they even start. Ash gives us a vision of what marriage should be like and what it should be about, and in that respect this book makes for healthy reading for anyone who's thinking about marriage down the road. Once you grasp that marriage is not about self-fulfillment but kingdom service, you're in a better position to pursue and choose a mate.

On the Christian courtship side, resources include:

Her Hand in Marriage by Doug Wilson: Wilson's book is loaded with OT exegesis, as he applies "federal headship theology" to courting relationships. This book is best for fathers. Wilson's point is that when a guy goes after a girl, he's trying to get her into bed, either honorably or dishonorably – Wilson shows what it means to do so honorably, soberly, and scripturally. Lots and lots of good stuff here. See also—

<http://creationproject.wordpress.com/2007/03/30/douglas-wilson-on-courtship-questions/>

<http://www.new-life.net/cortshp3.htm>

<http://havingtwolegs.blogspot.com/2008/09/seventeenth-sunday-in-trinity-theology.html>

Also, men of all ages should read Wilson's *Fidelity* and perhaps also Mark Driscoll's e-book on porn:

http://relit.org/porn_again_christian/

Dating vs. Courtship by Paul Jehle: Like Wilson, Jehle points to the bankruptcy of the American dating system and the need for a more biblically grounded alternative. A bit overdone at points, but still useful.

I Kissed Dating Good-bye and *Boy Meets Girl* by Joshua Harris: These are definitely the most popular evangelical books from a courtship perspective, and with good reason since Harris is an engaging writer and has lived out his message. Harris does not have the covenantal emphasis or biblical exegesis of Wilson, but his books are full of practical counsel for Christian parents and older kids. See also this—

<http://www.covlife.org/resources/search/ed4b7ae8441e59459686a089ef9a82c6/>

The Family by Robert Andrews: A bit cheesy, but still very helpful. This book deals with every aspect of family life. The section on courtship is filled with personal anecdotes. While we can no longer rely on a culture-wide courtship system (since such does not exist), Andrews shows there are things fathers can do and the church can do to guide and protect our children as they enter into relationships. Andrews' personal stories show that even wise and well-intentioned parents can make mistakes, but the damage from those mistakes can be greatly limited in a courtship system.

Sex and the Supremacy of Christ edited by Justin Taylor: This is a very fine overview of the Bible's teaching on sexuality, and includes many good thoughts on the dating/courting process. See especially Scott Croft's material, page 145ff.

"The Marks of Manhood:" by Al Mohler

(<http://www.boundless.org/2005/articles/a0001093.cfm>): This essay will help a guy decide if he's marriage worthy, and if not, what he needs to do to get there. See also—

<http://www.boundless.org/2005/articles/a0001217.cfm>

http://www.boundless.org/2000/regulars/office_hours/a0000408.html

http://www.boundless.org/2002_2003/departments/beyond_buddies/a0000687.html

<http://www.boundless.org/2000/departments/theophilus/a0000398.html> (see especially the "Racing to the Altar" section)

The "Boundless" webzine (<http://www.boundless.org/>): The following archive pages are relevant--

<http://www.boundless.org/datingcourtship/>

<http://www.boundless.org/beingsingle/>

<http://www.boundless.org/marriagefamily/>
<http://www.boundless.org/sex/>

On the history of dating and courting, again, the bibliography is vast, but here are a couple of useful resources:

From Front Porch to Back Seat by Beth L. Bailey: Bailey's secular book traces out the changing (and disturbing) trends in American courtship in the 20th century. The major shifts in the economics and locations of courtship have increasingly put young women at a disadvantage. See these related essays on the end of courtship and the reconstruction of Christian dating practices—

<http://www.studycenter.net/documents/GCFHistoryoftheDateOct2004.pdf>

<http://www.boundless.org/2005/articles/a0001456.cfm>

<http://www.boundless.org/2005/articles/a0001461.cfm>

<http://www.boundless.org/2005/articles/a0001154.cfm>

<http://www.boundless.org/2005/articles/a0001158.cfm>

<http://www.boundless.org/2005/articles/a0001161.cfm>

http://www.boundlessline.org/2007/02/biblical_dating.html

http://www.boundlessline.org/2006/12/biblical_dating.html

http://www.boundlessline.org/2006/10/it_takes_a_purp.html

<http://www.boundless.org/2005/articles/a0001512.cfm>

<http://www.boundless.org/2005/articles/a0001401.cfm>

<http://www.boundless.org/2005/articles/a0001475.cfm>

<http://www.boundless.org/2005/answers/a0001464.cfm>

<http://www.boundless.org/2005/articles/a0001689.cfm>

<http://www.boundless.org/2005/articles/a0001150.cfm>

<http://www.boundless.org/2005/articles/a0001699.cfm>

Sex, Marriage, and Family in John Calvin's Geneva: Courtship, Engagement, and Marriage by John Witte and Robert Kingdon: If you want to know how they did it in the glory days, this book has loads of useful information. Some of it shows us that the glory days weren't really so glorious (e.g., couples marrying with *huge* age gaps), but there is still a lot to learn here (e.g., engagement "rules," how to deal with overbearing parents, etc.).

Girls Gone Mild by Wendy Shalit: A young Jewish woman protests postmodern pansexualism. This is a follow up to her earlier book, *A Return to Modesty*, which was also quite good. See a review here:

<http://www.battlefortruth.org/ArticlesDetail.asp?id=254>

“Wandering Towards the Altar,” a special report by Ken Myers’ Mars Hill ministry (<http://www.arederscorner.com/si/100515.html>). This is a helpful audio overview of what has happened to traditional dating and courtship practices in the 20th century. See also--

<http://www.studycenter.net/WanderingTowardAltar.htm#WTAResources>

<http://www.studycenter.net/documents/WTABibliography.pdf>

<http://www.studycenter.net/documents/Supplement-RiseoftheTeenager.pdf>

<http://www.studycenter.net/documents/GCFHistoryoftheDateOct2004.pdf>

Some more (very rough) notes on this whole topic:

If the “Christian dating” proponents find themselves occasionally blurring the line between the church and world, bordering on antinomianism, the “Christian courtship” advocates sometimes propose oversimplified solutions to complex issues, bordering on an unworkable legalism. There are dangers on both sides. Thus, the need for wisdom on the part of everyone involved is paramount. The only thing worse than a couple setting out on their own without any oversight is a couple trying to carry on a relationship under the auspices of an overbearing father.

Before you pursue the girl of your dreams, guys ask yourself: “If I was a godly Christian girl, would I be willing to marry a guy like me?” Dating/courtship starts not with *finding* the right person, but with *being* the right person. You need to be the person your ideal spouse would want to be with. And always remember that while looks and outward attractiveness are important, character trumps everything because inner beauty does not fade. A lot of the resources above get into what to look for in a potential mate. I won’t repeat that here. But I will add this for the girls since I think it is often overlooked: A girl should make sure her potential mate is well liked and well respected by other godly young men. That’s one of the best litmus tests for character. If he can’t relate to “the guys,” he probably has problems. Also, note that if there is something that bothers you while you are dating someone, it will probably bother you a whole lot more after you’re married. That’s not to say you shouldn’t marry – it depends what the issue is. But you should marry with your eyes wide open. You don’t want to marry a “project.”

People who have sex before marriage (or look at porn or commit other forms of sexual sin) are after more than gratifying hormones. They are on a *spiritual* quest.

But they are chasing the wind because physical intimacy with another human being (real or imagined) is not our deepest spiritual need. The foundation for any healthy relationship is your relationship with Christ. If we make a god out of our own sexual pleasure, we will end up very, very disillusioned and disappointed.

God made marriage for sex and sex for marriage. Marriage is a sexual relationship within a covenant bond. But covenants are not cut in the back seats of cars or in dark alleys – they are made in public, and they recognized and *celebrated* by the public. You cannot make love unless love is there to begin with – love that is tied to a covenant, love that forsakes all others til death does us part.

Dawn Eden summarizes the rationale behind Christian marriage very well:

God created marriage as a means to make us more like him. The greatest way we can be like God is to love one another the way he loves us. In the words of Augustine, “God loves each of us as if there were only one of us.”

In other words, God wants you to be able to love one man the way he loves you – as though you were the only person in the world. From there, he means to shape you further. In a deeply spiritual way, you’re meant to spread the love that you share with your husband to the rest of the world.

This is why Christians believe that marriage is more than a just a check box on the census form. It’s a spiritual *vocation*. Those of us who long for it are called to it, the same way that some people are called to be pastors.

That’s what you’re looking for when you set out in a dating/courting relationship.

To love your spouse as if he she were the only person in the world also means making your spouse your standard of beauty. Once you’re married, you must not compare your spouse to the Hollywood beauties. *Whatever your spouse is like is what you must be “into.”* In the world of Hollywood tv and movies, you can never be attractive enough, never have enough sex partners, never have enough “stuff,” etc. Christians reject that. The simplicity of the Christian lifestyle means we have eyes for only one member of the opposite sex – our spouse. It means we are content with what God has provided us. We are not obsessed with “options” of “what ifs,” but with doing what God wants. Marriage is given for mutual kingdom service and kingdom building.

If that's what Christian marriage is all about, our entry way into it must be consistent with that vision. You are not preparing yourself for Christian marriage if you are constantly flirting, moving in and out of "serious" but purposeless dating relationships, getting physically intimate with members of the opposite sex, using others to bolster your own self-esteem (and getting used by others for the same reasons), etc.

The only sex sin left in our culture is to have sex without contraception. But the reality is the only truly "safe sex" is sex within a marriage covenant. There is no prophylactic for the heart or the soul. Because the modern day dating system expects and even encourages sexual interaction, it must be rejected wholesale by Christians. Whether a couple pursues a Christianized form of dating or a more covenantal, family-based courtship approach, the bottom line is that every Christian couple should be open to accountability. What you do with your boyfriend or girlfriend is not a private matter because all sexual sin sends ripples through the entire church community (and society outside the church as well!) There is no place for a privatized, autonomous sex ethic in the church.

In our society, especially on our college campuses, there isn't even very much dating anymore. Rather, the dating system has been replaced with "hook-up culture." For a (sometimes graphic) description of this hopeless cultural phenomenon, check the following – even secularists are troubled by the way this trend rips sex out of meaningful relationships and are begging young people to "bring back dating":

<http://media.www.thepolypost.com/media/storage/paper1127/news/2007/04/17/News/A.Look.Inside.The.HookUp.Culture-2844188.shtml>

<http://www.campusprogress.org/soundvision/1462/moral-panic-comes-unhooked>

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/17540879/>

http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2007/11/hook_up_culture_hurts_women_sp.html

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/june/14.21.html>

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=990DE2DB173EF933A05756C0A9629C8B63&sec=&spon=&pagewanted=all>

http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/01/fashion/01hook.html?_r=1&oref=slogin&pagewanted=all

<http://www.thenation.com/doc/20070730/willis-aronowitz>

<http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2008/01/29/hookups>

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/february/14.48.html>

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/february/13.44.html>

<http://www.ncsu.ruf.org/posts/753>

Our cultural disdain for marriage reaches all levels. We have totally divorced sex from the only context in which it makes any sense. For example, former Presidential candidate John Edwards was recently caught for lying about an adulterous relationship he had with a woman while his wife's cancer was in remission (<http://chronicle.com/review/brainstorm/barreca/its-okay-because-edwards-didnt-love-her>; <http://pajamasmedia.com/richardminiter/2008/08/08/its-okay-he-didnt-love-her/>). This woman even bore his child (allegedly). But Edwards excused the whole ordeal by saying he "didn't really love her." Unreal. He is essentially openly admitting to *using* this woman for his own pleasure, then paying her off to keep her quiet! No love was involved. The sex was not about love. The child isn't even a "love child," but an absolute bastard. In better times, men who fell into such relationships and got caught at least had the decency to not openly deny love for their adulterous partner. They at least tried to preserve some measure of decency and dignity. Not anymore. If this woman was not loved and got paid, what does that make her? (My guess is that Edwards' wife put him up to this confession, not realizing it makes the whole thing look much worse, instead of better.) Minter describes the whole ordeal very well:

The strangest thing about [John Edwards' admission](#) that he cheated on his cancer-stricken wife with a plaything on the his payroll is... that he says he "didn't love her."

There is a volume behind that line.

First, it is ungentlemanly and cowardly to say it. Even if he never loved her, in some important metaphysical sense, he should never say so. It means he thought of poor Rielle Hunter as an object to be used. And then thrown away. Plus, he paid her. That makes her a whore. Surely he has done her injury enough; why add this insult? ...

Second, it seems like the kind of thing extracted by his wife. A kind of desperate grabbing for the feathers when loyalty has flown. But, whimper, you didn't love her, did you? Did you? No, of course not, honey. Still, why did he share this no-love verdict with the public? Because she demanded it, like one does a *plea agreement*. (He didn't love her, he loves me!) That makes her complicit and it suggests that this was not the first time.

Third, it means that the feminist moment is over. When a man can have sex with a female employee, deny the paternity to her love child and, even, deny that he ever had a tender feeling for her—and the folks at the

Feminist Majority and Ms. Magazine are not calling press conferences, not even batting an eyelash— well, it means that their credibility is gone too. It turns out that the Clinton wound was mortal.

All of his public life, John Edwards has acted as if life is a trial with a gullible jury. Maybe he was right.

My point with this example is not political. It's cultural and ethical. Even theological. This is a sign of where culture has ended up. After the sexual revolution and women's lib, here we are: Women are getting used for sex (without love) and paid off in full public view, by leading cultural figures, with no real public outcry or shame. The days of throwaway relationships and throwaway people are here to stay – until we repent.

It's been said by one of our cultural cynics that "marriage is to sex what rain is to baseball." That is to say, "conventional" sex within a monogamous marriage is boring. Sex loses its zip and excitement in the context of marriage. But this is a lie our culture is foisting upon us (albeit, with a great deal of success.) In truth, mutual respect and covenantal commitment is the pre-requisite to lasting and ever-increasing romance. When will we learn that God's way is not the right way but also the most joyful, satisfying way?

In our day, we not only need to map out a biblical and wise route from singleness to marriage for those so called, we need to go even deeper and lay a foundation for *why* one should be open to marriage in the first place. Our culture is rampant with cynicism about marriage. Why should anyone bother with such a dilapidated institution? The wisdom of Erasmus is a good antidote, explaining why Christian men should be willing to pursue biblically shaped marriage even in a sexually anarchistic culture:

The affection of a wife is not spoiled by faithlessness, is veiled by no pretense, is shattered by no change of fortune; in the end it is severed by death alone, or rather not even by death. She disregards her duties to her parents and sisters and brothers out of love for you, she looks up to you alone, she depends on you, with you she would fain die. If you have wealth, you have someone to look after it and increase it; if you have none, you have someone who can seek it [with you]. In times of prosperity, happiness is doubled; in adversity, there will someone to console and assist you, to show her devotion, to wish your misfortune

hers. Do you think there is any pleasure to be compared with so close a union? If you are at home, she is there to dispel the tedium of solitude; if abroad, she can speed you on your way with a kiss, miss you when you are away, receive you gladly on your return. She is the sweetest companion of your youth, the welcome comfort of your old age. By nature any association is pleasant for man, seeing that nature begot him for kindness and friendship. Then how can this fail to be the most pleasant of all, in which there is nothing that is not shared?

“Nothing that is not shared.” What a beautiful description of the marital bond! And yet so many people today enter marriage feeling they have nothing left to share because they have given themselves away physically and emotionally to so many previous partners in short-term, ill-fated relationships. Like tape that has been stuck on something and peeled away again and again, until it finally loses its stickiness, our pre-marital relationships can ultimately make bonding in marriage impossible. Thus, it’s been rightly said the present system is more attuned to preparing people for divorce than marriage. We can’t give anything to our poses because we have nothing left. Hence, our cultural malaise.

Further, divorce is so prevalent, some have pointed out that when kids meet these days, they no longer ask, “What does your dad do for a living?” as they used to, but “Where does your dad live?” Divorce is simply taken for granted as painful but all too common reality. If most marriages are going to end tragically, why bother?

Again, we have to consider the beauty and joy that comes with doing things God’s way. Premarital sex does not create anything new except heartache. Sex within marriage, on the other hand, is full of life and newness. Michael Lawrence describes what it means to be one flesh and the newness that the marital bond brings:

This union of sexual intimacy, complete in itself, is also a sign and symbol of an even more profound union of lives in the covenant marriage, when a man leaves his father and mother, and is united to his wife, and the two become one flesh. Being "one flesh" with someone can refer in a secondary way to sex, but primarily it's just a Hebrew way of saying one family, flesh and blood. The union of marriage is not an alliance of families, with each partner representing a previous set of priorities and loyalties. No, and this was and remains quite radical, marriage is a union that dissolves the old bonds, the old loyalties, the old priorities, and creates one new

family, with all that entails — one new set of priorities, one new set of fundamental loyalties.

The end goal of courtship is this kind of life-on-life intimacy. Marriage creates something new — a new family, a new form of shared life together, ultimately new life in the form of children. But if marriage is going to be about this deep oneness and newness, then we must prepare for it in a way that promotes such oneness after the wedding. Our marriages are failing today because our current system of dating and “hooking up” is failing us.

Feminists liked to say that a woman without a man was like a fish without a bicycle. But it's more accurately said a woman (unless she is specially called to singleness) is like a man without a job. Most of us, male and female, were made for marriage. But the only way we can enter into marriage in a healthy way, with a solid hope of finding happiness, is if we carefully guard our premarital relationships. Think of premarital life as training for your future “job” as someone's spouse. Discipline yourself, study what the Bible says about marriage and sexuality, prepare yourself by being a student of the opposite sex, and get yourself ready to the work God will call you to when the time for marriage finally arrives.

What if your marriage is not like the ideal described in Scripture? What if you made poor choices before marriage and are now suffering the consequences?

You need to begin by confessing sin and repenting. God's forgiveness does not cancel out all the temporal consequences of sin, but it can certainly mitigate those consequences and make them more bearable. (Of course, the eternal consequences are completely abolished!) Also, remember this: No matter how hard your marriage is, you're always and already part of a “marriage made in heaven.” You are part of the bride of Christ and are therefore married to Jesus, the perfect spouse who will never leave you or forsake you.

But consider that same marriage from Jesus' perspective for a moment. Jesus is, you might say, in the marriage from hell. He never sins against us, but the church sins against him continually. You might feel like you married the wrong person, but how do you think Jesus feels about his spouse? His bride keeps messing up and disobeying him! But the reality is, he keeps on loving us even though we often fail to uphold our side of the relationship as we should. Thus,

Jesus is a model for anyone who finds himself or herself in a difficult marriage. You need to make the most of even a very difficult marriage. Jesus sticks with his bride through thick and thin, and we are called to do the same in our marriages. Your suffering in a hard marriage is a Christ-like, cruciform kind of suffering.

Now, there are grounds for divorce and there is such a thing as apostasy. But short of those considerations, Christians need to be committed to making their marriages work, no matter what. You need to say, "As much as it depends on me, I will find a way to make this marriage a success." You find glory in your marriage by refusing to focus solely on whether or not your needs and desires are being met, but instead in giving yourself wholeheartedly in a Christ-like way to your spouse again and again.

There are a couple of caveats I want to make following the sermon. First, while I pointed out a number of problems with the modern dating system, I do not think there is *necessarily* anything wrong with a guy and girl going to an event together as friends. That is to say, they would go on "a date," but without really having marriage in view. I'm thinking of, say, a high school prom, or a graduation party, or a football game. Of course, this only works if the parties involved are mature and responsible, if their intentions are clear, and if there is accountability to make sure they stick to the plan. Winner makes the point that whereas younger folks are often trying to find a date because they want to go a particular event, older folks are often trying to find an event to go to because they want to be with a particular someone (*Five Paths*, 45). That's probably correct. There is nothing wrong with two people enjoying one another's company and even doing something together without pursuing romance or marriage. But we need to be careful to not fool ourselves. That's why we need to be part of "thick" communities that can hold us accountable. We also need to admit that when we move from "a date" to "dating," marriage is implicit, at least as a possibility.

Also, while I spoke in terms of a smooth transfer of a girl from her father's household to her husband's, obviously in the real world things aren't always that neat and tidy. A grown, financially independent single woman may *in some sense* still be a part of her father's household. Thus, e.g., he will still be the one to walk her down the aisle and give her away when she marries. Certainly, if her father is a believer, or at least a respectable man who loves her, he should be a guide and help in her dating/courting situations, even if she is older and independent. But he does not really "run her life." She's going to have a lot more independence in

the process than, say, an 18 year old girl who gets approached by a potential suitor. In the ancient world, that is, the cultures into which the Bible was written, a woman almost certainly married young or not at all. In our world it is not so, and many fine, godly women find themselves pursuing education and a career, while waiting to be pursued by a worthy man. In these situations, we have to allow for some measure of fuzziness about the woman's status. She's not quite like the widow or divorcee who is head of her household (and therefore free to marry whom she wishes, as Paul says in 1 Cor. 7), but neither is she just like a younger girl who is still a dependent on her parents. This is precisely why wisdom, rather than a handbook of rules and regulations, is what we need.

Further, while I think in a healthy situation, Christian parents will play an active role in the courtship process, their authority is never absolute. For example, if a father is forbidding a match that looks perfectly lawful and reasonable, the couple may make appeal to the elders, who may find just cause for overriding the authority of the father. Such cases should be rare, but they can happen and thus Calvin's Geneva (to cite one respectable example) made provision for them. At the same time, if a match was allowed by parents, but judged to be foolish by church authorities, those church authorities could intervene once again to stop the marriage. All that to say: marriage is the convergence of consent on the part of the couple, their parents, and their pastors. No one can be forced to marry against their will, but public blessing is needed as well. For an example of a discussion of possible tensions, see:

<http://www.boundless.org/2005/answers/a0001857.cfm>

Finally, my use of brother/sister categories for opposite sex friendships needs to be developed. It's been said that guys and girls can't be "just friends" for long because sex/sexual attraction gets in the way. I don't know if that is always the case. But I do think there are definite limits to such friendships. If such a friendship is not leading to romance (eros being added to philia) then the relationship is only going to be able to go so far. I think it is best for young people's "best friends" to be same sex relationships until that future spouse comes along.

Some studies have estimated that singles rule out potential mates on the basis of physical appearance within 15 seconds. While physical attraction is certainly important to the overall chemistry of a couple, this is a bit absurd. It seems best for singles to get to know one another a little bit before ruling someone out.

Sometimes, love happens 'at first sight.' But sometimes, we notice things about a person we missed on first glance, and attraction grows over time. In short: Don't make snap judgments and consider beneath-the-skin levels of attraction as well as sexual attractiveness.

If the only bond between a couple is physical, expect it to flame out quickly, like Kleenex doused with lighter fluid. When the attraction is more substantial (physical + spiritual), it's like hardened kindling that can burn for a long, long time.

Modern dating is too much like shopping: we simply keep looking till we find something that suits us, then if we don't like what we got, we return it to the store for a trade in. It's all about me – my needs, wants, desires, etc. While personal desires enter into the equation in more biblical models, we need to think more broadly, in terms of God's kingdom. Dating trains us to think like consumers, courtship like servants.

The inevitable question in a dating/courting situation is, "How much physical contact/intimacy can there be?" Obviously, Paul sets the line pretty early, in that he does not want even a hint of sexual immorality in the church community. The basic principle is this: no covenant, no close contact. Intimacy should not precede commitment, but flow from it. Until you are married to a person, that person does not belong to you and needs to be treated accordingly. Do not defraud or take advantage of your brother or sister by taking what is not yours (cf. 1 Thess. 4). The rule I give dating couples is Lauren Winner's "rotunda rule." (You'll have to read her book *Real Sex* to find out what that means!!)

For more see, in addition to the resources given above, see these highly idealistic articles (perhaps they're too idealistic, but isn't it better to err on the "safe" side when playing with white hot fire?):

http://www.boundlessline.org/2006/12/biblical_dating_1.html

<http://www.boundless.org/2005/answers/a0001612.cfm>

<http://www.boundlessline.org/2007/11/i-prefer-someon.html>

http://www.boundlessline.org/2007/01/i_regret_kissin.html

http://www.boundlessline.org/2007/01/hi_all_to_every.html

<http://www.boundless.org/2005/articles/a0001429.cfm>

http://www.boundlessline.org/2007/01/is_kissing_sinf.html

http://www.boundlessline.org/2007/02/whats_the_sourc.html

<http://www.boundless.org/2005/articles/a0001598.cfm>

Some have applied the “golden rule” to premarital relationships: Treat your date tonight the way you want your future spouse to be treated by the guy she’s on a date with tonight. There may be some problems with that kind of approach, but the intention is helpful since it brings everything back to love of neighbor. It’s a helpful way to think about the whole issue.

The bottom line is that sex/sexuality/sexual expression is reserved for marriage. And if that’s so, those bodily acts and forms of contact that *lead up to sex* are off-limits. Why frustrate your body? Why get revved up only to have to slam on the brakes and shut your engine down? If a married couple would consider an act foreplay, it is off limits to a non-married couple. Once you get on the superhighway of physical intimacy, it is very hard to get off. It’s like having to walk down the up escalator. Again, contact and commitment go together. Or to put it another way, intimacy and covenant go hand in hand. Do not use sex to achieve commitment, but to express already made commitment.

Now, that being said, there is something kind of weird about those situations where courting (and even engaged) couples never show *any* physical affection to one another. Once again, our greatest need is for balance and wisdom.

Tim Keller shares some helpful thoughts on sex and the Christian community in this newsletter:

<http://download.redeemer.com/pdf/newsletter/RedeemerNewsletter-2004-06.pdf>

Keller makes the point that the church does not merely hold meetings, she shares a common life – eating, recreating, praying, working, playing, etc. together. We share our homes, time, money and possessions. We bring our whole lives into contact with one another. But one aspect of this shared living is mutual accountability.

This cuts against the grain of our culture – we are intensely private people, especially when it comes to matters of sex and money. We cling to our autonomy and feel our privacy has been invaded if we have to answer too many “nosy” questions. We say, “What I do with wallet and in my bedroom and on my computer is none of your business.”

But it should be obvious that this doesn’t work. Take sex, since it is most germane to our topic here. As Keller says, sexual practices lead to a dizzying

array of diseases that burden society with enormous costs. Children born out of wedlock cost society, especially since they more likely to get into crime, go to prison, buy and sell drugs, etc. The heartache of broken relationships and divorce cost society, and these are directly related to sexual activity.

Keller goes on to point out that traditional societies had something profoundly *right* in seeing sex as “part of the larger project of creating households and families. Sex obviously produces children, but it also (to use Wendell Berry’s term) is a ‘nurturing discipline’ which uniquely creates joy, tenderness, and long-term unity between two people for the purpose of creating the very long-term, stable, nurturing households which are the only safe place for children to grow and flourish. When sex occurs within a whole life covenant – marriage – it melds two people into one indissoluble unit.”

But our society today does not use sex for the building of stable community life (e.g., family, church). Instead sex has become a means of personal pleasure, divorced (in many cases) from meaningful or committed relationships in every way. As Keller says, “It turns out that how you use your sexuality actually affects everyone around you. Sexuality either builds and strengthens the social fabric or tears it apart. If we use our sexuality only for recreation rather than the nurture of long-term relationships and community then everyone suffers. Your sex life therefore is not just your business but everyone’s business.”

This is why in the biblical narrative, we find from the very beginning, sex was made for marriage. “For Christians, sex within marriage is the way to produce a mini-Christian community, a mini-church, which can be a sign of the coming kingdom.”

Thus, we should not shy away from sexual accountability within the church. How we use our bodies, our words, our sexuality, etc. is the church’s business. This does not open the door to being crass -- we should always be careful about the context and form in which we discuss sex. But a healthy church is a place where sexual sin is named for what it is and openly renounced. It is be a place where sexual sinners can confess their failings without fear of rejection, and receive the help, hope, and encouragement they need. No one is above falling in this area. We need one another if we are stay chaste and pure, as God wills.

Holding one another accountable might mean asking probing questions. But when we go down that path we need to make sure we avoid self-righteous condemnations that are not in line with the spirit of Jesus. (The gospel has plenty

examples of how to handle repentant sexual sinners – as well as how not to!) Confession of sin should never become an occasion for slander, gossip, or personal attacks against another.

Some time ago, I was asked what I thought about Christian dating and the courtship movement. Here's the gist of my email response – I think it can serve as a good summary of where I'm coming from:

As for the dating issue....

[a] What happens when kids reach the age where they're ready to date/court is very much a function of what has happened in previous years growing up. If they have learned to trust, love, and respect mom and dad, then mom and dad will quite naturally be consulted and give counsel on developing relationships. Without any kind of "courtship rule book," mom and dad will be organically involved in the whole process, coaching and overseeing, even if from something of a distance. If that trust has *not* been cultivated in the earlier years, all the courtship techniques in the world won't help.

[b] I don't really have a problem with mature young adults going on dates. The age at which such pairing up is appropriate will vary depending on the maturity level of the people involved. Of course, there needs to be a lot accountability in such dating. As I understand it, this is the difference between "Christian courting" and the dating system -- there is oversight from parental or parent-type figures. When this framework of accountability is in place, it can also keep the young people involved from getting hurt. I think it's great if dads want to act as "gatekeepers" for their daughters very early on in the "getting to know each other" process -- but, again, it would be impossible to prescribe a tight system of rules for this sort of thing. I do know that it's often easier for a dad to tell an interested young man "she's not interested" than it is for the girl to tell him no. But that may not always be the case. Some young women are better than others at looking out for themselves. At any rate, I do think dads ought to feel a lot of responsibility for overseeing and protecting their daughters in this area, even though they obviously also need to avoid being overbearing or overprotective.

[c] Whatever "dating" takes place on an ongoing basis should be intentional/purposeful, not recreational. That is to say, it should aim at finding a marriage partner. This does inevitably elevate the seriousness of what's going on when two people even do something simple, like go get coffee together. But there's really no other reason for extended one-on-one time. You figure out who you're interested in group settings, and then pursue more seriously whoever you're interested in as a future spouse. One date doesn't mean you have to marry the person, but further dates should indicate that is the desired trajectory. If that's not the arc of the relationship, it should be brought to an end. As soon as a person is ruled out as a suture spouse, the one-on-one times should be cut off. Of course, a lot of young men will rightfully feel like they cannot intentionally pursue a marriage partner until they are self-supporting, or close to it. Others may work out a deal with mom and dad to get some support so they can marry earlier if they find the right person. Again, I see more broad principles than specific rules, and lots of room for variety from one family to the next (or even one child to the next, as the case may be).

Those are my thoughts at this point anyway. I think I could ground them more explicitly in Scripture than I've attempted here. But that's the gist of it, based on a mix of exegetical reflection, watching other couples and families in this area, and my own experience. I think further discussion about this would be good at some point.
