

Dating Vs. Courtship

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I. What's wrong with dating?

Introduction

Our attitude to dating is not so much a matter of church policy but a matter of family government. Laying a solid foundation in this area is a parental responsibility, but the church has a responsibility to hold the family accountable to the Word of God. If we want our young people to be prepared for marriage these are the questions that we must ask:

What is the best way to be prepared?

Is dating an effective preparation for marriage?

In answering these questions, we need to know the criteria by which the answers must be judged. Our culture finds it hard to make such judgments because the dating scene seems to be an expression of "teenagers in love" - and love is thought to be something that just happens, over which we have no control. Dating is part of the lie of the enemy that is ensnaring our young people. The Bible tells us that all that has to do with love can and must be tested. The test is Rom 13:10 - "Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law." So we must find a lawful way for our young people to fall in love and prepare for marriage.

We will start by highlighting three areas in which the modern system of dating fails to meet the standards of God's Word, and thus may be described as an unlawful expression of love.

1. Cultural Pressure

Most teenagers date because it is the thing to do. It is an established cultural norm to be followed without further question. Most parents continue to allow dating because it is the way that they did things in their day, and they believe that they survived. (But as we shall see, they probably did not survive unscathed).

The fact that "everybody does it" is not a reason for continuing to do it, but a reason for questioning it. 1 Jn 2:15-17 states, "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 16 For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. 17 And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever."

Is dating morally neutral? Is it just an innocent cultural expression; the way we do things in the west in the present century? Or is it a product of "the world?" Bill Gothard has defined a date as, "Any planned event involving a shared activity between a man and a woman" - one person asks the other to share in an activity, and a publicly recognizable pairing occurs. It always implies some kind of romantic interest, and both parties know this even if the date is going to a church meeting or to a Bible study. But what could be the harm in that, you may ask?

Compare this cultural norm with the one that prevailed in western civilization until the early part of this century. Ask yourself these questions: "Which is more biblical?" "Are the changes morally neutral?"

a) Previous Culture:

In earlier times, all courtship included rigid supervision and protection of the female. It was built on the premise of family introductions, and the focus was on the father's role in establishing a new family, hence the question in the marriage ceremony, "Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?" And, by the way, the modern answer of "Her mother and I" is a gross misunderstanding of who it is that carries the complete and total responsibility for the daughter's purity. It is the Father, the authority of the young woman, who says: "I do." For the Father of the bride to say, "Her mother and I" is tantamount to the Bride saying, "My Mother and I" when the Bride is asked who will marry the Groom!

b) Present Culture:

In our day, dating arrangements are made entirely by young people apart from parental involvement. The date is planned by young people with a known expectation of physical intimacy. All that is unknown is its degree, or the speed of its intensification. A woman is left very vulnerable. Without her father's protection, she alone must determine the degree of sexual intimacy, and that in the heat of the moment. Furthermore, there is no commitment beyond the next date; relationships (and thus marriage) are initiated out of a romantic attraction.

When the two alternative cultures are compared with a biblical model there is no question which is the more acceptable.

2. Sexual Pressure

We are confronted with a massive predominance of amorality. Sexual activity among teenagers is commonplace. It remains true that it is very unlikely that a girl will get pregnant if she does not go on a date. But the practice of dating has transformed the nature of teenage sexuality.

In the US more than one million teenagers get pregnant annually.

40% end in abortion; 13% in a miscarriage.

90% of males and 80% of females are sexually active by the age of eighteen years.

One in five girls will be date-raped, but only 5% report it.

50% of teenagers think it is OK to force sex.

What are the factors underlying this terrible state of affairs?

(a) Dating (contrary to the Bible) makes "provision for the flesh" (Rom 13:13, 14)

Dating is in direct contradiction of the following scriptures that admonish us to flee youthful lusts (Eph 4:22; 2 Tim 2:22); flee fornication (1 Cor 6:18). "Flee" is not merely refraining from sexual intercourse, it means staying away as far as possible from the beginning of the process. Fornication is an expression of lust not love. It seeks self-satisfaction apart from the responsibilities of marriage. It is not love (Rom 13:8-10). It is robbing! It robs a woman of her virginity. It robs a man of the inheritance of an unspoiled wife, and robs the institution of the family of its true foundation.

(b) Naive views of human sexuality

It is naive to think that an invitation to a Bible study has no romantic connotations, or to think that any form of male/female touching is not sexual - a "touch" is sexual. (1 Cor 7:1; Gen 20:4,6; Prov 6:29). It is good for a man not to touch a woman. It is naive to think that a woman is able to make decisions limiting sexual activity in an unsupervised context. The prevalence of date rape proves that it is impossible for a woman to guarantee she can say no, after one hour of introductory intimacy. It ignores the biological facts of human sexuality. Sexual desires are not designed to be started and stopped over and over again!

Finally, it is naive to think that it is all a matter of self-control. What is self-control: one kiss, or two, or four, or five? What is the self-control time limit in a kiss? Who's going to time it?

Self-control means refraining from sexual touch of any kind, at least until covenantal engagement.

This is not a platonic relationship which regards the body as evil, but a spiritual relationship which regards the body as good. So good that I dare not touch what does not yet belong to me. Only marriage relinquishes ownership of one's "good" body to one's partner.

Parents must overcome this naivety when a teen complains about parental restrictions. To the all too common gibe, "You don't trust me," the only possible answer is - "True! I wouldn't trust myself either in those circumstances." If I wouldn't allow myself to be alone in a car with a woman other than my wife, why should I trust my teenagers?

(c) Inadequate understanding of the inheritance of virginity

Virginity is not just refraining from what I want to do before marriage, but bringing an inheritance into a marriage by the presentation of a pure body. An inheritance of passion all stored and reserved for one partner, and an inheritance of security in a partner with a proven track record of faithfulness and self-control.

(d) Parental foolishness

It is parents who open the door to an obsession with sex. You may think that your children pick things up at school. Yes, but from whom? From those whose parents have opened the door.

Most parents think it is cute and natural to see their children's growing fascination with the opposite sex. It doesn't matter because they survived the dating system, and here they are in church loving God. But they are still reaping what they sowed, often in a later generation who bear the fruit of their careless immoral ways.

Parental foolishness starts early on in the pre-teens, where crushes are condoned, and the habit of living in fantasies is established. It can all sound so cute coming from a ten-year old, but any notion of seeing others as "special friends" needs to be addressed at that age. Any signs of attempts to catch the eye of others with make-up, style of dress, hair, phone calls, attention-seeking behavior, must be addressed parentally at that age. Dates occur in the imagination before they actually happen if children have an expectation that dating is normal. Watch for isolationism where a child withdraws into a fantasy world dreaming of being together with somebody else emotionally.

(i) What they watch

There is a very close correlation between sexual pre-occupation, standards of family TV viewing and music habits. We cannot underestimate the enticement to sexual impurity with which we are constantly bombarded in the media today.

Our teenagers are bombarded with sensual and lustful images - commercials, movies, magazines etc. They are surrounded by peers talking about who thinks who is cute, what their first kiss was like, and they are informed about sex education material they do not know how to handle.

This is a violation of the Word of God. We must train a generation that is innocent, not worldly-wise. (Rom 16:19, 20). It is the only way in which our young people will have peace. (Phil 4:8, 9)

(ii) Watch what they wear

The Bible gives clear guidelines about the requirement for a distinctiveness between masculinity and femininity (Deut 22:5; 1 Cor 11:14, 15); about modesty (1 Tim 2:9, 10; 1 Pet 3:3, 4); about not drawing attention to our bodies, but bringing attention to our character and behavior (e.g. cleanliness, thoughtfulness, carefulness)

3. Relational Pressure

Our young people need relationships. They need to learn how to relate to members of the opposite sex. But does dating help or hinder them in this process?

a) The starting place for building relationships

Teenagers often express the need for a boy/girlfriend in terms of needing to overcome loneliness, to have somebody who understands, somebody who cares. The antidote to that loneliness is not dating it is family and fellowship.

Family: Most teens sense alienation from their family and parents. We call this modern phenomenon "The Generation Gap." It is both real and unreal. It is unreal because there is no biological inevitability that teenagers will go through a phase of separation and rebellion towards their parents. It is real, because where parents have failed to build relationships with their children, in many instances, the Gap appears. It is a phenomenon largely symptomatic of a departure from biblical parenting. The antidote is creating, from early childhood, an atmosphere of security, love and worthwhile activities that would give no cause for a sensible teenager to want to look elsewhere for a life.

Fellowship: The second context where the Bible speaks of relationships is in the church, which is, in essence, an extended family. The church provides a setting where all kinds of relationships can be established with absolute purity. Young people need to be trained gradually to relate on a broader scale than the family, and there is no need for exclusive boy/girl friendships to learn how to relate to the opposite sex. To belong to the Body of Christ is a wonderful privilege, enabling us to prepare our children for relationships in the world within secure boundaries. It is an extension of relating as brothers and sisters, and in a group context that can occur with absolute purity, as it did with Jesus. (Luke 8:2, 3; 23:55, 56) and Paul (Phil 4:3).

The antidote to loneliness is fellowship, not dating; the need is for friendship, not sexuality, The exclusiveness of romantic relationships precludes building friendships. Dating substitutes sensual feelings for friendship, passion for honor and respect, foolish jesting for thankfulness, our pleasure for His business.

b) The starting place for destroying relationships

Dating creates relationships built on insecurity. There is no commitment by either party to continue beyond the first date, and there may be others they would consider dating given the opportunity. They both know that.

The main purpose of dating is to try out as many partners as possible in the process of looking for the perfect one. Thus, by definition, breaking up is as common as dating itself. There are more pop songs written about breaking up than pairing up. Dating becomes a preparation for handling divorce, not a preparation for building a permanent marriage. We were designed for sexual involvement with one partner, but we get used to the idea of rejecting and being rejected in the search for the perfect relationship. The more dates you have, the more the boundaries become blurred. Rejection becomes a way of life, and saying "I love you" becomes meaningless. It is no more than saying, "At this moment in time, I find you sexually attractive." We learn to break covenant at a whim; we learn to follow our emotions and desires. If it doesn't work out, we can simply break it off. It provides no training for having to work it out for the long haul. It is practice in divorce at an early age.

Dating builds insecurity into relationships. Imagine a marriage without scars of rejection to overcome, with a partner you can trust, because you have not been spoiled by earlier partners who have proved untrustworthy. Imagine a relationship without having other faces in your mind and the comparisons that ensue against the spouse that God has given you. Imagine having no pornographic images of Miss Universe with which to tarnish the beauty of the wife who is at your side.

c) The only place for exclusive relationships

In scripture, one-on-one male/female relationships are always exclusively marriage relationships. They only occur in marriage, or in anticipation of marriage. (Gen 2:23, 24; hence Ruth 3:9). God has created us to fit this biblical norm, and the romantic response is intended to come to its true fulfillment only in marriage.

Recreational dating envisions a one-on-one relationship apart from marriage, but it should be no surprise when it leads to its intended climax - becoming one flesh. God designed us that way! To try to survive exclusive relationships sexually unscathed is like fighting against the grain of creation.

So how are we supposed to find a way to arrive at those exclusive relationships which prove to be marriages made in heaven? We must break out of the mould of our culture.

II. The alternative to dating is not courtship

Introduction

The word about the inappropriateness of dating has got out, but I'm not entirely happy with the response - which is usually an attempt to adapt the system rather than discard it. These attempts usually take one of two forms. Firstly, there is an attempt to take the risk out of it, so we talk about double-dating, where in reality peer supervision is no more and no less than peer pressure. Secondly, there is an attempt to put something substantial into it, so we tell our teenagers that dating is no longer possible, courtship is the way to go.

Because of this misconception, we have actually made the problem worse. Knowing that they are not allowed to have casual friendships (falling in and out of love), young people are led to believe that they can have exclusive relationships with the opposite sex through courting. They can become as pre-occupied with courting as they can with dating, which is worse, because it has the added pressure of the seriousness of marriage. Teenagers do not need the frivolity of casual dating, nor do they need the intensity of serious courtship.

Courtship is not the alternative to dating. I believe in courtship, but courting is what a man and woman do in preparation for marriage. Courting is not what Christian teenagers do instead of dating.

Courtship is essential in its proper place, but unessential for our young people as a contrived form of dating. What is the alternative? What should they be doing with their teenage years?

1. It is a time for "Father's Business."

Jesus has to be the model teenager. Although we don't know much about what happened during his teenage years, we do know what his focus was. (Luke 2:49). Most teenagers see these years as a time for "my fun" but Jesus saw them as a time for his Father's business.

We will never evidence a radical change in our young people until we are convinced that teenage years are not supposed to be years of care-free, independent, experimental, frivolous self-gratification. They are to be years of training and preparation. Our culture has emphasized external fun more than internal preparation, the result is a generation that is both unhappy and unprepared.

Teenage years are a time to lay a foundation and start to practice "being about Father's business," thereby discovering calling and destiny. It is to be a preparation for life.

The preparation of young people for marriage is one of God's great purposes for the church. It is not accomplished by setting up a dating pattern that is built on the same sinful pattern as the world, except that it is practiced between believers rather than unbelievers. It is rather a preparation that is accomplished by emphasis on character, life skills, ministry opportunities; all of which tend to get ignored by young people pre-occupied with their latest boy/girlfriend.

2. It is a time of preparation under parental supervision

Consider again what we know about Jesus' teenage years. (Luke 2:51,52). This is entirely consistent with the whole of the Bible. The emphasis is on the father's responsibility, and the preparation under his supervision for the teenager to be able to become responsible. In Old Testament law, a father has particular responsibility for his daughters in the biblical pattern. He was expected to be able to guarantee his daughter's virginity (Deut 22:15-19), and with that responsibility came the right to defend her reputation.

If another man violates that by becoming sexually involved with his daughter, two things happen (Deut 22:28, 29), the two should get married and the man must pay the father a dowry. We can learn from this that there is no such thing as sex without responsibility.

The principle is seen in the dowry system. In the Bible, the dowry is a demonstration of assuming financial responsibility. The man who has a sexual relationship with a girl has to marry her; he must assume responsibility for her and her children. He cannot just walk away from it all. If he does, because he has had to pay a dowry, the father has money to provide alimony for his daughter's financial security.

The dowry was customarily three years wages, about \$100,000 in today's money. That would make a teenage boy think twice! But the issue is not primarily money, it is responsibility. The problem of our culture is not merely sexual immorality, it is also sexual irresponsibility. In a biblical pattern there is no escape from responsibility. Teenage years are a preparation for responsibility, not for irresponsibility. To get married, there is going to be a dowry to pay and that dowry will require years of work! When we see teenage years characterized by irresponsibility, we know we have missed the mark. Parental supervision is designed to train toward responsibility.

3. It is a time of warfare

Young people are built for warfare (Ps 8:2; 127:3-5; 1 John 2:13,14), but they are undoubtedly a target for Satan's attack. If he can destroy the preparation for marriage among teens and singles, he can destroy countless homes and families later on. The foundations have been undermined. The flood tides of filth and sensual temptation are destroying future marriages before they even begin.

The enemy can be resisted, however. Young people are built for war! To be a force against evil, we need to train an innocent generation. (Rom 16:19, 20). But people are afraid that our children will be naive and not know what's going on in the world. Good! That's how they are supposed to be! As soon as they know what's going on in the world they are seared by it, but when young people are distinctively pure they offer a powerful unique example. (1 Tim 4:12)

They may feel inadequate and they may say, "I don't have a testimony of how God delivered me from a life of gross sin," The answer to that is "Great!" "You do have a testimony of how the Lord kept you from a life of terrible sin." A testimony of God keeping us from evil is at least as powerful as one about how God delivered us from evil, and that saves a lot of heartache along the way.

The time of one's youth provides the greatest opportunity, while carrying the least responsibilities, to damage the enemy's kingdom. That is why the bible talks about singleness as a gift, and as a good gift at that. (1 Cor 7:25, 26, 32-35). Teenage years preoccupied with dating are the worst of both worlds. There is the care of worrying about your partner (or a succession of partners) without the benefits of marriage, and there is no freedom to serve God without distraction either.

4. It is a time for prayer

Teenagers should be praying for a husband or a wife, not a boyfriend or a girlfriend. So should their parents on their behalf, because finding a partner is a matter of faith, not striking lucky when playing the field. It does not necessarily require being part of a large crowd. For example, see Ruth 2:3 (though the process was aided by family directives). Prayer is especially important in seeking the preservation of the purity of a future mate, and the preparation of his/her character.

5. It is a time for teamwork

One factor in high divorce rates is that couples build relationships on the basis of romance, not of working together. Adam and Eve met and married in the context of work, hence the word "helpmeet." Youth and singleness provide an opportunity for people to learn to work together.

Sadly, too many young people learn to live for themselves and their own pleasure. They don't know how to work for the common good, to work as a team. They will take the same self-centeredness into marriage because they do not know the fulfillment of accomplishing something together. The first place to learn teamwork is the family, then there comes the need for group projects such as team ministry.

Team ministry requires some external purpose, a reason for sacrifice. When that vision is clear, self-denial is possible and working together begins. It opens up the possibility of far greater success than we can achieve on our own, and it is the best context in which to build friendships rather than the modern preoccupation with talking about relationships. When you focus on knowing one another, you become introverted. When you focus on a goal, you get to know one another. It is there where you learn to communicate, and then that you don't worry about what to talk about!

The environment of ministry is the best place to find a mate, for there you see the possibility of being equally yoked. Rather than building relationships on physical attraction, teenagers and young singles need to discover what they are really looking for in a partner. They are able to do this through the intensity of ministry and a sense of inadequacy in being able alone to fulfill the call of God on their life. They need to build friendships of loyalty and faithfulness that do not get discarded when emotions change.

6. It is a time for friendship

Biblically the word friend has the implication of close associate or neighbor. It is used in the context of two people who pasture in the same field, i.e. friends who work together in a common goal. So what are the ingredients of true friendship that our young people need, and how do these tie up with the dating game? Take time to see what God has to say about friends in the following scriptures:

Prov 18:24 - Friends come in limited numbers

John 15:13 - Friends are servants

John 15:15 - Friends are intimate confidants

Prov 17:17 - Friends are loyal

Prov 27:9 - Friends give good advice

Prov 27:6 - Friends give correction

Job 6:14 - Friends give encouragement

Prov 27:17,19 - Friends are honest

Prov 17:9 - Friends are trustworthy.

On the basis of such criteria, parents need to monitor relationships so that these possibilities for genuine friendship develop. The contra indication, however, is seen in 1 Cor 15:33.

These criteria are the ingredients our young people need. This is the alternative to dating. With these in place, they will be prepared and ready for the time when God opens up the possibility of marriage. Not until they know that they are ready to start thinking about the responsibilities of a spouse, a home, and a family should they start thinking about an exclusive relationship. There is no set age when that becomes appropriate. For some, the readiness and maturity comes early. For others, even if they are ready, God has other plans than early marriage. For some, singleness will be a life-long gift, an opportunity to serve God in different ways than is possible for those with family responsibilities.

III. What's right with courtship?

Introduction

What is "courtship?" Webster's 1828 dictionary defines it as: "The act of soliciting favour. The act of wooing in love. Solicitation of a woman to marriage. Civility; elegance of manners."

Three things about courtship stand out. It has to do with marriage. It is not casual dating, it is a relationship with a view to marriage. It has a lot to do with manners; there is an appropriate way to behave. It also has to do with law. It involves a "court". Following appropriate procedures, the suitability of marriage is put to the test, brought to the court. Feelings and leadings are tested and proved in the court where witnesses will confirm God is indeed calling two people to be married. That's why Webster's also speaks of a synonym for courting - being a suitor. A man in presenting his suit, is declaring the justice of his claim for the hand of a woman. Courtship is lawful, dating is lawless.

1. Preparing a case for your date in court

A man has to be able to present a case to support his claim for the hand of a man's daughter. The importance of this preparation is seen in the biblical principle of the dowry.

Jacob agreed to work for seven years to marry Rachel. He was not prepared initially, so he had to work for a dowry, and he had to work longer than most. The normal dowry was about three year's wages (\$100,000). Why? According to biblical law, it was a kind of insurance policy. It provided protection for the wife and children if the husband should die, or renege on his marriage vows in divorce. As we have seen (Ex 22:16,17; Deut 22:28,29), even in the case of rape or seduction, the man was required to provide a dowry (assume financial responsibility for) the woman he violated. Having lost her virginity in that culture, she was unlikely to be able to find a husband to support her.

The dowry was a gift of love from the groom to the bride. It was also a guarantee of an inheritance. Jacob loved Rachel enough to offer to work seven years and wait seven years, and even to wait another seven years when tricked into first marrying Leah.

a) Financial preparation

This biblical principle certainly cautions us against marriage without prior economic preparation. It does not mean only rich people get married, for the solution is not inheritance but work. Today, insurance policies can offer similar security but, more importantly, we must continue to see courtship as the demonstration of suitability for marriage. The father has to be convinced that he is being responsible in handing over his daughter. \$100,000 is a figure that would convince many fathers!

Traditionally, the bride has brought a dowry into the marriage as well. The father of the bride, according to an old American custom, gave her a cow, which was intended to be the mother of a new herd to supply milk and meat for the new family. Either way, both parties came into marriage prepared for the future.

b) Character preparation

The dowry is as much a matter of bringing character as bringing finances into a marriage. Adam demonstrated his ability to work in the calling God gave him before Eve was brought to him. This was a father's protection of Eve. Who else was she to marry? There was nobody else around! God ensured, for her protection, that Adam was established in his calling before marriage became a possibility. In scripture we can see that Adam understood his calling (Gen 1:26-28); he was a good worker (Gen 2:15); he exercised responsibility (Gen 2:16,17) and he recognized his need for a help-meet (Gen 2:18-25).

We can see similar preparation necessary in a wife. (Prov 31). She is active in ministry (Prov 20-22); she is known for her diligence (vs 15-19,27); she is trustworthy (vs 11,12) and she is virtuous (vs 10,30).

2. Passing judgment on the case in court

To whom does the suitor present his case? The Bible is clear on the role of the father in this matter. The Bible speaks of those who "marry and are given in marriage". It is the role of a father to give away what is his own, even as God the Father brought the first woman to man. The daughter is then to be given as a virgin (1Cor 7:37). But the father retains a choice (1Cor 7:38). Courtship acknowledges that a father

trains his children, protects his children, and then gives them. He has the right, in the dowry system, to place stipulations on that.

The courtship process provides an opportunity for paternal investigation of the suitor, with particular reference to his godliness, doctrine, worldview, family values, financial responsibility, work ethic. Any man who is irked by such parental care has such a weak view of fatherhood that I wouldn't want him to become the father of my daughter's children, my grandchildren. Even if he doesn't understand it he'll toil for my daughters if he loves them (Jacob with Rachel).

Dating removes the parental involvement in marriage, but we are not advocating arranged marriages without the consent of the children. (Gen 24:50, 51, 58). In practice, it was the parents of the bride whose consent was legally needed, for she is under her father's covering and this only changes on marriage. Courtship, being a legal matter is looking for the credibility of the testimony of witnesses, and the most obvious witnesses to call are the parents. If two young people cannot convince their own parents about the suitability of marriage, there is probably something seriously wrong, as has been demonstrated in the experiences of countless people.

Courtship starts at home, where "a covenant of purity" is established. A father determines to prepare his son to be a faithful husband. The father of a future bride determines to win and retain his daughter's heart until he is ready to give that heart to her future husband. That is only possible in an atmosphere of secure leadership, natural affection and a loving relationship.

The possibility of such courtship becomes more feasible where church and school support rather than undermine such a covenant of purity being established in the home. As a church, we set a different tone. Walter Trobisch advocated the development of the "etad" - the opposite of a date. It is any activity where adults and young people are together, treating one another with honour and respect; providing a context for friendship, relationship and shared activity

3. The legal proceedings of the court

a) Prayer

The process of preparing for marriage begins with years of prayer. Prayer by the parents from the early age of a child; later supplemented by the prayers of the young people themselves.

b) Involvement in work/ministry

In Gen 24:16 we see that Rebekah was at the well, which is a place of service and a place of public interaction. Meanwhile, Isaac was many miles away in the field, which was his place of work and prayer (Gen 24:63). He was not out dating or flirting, yet God found him a wife.

c) Developing friendships

Friendships do not need to begin in an exclusive way. In the early stages, group settings are far more conducive to balanced friendships, rather than intensely physical relationships. Courtship provides a context for communication and the foundation for a future marriage built on relationship and romance. Communication should not be based on lust or touch, but on working together.

As the friendship develops, it should be pursued increasingly in the context of the family. Chaperonage does not prohibit private conversation, but it puts it into a safe context and combines it with natural larger group settings. Church families must provide such settings when natural families do not exist.

d) Confirmation by witnesses

At this stage, the prospect of a serious relationship can be spoken about openly. Proper confirmation of the appropriateness of this is only possible when families have been involved in the relationship. How else can they offer testimony in this court unless they have been first-hand witnesses to the relationship? Everything prior to engagement is done in the openness of family (Gen 24:28).

e) Engagement

With parental confirmation, the prospective bride can now give a confident and joyful "Yes!" The transition away from her father's house begins, but it is a transition that has already been sealed with covenant. Engagement is not yet marriage, but it is not casual. Engagement is covenantal, thus, to break off courtship is a serious thing.

From this point on, there is appropriate time alone. The larger responsibilities and wider friendships should not be dropped, for they will still be there after marriage. There are still guidelines, however, for appropriate behavior, as ultimately the girl is still under her father's covering. It is his responsibility to present her to her husband on their wedding day as a virgin.

Restrictions on the freedom of a courting couple are the prerogative of the girl's father. But they need not be isolationist; a degree of physical contact may be a matter of Christian liberty. Guidelines during the engagement should be established on the basis of the maturity of the couple, length of the engagement and the previous history of the parties and their relationship.

f) Wedding ceremony

With a wedding ceremony, covenant vows and family blessing (Gen 24:60) finalize the legal proceedings. The reception is a public celebration whereby the newly married couple are received into the wider circle of family and friends, and bestowed with gifts and honor.

g) Consummation (Gen 24:67)

Conclusion

Doubtless, there will be objections raised. "Won't my kids get out of touch with their friends?" "Will it not be impossible to find a spouse?" "What about my daughter, doesn't this make things especially difficult for her?" Yes, there will be a rising feeling of insecurity when we are faced with giving up something that has been part of our thinking for so long. It requires a step of faith, but we can be encouraged by the fact that the way of godliness is always the way of maximum blessing.

Ultimately, this issue is a matter of parental responsibility rather than church policy, as we indicated at the beginning, but it will be a practical help if such principles are adopted by a whole church thereby reducing the sense of alienation.

Some will say, but doesn't this approach take out all sense of romance? The quick answer is, Yes and No! We have to ask ourselves, do we really want this thing called romance if it only equates with sexuality? Do we want that to be part of adolescent years? If it is saved, there will be a legitimate passion for the wife of one's youth (Prov 5:15-20). Then, not only will there be romance before marriage; more importantly, there will be romance after marriage.