

The Christian Family

Chapter 7: Dating Versus Biblical Courtship

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An area in which many Bible-believing churches (and consequently many professing Christian families) have blindly accepted pagan practices is the area of dating. Because the abandonment of biblical courtship in favor of modern recreational dating has been a disaster for families, churches and society, we need to examine dating from a biblical perspective and analyze the scriptural alternative: father controlled courtship. In this chapter we will define dating, note its recent origin, give reasons why its practice is unscriptural and in the process present the biblical alternative: father (parent) controlled courtship. For those of us born and raised in America (especially those raised as unbelievers) there may be a temptation to dismiss this topic as “obviously antiquated and absurd.” But, as you read this chapter you may be surprised at the clear and abundant biblical evidence for courtship (as scripturally defined).

The Modern Dating Game

What is dating? By the word dating we are referring to the twentieth century phenomenon known as modern recreational dating. It works something like this. A boy meets a girl, decides that she is pleasing in some sense (e.g., cute smile, sexy body, nice sounding voice, cool friends, groovy car, etc.) and then asks her to go out on a date. If she accepts, the boy will pick her up at a certain time and then (typically) will take her out to dinner, and/or to a movie (or concert, etc.) and then in many cases will park the car in a secluded area and engage in necking and heavy petting. In today’s culture “nice girls” will not allow the necking and petting until the second, third or fourth date. In modern America, dating among high school and college students frequently involves booze, drugs and sexual intercourse.

If a boy and girl date for an extended period of time and agree not to date other people then they are “going steady.” Going steady (as it is called) is in many ways an adolescent imitation of marriage (e.g., the boy often even gives the girl a ring or necklace). It, however, does not have the protection and real commitment of a marriage covenant and is therefore arbitrary and fleeting. Boys and girls who “go steady” become attached romantically, emotionally, and often sexually. Then when the boy or girl gets bored with the relationship, or get caught cheating or simply decide that someone else is more desirable, the relationship is ended. Breaking up often involves heartache, anger and has many negative emotional consequences. After a string of failed relationships young men and women can become hard-hearted and distrustful of relationships in general. Thus modern recreational dating leads to a high rate of divorce in society. It trivializes intimacy and supports the hedonistic idea that men and women are play things that can be tossed aside at will. In modern culture (generally speaking) the person that one marries is simply the last person in a string of relationships that involved emotional

and sexual “commitments.” Thus marriage is often viewed as basically a romantic add-on to what has occurred before. Modern recreational dating is not only unbiblical but it has its own negative consequences. The specialness and sacredness of the marriage covenant for many has been lost. It has been cast aside for the sinful foolish pleasures of the modern dating system.

While professing Christians who through ignorance, bad teaching and syncretism with pagan culture are involved in the dating system usually have better motives and intentions than their pagan counterparts (e.g., their goal for dating is not “to score”), all the unbiblical negative aspects of dating (e.g., a lack of real parental oversight; no chaperone; a certain amount of physical intimacy is accepted and expected; emotional, romantic and physical relations are occurring outside of the marital relationship, etc.) still accompany so-called “Christian dating.” Therefore, one should not be surprised that rates of sexual immorality among “evangelical” college students are almost identical to pagan college students. Or that rates of adultery and divorce among professing Christians is also about the same as the general pagan population. The dating paradigm has been a total disaster for American evangelicals.

Why is Dating Wrong?

The reason that the modern recreational dating system has had such negative ethical and social consequences for evangelicals is that it contradicts many biblical principles. In fact the modern dating paradigm is not at all based on the Bible but is rather a by-product of an apostatizing and post-Christian culture. In the nineteenth century (and before) most men and women were brought together and prepared for marriage through a father-controlled process called courtship. By 1930 a cultural paradigm shift occurred by which young adults came to control the process with little or no supervision from parents. Dating and petting became the norm.

The reasons for this shift are manifold. There were socioeconomic factors such as industrialization. Many young men and women moved from small agricultural towns to large cities to work in mills, factories and offices. There was the rise of the motion picture industry which promoted an unbiblical concept of romance and sexuality. Another important factor was the development of the affordable automobile. Automobiles provided young couples with a fast and easy escape from the eyes and ears of their parents. They provided boys and girls with a weather-proof, mobile, private, couch on wheels. As such, cars became the chief necking centers for teenagers during the twentieth century. The main reason, however, for the shift from courtship to dating was that most churches stopped preaching the whole counsel of God (e.g., God’s moral law, covenant headship, etc.) As a result fathers abdicated their biblical responsibility to oversee the relationships of their children and guard them from pagan culture, from acting foolishly and committing evil.

As we consider specific biblical reasons why dating is unscriptural and dangerous we of necessity will be presenting the case for biblical courtship. Although it may appear that dating is the norm for evangelicals today, there are a number of reasons why the Bible condemns such a practice.

(1) Modern recreational dating is unbiblical because it tempts the parties involved to commit sexual immorality and often leads to fornication. Because of our sinful natures

and because of natural sexual appetites believers should never place themselves in situations that can cause temptation and sin. Believers cannot trust themselves to be alone with an attractive person of the opposite sex especially when that person has a commitment and strong emotional attachment to the one they are with. “Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body” (1 Cor. 6:18). “For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one should take advantage of and defraud his brother in this matter, because the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also forewarned you and testified. For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness” (1 Th. 4:3-7).

Recreational dating presupposes that a certain amount of kissing and touching are acceptable outside of the marriage relationship as long as things do not go too far (e.g., second, third and fourth base). Such thinking, however, is totally contrary to Scripture. Paul says, “Now concerning the things of which you wrote to me: It is good for a man not to touch a woman. Nevertheless, because of sexual immorality, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband. Let the husband render to his wife the affection due her, and likewise also the wife to her husband” (1 Cor. 7:1-3). Paul says unequivocally that it is morally good for a single man not to have sexual relations with a woman. Sexual affection is strictly limited by the apostle to the marriage relationship. Kissing and rubbing various parts of the body are clearly foreplay; they are the normal prelude to sexual intercourse. Although a Christian man would never allow someone to conduct themselves in such a manner (i.e. foreplay, sexual touching) with a wife or daughter they convince themselves that such behavior is somehow acceptable when they are single and the hormones are flowing. He is also ignoring the fact that he is touching someone else’s future wife, while at the same time expecting his own future wife to be chaste. “Can a man take fire to his bosom, and his clothes not be burned? Can one walk on hot coals, and his feet not be seared? So is he who goes in to his neighbor’s wife; whoever touches her shall not be innocent” (Prov. 6:27-29). Sexual touching is forbidden before marriage. Therefore, modern dating is a form of rebellion against God.

Recreational dating (which nearly always involves necking and petting) is condemned by God because it causes illicit lust. Even when a professing Christian couple “make out” but stop while dressed and go their separate ways, they have still filled their minds with unlawful desires. Paul says, “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom 12:2). “Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry” (Col. 3:5). “That you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts” (Eph. 4:22). Jesus Himself warned that sexual lust is a violation of the seventh commandment. “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Mt. 5:27-28). Solomon writes, “Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life” (Pr. 4:23).

To engage in recreational dating is to draw one’s own mind and heart away from obedience toward seduction and sin. It is purposeful entering into temptation, a deliberate

jumping into a pit of lust and a snare of evil desire. Our Lord commanded us to pray that we not be led into temptation (cf. Mt. 6:13). Can we pray this prayer with sincerity while we deliberately pour gasoline on the ember of lust? All sin begins with an entering into temptation. Therefore, if you fear sin, then you must also fear temptation. You cannot have the fruit while you delight in and partake of the root. The reason that dating is so destructive of believers is because when men and women make peace with sinful desires and stimulate them with necking they have already consented to sin in the heart; and, sin in the heart often breaks forth into evil acts. An inner consent with lust always occurs before sinful deeds take place. "But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death" (Jas. 1:14-15). Instead of following the modern dating paradigm, we should heed the words of Peter. "Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul" (1Pet. 2:11). Lust is such a danger to Christians that Paul even warned Timothy, a man of God, to avoid it like the plague. "Flee also youthful lusts; but pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart" (2 Tim. 2:22.).

How many young Christians have fallen into great sexual sins because they blindly accepted the dating system; because they did not consider the danger of entering into temptation and the sinfulness of inward lust? How many believers have been scarred for life by following the world's method instead of Scripture? There have been many Christians who have backslid, fallen into grievous sexual sins, repented and been restored. Note, however, that the pain, suffering, and trauma that are the consequences of sin can last for many years, even a lifetime. "You will never find David dancing after his sin with Bathsheba. Not he; there was not dance in him after that! He limped to the day of his death" (C. H. Spurgeon). Sexual attraction is natural and normal. God made us with the ability to respond in this way. So, those raised in Christian homes shouldn't be fooled into thinking they won't be tempted in a dating situation. "Let him who thinks he stands, take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12). "A prudent man foresees evil and hides himself, but the simple pass on and are punished" (Prov. 22:3). "He who trusts in his own heart is a fool, But whoever walks wisely will be delivered" (Prov. 28:26).

(2) Another particularly troublesome aspect of the dating paradigm is that believers are trained to confuse lust and strong emotions with genuine biblical love. When a Christian young man takes out a young woman and causes her to lust and sin by necking and so forth he is not expressing biblical love, for true love obeys God's law. "Love...does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth" (1 Cor. 13:4-6). "This is love, that we walk according to His commandments" (2 Jn. 6). When a Christian couple engage in "making out" and "heavy petting" they are stepping outside of lawful behavior, imitating the pagan world, and are not acting in each other's best interest which is to serve Christ with the whole heart. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.... Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts" (Rom. 13:9-10, 13-14).

The Bible gives us a vivid picture of lustful passion as a substitute for true biblical love in the story of Amnon and Tamar in 2 Samuel 13. In this chapter the Bible uses the

word love in the common cultural sense to describe a strong infatuation based upon irrational, youthful, sexual lust. Tamar is an exceedingly beautiful virgin, but she is a chaperoned and well-guarded daughter of the king. Amnon, her half-brother who is consumed with sexual lust, comes up with a scheme to remove his sister's guardians and force her to have sexual intercourse. When they are alone, in the heat of passion Amnon reveals his wicked intention to Tamar. She is appalled. She says to him, "No, my brother, do not force me, for no such thing should be done in Israel. Do not do this disgraceful thing! And I, where could I take my shame? And as for you, you would be like one of the fools in Israel. Now therefore, please speak to the king; for he will not withhold me from you" (2 Sam. 13:12-13).

There are a number of important things to note from this chapter regarding our discussion of the unbiblical nature of modern recreational dating. First, note that Tamar properly assumes that in the area of sexual conduct there should be a clear distinction between God's covenant people and the surrounding pagan nations (v. 12). She also properly identifies any Israelite who engages in premarital sex as a fool (v. 13). Second, note the great difficulty that it takes to get alone with a young virgin in Israelite society. The Bible assumes that young men and women should never be alone together until they are married. Unmarried virgins in biblical society are protected from predatory men. They are guarded by competent moral chaperones. Such protection is the responsibility of the father.

Third, note that an infatuation which flows from sexual lust is impatient and fleeting. Amnon did not follow lawful procedures of biblical courtship because he wanted immediate gratification. Once his sinful lust was gratified, Amnon's infatuation turned into revulsion and hatred (v. 15). He used her for sexual pleasure and then cast her aside. Blaikie writes, "If anything more was needed to show the accomplished villainy of Amnon, it is his treatment of Tamar after he has violently compassed her ruin. It is the story so often repeated even at this day, -the ruined victim flung aside in dishonour, and left unpitied to her shame. There is no trace of any compunction on the part of Amnon at the moral murder he has committed, at the life he has ruined; no pity for the once blithe and happy maiden whom he has doomed to humiliation and woe. She has served his purpose, king's daughter though she is; let her crawl into the earth like a poor worm to live or to die, in want or in misery; it is nothing to him."¹ Note that the so-called love of the world with its lust, sexual immorality, deceptive words of affection and defrauding of gullible young women is antinomian to the core. In reality, it is hatred, humiliation and degradation masquerading as love. The modern dating paradigm serves the false worldly concept of love to a tee. "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world- he lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life -is not of the Father but is of the world" (1 Jn. 2:15-16).

(3) Modern recreational dating is unbiblical because it trains young people to take male-female covenant relationships lightly. With modern dating the goal of the relationship is first personal pleasure (i.e. having a lot of fun); then second, developing romantic feelings and strong emotions; then third (in some cases) the making of some sort of commitment (e.g., going steady). At this point in the relationship, however, the commitment is only one of restricting pleasurable activities (going out, sexual

¹ W. G. Blaikie, *The Second Book of Samuel* (Minneapolis, MN: Klock and Klock, 1978 (1893), 197-198.

gratification, etc.) to each other. Engagement or betrothal is only a future possibility at best. Note, that this so-called dating commitment can be dissolved by either party at any time for any reason whatsoever without any negative civil or social consequences.

Given the fact that the goal of dating is essentially self-centered and hedonistic and that the dating commitment can be broken for any reason at any time, we should not be surprised to find that Americans may have had five, ten, or even twenty “serious” relationships before they become married. Someone might ask, “What is wrong with that?” “Isn’t it a good policy to test drive the many cars before making a decision to buy one?” The problem with the modern dating paradigm is that: (1) It trains young people to have a pleasure-oriented, selfish (self-fulfillment) concept of marriage instead of the biblical God-centered, kingdom (dominion) oriented, service-oriented concept of marriage. When men or women make their own self-fulfillment through emotions and pleasures the foundation of the marriage relationship there is no solid foundation for a lasting (truly satisfying) godly marriage. (2) When people are married after several relationships in which the commitment was broken for any reason no matter how small, men and women are trained (habituated) to deal with problems in the marriage relationship (even petty things such as sexual boredom, a lack of strong emotions, putting on some weight, etc.) by getting a divorce. The dating system is one of the main reasons why America has such a scandalously high divorce rate. Young people have been trained to treat divorce as not a big deal, as an easy and acceptable solution to marital problems.

(4) The main reason that Christians must reject the modern dating paradigm is that it violates the biblical teaching regarding covenant headship. The Bible teaches that the father (and parents) has a biblical responsibility to guard and preserve a girl’s virginity until marriage. The father also has a responsibility to exercise oversight regarding finding a suitable Christian mate for a son or a daughter. The dating system leaves both of these responsibilities in the hands of a son or a daughter. As dating is practiced in modern America the most a father may require is to meet the boy who is about to take his daughter on a date. Thus, a father turns his own daughter over to a complete stranger on the basis of external appearance, a greeting and a handshake. Only the daughter really knows what kind of person she is dealing with. If this daughter is emotionally, romantically and sexually involved with a wicked, worthless fellow she will do everything she can to withhold the truth about him from her parents. The dating paradigm takes the process of finding a life partner out of the hands of Christian parents who are experienced, wise, spiritually mature and the guardians of a covenant child’s virginity and places this process in the hands of inexperienced, (often) naive, spiritual babies or children with raging hormones (i.e. adult bodies with adolescent minds). Recreational dating violates and destroys the foundation of the biblical family authority structure.

Parental Authority

The idea that parents (in particular fathers) are to exercise authoritative hands-on oversight over a son or daughter’s courtship process is so foreign to evangelicals today that an examination of the biblical evidence for this assertion is in order. There are many sections of Scripture that deal with a father’s authority in this area, particularly when discussing daughters. The Bible teaches that fathers are to give their daughters in

marriage. The giving of a daughter presupposes that a father has the authority to either approve or forbid the marriage of a daughter to a certain man. In other words choosing a spouse is not an autonomous decision on the part of the daughter. Even in the very first marriage God the creator and Father of Adam and Eve “brought her to the man” (Gen. 2:22). Obviously God’s giving of Eve to Adam served as a divine pattern for earthly fathers. This truth is confirmed by passages such as Psalm 78:63, which speaks of God’s judgment by killing daughters before they can be given in marriage by their fathers. “The fire consumed their young men, and their maidens were not given in marriage.”

When Paul takes up the subject of virgins in a time of distress (i.e. persecution) in 1 Corinthians, he instructs fathers that allowing daughters to marry is not sinful. He writes, “But if any man thinks he is behaving improperly toward his virgin [daughter], if she is past the flower of youth, and thus it must be, let him do what he wishes. He does not sin; let them marry. Nevertheless he who stands steadfast in his heart, having no necessity, but has power over his own will, and has so determined in his heart that he will keep his virgin, does well. So then he who gives her in marriage does well, but he who does not give her in marriage does better” (7:36-38). Hodge writes, “Though the apostle regarded marriage at that time as inexpedient, he tells fathers that they were perfectly free to exercise their own judgment in giving their daughters in marriage or keeping them single.”² The word translated as improperly or unseemly (*aschmone*) can be translated as passive thus meaning that the father believes his decision not to allow his virgin daughter to marry (thus far) brings disgrace to him or even more likely his daughter. The point of this passage is that Paul (under divine inspiration) places the decision to give or not to give in marriage squarely in the hands of the father. Therefore, one can not argue that such a procedure was only an ancient Jewish custom or one that belonged to a former dispensation. It applies to all new covenant believers.

The teaching of covenant headship is clearly presented in the discussion of vows made by women in the book of Numbers: “Or if a woman makes a vow to the LORD, and binds herself by some agreement while in her father’s house in her youth, and her father hears her vow and the agreement by which she has bound herself, and her father holds his peace, then all her vows shall stand, and every agreement with which she has bound herself shall stand. But if her father overrules her on the day that he hears, then none of her vows nor her agreements by which she has bound herself shall stand; and the LORD will release her, because her father overruled her” (Num. 30:3-5). Unmarried girls living at home are subject to their father’s authority even in the area of vows or religious obligations. “The unmarried female child was under the special care of her father, who would protect her interests until she had a husband to care and provide for her. A man’s oversight of his daughter’s activities included ensuring that she did not make rash promises or enter into agreements that she was unable to honor.”³ It even extended to vows or disagreements that the father considered unwise or imprudent. Although this section of Scripture would be viewed as dictatorial and sexist by modern culture we must not lose sight of the fact that headship laws are an expression of God’s love and concern for girls and women. They are to receive protection under the wise, knowledgeable

² Charles Hodge, *I and II Corinthians* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1974 [1857, 59]), 132.

³ R. K. Harrison, *Numbers* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1990), 377.

direction of a loving father or husband. “It is only an emasculated modern liberalism which would reverse this divinely appointed order of nature....”⁴

In verses 6 and 7 the exact same rules apply to a woman who has taken a husband. The covenantal authority that the father exercised over his daughter is transferred to her husband the day they are married. If the husband hears his wife’s vow (the text implies an obligation on the part of the daughters and wives to reveal vows and agreements to their covenantal head.) he has one day to either nullify it or ratify it. Note that Scripture does not allow the covenantal head to abandon his responsibility for even his silence shall suffice to ratify a daughter’s or wife’s vow. “The clear implication of these laws about women’s vows is that a wife’s duty to submit to her husband is comparable to the child’s duty to obey his parents (cf. 3-5). Neither wives nor children may substitute self-imposed religious obligations for God-given duties.”⁵

In verse 9 we learn that divorced women and widows are considered independent heads by God. “Also any vow of a widow or a divorced woman, by which she has bound herself, shall stand against her” (Num 30:9). This means that a lawfully divorced woman or a widow is not required to seek permission and guidance from a father if she desires to remarry. Paul’s teaching is in total agreement with the law. “A wife is bound by law as long as her husband lives; but if her husband dies, she is at liberty to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord” (1 Cor. 7:39). Lydia is an excellent example of a woman who is either divorced or widowed that is treated as a head of a household by Scripture. “She and her household were baptized” (Ac. 16:15). What this means is that children raised by a divorced or widowed mother that have not remarried must submit to their mother as the covenant head. In such cases the mother is responsible to oversee biblical courtship procedures.

The main purpose of this discussion of covenant headship is to prove from Scripture that daughters (who are not married, divorced or widowed) do not have a period of independence from their fathers after turning eighteen or twenty-one prior to being give to a man in marriage. The implications of this teaching for Christian families are manifold. First, it meant that daughters should live at home until they get married. A young unmarried woman who leaves home to get her own apartment is leaving behind the protection of her covenant head. Although her motives may be noble and her reasons well-considered such a move is clearly unscriptural. Second, the common American practice (even by Christian parents) of sending daughter off to colleges or universities to live in dormitories is unbiblical. Such practices not only open young women up to exploitation and various temptations, but also teach young ladies to live and act independently before marriage. The practice of sending out unmarried daughters has resulted in multitudes of professing young Christian women losing their virginity before marriage and has trained many thousands of women to become implicit (and even explicit) feminists through unauthorized independence. That many Christian girls have survived independence and college life successfully does not detract from the fact that such behavior is contrary to Scripture. As believers we must think and behave biblically, not pragmatically. Further, the statistics for premarital sex among the men and women

⁴ John Peter Lange, *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Critical Doctrinal Homiletical* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1960), 2:163.

⁵ Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981), 208.

who attend evangelical Christian colleges are appalling. They are only slightly less than secular institutions.

Another passage which sets forth the father's responsibility to guard, protect or fence his own daughter from sexual immorality by acting as a covenant head is found in Deuteronomy 22:13-21:

If any man takes a wife, and goes in to her, and detests her, and charges her with shameful conduct, and brings a bad name on her, and says, "I took this woman, and when I came to her I found she was not a virgin," then the father and mother of the young woman shall take and bring out the evidence of the young woman's virginity to the elders of the city at the gate. And the young woman's father shall say to the elders, "I gave my daughter to this man as wife, and he detests her. Now he has charged her with shameful conduct, saying, 'I found your daughter was not a virgin,' and yet these are the evidences of my daughter's virginity." And they shall spread the cloth before the elders of the city. Then the elders of that city shall take that man and punish him; and they shall fine him one hundred shekels of silver and give them to the father of the young woman, because he has brought a bad name on a virgin of Israel. And she shall be his wife; he cannot divorce her all his days. But if the thing is true, and evidences of virginity are not found for the young woman, then they shall bring out the young woman to the door of her father's house, and the men of her city shall stone her to death with stones, because she has done a disgraceful thing in Israel, to play the harlot in her father's house. So you shall put away the evil from among you.

This passage sets forth the legal process and penalty in a case in which a husband accuses his wife of "shameful conduct." Specifically the man accuses the woman of not being a virgin at the time of consummation of their marriage. This would mean (if the charge was true) that the woman was guilty of two serious offenses. First, she would be guilty of sexual immorality before marriage (i.e. She committed fornication in her father's house, v. 21). Second, she would be guilty of fraud (i.e. she convinced her suitor that she was a virgin when she knew that she was not). We are told that if the man in such a case is found to have lied that he is to be punished (The Hebrew word [*yissr*] probably indicates the man is to be whipped or flogged.)⁶; and, then fined one hundred pieces of silver. This amount is twice the required amount of one who seduces an unbetrothed virgin (cf. Dt. 22:29). The money is to be given to his wife's father. The man also forfeits the right of divorce. This severe punishment reflects the wickedness of slandering one's own wife. If, however, the wife is found guilty she is to be stoned to death in front of her father's house.

This section of Scripture tells us a number of things regarding the role of fathers (and parents) as the custodian and protector of their children. First, note that the father of the woman presents to the court the tokens of his daughter's virginity. The "tokens of virginity" refers to the bloodstained cloth resulting from the first sexual union of the married couple.⁷ A daughter of Israel was expected to remain chaste until marriage. The

⁶ According to Josephus, *Antiquities* (iv 8.23), "he received the legal 'forty stripes save one'" (Samuel Rolles Driver, Deuteronomy [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986], 256.)

⁷ Some more recent commentators have taken the position that the evidence of a girl's virginity was blood stained cloths proving menstruation immediately before marriage; thus, indicating the bride was not pregnant at the time of the wedding. Given the quite fallible nature of such evidence and the fact that the practice of parents saving the blood-stained linen sheets after the first sexual union of a bride and groom

fact that the parents were responsible to preserve the tokens of virginity indicates that they have a biblical duty to raise their children in a manner so as to preserve their chastity. Second, the fine of 100 shekels of silver is paid to the father of the accused woman. Why is the money paid to the father and not the slandered woman? Although the charge was brought against the woman, it is her father's reputation (as the one responsible to protect and preserve his daughter's virginity) which is particularly at stake. Thus, the guilty man must pay for the scandal and dishonor brought upon his wife's former covenant head.

Third, the woman (if guilty) is executed in front of her father's house. Why in front of her father's house and not by the gate of the city? The answer is that the father, as the woman's covenant head prior to her marriage, is held in some sense responsible for his daughter's wicked behavior. "The location of the execution points to the shame resting on the family.... By committing fornication in her father's house-the sense is not that the act was done literally in the house (though it could have been), but that the woman was guilty of fornication while still resident in the family home, before her marriage. Her act was tantamount to making the family a 'house of ill-repute.'"⁸ The place of punishment presupposes that even though the father was very likely unaware of his daughter's sexual activities while living at home, he must still bear the shame because he failed to properly protect and fence his daughter from such behavior. Therefore, one can infer that fathers who allow their daughters to engage in recreational dating are (according to Scripture) guilty of gross negligence.

The responsibility of the father is also set forth in Exodus 22:16-17: "If a man entices a virgin who is not betrothed, and lies with her, he shall surely pay the bride-price for her to be his wife. If her father utterly refuses to give her to him, he shall pay money according to the bride-price of virgins." The virgin in this case is both unmarried and unbetrothed (i.e. unengaged). Since her behavior does not involve the breaking of a covenantal vow, her punishment does not merit the death penalty.

There are a number of things to note in this passage which relate to the serious nature of fornication (as a sin and a crime) and the father's central role in dealing with such behavior in a daughter. First, premarital sex between unbetrothed parties according to biblical law has virtually the same effect as making a private vow of betrothal. North writes, "The consent of the girl to her seduction is the equivalent of her private betrothal. She takes a binding covenant vow with the seducer by means of her body. The seducer does the same with his body. She implicitly agrees to marry the seducer, and he implicitly agrees to marry her. Neither of them has the option of breaking the vow."⁹ Second, God's law requires the male seducer to take full responsibility for his behavior. He must either marry the girl or if her father refuses, pay a large cash settlement (*mhar*-the bride price) to him. The bride price was such a large monetary penalty (fifty pieces of silver) that it is likely that the guilty man in such a case would end up serving a few years doing hard labor as an indentured servant, unless his parents were able and willing to put up the

was the general practice throughout the Middle East (e.g., Syria, Palestine, the Arabs and the Moors), the older more common interpretation should not be abandoned (see John Gill, *An Exposition of the Old Testament* [Streamwood, IL: Primitive Baptist Library, 1979] 2:95-96; and Samuel Rolles Driver, *Deuteronomy*, 255]).

⁸ P. C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 293.

⁹ Gary North, *Tools of Dominion: The Case Laws of Exodus* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990), 645.

money. Such a law (if strictly enforced) would suppress sexual immorality in society. Men involved in fornication would either immediately become married or they would have to pay (in today's dollars) around thirty thousand dollars to the girl's father. Such a law would virtually eliminate the predatory male from society. Note that biblical law, unlike feministic and secular humanistic law, does not allow the exploitation of women by men.

Third, this law requires the girl to immediately tell her father of her fornication. God's law leaves her no other choice. She must either inform her father or suffer dreadful consequences. A woman (according to Scripture) who does not tell and thus accepts sexual intercourse outside of marriage is biblically designated a whore. North writes,

The daughter's original consent to the act of seduction does not itself constitute whoredom. Her failure to tell her father immediately of the seduction is what constitutes her whoredom, for whoredom (as distinguished from adultery) is defined biblically as sexual bonding apart from a marriage vow. If she accepts the legitimacy of her sexual union apart from a marriage vow, then she has become a whore. She had taken the vow implicitly by her consent to the act, but her unwillingness to tell her father of the act constituted her vow and thereby establishes her covenantally as a whore.

She remains "in her father's house" (Num. 30:16), and under his covenantal jurisdiction, yet she is no longer a virgin. The presence of this unannounced non-virgin daughter brings a disgrace on her house and on Israel when she is discovered. Because she has willfully broken her covenantal bond with her father, but has refused to acknowledge her implicit vow with her seducer, biblical law considers her a whore. The capital penalty can subsequently be imposed if she marries another man who has been asked to pay a bride price to her father, if the new husband immediately decides to prosecute her (Dt. 22:13-19).¹⁰

While modern American culture has largely accepted premarital sex as a normal part of dating and growing up, God regards such behavior as wicked and criminal. Unrepentant fornicators are to be excommunicated from the church (1 Cor. 5:1-7, 9-11) and treated as habitual incorrigible criminals by the state (Dt. 23:17; Lev. 19:29; 21:9).

Fourth, the father is the lawful prosecutor of the seducer and determines the fate of his own daughter. No matter how much the daughter may proclaim her love and devotion toward the seducer, the father is the one who will decide whether the sinful act will result in marriage or the payment of the bride price. Unmarried daughters are under the covenantal jurisdiction of their fathers. The father is to act in the best interests of his daughter, family, church and community. God places this crucial decision in the hands of the covenant head, who is to be objective, wise, and discerning. The father is not influenced by infatuation, sexual attraction, romantic feelings or emotions. His sole concern should be the glory of God and Christ's kingdom. If the seducer has a prior record of sinful behavior and is not a solid Christian the father will be detached and wise enough to send the young man away.

The biblical teaching regarding daughters is explicit: all women who are not lawfully divorced (i.e. their husbands are covenantally dead through adultery or desertion) or widowed are always subordinated to a man, either a father or husband. The father is responsible to oversee, guard and direct his daughter into a lawful, godly

¹⁰ Ibid., 646.

marriage. This procedure involves fencing her chastity by providing God-fearing chaperones so that his daughter is never in a situation where fornication could occur.

The biblical teaching on this subject raises some important questions regarding our modern culture and certain unusual exceptions. First, what are Christian women to do who do not have Christian parents and who are already independent? In our post-Christian pagan culture it is assumed that young ladies will get to a certain age, get a job, move out of the house and form an independent household. There are many thousands of young women who converted to Christ after they moved out and became independent. This is a difficult question. If a young believing woman has Christian parents or parents who through common grace lead outwardly moral lives and are not openly antithetical to Christianity (cf. Mt. 10:35-36), it would be wise (from a scriptural standpoint) to move back home while seeking a Christian husband. If a woman's parents are obviously evil and would attempt to prohibit a Christian daughter from attending a truly Reformed church or from marrying a Christian man she should not move home and should turn to the church for help. The idea that an unbelieving father can prohibit his Christian daughter from attending a good church or from marrying a godly man is blatantly unscriptural. Fathers are not Popes. All earthly authorities are required to submit to Jesus Christ and His law-word. Under such circumstances a Christian woman should move in with other believing women or with a Christian family who can serve as chaperones. If available, a good solution would be for young unmarried women to live with a godly servant widow of the church (Rom. 16:1-2; 1 Tim. 3:11; 5:9-10). The widow would serve as a surrogate head under the authority of the elders of the church. In today's situation the church needs to repent of its blind acceptance of unbiblical family and marital customs and return to the covenantal model of Scripture. Without Christian parents, men and women must turn to the church as the covenantal screening agent and guardian in the search for prospective marriage partners. This will not occur until there is a reformation in covenantal thinking and a return to biblical law.

A second question involves whether there are women who have the gift of remaining single. Paul certainly leaves open this possibility in 1 Corinthians. "There is a difference between a wife and a virgin. The unmarried woman cares about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit. But she who is married cares about the things of the world — how she may please her husband. And this I say for your own profit, not that I may put a leash on you, but for what is proper, and that you may serve the Lord without distraction" (7:34-35). In this passage the apostle is not advocating asceticism or asserting that virgins are somehow spiritually superior to married women. He is simply pointing out that women who are unmarried do not have divided interests. Therefore, they can devote more of their time to Christ's service because they are not distracted by household duties. "The present excellence of celibacy for the virgin arises from the greater facility of life which will procure for her; and to this advantage another is added, which belongs to the state of celibacy in general: the perfect simplicity of the task for which the unmarried Christian lives."¹¹ Apparently, if a young woman has a desire to remain unmarried and her father concurs (cf. 1 Cor. 7:36-38) the woman can stay single her entire life. Although some scholars argue that Paul is only discussing a situation applicable to the present crisis at Corinth (i.e. persecution, economic hardship, etc.) and that marriage is a normal preferred state for all men and

¹¹ Frederic Louis Godet, *Commentary on First Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1977), 387.

women, the apostle's statement does have application outside of crisis situations. Further, it is a historical reality that there are some Christian women who never do marry.¹² Such a woman would remain under the father's authority until he died and would live with Christian family members or other believing women. It is unseemly and somewhat dangerous for an unmarried woman to live alone. In any case, we are dealing with rare exceptions that the Scriptures do not explicitly address. The best we can do in such situations is to make logical inferences from clearer portions of Scripture. The worst thing we can do is to uncritically accept modern humanistic customs.¹³

When the Bible discusses parental authority as it relates to daughters it is very clear. A daughter is under her father's authority until she is "given in marriage" and moves into a new household with her husband, her new covenant head. We have noted that the practice of young single women moving out of their parents' homes to set up independent households is unscriptural. In fact there is not a single historical example from Scripture of a godly virgin woman living out on her own in the entire Bible.

This discussion brings us to the question of the status of adult non-married sons. What is their status? Is it different from that of adult daughters? Should adult sons move out of the house and set up independent households before they get married? These questions are not as easily answered as the ones regarding daughters. The word of God is not as explicit in its treatment of sons as it is for daughters. There is genuine disagreement among scholars in this area.

Although this is a difficult topic, it is our contention that the Scriptures give sons a certain measure of parent sanctioned and directed freedom that is not given to adult daughters. Before we examine the biblical evidence for this claim it would be helpful to note some of the likely reasons that the Bible treats young men and young women differently. First, unlike sons, daughters under normal circumstances will always function under a covenant head. In Numbers 30:3-16, special attention is given to the fact that husbands and father can disallow vows made by wives and daughters. Nothing is said regarding sons. Second, the Bible identifies women as the "weaker vessel" (1 Pet. 3:7). Therefore, it is logical that they receive greater care and protection than men. Further, given the nature and role of men as initiators and the sexual predatory nature of pagan men as a result of the fall, women receive greater protection under biblical law. Suitors are to approach the father of the girl. They can only court a woman within the father's covenantal fence. In Scripture we never encounter women approaching the parents of a man. It is always the other way around.

¹² In 1 Timothy 5:14 Paul instructs younger widows to get married, bear children and manage the house. This passage has been used to argue that all younger women should get married and raise a family. This would appear to contradict Paul's advocacy of the unmarried state for virgins in 1 Corinthians 7:34-35. The Timothy passage could be used to support the contention that the 1 Corinthians passage is limited to periods of crises. Such a view, however, is unnecessary when we consider the fact that young widows and virgins are not the same thing. Widows were at one time married and thus do not (at least at a younger age) have the gift of remaining celibate. Virgins on the other hand have never been married and thus in extremely rare cases can remain single without the natural desire for a husband and children.

¹³ Some scholars have argued that the fact that the girls are baptized in the New Covenant era while only boys were circumcised under the Old Testament dispensation means (that apart from women holding positions of authority in the church and speaking during public worship) girls and boys now have identical status. This position should be rejected because: (1) It is based on an assumption without any solid inferences. (2) The Old Testament laws concerning covenant headship and the status of women and daughters reflects creational reality (i.e., creation ordinances). They are not arbitrary or positivistic.

The idea that adult non-married Christian men have a certain measure of parent-controlled freedom is based on the fact that God-fearing parents can send their son away to find a godly spouse. In Genesis we read that Jacob was ordered to go to Padan Aram to find a wife by his father, Isaac. “Arise, go to Padan Aram, to the house of Bethuel your mother’s father; and take yourself a wife from there of the daughters of Laban your mother’s brother” (Gen. 28:2; cf. 29:15-20). Does this passage teach or imply that Christian sons should move out of the house and set up an independent household when they reach adulthood (e.g., 18 or 21)? No, not necessarily. Note, that Jacob was ordered to go for the purpose of finding a godly mate. The trip was made because of the need to marry a believing wife to perpetuate a godly seed. Therefore, the circumstances are at least partially extraordinary. Also, when Jacob arrives in Padan Aram he does not set up an independent household, but rather moves in with his uncle Laban. He served Laban and in a sense became part of his household. Although Jacob was given a certain amount of freedom by his father (e.g., the choice of a believing spouse is placed squarely in Jacob’s hands), he still lived and functioned under his parents’ authority. He did not constitute an independent covenant head until he married Leah. After his marriage to Leah and Rachel, his service to Laban was rendered as the payment of a debt (the bride price).

The idea of the single man out living on his own is foreign to both biblical revelation (with possible rare exceptions, i.e. a eunuch) and Puritan Christian society. Edmund S. Morgan writes, “Furthermore, since God had ordained that men live in families, the new government required them to do so. The selectmen of every town in Massachusetts had orders to dispose of all single persons ‘to servise, or otherwise.’ If a single man could not afford to hire servants and so set up a household or ‘family’ of his own, he was obliged to enter another family, either as a servant or as a boarder, subjecting himself to the domestic government of its head. His only freedom lay in the choice of families, and if he failed to make a choice, the selectmen would make it for him.”¹⁴

The proper time for the son to become an independent covenant head is clearly set forth in Genesis 2:24: “Therefore, a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife.” This passage teaches that sons are under the authority of parents until they get married. It assumes that the ordinary pattern is for men to leave home when they get married, not before. “Genesis 2:24 makes clear that a man shall leave his parental home and cleave unto his wife.”¹⁵ “Marriage calls for a move forward by the man and his wife; they break with the old families to create a new one.”¹⁶ John Gill writes, “...not that a man upon his marriage is to drop his affections to his parents, or be remiss in his obedience to them, honour of them, and esteem for them, if they stand in need of his assistance; but that he should depart from his father’s house, and no more dwell with him, or bed and board in his house; but having taken a wife to himself, should provide an

¹⁴ Edmond S. Morgan, *The Puritan Family* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966 [1944]), 27. The biblical concept of covenant headship may even be reflected in the Hebrew word translated as “children” - naarim. “Naarim actually refers to a broader category than children. All males who had not formed their own households are likely in view. However, the term also is used commonly for male servants” (Kerry Ptacek, *Family Worship: Biblical Basis, Historical Reality, Current Need* [Greenville, SC: The Southern Presbyterian Press, 1997 (1994)], 15).

¹⁵ Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, 344.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 167.

habitation for him and her to dwell together: so all the three Targums interpret it, of quitting the house of his father, and his mother's bed, and shall cleave unto his wife; with a cordial affection, taking care of her, nourishing and cherishing her, providing all things comfortable for her, continuing to live with her, and not depart from her as long as they live."¹⁷

The Hebrew word translated "will leave" (*ya'azobh*) is not simply referring to a change of location but also emphasizes a change of covenant loyalty. Many Hebrew scholars believe the Hebrew word *ya'azobh* should be translated "forsake." Hamilton writes, "Perhaps the most crucial element in this verse is the verbs it uses: forsakes and clings. The verb forsake frequently describes Israel's rejection of her covenant relationship with Yahweh (Jer. 1:16; 2:13, 17, 19; 5:7; 16:11; 17:13; 19:4; 22:9; many other examples from the Old Testament could be cited). By contrast, the verb cling often designates the maintenance of the covenant relationship (Dt. 4:4; 10:20; 11:22; 13:5 [Eng. 4]; 30:20). Thus, to leave father and mother and cling to one's wife means to sever one loyalty and commence another."¹⁸ Given the fifth commandment and the biblical teaching regarding children's responsibility toward their parents in their time of need (e.g., old age; cf. 1 Tim. 5:4, 8, 16), the forsaking of father and mother is to be understood in a relative, not an absolute sense. (This point explains English translators' preference for the translation "shall leave" over the more literal rendering "forsake.") "On marriage a man's priorities change. Beforehand his first obligations are to his parents: afterwards they are to his wife. In modern Western societies where filial duties are often ignored, this may seem a minor point to make, but in traditional societies like Israel where honoring parents is the highest human obligation next to honoring God, this remark forsaking them is very striking."¹⁹

According to Scripture the unmarried son is still under the covenantal authority of his parents. However, unlike daughters, adult sons have more parent supervised freedom. Given the Scripture passages which speak to this issue, the Puritan practice of sending adult sons to live with godly friends or relatives to attend college or study a trade is much more in accordance with biblical teaching than the modern practice of unmarried sons setting up an independent household. (This statement is not an endorsement of the New England Puritan practice of sending children [e.g., ages 12 to 15] off to live and learn a trade as an apprentice. Such a practice was harmful to children and led to declension in Puritan society.) As Bible believing Christians we must base our courtship practices, laws and marriage customs upon Scripture alone and not our modern pagan culture.

Lastly, there are some practical reasons for the son to stay at home until he is married. He can save money for a home of his own instead of throwing away money on rent. During courtship, the young couple will not have the temptation of going to the man's apartment unsupervised. It is also easier for the woman he is courting to evaluate the young man's family and his relationship to them when he is still living at home.

¹⁷ John Gill, *Exposition of the Old Testament* (Streamwood, IL: Primitive Baptist Library, 1979 [1810]), 1:21.

¹⁸ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis 1-17* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 180-181.

¹⁹ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 71.

Basic Principles of Courtship

In biblical courtship, the Christian father has a responsibility to oversee the process of finding a mate for a son or a daughter. This process is a rejection of both the modern dating system and arranged marriages where a son or daughter have no say or input whatsoever in the selection process. Although the parents clearly have the authority to say no to a relationship there is no biblical evidence for a father ordering a daughter or son to marry someone. Rushdoony writes, “Marriage in Scripture is the voluntary union of two persons, a man and a woman, in wedlock; although marriages were commonly arranged, consent was also secured. Without consent, the union is always in effect rape. Calvin and Luther both stressed the fact of mutual consent as necessary to a valid marriage in their discussion of the Jacob-Leah episode. The question can be raised then as to why Jacob accepted Leah. The answer is clearly that he was in a coercive situation. He had been shamed and taken advantage of by Laban, who knew that Jacob had no legal recourse as a stranger. In a sense, it was rape of Jacob, who could do nothing except protest or run away, but could not exert his legal rights successfully.”²⁰

Fathers can only order a marriage in the case of fornication between unmarried/betrothed persons of the opposite sex (cf. Ex. 22:16-17). A possible exception to the statement that the Bible does not condone arranged marriages (in which a son or daughter has no input) would be the case of Abraham’s involvement in finding a wife for his son Isaac (cf. Gen. 24). A careful examination of this story, however, reveals that the circumstances surrounding finding a mate for Isaac were very unusual and thus necessitated improvisation on Abraham’s part.

Abraham and his family were living in a strange land completely surrounded by a grossly heathen culture. Therefore, Abraham recognized that the only suitable place to find a wife for his son Isaac would be among his God-fearing relatives in Aram-Naharim. The patriarch, however, does not send Isaac back to his native land but rather sends his servant. Abraham was guarding his own son from both intermarriage and emigration to his native land. “If Isaac is to inherit the land, he must not marry among those destined to disinherit the land. Nor must Isaac disinherit himself [from God’s covenant promises] by

²⁰ R. J. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), 401. The Westminster Standards’ (1647) *Directory for the Public Worship of God* emphasizes that the parties involved in a marriage must be fit and free to make their own choice in the matter. It also emphasizes the importance of obtaining (under normal circumstances) parental consent. It reads, “Marriage is to be betwixt one man and one woman only; and they, such as are not within the degrees of consanguinity or affinity prohibited by the word of God; and the parties are to be of years of discretion, fit to make their own choice, or, upon good grounds, to give their mutual consent. Before the solemnizing of marriage between any persons, their purpose of marriage shall be published by the minister three several sabbath-days, in the congregation, at the place or places of their most usual and constant abode, respectively. And of this publication the minister who is to join them in marriage shall have sufficient testimony, before he proceed to solemnize the marriage. Before that publication of such their purpose, (if the parties be under age,) the consent of the parents, or others under whose power they are, (in case the parents be dead,) is to be made known to the church officers of that congregation, to be recorded. The like is to be observed in the proceedings of all others, although of age, whose parents are living, for their first marriage. And, in after marriages of either of those parties, they shall be exhorted not to contract marriage without first acquainting their parents with it (if with conveniency it may be done), endeavoring to obtain their consent. Parents ought not to force their children to marry without their free consent, nor deny their own consent without just cause.”

repatriation to Mesopotamia.”²¹ The extraordinary circumstances surrounding finding a mate for Isaac are indicated further by Abraham’s declaration of faith/prophecy that Jehovah “will send His angel before you, and you shall take a wife for my son from there” (Gen. 24:7).

The biblical evidence for courtship over dating or an arranged marriage without the child’s consent is found in the following: (1) Contra modern dating, Abraham considers it his responsibility to find a good wife for his son, Isaac. (2) However, (contra arranged marriage) Abraham assumes the woman has a choice in the matter when he says, “If the woman is not willing to follow you, then you will be released from this oath.” (3) Biblical courtship is supported by the fact that permission from this girl’s father is first sought and obtained before the girl (Rebekah) proceeds to Canaan (cf. Gen. 24:50-51). Godly Abraham did not leave the finding of a suitable mate for his son to chance, dating or romance, but took an active role in finding a godly mate for his son and thereby ensured continuance of a godly seed.

As we examine the courtship process there are certain principles or rules that need to be considered.

(1) Courtship procedures are not to begin until a son or daughter is ready and expresses a desire to get married. Fourteen, fifteen or sixteen year-olds should not be concerned about courtship or having boyfriends or girlfriends or finding dates. They should be preparing for marriage, studying, training and working on personal sanctification. Once a Christian family rejects the unbiblical concept of recreational dating they understand that finding a mate for a son or daughter is serious business. They are looking for a life partner not a temporary friend or playmate. Given these considerations, there is simply no reason for a young teenage boy or girl to concern themselves with having a one-on-one relationship with the opposite sex. There is nothing wrong with families having fellowship and young boys and young girls getting to know each other in a public family setting. However, there should be no pairing off, emotional commitment or romantic ideas until young men and women are ready to get married. Godly families can network with other dedicated Christian families in order to consider potential mates for a son or a daughter. However, they don’t get down to business until the time is right.

Although biblical courtship is a process that should only begin when a son or daughter are ready to get married, Christian parents should be preparing their children for marriage throughout their childhood and young adult life. The training of boys and girls in many areas will be quite different in order to reflect the different duties between husbands and wives.

A son must receive training regarding the nature of marriage and his biblical duties as a husband and father. This training will involve many areas. First, a son must be instructed in the scriptural teaching regarding headship. What does it mean to be a loving leader? What are the responsibilities of husbands and fathers? A son must be taught and equipped to lead a family. Although because of sin many women may desire a man that refuses to lead and who is irresponsible, godly parents must instill in sons covenant masculinity. This will involve careful instruction and setting a biblical example. As we noted in our discussion of the duties of husbands, a failure to teach and lead by example in this area has resulted in a feministic influence on the church and society.

²¹ Victor Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis* Chapters 18-50, 140.

Second, a son must be trained to support a family financially and must receive instruction in financial responsibilities. This responsibility is exhibited even before the fall. Note that Eve is created “only after Adam had proven himself responsible by discharging his duties faithfully and well. Responsibility is thus clearly a prerequisite to marriage for the man.”²² Rushdoony writes, “Man was required to know himself first of all in terms of his calling before he was given a help-meet, Eve. Thus, not until Adam, for an undefined but apparently extensive length of time, had worked at his calling, cared for the garden and come to know the creatures thereof, was he given a wife. We are specifically told that Adam named or classified all the animals, a considerable task, prior to the creation of Eve. However general and limited this classification was, it was still an accurate and over-all understanding of animal life. The Adam of Eden was thus a hard-working man in a world where the curse of sin had not yet infected man and his work.”²³

This responsibility is also taught by the dowry system. In the Old Testament a man had to give a girl’s father a bride price (the *mhar*) before the marriage took place. The bride price was a large sum of money that served a number of purposes. (1) It was a sort of insurance policy for the wife in case the husband died or turned out to be irresponsible and left. The father kept the money for his daughter so that she would not be impoverished if calamity occurred. (2) It also served as a sign of man’s financial responsibility. Today it would be the equivalent of a man having thirty thousand dollars in the bank as a down payment on a new house. Men who are slackers, who are irresponsible with money do not have that kind of money in the bank. The principle of the bride price is that a man must have his economic act together before he gets married. If a man would like to get married he needs to: a) determine his calling; b) finish his education; c) get a job; d) acquire a good amount of capital (i.e. savings, stocks, bonds, or real estate). Only then is he really prepared for marriage. The common occurrence today of women working their husbands through school is contrary to the biblical pattern. If a young man’s desire for marriage is strong then he should apply himself diligently to the task of financial responsibility (e.g., young Christian man can graduate from high school early, finish his bachelor’s degree in three years, get a masters degree and be ready for marriage by the age of twenty-four).

In our post-Christian culture unbelieving husbands and wives frequently fight regarding financial matters. This should not be the case among Christian couples. A believing wife should be able to focus on her responsibilities without worrying about money. Christian sons need to learn about the biblical teaching concerning debt. Although we do not want our sons to be selfish or misers they do need to understand the poverty mentality (i.e. the philosophy of instant gratification by spending or going into debt at the expense of future capital building and prosperity). Fathers should instill wisdom in their sons in this area and should protect daughters from financially irresponsible men.

Third, a son must be trained to lead a family theologically. It is a great mistake for fathers to leave the theological training of their children solely in the hands of the local church. The Bible places the chief responsibility of the doctrinal instruction of children in the hands of fathers (cf. Dt. 6:7 ff.). When parents train up a son they must keep in mind

²² R. J. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), 343.

²³ *Ibid.*

that they are training up a leader of the next generation. A man who does not have a grasp of the Scriptures, who cannot lead his family theologically is not ready for marriage. Believers must abandon the mentality which leaves doctrine and the task of godly dominion solely in the hands of church officers. The church officers (i.e. elders and pastors) are to “equip the saints for the work of ministry” (Eph. 4:12). Only a son who is equipped theologically will be able to handle all the various contingencies of marriage.

Fourth, a son must be trained to be responsible sexually. This point is an aspect of a child’s over-all training in sanctification. Sons must be taught self-control. Failure in this area is one of the major reasons for divorce today. We live in a culture obsessed with sexual images and sexual immorality. A son who is trained properly in this area should be automatically repulsed by fornication and adultery. Sons need to understand that truly great, satisfying sex is restricted to the marriage bed. Nothing should be engaged in (i.e. premarital sex, pornography, etc.) which can interfere with and detract from married sexual pleasure as it was intended to be by God. Men must be happy and content with their marriage partner.

Given the fact that marriage is for life and husbands are to be content with their wives and only derive sexual satisfaction from them, sons need to understand that physical attraction is desirable in a mate. One extreme places a great emphasis on looks without a proper consideration of other key areas such as personal godliness, intelligence and personality. Some professing Christian men, through the influence of our culture, think that they should only marry a ravishing beauty. The other extreme is that physical appearance should not even be a consideration. If a woman is godly and would make a great wife and mother then (according to this view) it would be wrong not to marry such a woman. The biblical view (which lies in between a self-centered hedonism and an implicit neo-platonism) is that physical beauty is a creation by God and is good. However, it must be something that is weighed in the overall context of a person’s Christian character. It is very clear that God views physical beauty as a blessing by the manner in which the Bible repeatedly informs us of the great physical beauty of the wives and daughters of men favored by God (e.g., Abraham’s Sarah, Gen. 12:11, 14; Isaac’s Rebekah, Gen. 24:16; Jacob’s Rachel, Gen 29:17; David’s Abigail, 1 Sam. 25:3; Mordecai’s cousin Esther, Esth. 2:7; Job’s daughters, Job 42:15). Sons need to be trained to consider the beauty of women in its proper context. Given the choice between a ravishing beauty who is a lukewarm Christian and a modestly pretty woman who is very godly, the second choice should always be preferred. A son who waits and waits for a stunning beauty will usually end up passing by many wonderful opportunities.

A son who has been trained for marriage (who is godly, theologically competent, financially prepared and responsible, who understands the nature of marriage and covenant headship) is a man who will be very attractive to a properly trained godly Christian woman. Such a man will rejoice in the wife of his youth, instead of spending a great deal of time figuring out how to make a living and be a Christian husband.

Parents also have a responsibility to prepare daughters for marriage. The preparation of daughters will reflect the duties of wives. There a number of areas that ought to be emphasized. The first area is more a preparation for the courtship process itself. Daughters need to be instructed in Christian discernment. Young women need to be instructed in a way so that they will not be naive and gullible when it comes to the trickery and deceit of men. Young women need a certain amount of sanctified street-

smarts in order to deal with all the contingencies of courtship. Although the father is to be a screening agent for his daughter, this does not mean that daughters have nothing to say in the process. They need to be familiar with common tactics of single men. They need to learn detachment and objectivity as they gather and analyze information regarding a potential suitor. Men who are very attracted to a young woman physically may attempt to by-pass a woman's fact-gathering process by appealing to her emotions. They may use flattery or romantic speech or physical attraction to attempt to disengage a woman's patient objectivity. A woman who has been properly trained will not be taken in by irrational appeals. A properly trained young woman will also know when to defer to her father if her emotions get ahead of her objective analysis. A daughter must know that she can immediately appeal to her father if she is confused or if she thinks something is not right. The father is there to protect, direct and instruct his daughters through the process. This covenant protection should be a great comfort to her. It becomes a godly habit. It becomes something that a young woman does not have to struggle with. A Christian woman who is submissive to her father will attract godly single men. Women who are unsubmitive and rebel against proper authority will drive away wise, godly suitors. "The contentions of a wife are a continual dripping" (Pr. 19:13). "Better to dwell in a corner of a housetop, than in a house shared with a contentious woman" (Pr. 21:9).

Third, daughters need to be trained in house management skills. Young women should not wait until they are married to learn about cooking, cleaning, babies, children and husbands. There is no greater or more important job on earth than raising children and managing a household. Although women are created by God with certain female desires and nurturing skills they do not learn homemaking by osmosis. They need guidance and instruction as they are growing up. This instruction is also to be learned through experience by observing a godly mother at work. If young mothers need instruction they can learn from older more experienced women at church. "The older women likewise, that they be reverent in behavior, not slanderers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things-that they admonish the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, homemakers, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be blasphemed" (Tit. 2:3-5).

Fourth, daughters need to be instructed in how to be attractive without being seductive. Our culture instructs young ladies to dress inappropriately. Many girls and young women dress themselves as sex objects, as females that are to be lusted after. If a young Christian woman imitates the world with a lot of make-up, mini skirts, low-cut blouses and so on, she will likely drive away the most godly suitors and instead will attract men who have the wrong priorities. Parents must only permit their daughters to dress in a modest fashion, and must clearly explain the biblical reasons for proper attire. Peter writes, "Do not let your adornment be merely outward-arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on fine apparel-rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God" (1 Pet. 3:3-4). If a woman wants to win a godly man, she must not dress in an ostentatious manner but rather must focus on inward beauty. She must work on making herself attractive within.

This point does not mean that women must wear sackcloth or dress themselves in black or grey. We know from other portions of Scripture (cf. Ez. 16:6-14; Gen. 23:47, 53; Song 4:10; Is. 49:18; 61:10; Jer. 2:32; Rev. 21:2) that God permits and even praises

outward female adornments. The Bible speaks in a favorable manner of perfumes, jewelry, nose rings, and beautiful attire. He does not expect Christian women to look ugly or to dress like orthodox Muslims. What God condemns is a woman who focuses on the outward, without giving proper consideration to inward sanctification. Jehovah condemns covenant women who imitate the world and dress like harlots.

Fifth, daughters need to be loved by their parents especially their fathers. Daughters that are neglected, that are starved for attention and affection often seek attention from men in unbiblical ways. When a daughter is small this seeking of attention from others may appear to be a minor nuisance. But when a daughter (who has not received proper affection or love) matures physically she may seek attention from unsavory young men (i.e. “lewd fellows of the baser sort”). Girls usually get their impressions of what a husband may or must be like from their own fathers. Therefore, it is very important that fathers model Christ by their loving leadership of the family and give proper affection to their children. This caution does not mean that daughters who have lousy parents have an excuse to sin. They most certainly do not. It also does not mean that the grace of God cannot overcome a neglectful pagan or hypocritical Christian household. Many churches have scores of wonderful godly Christian couples who came from “dysfunctional” pagan households. But, in general, daughters (as well as sons) need love and affection for proper development.

(2) Parents must only consider like-minded Christians as potential mates for a son or a daughter. This point means first of all that unbelievers should never be considered as potential mates for a covenant child. This is a common, prominent, explicit teaching of Scripture. In Genesis 24 we read that Abraham sent his servant to another country to find a God-fearing mate for his son. Leupold writes, “[T]he patriarch’s chief concern was to find a wife for Isaac who with him knew and believed in Yahweh and so would share with her husband a common faith and so allow for the deepest of all harmonies in the home, spiritual harmony. For again, only in a home where true spiritual harmony prevailed would the special heritage of Abraham be jealously guarded and faithfully transmitted to coming generations.”²⁴ In Deuteronomy 7:3-4 God warns the covenant people of the consequences of mixed marriages: “Nor shall you make marriages with them. You shall not give your daughter to their son, nor take their daughter for your son. For they will turn your sons away from following Me, to serve other gods; so the anger of the LORD will be aroused against you and destroy you suddenly.” God warns us that intermarriage with unbelievers is unlawful and dangerous. Such behavior led to the destruction of the pre-deluvian world (cf. Gen 6:2); and the syncretism of religion under Solomon which resulted in the division and eventual destruction of the Jewish nation (cf. 1 Ki. 11:4-14).

The New Testament reiterates this same teaching that Christians are to marry “only in the Lord” (1 Cor. 7:39). Paul writes, “Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God” (2 Cor. 6:14-16). This passage applies to all unlawful alliances with unbelievers and therefore prohibits marriage (the most

²⁴ H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis* (Columbus, OH: The Wartburg Press, 1942), 660.

permanent and intimate relationship possible) between Christians and the heathen.²⁵ Under such circumstances Christian harmony cannot flourish because two completely contrary and antithetical world-views will exist under the same roof. Also, the intimate fellowship involved with a pagan would almost certainly compromise a consistent Christian walk. Robert Shaw writes, “The Christian who unites himself to such a partner exposes himself to many powerful temptations. He must necessarily mingle in the society of those whose views and pursuits are of a character entirely opposite to his own. His opportunities of religious improvement will be greatly lessened. Family worship can scarcely be maintained. His endeavors to train up his children in the fear of God will be counteracted by the example and instructions of his unbelieving partner. Instead of an help-meet for him in his Christian warfare, she will prove a snare to his soul. From this cause, many have apostatized from the faith, and others who have maintained their integrity have pierced themselves through with many sorrows.”²⁶ “Can two walk together, unless they are agreed” (Am. 3:3). Further, children raised in such a home will be thoroughly confused regarding which parent’s world-view to follow.

The predominance of mixed faith marriages (e.g., Judaism and Romanism) in America is a reflection of the ethical relativism in our culture. Even though many people who marry come from different cultural and religious backgrounds, as public school indoctrinated Americans they often share a core world-view commitment to hedonism, materialism, and idolatrous self-worship. Therefore, their world and life views are really as not as far from each other as they appear.

This command not to be unequally yoked also applies to apostate and heretical forms of Christianity such as Roman Catholicism and Arminianism. The Westminster Confession speaks clearly and correctly regarding this issue. “[I]t is the duty of Christians to marry only in the Lord. And therefore such as profess the true Reformed religion should not marry with infidels, papists, or other idolaters: neither should such as are godly be unequally yoked, by marrying with such as are notoriously wicked in their life, or maintain damnable heresies” (24:3). Although it is possible for a papist or Arminian to be inconsistent with his or her own church’s teaching and still be a genuine Christian, it is our responsibility to act upon a person’s outward confession and walk. If a person truly

²⁵ H. Krabbendam writes, “Unless the husband and wife are believers in Jesus Christ, their marriage will shipwreck in the eyes of God. This is not only so because without Christ they will not be able to overcome the power of indwelling sin. This is the clear teaching of John 15:5 and Rom. 7:1-25. It is also because without the Christ they have no focal point for their conduct. Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands as an act of worship of and love to Christ! If you do not submit, do not tell me that you worship and love Christ. See also 1 John 4:20. Husbands, love your wives and show that by your sacrifice for them and your edification of them. If you refuse to do so, do not tell me that the love of Christ is in you. See also 1 John 4:17.

But furthermore, unless husband and wife are both members of his church, their marriage will equally shipwreck in the eyes of God. This is not only because in the church the husband sees a pattern of sacrifice of and edification by Christ and the wife a pattern of submission to Christ. It is also because in the church the husband and wife are under the rule, authority, provision and protection, of elders who will train them in the understanding of sacrificial and edifying love and leadership as well as in the understanding of cheerful and loving submission and obedience” (*A Biblical Pattern of Preparation for Marriage* [Lookout Mountain, TN: self published, n. d.], 5).

²⁶ Robert Shaw, *An Exposition of the Confessional of Faith of the Westminster Assembly of Divines* (Edmonton, AB, Canada: Still Water Revival Books, no date [1845]), 256.

believed in the gospel of God it is extremely unlikely that such a person would remain in a church which denies the biblical doctrine of salvation.

When people in Reformed churches marry Arminians (and such behavior is actually quite common), they are allowing the poison of false doctrine into their households. They are saying by their actions that biblical doctrine and even the truth of the gospel are really not that important. As Reformed believers who have professed the true gospel as taught by Christ and the apostles we should be obsessed with maintaining purity of doctrine in our households and churches (cf. Is. 8:20; Ac. 20:28-31; Rom. 16:17; 1 Tim. 1:3-4; 4:16; 6:3-4; 2 Tim. 4:2-4; Tit. 1:9; 2 Jn. 9-11; Col. 2:8, 20-23; etc). It is our duty to pass sound doctrine on to our children and future generations.

The father should protect his son or daughter by never permitting the courtship of unbelievers, Roman Catholics, Arminians and other dangerous heretics. Believers should never fall into the trap of thinking it is ok to court heretics and unbelievers with the hope that such people may change down the road. Like so-called “evangelistic dating” what often happens in such situations is that professing Christians get emotionally attached and comfortable with someone they have no business getting married to and end up making a wrong decision based on feelings instead of the Spirit-guided (i.e. through the study of the Word) intellect. Another great danger is that the unbeliever or damnable heretic may pretend to be a Christian in order to get married. The only biblical and safe policy is to stick to strict Reformed believers.

When a father considers potential mates among Reformed Christians it is important that the person being considered be like-minded theologically. Reformed “conservative” denominations are not what they used to be. Many issues need to be discussed before a betrothal takes place. For example: What are a person’s views regarding public schools, home schooling, Christian schools? If a potential husband believes that public schools are fine and intends to send his children to a state school, he should be rejected by a father immediately. What are a person’s views on worship? Obviously someone who holds to a strict interpretation of the regulative principle of worship (and therefore does not sing uninspired hymns, celebrate extra-biblical holy days or partake of human innovations in public worship [e.g., musical instruments, performances, children’s church, etc.]) should not marry someone who rejects biblical worship. What is a person’s view of God’s law? Many Reformed people today are implicitly dispensational in this view of the Old Testament moral case laws. One could multiply examples of issues that should be discussed. The point of raising the issue of theological like-mindedness is that fathers must take an active role in the screening process of potential mates in order to insure theological harmony in a marriage relationship. People who ignore this process can have serious disagreements and problems after marriage has already taken place. Christian women can end up being pressured to submit to things they regard as unlawful. The historical pattern has been for most women to eventually become virtually identical to their husbands theologically for good or ill. Many men also will end up doing things they regard as wrong in order to please their wives (e.g., immersing their children in non-commanded pagan-papal holy days). Parents must be diligent in the theological screening process not only because it is their job, but also because they have the wisdom and theological training necessary to do the job right.

As a parent considers the doctrine and like-mindedness of a potential mate for a son or a daughter he should attempt to determine if a potential spouse's doctrine is a dead orthodoxy or is expressed in a living faith. There are people who have an intellectual understanding of Reformed theology yet who don't apply it to their own lives. If a man or a woman is dishonest, sexually immoral, can't control his or her temper, worships money and material things, doesn't place Christ first in all areas, etc, then such a person should not be considered no matter how orthodox his or her creed is. Further, there are young people who were raised in Christian homes that attend church each week who take Christ and truth for granted and thus are exceedingly lukewarm or even unregenerate. Such people go through the motions because of the love of family traditions rather than a zeal for the cause of God and truth. Parents should seek out mates that have a holy zeal for Christ's kingdom. "What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? ...Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead" (Jam. 2:14, 17).

(3) Biblical courtship involves the covenant protection of a child by the father and parents. This means that a father has a responsibility to make sure that a son or daughter is never alone with a prospective mate. This point is important because some people have an unbiblical view of father-controlled courtship. That is, he screens a prospective marriage partner yet still allows unchaperoned dating. Such a man may have good intentions and may even send a daughter to a public place such as a restaurant or shopping mall. However, once the daughter gets in the car and the car drives away, there is no chaperone. The father in such a situation can only hope and pray that his daughter's "date" will behave himself and keep his hands to himself. With biblical courtship a couple is never allowed to spend time together in empty apartments, cars or parks.

A father who practices biblical courtship will allow a daughter or son to spend time getting to know a prospective marriage partner in a chaperoned setting. For example, a young suitor can come over for dinner and then sit on the porch and discuss various issues with a daughter. He can take the daughter for a walk in the park as long as a chaperone or chaperones are following close behind (e.g., the scene in the movie *The Godfather* in which the character played by Al Pacino goes for a walk with a girl he wants to marry, followed by around 30 relatives). A couple can interact verbally and get to know each other easily even when the parents are close by. It is rather ironic that people who insist on complete privacy and thus spend a lot of time necking and petting are actually learning very little about each other (except perhaps each other's anatomy).

Covenant protection also means that prior to a covenantal commitment (i.e. engagement or betrothal) couples are not permitted to become emotionally involved. The goal of the biblical courtship process is not romance or physical affection but marriage. The courtship process is a largely an intellectual endeavor. It is primarily a data-gathering mission. Obviously there are personality and physical attraction considerations. However, these things do not at all necessitate touching of any kind or romantic expressions. Once an engagement occurs, romantic poetry and speech is appropriate. But, physical sexual touching is not to occur during the betrothal period. It is only to occur after the marriage covenant takes place. "Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge" (Heb. 13:4).

(4) Once a believer in consultation with his/her parents, decides it is time to seek a mate, he/she should take an active approach in the search for a partner. Some people are

of the opinion that one should pray and simply trust God to provide the right partner. While prayer is a necessary and an essential aspect of seeking a spouse that does not mean that Christians are to be passive and wait for a mate to drop out of the sky. Jesus says that we are to pray for our daily bread (Mt. 6:11) and Paul says that if we don't work we should not eat (2 Th. 3:10).

The Bible contains examples of fathers, sons and even daughters using lawful means to bring about a godly relationship. In Genesis 24 Abraham takes the initiative and sends his most experienced servant to his homeland to find a mate for his son Isaac. In Genesis 28 Isaac sends his son Jacob to Padan Aram to find a godly wife. There also is the example of Ruth and Naomi. Ruth places herself in a position to be observed by and meet a godly eligible man-Boaz (Ruth 2:2). When Ruth's mother-in-law discovers that Boaz is godly, eligible and a possible kinsman redeemer for her, she instructs Ruth to conduct herself in a manner that will most likely lead to marriage. "And her mother-in-law said to her, 'Where have you gleaned today? And where did you work? Blessed be the one who took notice of you.' So she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked, and said, 'The man's name with whom I worked today is Boaz.'Ruth the Moabitess said, 'He also said to me, "You shall stay close by my young men until they have finished all my harvest.'" And Naomi said to Ruth her daughter-in-law, 'It is good, my daughter, that you go out with his young women, and that people do not meet you in any other field.' So she stayed close by the young women of Boaz, to glean until the end of barley harvest and wheat harvest; and she dwelt with her mother-in-law. Then Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, 'My daughter, shall I not seek security for you, that it may be well with you?'" (Ruth 2:19, 21-23; 3:1). Matthew Henry writes, "Naomi's care for her daughter's comfort is without doubt very commendable, and is recorded for imitation. She had no thoughts of marrying herself, Ru 1:12. But, though she that was old had resolved upon a perpetual widowhood, yet she was far from the thoughts of confining her daughter-in-law to it, that was young. Age must not make itself a standard to youth. On the contrary, she is full of contrivance how to get her well married."²⁷

In a time of general apostasy and serious declension when solid Reformed churches are scarce in our land, parents (with their sons and daughters) should think of ways to find potential mates. Some possibilities are: attending Reformed conferences and seminars; making friends through the internet (and telephone) with people in other Reformed churches; visiting college age groups at larger Reformed churches; advertising in Reformed match-making services, etc. Some may argue that such a pro-active approach reveals a lack of faith in God's providence. Historical examples in Scripture, however, teach us that while we are to pray and trust in God's sovereign good pleasure we are to put to use our minds and plans as valid secondary agents. Abraham, Isaac and Naomi did not sit on their hands and hope for the best. They took action. They helped their children find godly mates.

5. In biblical courtship a man must recognize the authority of a prospective woman's father by approaching him and asking his permission to court his daughter

²⁷ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (McLean, VA: MacDonald Publishing Co., n. d.), 2:266. "Apparently it was an Israelite but not a Moabite procedure, for Naomi had to explain to Ruth what she must do to show Boaz that she was interested in marriage with him. Though Ruth carried out the plan readily enough there is no indication that she knew anything about the custom until Naomi outlined it" (Arthur E. Kendall & Leon Morris, *Judges & Ruth* [Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1968]), 284.

(Gen. 2:22; 24:50-51; 29:19-20; Ex. 22:16, 17; 1 Cor. 7:36-38). It is unbiblical for a man to seek to win over a Christian woman without her father's oversight and then if he is unsuccessful have her put pressure on her father to cave in to her autonomous decision. When a suitor approaches a Christian father and asks his permission, he gives the father the opportunity to exercise loving oversight on behalf of his daughter. If the young man is already well-known by the family and church involved, the father may (after consulting with his daughter) give permission quickly. However, if the man is not well-known or is a recent convert, the father will have to interview the young man extensively and do some serious investigating on behalf of his daughter. The father will want to investigate the man's family, work experience, financial situation, recent past (e.g., what does the man's family, friends, and co-workers think of him), conversion, doctrinal positions, future plans and so on. Given the fact that approaching a young woman's father can be intimidating, fathers should be courteous and gracious to potential suitors. They should engage in the screening process in a friendly manner. He should set the young man at ease by explaining the biblical reasoning behind these procedures. A father does not want to scare off potential suitors by being arbitrary, intimidating or unnecessarily harsh.

As churches return to the biblical practice of courtship, young men will understand the importance and necessity of such procedures. A man who seeks to circumvent this biblical process or who takes great offense at the screening process by fathers should obviously not be allowed to court a daughter. Such a man does not have a proper respect of lawful authority and does not want to submit to the Scriptures on this matter. A godly man will cooperate with a father and will encourage him to do his biblical duty. A Christian woman with a father who takes his responsibility seriously will be even more attractive to godly men. Such men will understand that this woman comes from a household that cherishes biblical law and applies the word of God to all areas of life.

6. Once the courtship process begins, it is important that all parties involved understand that a father's permission to court a daughter does not involve any promises or covenants. In other words, any of the parties involved may cease and desist from the courtship process at any time. A father may discover a serious defect of character in a potential suitor and stop the process. A daughter may decide that the man involved does not really interest her any more and cut off the procedure. The young man involved may also decide the woman is not right for him and move on. People involved in the courtship process are not in a covenantal relationship. They are involved in a fact-gathering mission—a screening process. Once it is understood that a person involved is not the right one, there is no reason to continue the process. One of the great advantages of biblical courtship is that it eliminates the desire or temptation to stay in a useless relationship because of feelings or an unbiblical concept of commitment outside of betrothal and marriage. Time is not wasted and any hurt feelings are kept to a minimum.

The Biblical Engagement or Betrothal

Because the goal of courtship is betrothal and marriage, it is important that believers understand what a biblical betrothal entails; and, understand the differences between the modern American concept of an “engagement” and betrothal (scripturally defined). Although the word engagement means a promise of marriage between a man

and a woman and thus is a synonym for the word betrothal,²⁸ its modern cultural usage means a promise that can be broken at any time for any reason. As Bible-believing Christians, we must reject the modern antinomian concept of engagement and return to the biblical practice of a binding betrothal. Some may object to this plea to return to a scriptural definition of betrothal as an ignorant acceptance of non-binding cultural traditions. Such an objection ignores the fact that the biblical teaching regarding the betrothal is not based on culture but arises from the Bible's teaching on binding oaths and covenants. It is part of the moral law and is an application of the ninth commandment.

The betrothal is a legally binding promise of marriage. A man and woman who are betrothed have entered a binding covenantal relationship. Although they are not yet married, they are not longer regarded as single persons by their families, church and society. They have a new covenantal relationship that is recognized and dealt with in biblical law. In a biblical society a betrothed man is not permitted to go to war. "And what man is there who is betrothed to a woman and has not married her? Let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man marry her" (Dt. 20:7). Further, God's law regards a betrothed woman to be the wife of the man to whom she is espoused. If an unbetrothed or unmarried man and women engage in sexual intercourse they are not put to death but are forced to marry and/or the man pays a large fine to the girl's father (cf. Ex. 22:16-17; Dt. 22:28-29). However, if a betrothed virgin lay with another man, both the woman and man are to be put to death (cf. Dt. 22:23-24). "The betrothed (but not yet married) woman is treated under the law as if she were married. The reason for this is clear when it is remembered that the crime consists not only in the act, but also in the lack of faithfulness signified by the act. Both the married woman and the betrothed woman were committed to a particular relationship with a man; the crime involved breaking that relationship through an unfaithful act."²⁹ According to Scripture the betrothal covenant is to be taken just as seriously as the marriage covenant itself. In Matthew's gospel narrative Joseph and Mary are identified as husband and wife during the betrothal period while Mary is still a virgin (cf. Mt. 1:18-25).³⁰ When Joseph discovers that Mary is with child he being a righteous man decides "to put her away secretly" (Mt. 1:19). This means that the espousal covenant could only be dissolved by means of a legal divorce. "Joseph's attitude is indicated with great naturalness and

²⁸ "What is Engagement, Betrothal, and Espousal? **Engagement** comes from gage, a Middle English word meaning 'a pledge' Thus engagement is a solemn pledge into which a man and a woman enter. **Betrothal** is derived from the Middle English word troth which means 'truth, truthful, faithful'. 'I plight thee my troth' has the sense of making a solemn promise to be faithful to the betrothed one alone. **Espousal** is the act of giving oneself to another as a spouse. The Latin verb from which espousal is derived, spondere, means 'to pledge oneself to, promise solemnly, vow.' What we learn from the derivation of these words is that in each case a solemn promise, vow, or covenant is given to become the faithful husband or wife of the one loved" (Greg Price, *Christian Education in the Home: Help! My Daughter Wants to Date* [Internet: 1994], 6).

²⁹ P. C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, 294.

³⁰ Joseph Addison Alexander writes, "...Many having been espoused, i.e., before the discovery here mentioned, as implied in the past participle (*mnasteutheiasai*). The Greek verb strictly means to court or woo, but in the passive form to be engaged, betrothed (as in the Septuagint version of Deuteronomy 22, 23, 25, 27, 28, compared with the active voice in Dt. 20, 7.) There are frequent allusions in the Old Testament to the marriage vow as a religious contract (Pr. 2, 17. Ez. 16, 8. Ma. 2, 14), but the first mention of a written bond occurs in the Apocrypha (Tob. 2, 14). According to the later Jewish books, the bride continued in her father's house for some time after her espousal" (*The Gospel According to Matthew* [Grand Rapids: Baker 1980 (1860)], 11).

delicacy, and the necessity for divorce, although the marriage had not taken place, is clearly shown. With the Jews, espousal was much more serious than an ‘engagement’ is with us, and could be severed only by divorce.”³¹ The Bible teaches that God considers couples who have made an espousal covenant to be husband and wife in a certain sense before the marriage ceremony takes place.

Although modern society generally views engagements as non-binding agreements that can be broken at will, believers ought to recognize a betrothal covenant (unless unlawful, e.g., incest) as a binding agreement before God. Therefore, entering into a betrothal agreement is very serious business. Espousal covenants should only be made after a considerable amount of fact gathering, prayer, counsel and thought. Once the parents of the parties involved assent to a betrothal, a covenant should be made in front of witnesses and the espousal should be made public. Once again we must emphasize the truth that the biblical manner of betrothal is not cultural but flows from God’s law. Obviously, a covenant that can be broken for any reason without sanctions is not a biblical covenant. It is an antinomian promise. “Lord, who may abide in Your tabernacle?...He who swears to his own hurt and does not change” (Ps. 15:1, 4).

The biblical teaching regarding betrothal is reflected to an extent in seventeenth century English law. Edmund S. Morgan writes, “When the Puritans left England, several steps were necessary to the proper accomplishment of a marriage in that country: (1) espousals *per verba de futuro*, or a contract to marry, made in the future tense, corresponding to a modern engagement but more binding; (2) publication of the banns, or announcement that this contract *de futuro* had been made; (3) execution of the espousal contract by a contract of marriage in the present tense, *per verba de praesenti*, solemnized at church and followed by a special service; (4) a celebration of the event with feasting and gaiety at the home of the groom; (5) sexual intercourse.”³²

The New England Puritans had a much more biblical concept of betrothal (or, as they called it, espousal) than we do today. The espousal was treated very seriously. Espousals were publicly announced (i.e. published) at least eight days in advance so that if a man or woman were hiding any serious defect of character it could be discovered. The parties involved would enter into and sign a contract (i.e. an espousal covenant). The espousal was a public event in which ministers often would preach espousal sermons. Once an espousal was made the parties involved were treated the same as betrothed couples in biblical law. Morgan writes, “In Plymouth, Massachusetts, and New Haven, as well as in Connecticut, a couple espoused were set apart; they were married as far as other persons were concerned even though the final ceremony had not taken place.... If after becoming espoused to one person, a man or woman had sexual intercourse with another, the act was considered adultery; and if either party broke the contract without just cause, by refusing to marry the other or by marrying someone else, he might be sued for breach of promise.”³³

Although a biblically defined espousal is much more serious than today’s shallow non-binding engagement promises, the betrothal is not the marriage covenant itself. A woman who is betrothed is still under the authority of her father and is not obligated to

³¹ Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982 [1915]), 4.

³² Edmund S. Morgan, *The Puritan Family* (New York: Harper & Row, 1944, 1966), 30-31.

³³ *Ibid.*, 33.

submit to her future mate. A man who is betrothed is not obligated to financially support his future spouse. Indeed, at this point she is still living under her father's roof. Further, both parties involved are not permitted to engage in sexual intercourse or sexual touching of any kind.

While the betrothal agreement is not the same as the marriage covenant itself, it does serve some important functions. First, it gives the couple and their families a period of time to plan the day of marriage and the great celebration that attends a wedding. Second, (if necessary) it gives the couple time to choose a place to live and buy or rent a house. Third, it gives a couple additional time to seek counsel regarding the marriage relationship. Fourth, it gives the couple time to develop warm emotions and romantic thoughts regarding their future partner. This point was particularly important to the Puritans. Morgan writes, "Marriage then, or at least proper marriage, resulted not from falling in love, but from a decision to enter a married state, followed by the choice of a suitable person. But since love formed the chief duty of marriage and since the unruly affections of fallen man might sometimes fail at once to knot themselves to the chosen object, a period of trial was necessary in which to bring the affections into the proper direction. That period was furnished by the custom of espousals. 'By this means,' said William Ames, 'the minds of the betrothed, are prepared and disposed to those affections, which in matrimony are requisite.'"³⁴ The espousal period is a great time for love letters, poetry, song and romantic speech.

A question that often arises concerning an engagement is: How long should an engagement last? There are very long engagements (e.g., two years) and short ones (e.g., one month). The word of God does not speak specifically to this area. However, there are biblical principles and practical reasons for favoring short engagements over long ones. First, given the serious nature of a biblical espousal covenant and the fact that all the parties involved should have done their analysis and preparations prior to the betrothal, once an engagement occurs there are no practical reasons for a long betrothal period. If a couple have doubts and want a lengthy engagement period to attempt to work things out, then they simply are not ready to get engaged. Important issues are to be resolved before the espousal covenant, not after. Note, a biblical concept of courtship and betrothal forces people to do their homework up front before a binding covenant is made. A sloppy non-binding concept of engagement tempts people to make agreements they are not ready to make with the hope that things can be ironed out later on. Unfortunately, in many cases issues and problems are not resolved before marriage and the days which should be times of great happiness, fun and bliss are spent arguing, fighting and fretting. Second, given the nature of man and the strong physical desires that young couples who love each other have, short engagements are to be preferred over long ones. Is it not better to marry than to burn with passion (1 Cor. 7:9)? Engaged couples are often tempted to touch one another in inappropriate ways. A short engagement will lessen this area of temptation. Third, given the nature and seriousness of the espousal covenant there are no practical reasons for having a long delay before the actual marriage takes place. Planning a ceremony, a party and a honeymoon are not very difficult.³⁵

³⁴ Ibid., 59.

³⁵ This teaching (i.e. engagements should be short) is set forth in the Westminster Standards-Directory for the Public Worship of God: "After the purpose or contract of marriage hath been published, the marriage is not to be long deferred. Therefore the minister, having had convenient warning, and nothing being objected

Extraordinary Cases

In our discussion of courtship we have dealt primarily with normal circumstances. That is, with young Christian men and women who are living in Christian homes, who have the loving oversight and counsel of believing parents. Given the fact that churches today have many people who were raised in heretical or unbelieving homes; or, who are older and living independently of parents; or, who are divorced, a brief discussion of such extraordinary cases is in order. What is a person to do when they are living apart from their parents? The answer to this question really depends on a person's own particular situation. If a man or especially a woman has believing parents and has moved out because of ignorance of biblical teaching, they should move back home. (The scriptural teaching on this issue is very clear when discussing the status of daughters.)

If a person has heathen parents, they must turn to the church for help with courtship while respecting their own parents within biblical parameters. Presupposing a person's church understands biblical courtship, a couple could approach the elders of the church for assistance in this area. The elders could open their own home as a chaperoned environment and offer counsel and screening advice; or, they could assist in finding a godly family who would be willing to fulfill this function. Greg Price writes, "All male-female relationships should pass through courtship and engagement on their way to marriage. God's plan is that all male-female relationships be governed by these biblical principles. All people (regardless of age) are in need of godly oversight in their relationship with the opposite sex. We must be careful that we not deceive ourselves into believing we have matured beyond the need of supervision in male-female relationships. Sexual thoughts and desires are not exclusively the lot of the young. We are taught by God to view the heart of man as deceitful and unworthy of trust, especially when it is our own heart (Jer. 17:9; Is. 55:7-9; Is. 65:2)."³⁶ Even people who are widowed or lawfully divorced (and therefore function as independent covenant heads), need to follow biblical principles in this area to avoid sexual sin and find a suitable Christian spouse.

What should a Christian man or woman do who has believing parents who have an irrational, arbitrary or unbiblical approach during the courtship process? For example the father will only consider rich suitors or the mother will only allow suitors who are extremely handsome. A person who finds himself in such circumstances should respectfully reason with his or her parents regarding their unpractical expectations. Parents should not go beyond the standards set by Scripture. If parents are absurd and obstinate in their expectations it is appropriate for the elders of the church to give the parents counsel and a rebuke if necessary. One thing Christians should never do is to completely cast aside their parents' authority and elope with someone without their parents blessing. Competent elders should be able to straighten out such situations.

to hinder it, is publickly to solemnize it in the place appointed by authority for publick worship, before a competent number of credible witnesses, at some convenient hour of the day, at any time of the year, except on a day of publick humiliation. And we advise that it not be on the Lord's day."

³⁶ Greg Price, 10.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have critiqued the modern dating system and set forth the biblical alternative-father (or parent) controlled courtship. Many reasons why believers should reject the dating paradigm have been noted. (1) Dating is a recent phenomena that developed in the soil of an apostate secularized culture. (2) Dating tempts the parties involved to commit sexual immorality. In fact, modern dating presupposes privacy and a certain amount of kissing and sexual touching. (3) Dating trains people to confuse infatuation, lust and strong emotions with genuine biblical love. (4) Dating trains young people to take male-female covenant relationships lightly. Its practice has contributed to a high divorce rate in society. (5) Modern recreational dating violates the biblical teaching regarding covenant headship. Fathers (and parents) have a God-given responsibility to oversee the courtship process. The modern dating paradigm has been an ethical disaster for evangelicals in America. It is time for Christian families and churches to repent of this unscriptural practice.

In examining the biblical alternative (father-controlled courtship), we have noted the following. (1) Parents have a duty to train and prepare a son or daughter for courtship and marriage. (2) Biblical courtship involves the covenant protection of a son or a daughter by the father. (3) The courtship process should not begin until a son or a daughter is ready to get married. (4) Fathers (and mothers) must get to know potential suitors. The parents are to be intimately involved in screening potential mates. (5) Parents must only consider like-minded Christians as potential suitors and mates for their children. (6) Potential suitors must recognize the covenantal authority of a woman's father. Men must approach the woman's father and get permission to court; and, to get engaged and married. (7) Parents should take an active approach in the search for a mate for a son or a daughter. (8) Fathers need to be friendly, courteous and non-threatening to suitors and potential suitors. (9) The decision to get engaged is to be made in conjunction with Christian parents. Betrothal cannot be forced upon a son or a daughter and son or daughter should not get engaged without their father's consent. (10) Biblical betrothal is a binding covenant that should be taken much more seriously than modern society's concept of an engagement. (11) Biblical courtship is not optional. It is rooted in the biblical teaching regarding covenant headship, the nature of covenants, God's holy law and the fabric of creation.

Biblical courtship is a great blessing. It takes the extremely important process of finding a life partner out of the realm of human autonomy (irrationality, fleeting emotions, lust and romance), and places it squarely upon God's infallible word. It frees men and women from temptation and peer pressure, con-artists and hasty, ill-informed decisions by protecting them by means of a convenantal fence. It brings men and women together with their Christian parents and their decades of sanctified experience. It also gives young adults a genuine opportunity to really get to know one another. It is our hope and prayer that God's people would return to this biblical practice.

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