

The Free Reformed Student Journal

SUMMER 1997

The Biblical Way to Marriage

By David J. Lipsy, BA

August 1997

To our Readers

In paradise man enjoyed two important God-given privileges which remained after the Fall. They are the Sabbath day and the institution of marriage. These institutions are both under great attack by Satan. The onslaught on marriage has resulted in an enormous increase in break-ups, bringing about an escalation of social and emotional problems in our times.

In this paper, David Lipsy, a former teacher and principal, and a father of eight children, who is currently studying for the ministry, traces much of the reasons of marriage breakups to ill or total lack of preparation for this life-time commitment.

From a Biblical perspective, coupled with a lot of common sense, Mr. Lipsy seeks to give practical and spiritual guidance to young men and women. He does this in a sensitive, easy-to-read and frank manner.

It is our prayer that this much needed instruction be taken to heart, causing young people to prayerfully prepare for marriage.

C. Keuning, Editor

Biblical Courtship

By David M. Lipsy, BA

INTRODUCTION

Part of our Reformed heritage is the continuing need to "Prove all things" and to "hold fast that which is good" (1 Thess. 5:21). A primary calling of God's church has always been to apply the authority of Scripture to every area of life. Certainly, our choice of a marriage partner affects us in a profound and lasting way. It is therefore incumbent that we, with God's help, trace out the Biblical principles upon which the process which leads to marriage ought to be based. This paper is a small attempt to do so.

The material presented here is not "new" in any sense. In fact, the irony is that much of what you are about to read comes right from Scripture and from the experience of former generations. Did you know, for example, that the present-day dating system is only about seventy years old. In the 1920's there were laws in the U.S. forbidding young people to associate with each other privately, outside of the context of family, until they were at least engaged. Would it surprise you to know that this is entirely consistent with Scripture?

"But haven't things worked out all right using the dating system? My parents and other relatives made out O.K.," you may say. Many wonderful marriages have made it through the dating system. Perhaps this explains why a fair number of older adults don't see a real need for change. But it is my intention to demonstrate that even these couples who "made it" could have done even better had they followed the Biblical pattern more closely. And let's not ignore the fact that there are many marriages today, also in the church, which are far less than wonderful, that do not even begin to approximate the lofty standard set by the Holy Ghost in Ephesians 5.

Allow me to conclude these introductory remarks with a brief summary of what's going on in society with regard to this issue, in order to underscore the need for a fresh re-evaluation of the way we take to marriage.

A New England newspaper article, written almost ten years ago, reported that in the U.S. 80% of girls and 90% of boys were sexually active by age 18. In one year, more than 1 million teenage girls would become pregnant. One in five girls would be forced to have intimate physical relations against their will, while only about 5% of those would ever be reported to the authorities. The U.S. government has, through educational programs, almost altogether abandoned even the discussion of abstinence. Since young people are going to do these things anyway, they say, we ought to concentrate on how to avoid the consequences of this behavior, even though the "how-to" is still taught in so-called "health" classes. And, of course, if all else fails, "legalized" abortion

is always an option, even up to a few seconds before birth.

The post-marriage picture is equally grim. In the U.S. we are currently experiencing moral scandals in government and in the military, adultery capturing headlines on an almost regular basis. According to a recent survey of the readers of Christianity Today, many of whom are clergy, almost one-fourth of those interviewed confessed to having an adulterous relationship sometime in their lives. The divorce rate has also reached epidemic proportions, with one out of two marriages consummated today ending in divorce. It is no longer uncommon to hear of couples who have been married for twenty, thirty, even forty years filing for divorce. Several states, alarmed by the devastation caused by high divorce rates, are presently re-evaluating the "no-fault" divorce laws they adopted in the 1970's. A few are even returning to a semi-Biblical "covenant marriage" option for newlyweds, making divorces more difficult to obtain. All these symptoms indicate a festering, underlying problem. Dating is not the exclusive cause of these problems, yet it will become very clear as we proceed that there is a substantial, definitive link between these problems and the dating system.

Let us begin our study by examining principles derived from Scripture.

First Principle - God's Primary Goal in Men/Women Relationships

First, we all know that marriage is a divine institution originated by God in Paradise. It is important to realize, however, that marriage was not just an abstract principle God set up for man. Marriage actually has its foundation in the Trinitarian relationship. You see, God is a relational Being. He has continuous communion with Himself and enjoys perfect unity in that communion. In creation God established a relationship with man, and He has continued that relationship through providence and grace. Man, made in the image of God, is also a relational being. Though God pronounced all creation "very good" (Gen 1:31), He also said, "It is not good that the man should be alone." Men and women were created in such a way that each has those qualities which perfectly complement the other. Eve was to be Adam's assistant (Gen. 2:18). Marriage is not only the first relationship between humans in history, it is also the only relationship between unrelated members of the opposite sex which the Word of God speaks of with approval. In only two places Scripture speaks of a friendship between a man and a woman. One is in the context of marriage (Song 5:16), and the other is of an adulterous woman (Hos. 3:1). Though friendship has become a central word in our society, Scripturally speaking, the concept of a friendship between a man and a woman outside of marriage or family is foreign to the Word of God.

Now, it is important to know that there are relationships between non-related men and women in Scripture, though they are not identified as friendships. Paul, for example, in Romans 16, writes of a "sister" (in the Lord) or of "helpers in Christ Jesus," these terms illustrating relationships among the functioning members of the body of Christ, the church; a co-laboring relationship, though not in close proximity. However, and we repeat it for emphasis, nowhere does Scripture speak in a positive manner of friendship between a man and a woman outside the marital context.

"But," you say, "at least we may have Christians friends, like Paul seemed to have, with whom we may engage in the work of God's kingdom." Before one jumps to that conclusion, consider Paul's letter to Titus. In chapter 2, verses 3ff., Paul writes about the need for instruction and counselling in the church. As you carefully read that chapter, what do you find Paul telling Titus to do? After he lays out the description of the model that aged women, aged men, young men, etc., should aspire to be, he tells Titus to personally instruct the older women and have them teach the younger women (vv. 3-4). If Christian pastors followed this advice, do you think it might have had an impact on the Christianity Today survey results we quoted earlier? And does not this kind of cooperation more closely model the idea of the church being a body of many members working together to the edification of the whole (1 Cor. 12)? Are not our pastors very busy with many activities, not the least of which is counselling?

Are such friendships between the opposite sex to be completely avoided then? Scripture is certainly telling us we need to be very careful, even guarded in such relationships. This warning is not sounded in society. In fact, such familiarity is not only common in most Christian churches and schools, but even encouraged. But we need to look at Scripture with a receptive mind. If such mixed friendships enjoyed God's favor, wouldn't we expect to see this reflected in Scripture?

So-called "working relationships/friendships" are not exempt from this discussion. Consider the trouble and scandal the introduction of women into almost all facets of the U.S. military has caused. How many problems have not sprung up from the now-common practice of businessmen travelling on business trips sometimes far distances with female co-workers?

Let us summarize by stating the first Scriptural principle. God's primary goal for relationships between non-related men and women is marriage. Casual romantic relationships and intimate friendships between men and women are never positively depicted in Scripture.

Second Principle - God's Three Purposes for Men/Women Relationships Achieved Only Through Marriage

God's Word speaks of three purposes for His institution of marriage. The first two are recorded before the Fall; the last is mentioned after.

One of the two pre-fall purposes of marriage is mentioned in Gen. 1:28 - procreation, i.e. bringing forth children. Again, as we gaze upward from the human plane, we see, in the Trinity, an eternal begetting - the Son begotten by the Father (John 1:14). Have you ever considered the family within the Trinity? There is the Father and the Son. The Son is the express image of His Father (Heb. 1:3). The Holy Ghost was the divine means Who brought about the incarnation of the Lord Jesus in this world (Mt. 1:18). In this light, we should never consider the procreative purpose of marriage as somehow demeaning or mechanical.

Notice how this very purpose is attacked by our contemporary anti-Christian society. "Child bearing is optional," the pundits say. "It is entirely the prerogative of the individuals involved how many, if any, children are to be brought into this world." Tragically, it is now the unilateral choice of the woman whether she wants to carry the unborn child to term or simply dispose of it. Is this assault just coincidence? Satan knows and is directing his assault straight at God's purposes in marriage, with the ruin of souls as his ultimate goal.

The second purpose of marriage is found in Gen. 2:18 - companionship. God said that it was not good for man to be alone. He Who created man knew intimately and perfectly what is best suited for man. Some theologians say God created man because He was lonely. But this denies the perfection of the Trinity. God enjoys a perfect relationship within His own Being and has designed marriage to reflect something of this relationship. The Trinity is three Persons in one Being. How striking the parallel language God uses to describe the first marriage. "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh" (Gen. 2:24; Mt. 19:5-6). We don't want to draw these parallels too closely, but certainly there is a likeness here.

In our society today, this second purpose of marriage is also challenged. Intimate companionship can be achieved in all kinds of alternative ways, we are told. Men and women can achieve intimate relationships without marriage. The whole homosexual movement openly spurns and despises God's created order and design, while Christians who oppose this are labelled with some pejorative. The protective enclave of marriage, where deep companionship was meant to be nurtured, is rapidly becoming the exception instead of the rule.

The third and post-fall purpose of marriage is moral preservation. In 1 Cor. 7:2 we read, "Nevertheless to avoid fornication let every man have his own wife and let every woman have her own husband." The inter-Trinitarian relationship is preeminently characterized by spotless purity and holiness. Marriage is the God-appointed means for safeguarding the purity of a relationship between a fallen man and woman. And is not this aspect of marriage under open and blatant attack today through all the physical stimuli and emotional stimuli that bombards us through a variety of means?

In sum, our second principle is, God's three purposes for marriage - procreation, companionship and assistance, and moral preservation - are not achieved with His favor between men and women outside of marriage.

Third Principle - Premarital Desires: God's Gifts to be Used Rightly

Perhaps about now some readers may be wondering, "These ideas are all fine on paper, in a theoretical setting, but this is not what's going on around us. This is not the society we live in. For example, what do I do about the desires I feel, already while I am a growing youth, toward certain individuals of the opposite sex?"

The sad fact is, sinful man has taken what God has given as a healthy gift and perverted it. These desires you feel are not inherently evil. If properly understood and channelled, they are to be regarded as gifts of God. They are also not to be understood as strictly post-Fall phenomena. Let us first look at a few illustrations from Scripture and then develop our third principle.

Did it ever occur to you that Scripture describes rightly-channelled desires between men and women in full, unclouded, joyful terms? One example is the Song of Solomon. The Jews did not allow their children to read this Book of Scripture until the later were fairly mature. Why? Because in that Book is a mature expression of the love between a bridegroom and his bride. We all know that this Book is a picture, a figure of the higher relationship between the Lord Jesus and His elect bride. With this in view we would certainly never expect to find anything in it that could be considered impure or inappropriate. Yet, at different instances throughout the Book, strong desire-filled language freely flows between the bride and the bridegroom. That which makes that language so beautiful is its marital context. Imagine how sordid and wicked this lovely dialogue would appear to us if the participants were not married? Even we, as desensitized as we are in our modern society, can immediately feel the difference.

Consider also the Book of Proverbs. More than any other Bible Book, Proverbs warns against illicit relationships - the strange woman whom we are to stay apart from and so on. And yet, right in the midst of Proverbs 5:19-20, God, speaking to the married man says, "Let her [your wife] be as the loving hind and pleasant roe; let her breasts satisfy thee at all times; and be thou ravished always with her love. And why wilt thou, my son, be ravished with a strange woman, and embrace the bosom of a stranger?" These premarital desires that we feel, that we wrestle with and grapple with perhaps, Scripture speaks of in a positive light so long as they are directed to God's purpose. Why does God give them before marriage? The first reason is to awaken us to a need we have. Instead of thinking of these things in a negative sense, think of them as God's call to you to start praying about and seeking after the man or woman He has prepared for you. By means of these desires God is telling you, "Marriage is My direction for you. And this is how I am telling you that this is My direction for you - by awakening these needs in you." We need to bring these needs back to Him. That means we need to pray against the modern teaching that self-gratification or self-stimulation is all right and normal. God did not give us these desires to end in ourselves. He gives us them to end in another. He draws people to marriage through these desires. By them He is causing relationships and bonds which reflect, if they are characterized by godliness, His own relationship with

His church (Eph. 5). He uses the primarily emotional needs of a woman for a man and the primarily physical needs that a man has toward the woman. As the marriage grows and deepens, these needs often balance out. The man's emotional attachment, which perhaps was less active at first, grows and vice versa. Gifts to be prayerfully used to right ends - this is how we should look at pre-marital desires.

We need to say a word to those of you who may not feel this need. Paul, in 1 Cor. 7, speaks about some having what we call the gift of continency. There are individuals

who do not feel the need for marriage, do not feel the need of that kind of emotional support or physical release or anything like that. These people, Paul says, have a special gift (vv. 7,9). These are to concentrate more exclusively on how to please the Lord (v. 32). These are men and women who have more freedom to live more fully to the Lord in their singleness, having greater opportunity and liberty to labor on His behalf. But those who are not given that gift and who do have these desires are instructed to channel them into marriage (v. 9).

We also feel a need to say a word or two about physical contact before marriage. The Jewish people, from Old Testament times even till today, are a very emotional people. Often, when they gather, there is an abundance of embracing among families, at weddings, etc. Yet you won't find one instance in Scripture, in the context of God's favor, where a non-related or unmarried man and woman touch. Doesn't that strike you as peculiar? This question, "How far should a physical relationship go?" surfaces time and again. Let me suggest to you that God never meant there to be a stopping point in a physical relationship. He designed us in such a way that the first romantic contact should not meet with artificial barriers preventing deepening intimacy, and this is not theoretical but a common experience. Why do some unmarried persons begin to feel uncomfortable with one degree of contact or another? Consciously or unconsciously they realize that this process is a continuum. Well, it was designed that way. By allowing this or that much intimacy and then prohibiting more, society has introduced interruptions that are contrary to our design. We should rather see this progression as a gift of God in marriage through which He achieves the three purposes we spoke of earlier. To those of you who might still be sceptical, ask yourself this question. Can you tell me one instance where any kind of pre-marital physical contact has substantially, verifiably improved your relationship? Almost always, the depth of real relationship development decreases in proportion as physical contact increases. By virtue of the way He designed us, God intended that there be physical contact within marriage, and that this contact should not meet with artificial barriers. Toying with this God-given continuum designed for marriage leads us to another kind of continuum. James writes, "But every man is tempted when he is drawn away of his own lust and enticed. Then when lust has conceived it bringeth forth sin" (James 1:14-15). You may be wondering, "But does that mean no physical contact before marriage?" Why don't you answer that one. Just consider what's been said on the basis of Scripture.

Let us summarize by stating our third principle. Physical and emotional desires are gifts of God and are meant to awaken us to our need to prayerfully seek marriage. These desires are to be channelled into the marital state where they serve as means to fulfil God's three purposes for marriage, and where they may be enjoyed with God's favor.

Fourth Principle - Headship

Have you ever noticed that Scripture consistently shows us that women were never meant to be alone or "on their own"? Consider the story of Ruth, for example. At one time Ruth was married, but then her father-in-law, husband, and two sons died. Even though she was now a widow, she remained in a family context - she was with Naomi.

But you'll remember that Naomi was not at rest until Ruth could be placed in the care of another man, Boaz. Another example is Jacob's daughter Dinah (Gen. 34). She was old enough to be married, and yet she lived under the protective care of her father and her brothers. She got in trouble only after she came out from under that protective covering. Finally, consider Jesus. While on the cross, amidst all His agonies, He takes a moment to commit His mother into John's care, as He Himself would no longer be with her in the flesh.

Actually, there is no record in Scripture of any woman who was clearly not living under the care of some man. Even the widows who were "widows indeed" were to be cared for by the office bearers of the church (1 Tim. 5). The very act of the woman's creation, being taken out of the side of the man, is even illustrative of this point. From that moment on, women were never meant to be independent. Is this the teaching of the world today? The world calls this "slavery," making women second-class to men. But is that what Scripture says? No, Scripture speaks highly of the woman who seeks, by grace, to exemplify godliness in her God-ordained role (Prov. 31). Even in the Trinity, perfect unity does not mean that each Person is exactly the same as the Other. Is there disunity because the Father has distinct features or labors from those of the Son? Paul's illustration of the church as a body made up of many diverse members also illustrates this principle. Headship is a unique feature God ordinarily ordained for men, not women.

The only place in Scripture which speaks about the calling of single women is 1 Cor. 7, but even though she has liberty to dedicate herself more fully to the Lord, she does so from the safe confines of her father's house (v. 37). The modern trend of older unmarried girls moving out of their parent's house to "live on their own" has no foundation in Scripture. In fact, Gen. 2:24 tells us the same is true for unmarried men. "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh."

Men, do you realize what this principle of headship means for you? What responsibility you have or will have, DV, in marriage with regard to your wife and children? Our forefathers spoke simply yet beautifully of these things in the Marriage Form. The Form does not speak of inequality. It speaks of unique callings working side by side.

Fifth Principle - The Glorious Goal

The final principle we want to consider has to do with the ultimate and most glorious goal of marriage. The highest ideal is not the happy marriage your parents might have or the joy-filled marriage a friend of yours has. Scripture says our goal is to approximate, as well as sinful human beings can by the grace of God, the relationship between Christ and His church. Review Ephesians 5, and see how Paul ties the two together all the way through. As Christ is to His church, so men are to be to their brides. As the church ought to be to Him, so women to their husbands. It's remarkable, is it not, how God as it were envelops our human relationships in His own? Are there any relationships in the world that God puts such value on as He does marriage? This

then is the glorious goal. This is what we are to aim for - that we, in our married life, would be a reflection, albeit a small and imperfect one, of the relationship Christ has with His church. Is that bondage? Is being a bride of Christ demeaning or somehow unfulfilling? That's what Satan has been trying to convince us of from the beginning. We are directed by God to use our calling, whether it be the marriage state or single life, to His glory. This can only be realized by following the principles God has given us in His Word. By God's grace, this is also the way to enjoy true joy and peace in our relationships.

Now that we've considered Scriptural principles, we will consider how these translate into a practical approach to marriage.

How to Approach Marriage Based on Scripture's Principles

I. PREPARATION

Before considering how Scripture would have us pursue marriage, we should first ask ourselves if we are indeed ready for this pursuit. Preparation is essential.

We have seen that Scripture insists our romantic relationships be limited to those leading to marriage. In general, most couples know whether they are compatible enough for marriage by the end of the first year of their relationship, though we realize there are always exceptions. In light of this general time frame, we first must ask if young people who are too young to even begin seriously considering marriage should begin relationships. So often we set arbitrary age limits when "dating" can begin. Considering what we've learned from Scripture, are romantic relationships at early ages right? "What harm could there be?" you ask. Plenty.

Dating trains people well for one thing - breaking up. Dating advocates the "shop around and see" attitude. You "check out" some guy or girl, try a relationship out, and if it doesn't work you just break it off. How many relationships young people "try out" before they "settle down" varies. But how, all of a sudden, when two people get married, do they automatically get out of this way of relating to others? The sad thing is, many don't. After a shorter or longer period of time many begin to "check out" others, perhaps making comparisons with their own spouse. "Tom wouldn't treat me like my husband does - He's so considerate." "My secretary's cheerful attitude and cooperative spirit sure beats the haranguing I sometimes get from my wife." And what happens so often today? People just continue "breaking up" - only now we call it divorce. This is why we need to seriously consider whether we are really ready to begin seeking a marriage partner.

I once saw two young children put on a skit as part of a presentation on courtship my wife and I attended some time ago. The young man comes to the young lady. She has a big construction paper heart. He asks her out, and she gives him a slice of the heart. Soon she is upset with him for some reason and breaks up. He drops the piece of heart and leaves. Another and another comes to her and the same things happens. A slice

of the heart and another leaves. After several fellows, one finally asks her to marry him. She consents and gives him her "whole" heart, which by this time is a little sliver.

If we get used to giving and taking back, giving and taking back, emotionally or physically, we'll miss so much joy when we eventually do marry, not being able then to give our entire, untainted self to the man or woman we really love. God does forgive sin through gracious repentance and faith in Christ, but He often does not remove the scars our sins have made. Couples who have tried to follow these Biblical principles often find it hard to express the tremendous joy they experience when, after they are married, they can give themselves completely to each other, having been kept emotionally and physically for that day.

"Am I too young to begin a relationship?" First, ask yourself what God is calling you to do right now. If you are at an age where you cannot seriously consider getting married in a year or two, it is likely that God's calling in your life, obvious even by His providence, is rather to concentrate on learning what you can at school and developing your character at home. How much thought-time is wasted in daydreaming about girlfriend and boyfriend matters (which likely won't matter a year from now) instead of concentrating on what's going on in school and church? And many young people overlook the fact that their own home, amidst their own family, is God's training ground for future marriage roles. Are boys and young men learning to be hard workers, wage earners and wage savers, respectful toward authority, taking on more and more responsibility, learning useful skills from parents, etc.? Are young girls and women developing submission, maturity, homemaking skills, child rearing skills, also taking on more and more responsibility, etc.? In the armed forces, basic training comes before active duty. One generally applies for a job only after one has prepared for it. Why should marriage be different?

"O.K. In what ways should I be prepared?" In three ways.

Spiritual Preparation

Spiritual preparation comes first. We're not talking about trying to convert ourselves. But by the same token, Scripture is emphatic - "Ye must be born again." You see, no one is really fit to go out with someone, or even think about marriage, until he or she is born again. Scripture plainly tells us that we are to marry "in the Lord" (1 Cor. 7:39) and to do all to the glory of God (1 Cor. 11:11). Proverbs 3:33 tells us, "The curse of the LORD is in the house of the wicked: but He blesseth the habitation of the just." In the face of these and other texts, how can unbelievers expect His blessing on their marriage? Most married couples face one or more pretty big storms in their married life. Some trials are incredibly difficult, even for the godliest of married couples. How are you going to face these without God? It's difficult enough, even when both partners are God-fearing. What will unbelieving couples do when these storms rip through their lives or the lives of their children? In light of this, why start such an important relationship with someone before our relationship with God is right? The very best time to seek Him is when we're single. Let us not be impatient to get on with our earthly plans before

we've earnestly addressed eternal matters.

You may ask, "But does that mean if I'm not born again I cannot marry?" Well, I didn't say that. I said you're not fit for marriage. Friends, we cannot continue to go on through life saying we are allowed to get married, allowed to join church, allowed to take on baptismal vows, and so on, and still be unconverted. We have to come to grips with the fact that we cannot do anything right without being made right with God. Scripture and church history form a unified witness on this - the time to seek the Lord is especially when we're young.

But even from an intellectual and practical perspective, are you, men, prepared to take charge of the religious instruction and oversight of the girl you are seeing? Are you prepared to bring up children in the ways of the Lord? Please don't do as so many of my generation did - wait until you're in that position to start thinking about it. To both men and women, what you're learning at home, in church, and at school needs to be learned well enough to pass it on to your own family. Hebrews 13:7 says, "Whose faith follow." Will your spouse and children be able to say that about you?

Emotional Preparation

Are you emotionally ready? Many times others can better answer this question for us. Are you serious about the relationship you are in or about to enter? Are you ready, emotionally, to start facing questions about family devotions, a place to live, a family budget, a calling in life, bringing up children, and the countless other matter-of-fact realities of married life? When we go through adolescence into adulthood, we face several internal and external challenges. Is this the best time to take on the emotional weight of an important relationship? Remember how we said that, aside from your relationship with the God, nothing will likely have a greater impact on your life than your marriage. Emotional readiness and stability are essential from the very start.

Fathers and Mothers should guide and instruct their sons and daughters that relationships ought to be practical as well as romantic. They need to build relationships which smooth the way to the practicalities of married life. Offer assistance by sharing with your sons and daughters what kinds of important day to day matters you've faced in married life. Remind them that discussing these kinds of things is a very important part of their relationship with their partner. And stress, in all the years of training, that these relationships, like espousals in Bible times, ought to be taken as seriously and with the same level of commitment and determination as marriage - until such time as it becomes apparent that the relationship will not end in marriage, at which time it should be ended.

Financial Preparation

Certainly every reader is familiar with Jesus' statement about counting the cost before building a tower (Luke 14:28). Are you financially prepared to build a marriage? Men, have you considered what it will take to financially support the girl you are seeing or

want to see? Have both of you been earning and saving so you don't have financial struggles right from the start? Girls, have you surrendered yourselves to the possibility that soon after marriage you may be called by God to set aside your plans for a career to answer the high calling of motherhood? Are the two of you prepared for a one-paycheck budget? Statistics show that financial problems are a very common, though unbiblical, reason for divorces today.

Suffer one brief cautionary note before we leave this part of our subject. I realize that some of this material on being prepared might be somewhat new to you, but if you inwardly and casually scoff at these ideas, that is probably a strong hint that you are not ready to enter a relationship just yet.

II. PRAYER AND PARENTS

After we have prayerfully assessed our readiness, we need to proceed - but how? The first step is ardent prayer. When the first desires rise in your heart, your prayer should be that God would both prepare and lead His choice for your life to you. Example after example can be cited of seriously-minded people whom God has brought together, who didn't have to "go fishing" for each other as the world says we must. "God setteth the solitary in families....He maketh the barren woman to keep house, and to be a joyful mother of children..." (Ps. 68:6a; 113:9). Relationships that were preceded by prayer are often followed by blessings.

Men, after praying, the first step you should take when wanting to begin a relationship with a girl is to seek the advice and blessing of your parents. If you are reluctant to do so, it is a likely indication that you don't you have the kind of relationship with your parents that God says you should. Value the advice, experience, and prayers of your parents more than your own. This is Biblical. Even the headstrong Samson asked his parents about his choice of a mate, though he didn't listen to their advice and ended up paying for it later. You are going to want to have a good relationship with them after you're married, aren't you? Why skip over them now, at the very beginning? Remember that God rules us through levels of authority. If the "king's heart is in the hand of the Lord" and He "turneth it whithersoever he will," your parents hearts, even if unbelievers, are in His hands also. If you've shown yourself to be an obedient and thoughtful son, they will give greater deference to your thoughts on a marriage partner.

Parents, grandparents, and office bearers - are you ready to give this kind of advice when asked? Though you are busy, make it a point to take time, with your spouse, to really stay aware of which young people take spiritual matters seriously and which don't, and who you might recommend to your sons when they ask you for advice. How can you bless your son's relationship when you really don't know much about his partner?

After the man secures his parent's advice and prayers, he, according to the Scriptural way, ought to go visit the girl's father. Why? We return to the fourth principle. The Bible clearly teaches that women are meant to live under the protection of men. You who are seeking a girl's hand in a relationship must first go to him who has her oversight in order to secure his permission. Some day you might be asking his permission to

marry his daughter, to take over her care. He who now has that responsibility ought to have the chance to see if you are up to the task, shouldn't he?

Young women, all the time you were growing up, your father had the ultimate responsibility for your protection. In his absence, your mother did. As we have seen from Scripture, that's not supposed to change until another man, your husband, takes over that responsibility. Didn't you ever wonder why, at weddings, it is customary for the minister to ask, "Who gives this bride away?" The answer is given by your father, "Her mother and I do." This means they are giving the responsibility of caring for you to your husband.

There are at least two other reasons why this step is important. First, in dating, there is pressure on the girl to give her answer right away when asked out. According to Scripture, God has ordered it so that pressure should not rest on her alone. Abraham's servant had to present his case to Rebekah and to Laban. This is reinforced in 1 Cor. 7:36-38. Second, from a purely practical point of view, a young man will tend to be more thoughtful about whom he will ask out if he knows he has to see her dad first, and it is likely girls will have greater respect for a young man who cares enough about her company to be willing to discuss his desires with her father first.

It is important to emphasize that the girl's father is not deciding the matter for her. This is a widespread myth. The final decision was Rebekah's, not Laban's. Keep in mind however, it is her father's duty to protect her from insincere young men. Though not willing to admit it, some girls simply haven't the maturity to discern a young man's motives or character very well. The grave statistics we quoted earlier bear this out. God, Who is very wise, has given us fathers for when we are older, just as much as for when we were younger. Let us appreciate that gift with thankfulness. The dating system generally sidesteps this important fatherly function.

What will the father and the young man talk about? Dad will ask a few questions like these: What are your intentions regarding my daughter? Tell me something about yourself, also spiritually. How are you financially prepared for this relationship? If Dad is satisfied, he will ask his daughter what her thoughts are. If she is not interested, things would stop there. Father could even break the news to the young man himself if she wished. If the father has strong objections, his "no" today might be a cause for thankfulness for a lifetime. And the young man who leaves will have some important matters to think about on his way home. This could really help him in the long run.

III. THE FAMILY SETTING AND TIME ALONE

Today, dating varies greatly from one couple to another. Some spend a lot of time in groups, while others spend it alone. Being alone has two drawbacks. One is the obvious physical temptations that will almost certainly come. The other is you will not learn very much about your partner. "Not learn as much being alone?" you ask. "How can that be?" Men, if you really want to know how your girlfriend will relate to you as your wife, look at how she relates to father now. Girls, how will your man relate to you once you're

married? Take a look at how he treats his mother. And how your partner relates to his or her brothers and sisters is likely to be similar to how he or she will treat the children God gives you. Spending time alone on dates sheds little light on these important relationships. Besides, on dates you both have your best foot forward the whole time you're together. But how often, once you're married, are you going out to dinner, climbing a mountain, or doing the other unique things people do on dates? The beauty of marriage lies in the ordinary, day to day activities - being home together with the children, interacting with your extended family, visiting other couples, and other everyday things. Why not do these things now, before marriage? Preparing now for what you're actually getting into later makes sense.

Now I realize there is a need for young people to be alone sometimes, to talk about serious matters and things that are important to them. But on account of our susceptibility toward physical temptation, consider a better setting for such discussions, not placing yourself in a situation that could degenerate. If you find yourselves always wanting to "pair off" and be alone, your relationship is not heading in a good direction. Authors who write books on courtship, which is the name often used today for this Biblical way to marriage, give long lists of practical things young people can do together to really build a solid relationship. I suggest you build your own list - together.

By all means, get to know each other's families well and do things with each other's families. Try to be around seriously-minded couples. Don't spend too much time or money on less practical things. Work the basics. Cook or shop together. Volunteer some time together at a local hospital. Do some church work together. See how you can help a local Christian crisis pregnancy center. And talk together about the kind of family you want to build, with God's help. Talk specifics. Talk about devotions, finances, practical matters. Some pastors develop pre-marriage questionnaires. See if you can get a copy and fill it out together. Have your pastor or your parents or a mature Christian couple go over it with you after you're done. You'll learn a lot more about each other that way than by looking at each other dreamy-eyed over a candle-lit table in some restaurant.

IV. PRAYER AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Some young people ask how soon in a relationship they should pray together. If we agree we need God from the start, then begin praying together right from the start. This can help a great deal to keep your time together properly focused. If you or your partner feel uncomfortable about praying together now, it could be a strong indication you are really not prepared enough to begin a serious relationship at this time. Casual relationships without prayer tend to end up in casual though sometimes costly breakups down the road. Fathers and mothers should gently ask, and gently remind sons and daughters that prayer should be just as much a part of their relationship as it is at home in the family circle.

Many advocates of courtship speak about being accountable to someone regarding your relationship. One young man asked his girlfriend's father to be his accountability

partner. He told the father that he could call him anytime and ask him anything about his relationship with his daughter. Prayer and a simple means like that can help keep both of you on target.

VI. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND LINGERING QUESTIONS

I remember a girl getting up in front of a large group of adults and young people, telling how she first rebelled against her parents' ideas about courtship and then how she was eventually won over with her whole heart after some of her experiences with dating. This experience has been repeated many times, as this and similar Bible-based approaches to marriage are becoming more widely known and practiced in Christian churches throughout our countries.

Please prayerfully consider the things you've just read, even if your first reaction is negative. Since there is so much more to do in this area, I would love to hear from you with suggestions or comments. Even if you disagree, it's important to hear that, too.

Finally, dear friends, let me give some typical comments and questions on this subject.

1. These are the 1990's, not the 1920's. You're right. And the statistics read at the onset are not taken from the 1920's either. Could there be a reason why they are so alarming today? The Bible is over 2,000 years old, yet it proves to be an inexhaustible source of wisdom till this day. Principles derived from it are equally timeless. Dating had its turn. Are the results that impressive?
2. Those statistics are about the world. We live in the church and go to a Christian school. Sadly, we both know that this excuse isn't valid anymore. You know what kinds of temptations you face while dating, Christian church and school notwithstanding.
3. But there is no freedom, no fun in this whole system. Everything is so serious, so careful. Can't we be trusted? God's response is Prov. 28:26, "He that trusteth in his own heart is a fool: but whoso walketh wisely, he shall be delivered." Being truly free means being a servant of God and His will. Freedom in the flesh is bondage to sin. One couple, Jeff and Danielle Myers of Summit Ministries in Colorado tried courtship. They write about the increased joy and decreased pressures they experienced in their relationship compared with dating.
4. Aren't you trying to transplant the culture of Bible times to 20th century western society? Though several of the particulars outlined in this paper are similar to those used in Bible times, (Gen. 2:22, Judges 14:3, Mat. 1:18, 2 Cor. 11:2, etc.), I have not brought all the cultural trappings along, like the veils, the week-long wedding feasts, or the dowry concept. The system outlined here is not inflexible. It's a model with which to begin.. But it does work in the 20th century.
5. I still conclude this will never work. Even if I go along, nobody else will. Dear

friend, what if Martin Luther had felt that way? "God would have raised up another man in Luther's place." You're right. And I believe God will raise up young people in your place too if you continue to cling to a dating system that is not standing up well to the test of time. The church needs young people with vision today. How about you being one of them? I have met young people looking for a better way.

6. This is too idealistic. We have to deal with realities. Friend, a true Christian is an idealist. God's ideals are our reals. There's a young people's magazine that's been around for a long time called Youth Living Ideals. Aren't you really saying "God's ways are out of reach, out of touch, too idealistic? 1 Cor. 1:25 says, "The foolishness of God is wiser than men." If these principles are not founded on Scripture, you do well to disregard them. But if they are, you do ill to spurn them.
7. Are there any materials I can purchase on this subject? I have reviewed some of the available material. I've found three books I can recommend. The best, in my opinion, is Dating vs. Courtship by Paul Jehle. It is substantive yet straightforward. It sells for \$9.00 U.S. A less thorough book is Christian Courtship vs. The Dating Game by Pastor Jim West (\$5.00). A somewhat humorous but informative book with more practical suggestions ("how-to" material) is Of Knights and Fair Maidens by Jeff and Danielle Myers (\$8.00). All three books are available from Courtship Connection, 3731 Cecelia, Toledo, Ohio, 43608, (419) 729-4594 and possibly through some of the Christian book catalog companies like CBD, etc. Unfortunately, to date I have found no tape presentations that I could really recommend for our circles. A tape of my presentation at the HNRC Youth Conference, one from the HNRC Men's Conference, and the lecture given at the last FRC Student Society Meeting in Dundas are possible tape resources. The first two are available from The Tape Room, 540 Crescent St., NE, Grand Rapids, MI 49503 (616-456-1706) at \$2.00 U.S. each (see order form on last page for the tape of this speech).
8. Where do I go from here? The first place to start is with the Lord. Search the Word and pray for light to see if these things are truly Scriptural. If you conclude they are, beg for a willing heart to follow unconditionally and not haltingly like the situational ethicists advocate. Discuss what you've read with peers and parents. There are always the nay-sayers who are always playing down everything that's wholesome and decent. Discuss these things in your youth group or with your office bearers to see if there can't be a way to promote Biblical principles in this vital subject in church, in school, and even outside our circles.

Above all, make your requests known to God. He does hear and answer prayer. Be encouraged by the text, "When a man's ways please the LORD, He maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him" (Prov. 16:7). Confess and repent of past sins and seek peace with God in the blood of Christ. Pray to the Lord Jesus for grace, wisdom, and especially perseverance. And go forward, knowing that you are not alone. You will not be promoting some antiquated cultural system, but rather introducing and

encouraging Biblical ideas to your generation. May God encourage you, strengthen you, and prosper your way.