

## **Biblical Dating: An Introduction**

by Scott Croft

The system today's young men and women have inherited for finding and marrying a future spouse leaves a lot to be desired. We often hear complaints from readers about the confusion, hurt and sexual sin they've encountered despite their best intentions. Many want to know how they can go about getting to know someone and eventually getting married without getting hurt or compromising their faith.

At Focus on the Family, we've offered a range of resources and expert advice bringing Biblical principles to bear in this area. Some of the messages we've presented have taken the position that Christians can apply their faith in such a way that they can still work within the system they've inherited. Other messages have stressed that Christians need to be much more counter-cultural. Joshua Harris, for instance, has promoted a model of courtship that harkens back to a model used broadly before modern dating evolved.

People attempting to follow a courtship model within today's culture, however, often run into a lot of practical questions, such as, "What if her dad is unavailable or uninterested in being involved?" or "What do you do when you live hundreds of miles from your family?"

The goal of this series of articles, beginning with this introduction, is to provide our readers with a place to bring those questions. Scott Croft is an elder at Capitol Hill Baptist Church where he teaches a seminar on Friendship, Courtship and Marriage. He is also an attorney who is used to tackling tough questions.

The answers he brings may be different from anything you've heard before. The topics he's going to be dealing with are ones in

which equally committed Christians have found different Biblical interpretations. Not all will agree with Scott's approach, and we invite feedback from anyone who believes there are better interpretations for the Biblical passages Scott draws from.

It's our hope that this Q&A series will be valuable both for those who think the Bible gives sufficient guidance for operating within our current system as well as for those who are looking for a completely countercultural path to marriage.

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If you're reading this, you're interested in dating. You've done it, you're doing it, you'd like to do it, or you need to teach somebody else how to do it. Don't worry. You're not alone. In our society, dating has become something of an obsession. It is expected to be a universal phenomenon. It's just something you do if you're single and of age (and that age is quickly dropping) in America. It is considered the natural precursor to marriage, and is generally considered something to be desired, whatever form it might take.

It's also big business. If you were to Google the word "matchmaker," you would receive something in the neighborhood of 12,100,000 responses — with a few of these outfits claiming to be Christian, but most making no such claim. "Dating" will get you 462,000,000 hits.

As evangelical Christians, we're called to be distinct in the ways we think and act about all issues that confront us and those around us. This topic is no exception. So, is there such a thing as *biblical* dating? If so, what is it? How can Christians think differently about this pervasive issue in media and culture? How are we doing so far?

The answer to that last question is "not well." Surveys consistently indicate that professing Christians behave almost exactly like non-Christians in terms of sexual involvement outside of marriage (in both percentage of people involved and how deeply involved they are — how far they're going), living together before marriage, and infidelity and divorce after marriage. In fact, depending on which statistics one believes, the divorce rate for professing Christians may actually be *higher* than for Americans as a whole. Granted, not all of these people are evangelicals, but we're not doing so well either. Indeed, the central issue we need to confront — and the reason I write and speak on this topic — is that when it comes to dating and relationships, perhaps more than in any other area of the everyday Christian life, the church is largely indistinguishable from the world. That truth has brought immeasurable emotional pain and other consequences to many Christians. Worse, it has brought great dishonor to the name of Christ and to the witness of individuals and the church.

It doesn't have to be this way. For Christians, the Lord has given us his Word, and the Holy Spirit helps us to understand it. We have brothers and sisters in Christ to hold us accountable and to help us apply the Word to our lives. If you're a Christian, that's the biblical life you're called to.

That's what I hope this column will be about — applying God's Word to the topic of dating, finding a spouse, and getting married. I also hope that many of you will set the agenda. Well, except for this column. Just this once, I'm going to set out a basic framework for biblical dating so we all know what we're talking about — or at least so you know where *I'm* coming from. After this column, you have my word that I'll spend the next several months answering *your* questions (that is, when I have answers).

So hang with me this time, then you're on.

## Scripture Rules

I have to start by explaining the theological doctrine that drives the approach I want to outline (and advocate). That doctrine is called the *sufficiency of Scripture*. Almost all professing evangelical Christians are familiar with and vigorously defend the doctrine of the *inerrancy* of Scripture (which states that the Bible is the authoritative Word of God, it's true, and it contains no falsity or error). I certainly agree with the inerrancy of Scripture, but that's not what I'm talking about here. The doctrine of the *sufficiency* of Scripture assumes inerrancy but then goes a step further. This doctrine simply holds that the Bible is sufficient to guide and instruct us authoritatively in all areas of our faith and life, and that there is no area of life about which the Bible has no guidance for us. The sufficiency of Scripture is taught explicitly and implicitly in many passages, but perhaps the most obvious is 2 Tim. 3:16-17:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

So, how does the sufficiency of Scripture apply to our coming discussions? Well, many evangelicals who otherwise believe in the inerrancy of the Bible and who might generally agree with the sufficiency of Scripture have nonetheless embraced the *world's* ideas about dating. In doing so, some make the argument that Scripture doesn't speak to this topic. I believe it does. The Bible speaks to *every* area of our faith and life at some level. Some things it talks about explicitly, like salvation, or sanctification, or marriage, or elders. The Bible guides us in

some areas by broader, more general principles and ideas we can build on as we strive to live the Christian life in practical ways. In either case, no area of life falls totally outside of the guidance and authority of God's Word.

My point is that we cannot simply state that the Bible "doesn't mention dating or courtship," and then think we're off the hook to pursue this area of our lives either on the world's terms or however seems best to us without diligent, submissive reference to God's Word. If the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture is true, then God's Word does have authoritative guidance for us about how we might best glorify God in this area of our lives. That means our conversation has to be a *biblical* conversation. I mention the sufficiency of Scripture as part of the groundwork for this column because it's one of those doctrines that touches every area of our lives, and it is at the heart of the approach to dating (and life) that we'll talk about here. No matter how practical or specific your questions or my answers get in the coming months, I will strive to have biblical support at some level for everything I say.

### **Biblical Dating**

OK. Let's take care of some basic definitions. We may define *biblical dating* as a method of introduction and carrying out of a pre-marital relationship between a single man and a single woman:

1. That begins (maybe) with the man approaching and going through the woman's father or family;
2. that is conducted under the authority of the woman's father or family or church; and
3. that always has marriage (or at least a determination regarding marriage to a specific person) as its direct goal.

The Scriptural support for the idea of biblical dating is largely by example and implication. We will look at a number of passages over the course of our discussions that support various aspects of biblical dating, but for the moment, let me just give you some references to study:

- I Corinthians 6:9-7:19 (command to be pure, seriousness of sexual sin and instructions regarding marriage)
- I Thessalonians 4:1-8 (do not wrong or *defraud* one another in relationships — by implying a relationship or commitment by your words or conduct that does not actually exist)
- Song of Solomon 2:7 ("do not awaken love before it pleases" — i.e. before the proper time, meaning marriage)
- Proverbs 6:20-7:27 (warning to avoid sexual sin and foolish relationships)
- James 1:13-15 (temptation is to be taken very seriously)
- Romans 13:8-14 (love others, work for their soul's good; don't look to please self)
- Romans 14:1-15:7 (favor others, not self ... value what's good to their souls)
- I Timothy 5:1-2 (treat single women as sisters in Christ, with *absolute purity*)
- Titus 2:1-8 (young men and women should focus on self-control/godliness)
- John 14:15 (if you love Christ, you will obey His commands — read: above your own desires — and live biblically)

Again, we'll talk more about these and other passages as we deal with specific questions.

## Modern Dating

We may basically define *modern dating* as a method of introduction and carrying out of a pre-marital relationship between a single man and a single woman:

1. that begins with either the man or the woman initiating with the other;
2. that is conducted outside the formal oversight or authority of either person's family or church; and
3. that may or may not have marriage as its goal and is often purely "recreational" or "educational."

Now, the biblical support for the modern approach to dating ... (insert crickets, tumbleweeds, person whistling here)... That was it. There isn't any. The very idea of extended romantic or sexual involvement outside of marriage doesn't even appear in Scripture unless it is described as illicit (sinful). Furthermore, it doesn't even appear in any society, western or otherwise, in any systematic way until the 20th century! While the principles supporting biblical dating have their beginnings with the very structure of the family, modern dating has its origins with the sexual revolution of the 1960s. It is brand new, and yet, seemingly, it is all we know.

## Differences Between Modern Dating and Biblical Dating

So what's the real difference? Here are some fundamentals:

Modern dating philosophy assumes that there will be several intimate romantic relationships in a person's life before marriage. In fact, it advocates "playing the field" in order to determine "what one wants" in a mate. Biblical dating has as its goal to be emotionally and physically intimate with only one member of

the opposite sex ... your spouse.

Modern dating tends to be egalitarian (no differences between men and women in spiritual or emotional "wiring" or God-given roles). Biblical dating tends to be complementarian (God has created men and women differently and has ordained each of these *spiritual equals* to play different and valuable roles in the church and in the family).

Modern dating tends to assume that you will spend a great deal of time together (most of it alone). Biblical dating tends to encourage time spent in group activities or with other people the couple knows well.

Modern dating tends to assume that you need to get to know a person more deeply than anyone else in the world to figure out whether you should be with him or her. The biblical approach suggests that real commitment to the other person should precede such a high level of intimacy.

Modern dating tends to assume that a good relationship will "meet all *my* needs and desires," and a bad one won't — it's essentially a self-centered approach. Biblical dating approaches relationships from a completely different perspective — one of ministry and service and bringing glory to God.

Modern dating tends to assume that there will be a high level of emotional involvement in a dating relationship, and some level of physical involvement as well. Biblical dating assumes NO physical intimacy, and more limited emotional intimacy outside of marriage.

Modern Dating assumes that what I do and who I date as an adult is entirely up to me and is private (my family or the church

has no formal or practical authority). Biblical dating assumes a context of spiritual accountability, *as is true in every other area of the Christian life*.

Basically, we can make three general statements about modern dating vs. biblical dating in terms of their respective philosophies:

1. Modern dating seems to be about "*finding*" the right person *for me* (as my friend Michael Lawrence has written on this site); biblical dating is more about "*being*" the right person to serve my future spouse's needs and be a God-glorifying husband or wife.
2. In modern dating, intimacy precedes commitment. In biblical dating, commitment precedes intimacy.
3. The modern dating approach tells us that the way to figure out whether I want to marry someone is to act like we *are* married. If we like it, we make it official. If we don't, then we go through something emotionally — and probably physically — like a divorce. In biblical dating, Scripture guides us as to how to find a mate and marry, and the Bible teaches, among other things, that we should act in such a way so as *not* to imply a marriage-level commitment until that commitment exists before the Lord.

I'm supremely confident that as we go back and forth in the coming months, some — perhaps many — of you will disagree (if you don't already) or be initially annoyed at some of my statements. Ask yourself why. What are you trying to hold onto that you think this approach will take from you (privacy, autonomy, a secular idea of freedom or of your own rights)?

I have a particular challenge for those of you whose main

objection is that the practical details we'll talk about here "are not explicitly biblical": think about the details of how you conduct (or would like to conduct) your dating life. Can you find explicit support for the modern approach in Scripture? Are there even *broad principles* in Scripture that justify the modern vision of dating (or yours, whatever it may be)? The Bible simply doesn't give us explicit instructions on some of what we'll discuss. Fair enough. In such a situation, we should ask what gets us *closest* to clear biblical teaching. In other words, within the many gray areas here, what conduct in our dating lives will help us to best care for our brothers and sisters in Christ and bring honor to His name?

That's it. That's a basic framework for biblical dating as best I can discern it from the principles of God's Word. Now, you're on. No question is too broad or too specific, too theoretical, too theological, or too practical. Agree with what I've said, or challenge it. This is how iron sharpens iron.

Just remember one thing: we're in this together — for *His* Glory.

## **Biblical Dating: To Kiss or Not to Kiss**

by Scott Croft

A promise is a promise. Last time I appeared on this site, I said that I would lay out my position on biblical dating and then turn it over to all of you to determine the rest of the column's topics by your questions.

You have not disappointed.

As many of you will know from the *Boundless* blog the last piece generated many posts and comments, from the challenging to the supportive, the general to the specific. In addition to what all of you saw on the blog, I have received dozens of questions and comments in e-mails, which I and the folks at *Boundless* have culled through to see what the most pressing questions seem to be.

Judging from both frequency and "passion," the most pressing questions arising from the last piece involve physical involvement — which I'm about to cover, initiation of relationships (especially the bit about involving the woman's father), and the practical details of how one of these relationships works. All of these topics will, Lord willing, be covered in future columns. It's simply impossible for me to address all of the fantastic individual questions and comments we've received, but know that we will do our very best to incorporate as many as possible into the columns themselves and the blog discussions that follow.

On to our topic for this column. Quite a few of you asked questions or made comments about my statement in *Biblical Dating, an Introduction* that "Biblical dating assumes NO physical intimacy" outside of marriage. Many wanted to know,

did I really mean *no* physical intimacy? What about showing affection? Isn't it *sex* outside of marriage that Scripture explicitly prohibits? How can you say definitively that other things are wrong? What if we're in a committed relationship? Shouldn't our physical relationship "progress" as other aspects of our relationship deepen? In this day and age, how far is really too far? I understand most physical stuff is wrong, but what about *just kissing*?

All good questions. With respect to pre-marital, romantically oriented kissing, we're clearly talking about an area about which reasonable believers can (and do) disagree. Let's go through what I hope will become the usual drill here. I will lay out what I view to be applicable biblical principles and passages on this topic, and then I and the editors will leave it to you to follow up with blog posts, comments and discussion.

I'll start by putting my position right on the line:

I believe the Bible to teach that all sexual activity outside of marriage is sin, and all *romantically oriented* physical activity is sexual activity. In my view, this includes premarital kissing.

As the questions above indicate, however, many single Christians have questions about whether premarital physical activity at some level *beyond* kissing is OK. We need to address the whole spectrum ("just kissing" included).

Let me offer a caveat or two at the outset. First, the fact that "romantically oriented" is in italics above is important. I am obviously not saying that hugs and kisses of affection or greeting to relatives and the like is out of bounds.

Another important point has to do with culture. In some cultures, kisses of greeting — between members of the same sex or of the opposite sex — as well as hand-holding and other forms of physical expression during normal, non-romantic social intercourse, are more common. Fine. You might even be able to talk me into the notion that *brief*, "non-leaning-in" hugs of greeting, sympathy, etc. between men and women who are not romantically involved are OK.

We all know what we're talking about here, and these are not the things I mean to address in this column. The game changes when two people are romantically involved or "semi-involved" (a fascinating phrase I recently heard).

All right. Before you start throwing things at your computer — I can't feel it you know, you're just hurting your own computer — let's go to Scripture. It is certainly true that no passage of Scripture says — in so many words, at least — "thou shalt not kiss before marriage." Having said that, I submit that there is a strong argument to be made from Scripture that there is *no* room for *any* sexual relationship outside of marriage. The argument becomes clearer when we look at some of what the Bible has to say about (1) sex, (2) our relationships with other believers and (3) sexual immorality itself.

### The "S" Word

As a good initial principle here, we should affirm that sex itself (and sexual activity in general) is not inherently negative or sinful. On the contrary, in the proper context, it is a kind and good gift of God. Michael Lawrence and other able *Boundless* authors have written before about the wonderful gift of sex, so I won't belabor the point except to repeat that the Scripture passages on sex, taken together, make very clear that God

instituted sex *within marriage* for purposes of procreation, pleasure, intimacy, holiness, and — ultimately — for his glory.

God instituted sex within marriage as part of his design of the family (Gen. 1:28). In 1 Cor. 7:3 and following, Paul says once we are married, our bodies literally belong to our spouse; he also instructs spouses to meet one another's sexual needs and to be together regularly so as to protect ourselves from falling into ungodly lust and extramarital sexual activity.

If you have any doubts about God's intention to give us sex as a wonderful, pleasurable gift, Song of Songs should put them to rest. In Song of Songs, God has given us a holy and beautiful picture of a marital sexual relationship, and everyone seems to be having an excellent time. Even there, however, God is clear that sex is *uniquely for marriage*: "Do not arouse or awaken love before it so desires (i.e., before it's appropriate — within marriage)." (Song 2:7) A blog comment or two emerging from the last column suggested a different interpretation of this verse and Song in general, but the orthodox interpretation of the book suggests both that an actual sexual relationship is part of what the narrative relays, and a context (at the time of the sexual part of the relationship) of marriage.

### Brothers and Sisters in Christ

So marriage is a unique relationship, and the good gift of sex is not only allowed but commanded within that relationship. Still, the overwhelming majority of believers will only share that relationship with one person in their entire lives. How are we to relate to everyone else (especially believers), and how does that question inform the topic of premarital sexual activity — including kissing?

The simple answer is that every believer to whom I am not married is my brother or sister in Christ, and I am to act accordingly.

There are too many passages to mention in this space that communicate God's command to live for God's glory and to "love" one another — defined as putting the spiritual good of others above our own desires. We are to do this in light of what God has done for us in Christ and in light of Christ's impending return. Just a few examples: Romans 12, especially vv. 9-13 ("Love must be sincere.... Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves."); Romans 13:8-14, especially vv. 9b and 10a ("Love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no harm to its neighbor."); 1 Cor. 13:4-7, especially v. 5 (love "is not self-seeking").

More specifically, 1 Tim 5:1-2 reiterates the "family" metaphor among believers and instructs us about how we are to treat our fellow members of the body of Christ:

"Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your *father*. Treat younger men as *brothers*, older women as *mothers*, and younger women as *sisters*, with *absolute purity*."

This is a didactic (teaching) passage generally instructing us about how to relate to other "family members" among God's people. We should note this analogy with care. With the exception of husbands and wives, there is *no* sexual dimension to "familial" relationships. Also, look at that phrase about how younger women should be treated — *absolute purity*. As a lawyer, I almost never see absolute statements. It's the strongest possible language Paul can employ.

1 Thess. 4:3-8 gets even more specific:

"It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God; *and that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him*. The Lord will punish men for all such sins, as we have already told you and warned you. For God did not call us to be impure, but to lead a holy life. Therefore, he who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God, who gives you his holy spirit."

Look closely at verse 6. Some translations render the word "wrong" as "defraud." To defraud someone is to deceive that person — in this context, to imply a commitment that does not exist by committing acts with someone that are appropriate only in the context of a particular relationship (i.e., marriage) in order to satisfy my own "passionate lust." To commit sexual immorality with and against someone, far from showing the "love" to which Scripture calls all believers, is to act like those "who do not know God," and this passage calls such acts "sin."

Now, one obvious counterargument to the point I intend to make is that the Scriptures I've cited above just beg the question of whether kissing and other sexual activity violate those passages. The argument might run thus: "Of course I want to be loving to others. Of course I want to care for their spiritual good. I just think I can show genuine affection by engaging in kissing and/or other sexual activity (short of intercourse) with someone I clearly care about and still obey those passages."

Fair enough. Let's explore that idea. Let's say for the sake of

argument that it is theoretically possible to engage in extramarital romantically oriented physical activity *and* obey the above biblical standards while doing it. *Have you ever met that mark?*

Think about the times you have engaged in any type of physical activity with someone not your spouse. It might have been last night or last week or last year or back in high school or college. Maybe one or both of you achieved orgasm even though you didn't actually "have sex" as you define it. Maybe you explored one another's bodies but were only partially naked. Maybe you just caressed one another above the waist as you kissed. Maybe you just kissed passionately for awhile. Maybe it was just a long, lingering kiss goodnight.

Would you describe whatever you did as "holy and honorable," or was it done to satisfy the "passionate lust" of you or your partner or both (1 Thess. 4:4-5)? Were you honest with the person about making a commitment to him or her before the Lord, or did you defraud or deceive that person in some way? Was your *purpose* for doing what you did to build that person up spiritually — to make that person "more holy" (Eph. 5:28-29)? Do you believe that you and your partner "honor[ed] God with your bodies" in doing what you did (1 Cor. 6:20)? Whatever you did, did that interaction reflect "*absolute purity*" (1 Tim 5:2)? Was there "even a *hint*" of sexual immorality in what you did (Eph. 5:3-5)? Whatever you did, as you now think about it, does it inspire a comfortable peace or an uncomfortable shudder to remember that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit observed it all? Do you believe God was glorified or grieved by what he saw?

How'd your answers come out? I can tell you from literally hundreds of e-mails and personal conversations that the only

people who really attempt to justify premarital sexual involvement (with a few exceptions for "just kissing") are those who would like to engage in it in the future or who are currently engaging in it. I have never heard *any believer*, single or married, defend their extramarital physical relationships from a position of looking back on them.

Keep in mind that the idea of holy, God-glorifying sexuality is by no means an impossible standard once you figure marriage into the equation. While no person stops being a fallible, broken sinner just because he or she gets married, the context of marriage makes it possible — even normal and likely, in the case of two walking Christians — to answer well the questions I just posed. Sex within a godly marriage *is* holy and honorable before God (1 Cor. 7, Song of Songs, Hebrews 13:4). It is part of the process of building one another up spiritually in marriage and should be done to that end. It is also meant, among other things, for sexual pleasure. And marriage — including the sexual relationship within it — reflects the covenant and the joyful, loving, intimate relationship between the church and her Savior. Not to put too fine a point on it, good sex within a godly marriage actually reflects God's character and brings him glory. It meets the mark.

### **The Problem with "How far can we go?"**

For those who have not thought about the passages above or who disagree with my argument from them, "How far can we go?" is still the big question on many minds. A brief tour of Christian blogs and bookstores will provide several different answers to the question, attempting to compose lines and boundaries somewhere on the sexual continuum behind which singles must stay. Some don't even draw lines beyond sexual intercourse,

inviting singles to think it through and let their consciences guide them in the context of a committed relationship. I realize there's disagreement here.

In my view, the problem with asking "How far can we go?" is that if we want to *positively pursue godliness*, it's simply the wrong question. What that question really asks is "How close to the line (sexual sin) can I get without crossing it?" The problem is that Scripture explicitly tells us not to try to "approach" the line at all, but to turn and run from it.

### **The Bible and Sexual Immorality**

"Flee from sexual immorality" (1 Cor. 6:18).

The Greek word for "flee" in this passage is an exaggerated form of the word "repent" that means (roughly) to turn and run from something. I once played golf on a course in Florida that was home to many large alligators (don't get distracted — my lack of judgment is not the point here). Every hole had big blue and white signs on it that said (I'm paraphrasing): "DANGER: ALLIGATORS PRESENT. DO NOT FEED OR APPROACH ALLIGATORS. IF YOU ENCOUNTER AN ALLIGATOR, FLEE IMMEDIATELY."

Now, we could quibble about exactly what "flee" means here. It might mean "run in the other direction." It might mean "walk in the other direction." What it certainly *does not* mean is "attempt to carefully indulge your interest in alligators by taking your 5-iron, walking up to the alligator, and seeing how many times you can poke it without becoming its mid-afternoon snack."

Scripture is replete with statements that sexual immorality leads to death, that it is idolatry, and that those who are characterized

by it will not enter the kingdom of heaven (Check out 1 Cor. 6:12 and following, among many others). In addition to 1 Cor. 6, other passages explicitly tell us that sexual immorality is not something to flirt with. Romans 13 (right after speaking positively of how and why to selflessly love one another) admonishes us not even to *think* about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature." Ephesians 5 tells us that there must not be "even a *hint* of sexual immorality" among the followers of Christ. If you want to think through this idea well, take your concordance and look at what the Bible has to say collectively about sexual sin of all types. It's intensely sobering.

The question is not "How far can I go in indulging my desires for sexual gratification or intimacy without getting too close to this thing the Bible utterly rejects?" The question we should all ask — in any area of our lives — is "How can I best *pursue* that to which God in His Word has *positively* called me?" He has called us *all* to pursue holiness and purity in our personal lives. That leaves little room for intentional flirtation with any sin, sexual or otherwise.

### **"Just Kissing"**

Let's talk about two practical arguments that have implications for "just kissing." The first is that all sexual activity is sex. God's design of sex doesn't merely include the act of sexual intercourse. It's also everything that leads up to that act, and everything on the sexual continuum is meant to end in that act. It's called foreplay, and it's a fundamental part of God's design for sex. To borrow (and embellish) an analogy from Michael Lawrence, sexual activity is like a down-hill on-ramp to a highway. It's one way, you gather momentum the second you enter it, and according to the Great Engineer's design of the

highway system, there's only one reason to get on it.

This truth bears itself out not only in our emotions, desires, and common sense, but literally in our physical bodies. The moment two people begin kissing or touching each other in a sexual way, both the male and female body — without going into unwarranted detail here — begin "preparing" for sex. God has designed us that way, and when we begin any sort of sexual activity, our bodies know exactly what's going on — even if our self-deluding minds deny it.

I'll simply call the other argument the "wisdom argument." Even if we assume for a moment — just for the sake of argument, mind you — that kissing without doing anything else isn't sex and is therefore OK. When two people care for one another, it is natural to want to consummate that affection physically. In the right context, those desires are good and right and God-glorifying. In *any* context, they are some of the strongest desires known to human kind. Kissing will only make you want to do more than kiss. It will make you want to indulge in sin. That desire will be strong enough in both of you without blatantly tempting yourself by trying to put just one foot on the on-ramp. It's simply a physiological and emotional reality. If courting such spiritual danger is not sin itself, it is, at the very least, an unwise invitation to sin, what Proverbs calls "folly." Why put someone you claim to care about at spiritual risk?

### **Remember the Gospel**

I'll be the first to admit that this column has been a pretty rough slog through a type of sin many of us (myself included) have fallen into at one time or another in our lives. Let me close by reminding us all that while God hates sin, and while sexual sin — like all sin — is destructive to us and grieving to God, there is

hope and forgiveness in Jesus Christ. If we truly repent of our past sins and turn from them and believe in the atoning blood of Christ, we are not "damaged goods," but *new creations*. What was red as crimson has become white as snow.

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

## **Biblical Dating: Are You Ready to Date?**

by Scott Croft

I told you this series wouldn't be dull. Last month's column on premarital kissing brought forth a huge number of comments and e-mails. Some agreed with the article, and some "not so much." It was a great discussion. This month I'm responding to another question that was repeated numerous times after "Biblical Dating: An Introduction" was published: "As a practical matter, how do we begin such a relationship?" *Boundless* readers especially questioned the idea of initiating through the woman's father.

As usual, I'll attempt to lay out some biblical principles and practical implications on the topic at hand, and then turn it over to you for comments and e-mails. Other *Boundless* authors have recently written more narrowly on the topic of DTR conversations, so I'll cover this topic in slightly broader terms.

### **First Things First: Are You Ready to Date?**

Before we get into initiation itself, a few preliminary ideas bear mentioning (or repeating, as the case may be).

The first step in the process of moving toward marriage through the initiation of or participation in a godly relationship is to evaluate *yourself* spiritually. Remember, one of our guiding principles here is that we are trying to *be* (or prepare to be) a godly spouse even as we try to *find* a godly spouse. All singles who profess Christ and aspire to marriage — even as a possibility — have this responsibility (even outside this area of life, we should all be trying to grow in Christ). Are you a Christian? If you're already sure of that basic answer, are you a growing and mature Christian? Are you generally humble and

teachable, and do you respect authority? As a practical matter, are you responsible and holy in the way you possess your own spirit, mind and body?

As you move into the stage of life in which you begin to seriously consider marriage generally or a particular relationship, your first step should be to soberly reflect, before God, on your own spiritual walk and maturity in Christ. If you aspire to be a godly husband or wife someday, what have you done and what are you doing to prepare for that ministry?

Second, are you at a place in your life at which you are ready and able to marry? As I've written on this site before, "practice" and "recreation" are not good reasons to date. Dating is for the purpose of finding a marriage partner. In my view, if you can't happily picture yourself married within a year, you're not in a position to date.

Third, once you decide that you are ready to date, look to God's Word to decide the kind of person to date, and evaluate potential dating partners on those criteria, rather than relying primarily on the world's treatment of ideas like "attraction" and "chemistry." I wrote at some length on this in my article, "Brother, You're Like a Six."

For you busy singles with time for only one mildly irritating column per day, the summary is this: Pick a potential dating partner with an eye toward godly manhood and womanhood — with an eye toward who would make a good husband or wife, defined by those characteristics *God* esteems in His Word, not the ones Hollywood likes.

See what an unsatisfying bumper-sticker treatment that was? You might want to read the full piece.

## Men Initiate

Among the different roles assigned to men and women in the Bible, men are assigned the role of leadership. This is true in the church and in the family. This is not a signal of male superiority or of the greater importance of men. It is simply God's design and assignment of equally valuable roles among spiritually equal beings. Men initiate, women respond. Briefly, biblical support for this position is found, among other passages, in the creation order in Gen. 2, in 1 Cor. 11: 7-9, and Eph. 5. True, these passages refer to marriage, but it is wise and right to set patterns that will serve you well in marriage, especially if one accepts the premise that the purpose of dating is to find a marriage partner.

What does this actually look like in a budding relationship between two people?

First, the man should initiate asking the woman out. Whether this means approaching the woman herself or her father or someone filling that role instead of her father, it should be the guy that starts things off. As I mentioned, he should not do this until he is "ready" to marry. If you're not ready to marry, you're not ready to date.

As a quick aside, if you are a single man and you would not describe yourself as ready to be married within a year, think about why that is. I mention this for two reasons: (1) Scripture seems not just to encourage, but to assume that part of the growth into biblical manhood is to seek marriage, so this is a biblical goal; and (2) easily the biggest complaint that I and others who advocate this approach get from godly Christian women is that *men don't initiate*.

If you're still in school or not out on your own, disregard this for

the moment. But if you're out of college and do not feel specifically called to singleness for biblical reasons, why are you not looking to be married? Dr. Albert Mohler has talked about a growing culture in society and in our churches of perpetual boyhood; some psychologists call it the "Peter Pan syndrome."

As I said, in the Bible, marriage and family are considered a natural stage of progression toward manhood. The command in Genesis to be fruitful and multiply is a general command. When Paul extols singleness in 1 Cor. 7 (which is an often-misused passage in this area of life), it is singleness for the purpose of enhanced *ministry (discipleship, teaching, missionary work)*.

If you are floating around staying single because you enjoy social flexibility or having time to yourself or hanging out with the guys or because you have worldly ideas about the perfect woman or how to approach marriage, consider: Are you approaching manhood and marriage biblically? Every male who is out of college should have at least thought this through.

Once he determines he is ready to be married generally, and once he has found a particular woman he is interested in pursuing, our single man's next step is to "put some feelers out." He should talk to some of her friends, see if she's been asking about him, have one or two subtly suggestive conversations with her to see if she gives anything away.... NO! This is not initiation. Initiation is not manipulating the situation so that while you're officially "asking her out" there's no actual risk of rejection or embarrassment.

Initiation means initiation. It means that you as the man take the first step, risk and all.

In his *Boundless* article, "Real Men Risk Rejection," Michael

Lawrence eloquently summarizes both the objections some men might raise to this idea, and, in my view, the ideal response:

"Wait a minute. Are you saying that all the risk is mine? Yes I am. 'Doesn't that mean that she can just tell me no and leave me twisting in the wind?' Yes is does. Welcome to leadership. Welcome to trusting God. Welcome to being a man. Your cards belong on the table. Your intentions and your feelings, to the extent that you can discern them and it is appropriate for you to share them, should be clear. Part of your role even at this early stage is to protect the woman of your interest from unnecessary risk and vulnerability by providing a safe context in which she can respond."

### **Women Respond**

As it is the man's God-given role to initiate, so it is the woman's God-given role to respond. Her response may be positive or negative, it may occur through her father, her family, or words directly to her potential suitor. But whatever the circumstances, her role is as responder, not initiator. As single men need to be learning how to lead (whether they like it or not), single women need to be learning what it is to let a man assume spiritual leadership in the relationship — and to respond to that leadership. Ultimately, this means learning to trust the goodness and sovereignty of God.

Clearly, this is not the popular secular view of the "liberated" woman's role. Hollywood's perfect woman runs with the boys, knows what she wants, and is aggressive en route to getting it — especially romantically. Hilariously, Hollywood even writes these characters into period pieces, as if the normal woman at all levels of society in the 18th and 19th centuries was a post-

feminist, post-sexual-revolution, "there-ain't-no-difference-between-me-and-you" libertine. But I digress.

Needless to say, that is not the biblical picture of the responder. So, what does this picture look like? Does this mean that a woman should never ask a man out on a first date? I think it does. Does this mean that a woman shouldn't be giving the guy the assurance he needs by "leaking" news of her interest to him by way of his friends? Again, I think so.

"Wait," you say. "What if I'm really interested in a man and he just isn't getting it and I need to move him along?" Don't. When men drop the ball on leadership (as we often do), it presents a temptation for the woman involved to pick up the reins and lead for him. This is no less true within marriage. Picking up the reins sets a terrible pattern that only confuses the roles in the relationship and encourages both of you to take the role of the other to the detriment of the relationship and ultimately the marriage.

The Lord is sovereign. If it doesn't work out with a particular guy because he didn't step up, the Lord will cause something else to work out. He knows what is best for each of us, and all of us must learn to trust him — especially about things that are really important to us.

### **Accountability Is Key**

Finally, let me advocate the initiating of a relationship under some accountability structure. I mentioned the woman's father or family because until the second half of the 20th century, that's largely how it was done. The idea was to protect the woman from potential hurt or awkwardness, to aid her in evaluating a man whom she might not have known well at the time of his

initiation, and to help ensure that the relationship was carried out honorably.

Certainly, this norm spread beyond the believing community and became more of a cultural phenomenon, but it still gels well with attempts to carry out a godly dating relationship — especially among those believers who hold a complementarian view of biblical gender roles.

In this day and age, however, the hard fact (as many of you voiced in comments) is that many single Christian women today have fathers who are not involved in their lives at all, are not believers, or are indifferent to or unaware of the notion of protecting and shepherding their daughters and potential suitors in a dating context.

Where that is the case, natural alternative might be some married individual or couple within the woman's (or man's) church community. Ladies, this doesn't mean that you have to cut your would-be suitor off mid-sentence, take off running and shout your father's (or whoever's) name and phone number over your shoulder as you go. It may mean that you explain to him that before you are willing to go out with him, he needs to meet person or couple X and discuss it with them or with the two of you.

If you don't desire that sort of protection or aid, at least insist that the two of you begin to meet with others who know one or both of you well so that there will be consistent accountability and an outside perspective on how the relationship is going. Humble openness to accountability is essential to a godly relationship. More on this in future columns perhaps.

So that's my take on initiation. It's not exhaustive coverage, I

realize, but this should at least get the discussion started on broad principles.

## Biblical Dating: Just Friends

by Scott Croft

One of the big questions hovering around the topic of courtship and dating is the role of friendship. How intimate of a friendship with someone of the opposite sex is OK? How do I move from friendship to dating? Won't the friendship be ruined if one of us expresses romantic interest and the other doesn't respond favorably?

Basically, the question seems to be how exactly single Christians should relate to members of the opposite sex in that large and awkward zone between "we've never met" and a deliberate dating or courting relationship.

Much of this is a fairly new problem. I won't repeat the full history lesson here, as several *Boundless* authors have already discussed it (John Thomas most recently, in his excellent piece "Stuck in the Just-Friends Zone"). Essentially, the historical reality is that until 30 or 40 years ago, long, intimate friendships between men and women in which each served as the other's emotional confidante, relationship adviser, and "best buddy" were far less common than they are today.

So, is the trend toward intimate friendships between single men and women a good thing? In my view, not so much. If you haven't read my previous columns on biblical dating, you'll be helped in thinking through this issue by reading "Biblical Dating: An Introduction," and perhaps "To Kiss or not to Kiss" as well. Based on some of the principles found there, let me offer a couple of practical reasons why I believe such friendships to be generally unwise, and then I'll suggest a positive role for friendship among singles in the Christian community.

## Friendship That Invites Confusion and Frustration

In this series, we've raised several biblical principles regarding the way we should treat our brothers and sisters in Christ. I Thess. 4:1-8 admonishes us not to wrong or "defraud" our brother or sister by implying a marital level of commitment (through sexual involvement) when it does not exist. As I've discussed before, a broad (but sound) implication of this passage is that "defrauding" could include inappropriate emotional — as well as physical — intimacy. Romans 13:8-14 calls us to love others, to work for their souls' good rather than looking to please ourselves. More specifically, verse 10 reminds us that "[l]ove does no harm to its neighbor." Romans 14:1-15:7 offers a discourse on favoring weaker brothers and sisters above ourselves, valuing and encouraging that which is good in the souls of others.

Bottom line: I believe it is *extremely* difficult and rare — as a practical matter — to honor these principles in the context of a close, intimate friendship between two single Christians of the opposite sex. (For the verbally precise among you, I think such friendships between non-single Christians are also a bad idea, but that's not what we're talking about here.)

Intimate friendships between men and women almost always produce confusion and frustration for at least one of the parties involved. Close friendships by their very nature tend to involve extensive time talking and hanging out one-on-one. They tend to involve a deep knowledge of the other person's hopes, desires and personality. They tend to involve the sharing of many aspects of each other's daily lives and routines. In other words, they tend to involve much of the type of intimacy and companionship involved in — and meant for — marriage.

And yet, even with all this deep communication going on, at least one aspect of these friendships inherently involves a mixed message. No matter how clearly one or both of you have defined what's happening as "just friends," your *actions* are constantly saying "I enjoy being with you and interacting with you in a way that suggests marriage (or at least romantic attraction)."

The simple reality (of which most people are aware, whether they admit it or not) is that in the vast majority of these types of relationships, one of the parties involved either began the "friendship" with romantic feelings for the other person or develops them along the way. Either way, that person is now hanging on to the "friendship" in the hope of getting something more despite the "clear words" from the other person that he or she wants nothing beyond friendship.

To the extent that one person's romantic feelings have been clearly articulated to the other (and were met with an unfavorable response), to continue in some no-man's land of "good friends," is arguably to take selfish advantage of the vulnerable party. Yes, I know, the other person is an adult who is free and responsible to walk away if he or she is so unsatisfied, but like it or not, it tends not to work that way. Hope springs eternal, whether it should or not.

And that's the "clear" scenario. What if one person develops romantic feelings in a friendship in which no "clear words" have been spoken, such that the desires of the other person are a mystery? Especially if it's the woman in this position (as seems to be the case more often than not), she will likely feel that if she pushes for something more than friendship, she may lose the interaction and companionship she currently has. Still, given her desire for a husband — and perhaps to have *this* man as her

husband — the status quo of "just really good friends but nothing more for some odd reason" will leave her unsatisfied, frustrated, and confused. I have seen and heard and read of such frustration and hurt playing out many times over.

Certainly, a man can find himself in a similar position with a woman he's attracted to, but given his obligation to be clear and intentional with the woman and to initiate the type of relationship he truly desires, he arguably has placed — or at least kept — *himself* in such a position. He simply is not "between a rock and a hard place" in the same way a woman is.

Finally, there's one more type of confusion to consider. How do *others* view your "friendship"? Ladies, might there be men who would have initiated with you but for their uncertainty about or discomfort with your intimate friendship with another man? Guys, has a woman perhaps turned you down over questions about a woman friend you spend lots of time with? Would *you* want to date someone knowing that he or she had a significant, pre-existing, and ongoing emotional bond with another single member of the opposite sex? If I were a single person desiring marriage, the answers to these questions would matter to me.

I admit we're not talking absolutes here, but almost. In my experience counseling and writing on this topic, everybody thinks (or at least *claims*) that his or her intimate friendship is the exception. "No *way* we'll end up in one of the situations you just talked about. Unlike most other people of our age and experience, we are (insert favorite answer here) (a) really astute students of our own and each other's hearts, (b) *super*-clear and talented communicators, (c) always honest with each other, even when such honesty entails huge vulnerability for whoever is speaking, (d) all of the above."

Maybe. But here I would pose the question that is relevant to so many aspects of the courtship and dating topic. Why risk harm to your own heart or to that of a brother or sister in order to have a type of companionship that, outside of marriage, is arguably questionable anyway? This brings me to my second argument against intimate one-on-one friendships between brothers and sisters in Christ....

### **Enjoying the Convenient, Delaying the Good**

Let's assume for the sake of argument that your intimate friendship is one of those rare jewels that is devoid of the potential for hurt or confusion. There's another drawback to such friendships. They discourage marriage.

Men and women who are not called to long-term singleness and celibacy have a strong desire for companionship with a member of the opposite sex. This is good and right. As I've discussed before, Scripture seems to consider marriage (and children) to be a normal part of the progression toward biblical manhood and womanhood (see, among others, Gen. 1:27-28; 2:23-24; Mat. 24:38-41; Luke 20:34-36).

In the past, when both sexual immorality and intimate male-female friendships were much less accepted and less common in society, men and women moved more deliberately toward marriage earlier in life. By offering a taste of the companionship and interactions that make marriage so satisfying, with none of the accompanying commitments or responsibilities entailed in marriage, intimate friendships discourage the pursuit of the grown-up, God-intended outlet for marital desires — marriage. This is especially so in a culture — and a church — that struggles with the widespread sociological trend in its young adults known as "perpetual adolescence." Albert Mohler, Alex

and Brett Harris, Candice Watters and other *Boundless* authors have written about this trend at length. In fact, the failure of many Christian men to pursue marriage well into their 20s and 30s may be one of the most disturbing results of this trend, but that's another topic for another day.

As you probably know, I believe Scripture to teach that engaging in the types of emotional intimacy and companionship involved in close male-female friendships — outside of marriage and for their own sake — is wrong (see *everything* else I've ever written for *Boundless*). But even if you don't accept that premise, such intimacy is still inadvisable in the sense that it delays and discourages marriage, which Scripture unambiguously calls good and right.

I would especially encourage women who desire marriage to give this argument some thought. If you are one of the *many* women to write me or Boundless Answers or another *Boundless* author to complain with great frustration that "Christian men don't initiate," consider this: Are you and your sisters satisfying the intermediate needs of your guy friends such that they feel no particular compulsion to pursue marriage?

### **Friendship Within A Context of Community**

So am I saying that I'm against the idea of relationships growing out of Christian friendship? Am I saying that friendship among single brothers and sisters has no place? Am I saying that single men and women need to shun one another, speaking only to utter the words "will you date me," followed by "yes" or "no"? Absolutely not. In fact, I would argue that dating or courting relationships *ideally* grow out of friendship among co-laborers in the gospel. The question is what those friendships look like practically.

I Timothy 5 describes a relationship among Christian men and women not married to one another as that of brothers and sisters. The Lord has mercifully called us not to live the Christian life alone but as part of a community of believers. Single men and women can and should serve in ministry together, study the word together, and hang out together socially. They should go out together, gather around meals, watch movies. In my view, however, these activities should be done, for the most part, in groups rather than one-on-one. Men can initiate group get-togethers, and so can women. In fact, single brothers and sisters in Christ, like the rest of Christ's body, are positively called to care for one another. Men can (and should) give women rides home rather than have them walk alone at night. Men can come over and move couches. Women can cook a meal for a group of guys in danger of developing scurvy from a near total lack of vegetables. Knock yourselves out.

Friendships grow out of the body of Christ functioning and, in turn, result in interests beyond friendship. To be sure, the friendships that develop in this context are not the same friendships with the same level of intimacy that would develop from spending consistent time alone with someone, but they provide a context from which initiations and relationships can bloom. Remember, the world has *falsely* told us that a high level of intimacy with another person needs to precede any sort of commitment to another person.

Is there a precise formula for whether a friendship or series of interactions is too intimate? If there is, I don't know it. Hang out in groups; serve together. By all means, chat and be friendly with your brothers and sisters in Christ. Should a friend make the assumption that you're ready to marry him or her if you initiate a one-on-one conversation at church or at a group

dinner? No. Have you blown two tires and gone screaming off into the trees if you ask someone to lunch or coffee once or twice? Maybe not. Depends on what happens from there.

Just be aware that "friendship" is no more a forum to play married than a dating relationship is. If you find that you are consistently showing one of your opposite-sex Christian friends more one-on-one attention than all the others, whether in conversation or through invitations out, it's probably time for (1) some clarification of intentions and (most likely) a change in the status of the relationship to something more overtly committed, or (2) a change in the way you interact with that person.

Beyond that, godly single adults will have to work this out on a case-by-case basis.

## **Biblical Dating: Navigating The Early Stages of a Relationship**

by Scott Croft

As I've mentioned before, the dating questions posed by single people often fall into two categories: (1) questions on specific issues (like physical involvement) and (2) questions about what a godly dating relationship should look like as a practical matter. We tried to begin answering the second type of question a couple of columns ago with "Biblical Dating: Are You Ready to Date?" The plan for the next column or two is to stay on that path before returning to topic-specific questions and answers.

One principle that bears repeating here, however, is that as Christians in dating relationships, we want to avoid hurting one another and dishonoring Christ by "defrauding" (see NASB translation of I Thess. 4:6) our brothers and sisters in Christ by implying — through word or action — a higher level of commitment to that person than we have made before God. Because this sort of (perhaps unintentional) deception is a particular temptation in a dating context, we need to be deliberate about avoiding it.

That's where the following practical suggestions come in. Note the phrase "practical suggestions." These are not sacrosanct biblical principles. This is not the only way the early-going of a relationship might look. These are simply suggested applications of biblical principles. In the end, there is no formula; no rote substitute for intellectually honest Christians seeking to care well for one another and to faithfully apply Scripture to infinitely varied relational circumstances.

So with all that said, let's consider how the principle of caring

for one another well in the early stages of a relationship might look.

### **What Are We Doing Again?**

The first thing that should happen if it has not happened during the initiation of the relationship is that intentions should be established. Whatever that conversation looks like, intentions should be clear and it should be the man making them so. Guys, tell her why you have initiated or are initiating with her, tell her that you intend to pursue the relationship to determine if marriage *to her* is the right choice before God.

In my view, this establishing of intentions should be done near the beginning of any exclusive or romantic time spent together — preferably within the first two or three "dates" during a deliberate conversation on the subject.

Guys, don't wait until you've had lunch or dinner or "hung out" one-on-one four or five times before you let her know what's going on. The idea is to remove that period of confusion or vulnerability for the woman by being forthright *from the beginning* about what level of intention or commitment exists (a la I Thess. 4). You probably won't know at this stage how things are going to ultimately turn out regarding marriage (that's why you date), so you need not communicate that right away. But you should know what you're trying to find out and what your intentions are — that is what you, as the man, must be clear about. From there, you obviously need a response from the woman to know whether or not things will go any further.

If you know the woman from church, if you've seen her interact in a group, observed her with others, maybe worked with her as a part of some ministry, that input should be enough for you to

think through the decision of whether initiation of a relationship is the right thing. Remember, your intent at this point is not necessarily marriage — and that's not what either of you are committing to at this stage! You're simply committing to get to know her a little better in an intentional way in order to evaluate whether the two of you should then consider marriage to one another.

Ladies, as uncomfortable as this may sound for the guys, you might be in a difficult position here as well, depending on how well you know the man initiating with you. What if that answer is "not well at all"? In that case, look to the biblical characteristics I've written about in other columns. Have you had any chance at all to see him in group settings, or do you know him by reputation? If you don't have even information at that level, feel free to tell him that you want some time to think and pray about it (that is, if you're not sure at that point that you're not interested).

Then — in addition to actually thinking and praying about it — ask one of your pastors or elders whether he knows him, and what he thinks. If the pastor or elder you ask doesn't know him well, he can guide you to a trustworthy source that knows him better.

If you know the man well or at least better than what I've just described, but you are not sure whether you are interested in him, I'd encourage you to at least take some time to get to know him before giving an unequivocal "no." Keep in mind that this is different from feigning interest when there isn't any. There are instances in which you can be genuinely unsure about a guy but still move forward this far.

Let me say it again: *Agreeing to date is not agreeing to marry.*

*That's why you date.* We're trying to make intentions clear, here, not asking anyone to commit to go the distance with no information.

As we've discussed in this space before, there are biblical and unbiblical reasons for a man to initiate with a woman, and there are biblical and unbiblical reasons for turning a man down. If you feel that you are not initially attracted to a man who initiates with you, OK — but at least ask yourself why that is. Are you considering biblical characteristics in that decision? Do you have enough information to know that you could not marry this man? If a man initiates with you, ladies, think and pray and seek counsel before simply dismissing him. If nothing else, treating men who initiate well will encourage other men to initiate.

### **So ... Here We Are**

If we are concerned about defrauding one another (again, this idea applies to both genders but particularly to the men as the initiators), another one of the early issues to address is how much and what kind of time couples spend together.

What kind of time should couples be spending together in the early stages of a relationship?

The answer turns on what you are trying to find out about this person at this stage of things. You're trying to find out whether this is someone you should know more intimately en route to figuring out whether this is a person you could marry. Did you catch how I phrased that? You are trying to figure out if you *should* get to know this person more intimately; you are not at the outset trying to *get* to know this person intimately. The difference is subtle but important.

One suggestion I have for couples starting out is that the majority of your time together should be spent with other people, preferably with the families and church families of the two people. Get to know one another in groups, find out how the other person reacts to people, spend time with the people he or she cares about. This will provide you a chance to get to know him or her well and will also provide a buffer and accountability against getting too emotionally intimate too early.

Many people want to start out a relationship by spending a huge amount of time alone together. This is understandable but unadvisable for a number of reasons. Spending too much time alone promotes a high level of intimacy on a number of fronts, can lead to some level of isolation from other friends, and puts undue emphasis on the relationship in the lives of both people, even before any significant commitment has been voiced.

If you do spend time alone, spend it in activities, read a book together, be in public places, etc. In these early stages, people should not be spending long hours looking into each others eyes over candle-lit tables or being alone together at one another's apartments. To do so courts temptation (so to speak) and implies a level of commitment that's simply not there yet.

Think not just about the kind of time you spend together, but how much. Even if you are spending the right kind of time together, there is such a thing as too much of a good thing. Don't get together (even with other people) four or five times a week. Leave space in your life for other activities and relationships. And don't spend every moment that you're not together on the phone or even e-mailing or texting or IMing back and forth. Build the momentum (if it will build) slowly.

## What Should We Talk About?

Have you thought about the fact that there are some topics that are inherently intimate and that almost automatically promote deep intimacy between two people? What do I mean?

For starters, let me suggest that you not go out in the first week and tell each other the long, teary versions of your testimonies and the greatest personal pain that the Lord has delivered you from in your life.

Don't immediately make that person your confidante in matters personal and emotional. Don't articulate your deepest feelings with respect to your life or even how you feel about that person. Also (and this may seem counterintuitive), I advise folks not to spend long periods in prayer together. Prayer is a wonderful thing, but it's also inherently intimate. Pray for the relationship, but don't spend hours holding hands and pouring yourselves out before the Throne. That may come.

What should you talk about then? Talk about a book you're reading, your interests, your faith (in more general terms or along the lines of issues), things going on in your life. Talk about your values and priorities, ambitions and plans you may have, your families and things that are happening in your church or in the world.

All right. Does this sound cold, uninviting, even deceptive? I admit it's not the stuff of movies, but the very point that I'm making is that at this point it *shouldn't* be. You are not yet that other person's main provision from the Lord for spiritual, emotional and physical intimacy and companionship. That role is reserved for the person's *spouse*. You are not that yet. You are in the early stages of seeing if that is a role that the Lord would

eventually have you fill in one another's lives, but you're not there yet, and the kind of intimacy I've described is not to be engaged in on a trial basis. Even if it looks more fun or stimulating to go there — and I *know* it does — it's also defrauding your brother or sister.

### **Emotional Intimacy**

This brings me to the larger principle bound up in these suggestions: Deep emotional intimacy should not be established in the early stages of a relationship.

It's not that you're being dishonest or cold, it's simply being cautious about living out a deeper commitment than truly exists between you. Song of Songs 2:7 tells us not to awaken love before it pleases: Do not start what you cannot — without sin — finish.

The modern, secular idea of dating relationships is to test the waters of marriage by acting as much like you are married as possible until you both (in the very heat of that temporary emotion and passion) decide what you want and either get married, or until one of you decides it's not a good fit and you go through something like a divorce (at least emotionally, if not physically — though that's pretty common too).

The biblical idea of marriage holds that such level of relating to one another begins when you *are* married. It's one of the things that makes marriage unique. Our goal should be prayerfully to decide whether the person we are dating should be the one we marry without having to go through a de facto divorce if the answer's no.

Will there still be disappointment and sadness and emotional

pain if a "biblical" dating relationship doesn't work out? Of course. There's no perfect way to do this. I assure you, though, that the pain will be lessened by the honest, mutual, spiritual concern for one another that results when two people treat one another like brothers and sisters in Christ first, and potential spouses second. This is for the protection of the people involved (especially the woman), for the witness of the church, and for the glory of God.

## **Biblical Dating: Growing in Intimacy**

by Scott Croft

The previous column sought to apply some of the principles we've discussed in this space to the early stages of a dating relationship.

We talked about how to establish intentions for the early stages, appropriate topics of conversation, types of dates, and level of emotional investment. The idea in all of that was not to establish a level of emotional (or certainly physical) intimacy that would imply marriage (defrauding one another), and result in a *de facto* emotional divorce if things don't work out. Our goal in dating as Christians is to save marital levels of interaction for marriage itself; to care well for the other person's soul, to be different from the world and so to bring glory to God.

This time, I want to apply some of the same principles we've been thinking about to a relationship that moves beyond the "early stages" and gets serious. As always, I'll assume the reader has at least a passing knowledge of the general principles we've discussed in previous columns. For the discussion below, you'll especially be helped if you take a moment to read last month's effort.

The essential line to walk here is to get to know one another better so that you can make a responsible and informed decision about marriage, but without *acting* married in the process and without violating I Thess. 4's admonition not to defraud and mistreat one another. Let's look at how this stage might play out by considering some of the same issues we looked at for the early stage.

### *Another DTR?*

Yep. Clarity and intentions should be established when things move from "testing the waters" to "yeah, the water's fine." Don't assume that because you agreed to start dating or courting (presumably with the intention to determine whether marriage was the right thing) you (or your partner) will "just know" when things begin to progress. In the design of a relationship that we're carving out here, caring well for one another means we can't place too high a premium on being clear.

Guys, again the brunt of the work falls to you here. If you've gone through the early stage of the relationship and truly feel before God (to whom you will give account for your decision) that you should begin to get more intimately involved with this woman because you think marriage to her is a good possibility, you have to tell her.

Tell her that you have loved getting to know her, that you find her a godly woman, that you are interested in pursuing a more serious relationship with her for a finite (and relatively short) period of time, basically to see if there are any clear obstacles (in terms of beliefs or affections or goals or personalities) to the two of you getting married.

Finally, you should tell her that if she does not find herself in the same place in terms of her feelings about the relationship (or if she becomes certain at any point moving forward that she is not interested in marriage to you), she should break up with you immediately.

Be clear. Be honest. Be deliberate. Is this scary? Sure. Will it feel a little forced or awkward? Maybe, but being deliberate and clear about where the relationship is need not suck all the fun,

spontaneity, and feeling out of the whole affair. In fact, many women tell me they deeply appreciate such clarity. Let me also reiterate that, like asking someone to date initially, *this conversation is not a proposal, and neither person is committing to marry the other at this point!* It's just a marker to say things are going well and, as far as you're concerned, the game is changing. If done well, it should actually put you both at ease moving forward.

### **Candle Time**

Obviously, as your relationship progresses, the two of you will probably spend more time together than in the early stage, and more of that time will be spent *alone* together. That's OK to a point, as you will need to have some more serious discussions about major issues.

That said, it is still dangerous to spend time together alone in a private setting. Temptation in this area is easily underestimated, and it is very difficult to regain discipline and backtrack once you have sinned physically. Spend time in public. Remember those long candle-light dinners in restaurants I suggested were unadvisable in the early stages of a relationship? They can actually be good at this stage — especially when compared to long nights "chatting" on the couch at one of your apartments. Even at this stage in the relationship, there is still no reason or need for the two of you to be alone in one of your apartments together. For the sake of purity, be very careful about how and where you spend time together.

### **Now What Do We Talk About?**

In getting to know one another more intimately, there will also be some changes in some of the topics that are appropriate to

discuss. You may, at this point, begin to get to know your potential partner at a more deeply spiritual level. You can share testimonies, talk more deeply about who you are, goals, hopes for your life's ministry (should the Lord tarry and give you many more years). As I've mentioned before, you should also discuss things like important theological issues and where you're comfortable going to church — to make sure the two of you are basically on the same page.

You should find one of two things as you have these these conversations regarding goals and anticipated ministries; there should either be a good deal of commonality between your goals and visions, or there should be significant flexibility on the part of the woman (who would one day be called to submit to her husband's headship with regard to career, direction of the family, etc.). Things will likely be very difficult down the road if one of you feels strongly called to a particular life or ministry that the other would absolutely dread.

You can also discuss things like interests, family, emotional issues, etc. in greater detail if it looks like things could be headed toward marriage, but caution is always in order as you get more deeply involved.

Also, do clearly discuss limits on your physical involvement (in other words, reiterate that there will not be one), and put methods of adhering to those limits in place. That said, don't make physical involvement — even a lack thereof — a frequent topic of conversation. That in and of itself can become a temptation — and the more you go over it and over it in your mind, the stronger the desire becomes and the less egregious the sin becomes (in your own mind, that is).

Finally, keep in mind that it is still not advisable to have long,

intimate prayer times together at this stage. The situation has obviously changed somewhat, but that is still too tempting and too intimate. Pray with the people that are watching over your relationship. For that matter, go back over the list of topics I just talked about. Feel free to have any of those discussions in the presence of people you both trust or who are counseling you about the relationship.

### **Emotional Intimacy**

Obviously, I've talked about this stage as being more emotionally intimate than the early days of a relationship, and I realize that in this day and age, many people feel that they must know the person they marry better than any other human being on the planet *before* they marry him or her. As I've written before, I generally think that is a wrong assumption and that such an approach leads to a lot of emotional "marriages" outside of actual marriage that are not biblical or healthy. Remember that in scripture, we don't see deeply intimate romantic relationships outside of marriage — or if we do, they're described as sinful.

Because of that, let me suggest, even as you assess at this heightened level whether marriage is right, that you limit your emotional (and, of course, physical) intimacy. Put that person on your list of confidants, but do not make that person your primary emotional outlet. As I wrote last month, that will be incredibly hard to do, but trust me when I say that that discipline and care for the other person will serve you well, whether you end up married or not.

This later, more intimate stage should not be used by either person to "drink deeply" of a level of companionship that feels good for its own sake. It's not intended to give you a forum to

"play married" and see how it works. It should not be drawn out. I cannot, as a biblical matter, give you a specific timeline here. As a practical matter, I think we're talking a matter of several months, not a year or two.

Guys, the woman you're dating can and should end the relationship if she realizes she doesn't want to marry you. But you are the guiding force in the relationship. It's incumbent upon you to be moving the relationship deliberately. This stage should be short, deliberate and limited.

### **Accountability**

Accountability is even more important as the relationship deepens than it was in the early going. It should still be frequent, personal, local, and tough. At this point though, more questions need to be added to the list. Not just "are you staying pure physically?" and all the emotionally equivalent questions, but "what are you doing?" "Where is this going?" "What kind of time frame are we talking about before some clear action is taken?" should be a regular part of conversations.

So those are a few suggestions for handling a relationship as things progress. Again, these are practical *suggestions* about how to apply biblical *principles* we've discussed before. It will certainly look different from relationship to relationship, and that's OK — even good. Keep the underlying biblical principles in mind, seek to live them out faithfully, and the Lord will be glorified.

## Biblical Dating: Tips for Engagement

by Scott Croft

This column wraps up a series on "stages of a dating relationship." Other installments included "Are you Ready to Date?", "Navigating the Early Stages of a Relationship," and "Growing in Intimacy." To avoid repetition, I'll assume knowledge of those columns and move on to the finale.

### Is This the One?

Let's talk first (and briefly) about the decision whether to marry a particular person. I've written about this elsewhere, but here's a quick review:

First, look at the purpose that God has for your life (generally to "bring glory to God and enjoy Him forever"; more specifically how you see that playing out in your ministry and circumstances). What do you think your ministry will be, or what is it now as the Lord has placed you? Will you be able, generally speaking, to serve God better together than apart? Will you be able to accomplish ministry (be it your original plan or one that you have caught a vision for through this person) more effectively together than apart?

Next, look more closely at Ephesians 5:22-33. Look at the roles laid out there for men and women. Do you desire to fill your role with the person in question specifically in mind? Do you feel that you can love her sacrificially, or respect and support him?

Also, what do others (those that both of you have been seeking counsel from, under whose authority the relationship has taken place, Christian friends or family) think of the relationship? Does it look solid to them? Does the relationship seem to be

good for both of you spiritually, glorifying to God, and Christ-centered?

Finally, is there an affection for this person in my heart and mind based on the way God has defined biblical manhood and womanhood? As I've written elsewhere, this is (hopefully) a much deeper and godlier assessment than simply asking "am I physically attracted to him or her?" or "Do we have chemistry?".

### Off You Go

If you get through all that soul-searching, you may decide (probably separately at this point) that marriage between the two of you is the right thing before the Lord. If that happens, the next step is for the guy to go through that ~~terrifying~~ joyful process of learning about ~~cubic zirconium~~ diamonds, ~~ascertaining the exact specifications of the ring his girlfriend wants through various acts of espionage~~ picking out the perfect ring based on heartfelt intuition, and ~~agonizing about~~ carefully planning a way to propose that will ~~not thoroughly embarrass him~~ sweep the woman he loves off her feet. Just as you women suspect, this process comes naturally and easily to all men. After the proposal is seamlessly executed and delivered by the man with no snags whatsoever, the woman says yes with no hesitation, accompanied by smiles and tears all around. *Individual results may vary.*

OK, congratulations, you're engaged. What do you do now? There is really only one concept to keep in mind when it comes to engagement, and it's quite easy. It's simple and it should guide you in every decision, thought and act until you are standing before God, the people and the pastor on the big day. Ready? ***You are not married yet.*** Now, depending on logistical or other circumstances, cultural backgrounds, length of relationship,

things other Christians might have told you, there's another way to put this: Ready? ***You are not married yet.*** Remember that if you get nothing else out of this column.

Assuming this "cardinal rule of engagement," let's look at some God-honoring, useful ways to spend this unique time.

### **What do We Do Now?**

In terms of how to spend your time and what to talk about, the main concerns should be to prepare for marriage, to avoid temptation and to keep in mind that ***you are not married yet.*** That simply means keeping basically the same constraints on the settings in which you spent time together before you were engaged. In other words, while you will be spending more time together, it still should not be alone in one of your apartments.

One topic that will occupy more of your discussion time after you're engaged than before is how you in fact ***are not yet married.*** Here are some other things to think about.

First, don't spend significant time talking about what your sex life will be like once you're married. As we've discussed before, do talk clearly about boundaries in your physical relationship, and do put clear methods in place to help you adhere to them, but don't spend time fantasizing about your future sexual relationship. This may seem like common sense, but trust me, it needs to be said.

If each of you feels that you should talk to someone that you trust (of the same sex) about fears or concerns you may have about your sexual relationship — especially the wedding night itself — then do that as your wedding approaches. You don't need to talk about it constantly as a couple, and you don't need to

do an in depth study of Song of Solomon with your fiancé two months before your wedding.

This is important: Don't buy into the secular myth that you are somehow inferior or failing your new spouse if you don't show up as a sexual expert on the night of your wedding. In fact, the opposite is true. If you are already a sexual expert on the night of your wedding, then you have, somewhere along the way, blatantly strayed from God's design for sexuality in your life. Learning and growing *together* in this way is one of the many wonderful things about marriage.

### **Prepare for Marriage**

Make good use of your engagement by using it to do more than just prepare for the wedding. Take some time to actually prepare for *marriage* as well. Get solid, biblical marriage counseling, either from the pastor who will be conducting the wedding service or from some other person who is mature in the faith and in marriage. Use that time to meditate on marriage as a relationship and as a picture of the way that Christ relates to the church. These will be incredibly edifying conversations.

While there's a great number of spectacularly bad books on marriage, there are also some very good ones. *The Complete Husband*, by Lou Priolo, and *Feminine Appeal* by Carolyn Mahaney are good — both practically and theologically. [Editor's note: Also consider *Complete Guide to the First Five Years of Marriage* and *Love for a Lifetime.*]

Finally, talk about things that you think might be sources of conflict during your marriage. A good marriage counselor will force you to do this by finding those areas and poking at them a bit, but you should make an effort on your own to address issues

that you know exist. In addition to possibly working through some of those issues early on, the exercise will enhance your communication skills. Trust me. You'll need them.

### **Prepare for the Wedding**

In my view, much less of your engagement should be spent planning the wedding than preparing for marriage, but obviously you will spend some time talking about this. Here are a few things to keep in mind as you do.

A wedding is not primarily about the two people getting married. It is not primarily the bride's special day (though it will unquestionably be a special day for her), and it is not primarily the groom's rite of passage into Christian manhood (though in some ways it is that as well). The wedding day is just like every other day in the Christian life — it is primarily about God. A wedding is a worship service in which two people happen to get married. In fact, in past centuries, it was literally that. At the end of the regular Sunday morning service, the two people getting married would either come down to the front of the church or simply stand where they were and take their vows.

As you plan the music, preaching, and other aspects of your wedding service, keep in mind that it is ultimately an event of worship before God. I advise that you keep it simple (even humble), and keep it worshipful. Too many couples put tremendous energy and stress — even tears — into which type of faux parchment they should use for the programs so as to most effectively evoke a "Mediterranean" theme. Meanwhile, they're neglecting their marriage before it even starts. A simple wedding will also allow you to have a short engagement, which in most cases is a great thing for a number of reasons.

### **Keep Logistics in the Back Seat**

Speaking of long engagements, let's talk logistics. If you believe that you are called to be married, and you believe you have found the person you want to marry, then get married. The logistics will never be perfect. Marriage is something that will last the rest of one of your lives. It will be central and controlling over whatever ministry either of you has. Adjust things like school, jobs, money, distance (in other words, logistics) to accommodate getting married. Don't adjust the purpose and timing of marriage for a significant amount of time to accommodate the caprice of logistics or other earthly circumstances.

In other words, it's unwise — and probably in sinful violation of some of the other principles we've discussed — to have a three-year engagement or an inappropriate relationship because the logistics of getting married aren't perfect. If the logistics are so bad (or so important to you) that you feel you just can't get married in the near future, then take a hard look at whether you should be in a relationship.

### **Accountability**

Believe it or not, real accountability is probably most important in this stage. It should still be frequent, personal, local and tough. Many couples make it to this point in purity and then fall into sin. It's usually because their sinful desire (combined with the message of the world and other factors) causes them to forget the cardinal rule of engagement: ***You're not married yet.*** Take steps to glorify God all the way to the wedding and beyond.

In this last set of columns, I've presented some "stages" of a relationship and some practical tips for each one. The *system* is

not sacrosanct. The *goal* is. As Christians, we don't get a free pass to carnality in this area. We don't begin to be holy once we have what we think is a permanent companion and sexual outlet. We are to be different from the world in every area of our lives; this one as well.

Your dating relationship and progression to marriage may look different than some of the practical minutia that I've laid out here. Just keep in mind the core principles: holiness, care for the other person's soul above your own needs, not defrauding one another, headship and submission beginning to play out and be pictured in a godly way for the world to see, relationships being played out corporately and under counsel, lack of inappropriate emotional intimacy, no physical intimacy, leaving marriage for marriage, being different from the world, bringing glory to God.

## **Biblical Dating: From "Hi" to "I Do" in a Year**

by Scott Croft

One question that has come up repeatedly — and somewhat passionately — is "why do you suggest that people should be married within a year of starting to date?" I do in fact believe that in the vast majority of circumstances, couples should commit to marriage within a year and should actually *get* married pretty soon after that. Let's talk a little more specifically about why I would foolishly provoke the wrath of bloggers and commenters everywhere by making such a statement.

As always, it's important to remember that we're talking at this point about possible implications and application of a scriptural principle, and not the principle itself. The thesis of this article is not that if you're in a relationship, and you hit the year-and-a-day mark without being married, you're necessarily sinning. I'm about to discuss what I think is wise, and what, according to my study and experience — and building on that of others — I believe to be the best course.

So here's the big idea: In matters of dating or courtship, I generally recommend that people either get married or break up within a year or so of beginning a dating relationship. Most relevantly — in terms of the type of questions we've received on this — I also believe that this recommendation applies with equal force to single men and women in college. I've arrived at this conclusion by thinking through a number of the biblical principles we've already discussed in this space.

### **Avoiding Temptation**

In an earlier column, we discussed that one of our bedrock governing principles in biblical dating — and in how we treat

our brothers and sisters in Christ generally — is not to "defraud" our single brothers and sisters by implying a greater level of commitment between us and them than actually exists (see 1 Thess. 4:6). I discuss this principle more fully in "To Kiss or Not to Kiss" and "What Does a Biblical Relationship Look Like?" As a quick refresher, we can "defraud" our brother or sister in a dating context by showing or encouraging a level of intimacy — either emotionally or physically — that the bible seems to reserve for marriage and marriage only. If we act like we're married before we've made that commitment, we're defrauding (and sinning).

### **Emotional Temptation**

I don't know whether you've noticed this, but people involved in a dating relationship tend to get to know each other better over the course of that relationship. In fact, they are usually really enthusiastic about doing so. We might even say that getting to know one another better and more deeply is (up to a certain limited point, of course) the very *purpose* of a dating relationship. When two people are dating — especially when it's going well and two people are really into one another — the desire to spend more and more time together, to know each other better and better, to confide in each other more and more often and exclusively, is overwhelming. As your general comfort level around each other rises, that momentum grows even more.

Now picture, for example, college life. We'll assume, per another clear principle from Scripture, that both members of our college couple are Christians. On most college campuses, that likely puts the two of you in the same relatively small social circle. Perhaps both of you are active in the same campus ministry, you go to the same church. Over time, maybe you take some of the same

classes, live near one another, etc.

In that context, living with the desires I've just described, how likely do you think it is that over the course of two or three or four years — some couples date over most of their college years — you will be able to maintain enough emotional discipline and distance to avoid acting emotionally and relationally "married"?

I've spoken to numerous "long-dating" couples, in college and beyond, who other than living together, could do little to intertwine their lives any more than they already are. They see each other every day, are with each other's families every holiday (and often know their partner's family as well as any son or daughter-in-law does), they travel together, spend most of their non-working (or studying) time together, they daily confide in one another (and maybe *only* one another), and are without doubt, closer emotionally with one another than with anyone else on the planet.

This is exactly the level of intimacy that is reserved for marriage only, and that dating couples should make every effort to restrain until the appropriate time. Can this level of emotional intimacy happen between people who have been dating for a shorter amount of time? Of course. But the longer a couple dates, the harder it becomes to avoid it.

### **Physical Temptation**

Scripture calls Christians to "flee" from sexual immorality (1 Cor. 6:18), not to "see how difficult we can make the temptation and still prevail" or to "see how close the line we can get without sinning." In my view, Scripture teaches clearly that there is to be *no* romantic physical intimacy outside of marriage. See fuller discussion of these issues and arguments in "Growing in

Intimacy" and "Tips for Engagement" and "Physical Intimacy and the Single Man."

No reasonable person would argue that physical temptation does not increase — a lot — the longer two people date who are attracted to each other and who grow to love each other. Sadly, statistics and anecdotal experience both indicate that even the *vast majority* of *Christian* couples who spend time in dating relationships of any length, sin physically.

The longer the relationship, the higher the percentage. Where a relationship is shorter, accountability stronger, and the level of *emotional* intimacy more responsible, the level of *physical* temptation, and the likelihood of sin, goes down.

### **The Bottom Line**

To put it simply, "not acting married before you're married," perhaps the sum total of the principles we've discussed in the rest of these columns, gets exponentially more difficult the longer a pre-marital relationship persists. If, as has been written before in this space, our goal is to move positively toward God-glorifying lives (rather than simply to "walk the line" by attempting to satisfy our fleshly desires as much as possible without sinning), wisdom and godliness would seem to counsel keeping relationships shorter.

Certainly, as God's people, we don't want to live in fear and have our lives be primarily defined by avoiding temptation rather than positively seeking after Christ. I'm not suggesting that we do. Still, where particular known areas of temptation exist, it's not living in fear to be deliberate about taking the wiser course.

## Popular Responses

Let me try to deal very briefly with the most popular responses I get to this argument — especially from college students.

*(1) "This argument doesn't really apply to us, because we're in a long-distance relationship."*

I think it does, even if the physical circumstances are different. As to emotional intimacy, we live in the age of e-mail, free long distance and unlimited any-time minutes, and cheap flights. It's still really easy to "act married" emotionally, even in a long-distance relationship.

As to physical intimacy, many long-distance couples have told me that because they are not physically close to one another as often, they actually experience *more* intense physical temptation when they're together. And again, if you believe the stats, long-distance couples don't do any better than others at staying physically pure.

*(2) "We dated for less than a year and then got engaged. We'll be engaged for the next 18 months while we finish school, but we're already committed, so that's cool, right?"*

Um, no. If you've forgotten the cardinal rule of engagement, re-read "Tips for Engagement." Engagement is a great thing, but it's not marriage. It may, as a practical matter, necessitate addressing issues and being a bit more intimate than they were before, but the simple fact is that couples break up even after engagement. Your fiancé is not your spouse until the wedding is over. In the meantime, the "we're already committed" rationalization tends to make couples feel free to act in all sorts of ways they didn't before, and every argument I've made in this and other columns

applies *even more strongly* to engaged couples.

*(3) "We're so much more 'fruitful in ministry' as a couple; we 'feel led' to be together; 'God's calling us' to date throughout college."*

I doubt it. The above language is hard to argue with (who can argue with *God?*), but that doesn't mean that anyone who uses that language is automatically correct. As a quick theological aside on guidance, God does not primarily lead His people by mystic feelings in the pits of our stomachs about what He wants us to do. He leads us primarily by His Word, and we are to look there first and primarily for guidance about how to live and make decisions.

God does not ever "call" or "lead" His people into sin, or even into folly or *spiritual* danger. We should take a given course of action because it comports with the principles of Scripture, not because we mystically feel "led" to do something we have a strong desire to do anyway.

*(4) "We have no choice. We have to wait. My parents will not pay for school if we get married before graduation."*

I hate to be a pain here, but you actually have at least *two* biblically responsible choices. They're both hard, I admit, but they are doable. Choice one is to get married anyway and work your way through. Many people work their way through school. Will it take longer? Sure. Will it lead to other hard choices? Almost certainly. Can it be done? Yes.

Choice two is to stay in school and put the relationship on hold. Stop spending time together one-on-one. Talk less often. Be deliberate about avoiding "marital" levels of intimacy. Wait until

a responsible time to start the relationship back up. By the way, more than one set of Christian parents have relented on this question in the face of *respectful*, biblical resolve by their children.

*(5) "People I trust think you should date at least a year or two before marrying. I can't get enough information about the other person over the course of a short relationship. I'm really worried I'll end up 'settling.'"*

Now *that's* a topic for an entire article in itself!

## **Biblical Dating: Settling**

by Scott Croft

In this article, author Scott Croft continues unpacking themes first explored in "When to Settle," by Candice Watters.

\* \* \*

My advice is this: Settle! That's right. Don't worry about passion or intense connection.... Based on my observations, in fact, settling will probably make you happier in the long run, since many of those who marry with great expectations become more disillusioned with each passing year.

Whenever I make the case for settling, people look at me with creased brows of disapproval or frowns of disappointment.... It's not only politically incorrect to get behind settling, it's downright un-American. Our culture tells us to keep our eyes on the prize ... and the theme of holding out for true love ... permeates our collective mentality.<sup>1</sup>

I came across these paragraphs the other night while doing some research on a completely different topic (it was late, and my internet research skills aren't state of the art anyway). The piece was written by an apparently non-Christian, successful, early-40s, single professional woman who had recently experienced an epiphany of sorts. She described an outing to the park on a beautiful spring day with a couple of friends — also single. In lamenting their common lack of romantic prospects, it occurred to the women that each of them had had decent guys interested in marrying them at some point but had turned them down in the hope of landing "The One," "Mr. Right," or some other term

connoting the perfect man as they individually conceived of him. They had all refused to "settle" and were not pleased with the results of that strategy — thus the above advice.

We've talked a lot in this column and related comment threads about a biblical approach to dating and finding a spouse, but we've never directly addressed the idea of "settling." Before we dig in, let's define what we mean. Let's use the following as our working definition of "settling": a willingness to date or marry someone who clearly fails to meet all the major criteria on your "list" to the extent you dreamed about when picturing your spouse, and/or doesn't appear to be your "soul mate" in the Friends/Sex in the City/fill in vacuous worldly movie/show here sense of the word.

Think Christians don't deal with this? Think again. I can't begin to tell you how many single believers I have spoken to and counseled who are trying to avoid settling, worried that they are settling, think it's "wrong" to settle, etc. Good relationships have gone down the tubes or never gotten off the ground because of this issue. The question for us is whether that approach to dating and marriage gels with the biblical approach to life and love we've tried to outline here.

It doesn't, for at least three reasons.

### **A Selfish Premise**

The first is that worries about settling reveal a selfishness approach to marriage that misunderstands the Bible's idea of love. "Holding out for true love" as the above quote defines it means demanding a person to whom I am completely attracted in the secular sense, somebody who meets all the qualifications on my "list," and whom I believe is the "best I can do." In the

author's mind — and unfortunately in the minds of many single Christians — anything short of finding that perfect match created in one's mind falls short of "true love" and constitutes the sad and unwise act of "settling." Such an approach to love and marriage fundamentally misunderstands the Bible's idea of both. I wrote about this at length in a previous article. The highlights are worth repeating:

I don't mean that such an approach [looking for a spouse based primarily on my own "list" and attraction] involves malice or the intent to hurt anyone. I simply mean that such an approach is self-centered. It conceives of finding a spouse from the standpoint of what will be most enjoyable for *me* based on my tastes and desires. What will *I receive* from marriage to this or that person?

In Scripture, love is described not as a mere emotion based on personal desire (i.e., "attraction"), but as an act of the will that leads to selfless actions toward others. According to Jesus Himself, the second-greatest commandment (after loving God) is to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31). He also said "greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). Jesus' love for us did not result from our inherent loveliness or our wonderful treatment of Him. He didn't go to the cross as a spontaneous response triggered by mere emotion. His perfect love of us was a choice, an act undertaken despite our lack of attractiveness — and it led to both sacrifice and joy.

The apostle Paul agrees. In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul describes the biblical definition of love in detail, and he lets us know that love isn't just felt, it *does* something —

something selfless.

In the world's version of attraction, I'm a consumer, not a servant. I respond to attributes of yours that I like because of their potential to please me. Again, this is not malicious or evil — it's just not how we're primarily called to treat one another in Scripture. It's not the Bible's idea of love.

[According to scripture], marriage is a beautiful (if distant) analogy of the way that Christ has perfectly loved and sacrificed for the church, and the way the church, His bride, responds to her Lord.

Marriage is incredibly fun; it's also incredibly hard. For most people it is the greatest act of ministry and service to another person that they will ever undertake. Husbands are literally called to "give themselves up for" their wives. Wives are called to submit to, respect, and serve their husbands "as to the Lord." Though husbands and wives receive countless blessings from a biblical marriage, the very idea of biblical marriage describes an act — many acts — of love, service, sacrifice, and ministry toward a sinful human being. According to Scripture, marriage is anything but a selfish endeavor. It is a ministry.

What sense does it make to undertake that ministry based primarily on a list of self-centered (and often petty) preferences? If your idea of attraction — whatever that is — dominates your pursuit of a spouse, consider this: Is your approach biblical?

The Bible calls us to reject the world's approach to love and

marriage. That may require a pretty radical rethinking of your own approach. If it does, join the club. If you can manage that rethinking (with the Lord's help), it will drain much of the angst from any discussion about "settling."

### **Everybody Settles**

Another problem with the usual discussion on settling is that it usually reflects two unbiblical beliefs: (1) we can strategize our way around the effects of sin in human relationships and the reality that marriage is hard work, and (2) we can hope to be perfectly, ultimately fulfilled by marriage — or any other earthly relationship.

If you have a biblical understanding of human nature, then you will realize that in one sense, everybody settles — even the people who think they are refusing to. Every person who decides to marry makes the decision to marry a sinner. That means you will marry someone who is at some level selfish, who has insecurities and an ego, who has annoying tendencies that you will only discover *after* marriage because they will only be revealed in that intimate context. And don't forget, your spouse will have married the same type of person. As sinners, we all "settle" for marriage to a person who will not always meet our sinful, individualized, selfish whims, who will not be the spouse we "dreamed of" every day, and who likely entered the bargain with some level of expectation that you were going to be the one *for them*.

It's also true that anyone who enters marriage expecting it to serve as a substitute for Christ in the ultimate fulfillment of his or her own desires for companionship, love, intimacy, security or anything else will indeed be disillusioned — quickly. It's a fallen world, and we are sinners. We cannot gain in *any* earthly

relationship what the world tells us to seek from "romance" and marriage. We all settle.

### **Nobody Settles**

Finally, deep worry about settling for less than one desires or deserves in marriage fails to acknowledge two fundamental biblical truths that apply to all areas of the Christian life — not just dating and marriage: (1) as sinners, what we deserve is condemnation from God; and (2) we have been given greater gifts than we could possibly deserve or attain on our own. In other words, compared to what our lives should be before a just and holy God, no believer in Christ ever settles — in marriage or in anything else.

To get at this, we have to talk about sin again, so forgive me for being a little stark for a minute. The Bible teaches that we have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God. It teaches that what we all "deserve" is instant condemnation at the hands of a righteous and holy God. We deserve hell. But the Lord hasn't given that to you, has he? For God's people, he has given salvation in Christ, eternal life, sonship in God's kingdom, and glimpses of heaven on earth — one of which is marriage. I know, I know — we're talking about settling here. Still, in any discussion of earthly circumstances or relationships, when we are tempted to pursue and think we're entitled to an idealized, easy, hassle-free life, it's no bad thing to think about the truth of what we deserve, and the blessings God has given us instead. God's people don't settle; the "best we could do" apart from Christ is a horrible tragedy compared to the lives we have with him.

What's more, nobody really "settles" in a biblical marriage because God has designed marriage as a wonderful gift that gets

better with age. This is what people worried about settling don't seem to get. They think joy in marriage is all about the original choice one makes about whom to marry, rather than how the nurture and build their marriage. Again, this misses the picture of biblical marriage.

Read Song of Songs. Look at the implied deepening of a marriage that has to take place if Ephesians 5:22-33 is to be lived out. Sure, it takes hard work. But if two people are truly faithful as spouses, growing in God's word, studying one another deeply and attentively with an eye toward uniquely ministering to and serving each other, both will find that 10 years in they are known and loved and cared for better and more deeply than when they were newly married. That doesn't hinder passion, people. It builds it. More on this in later articles perhaps.

Bottom line, the real danger for God's people in pursuing a spouse is that we will "settle" for the world's vision of self, love, marriage and even romance, rather than a vision of those things steeped in scripture and rooted in the love of Christ. Biblical love and marriage ask more of us than the world's selfish pursuit of non-existent perfection. But the rewards are infinitely richer. "Keep your eyes on the prize"? Sure. Just make sure it's the right one.

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## NOTES

1. Gottlieb, Lori, "Marry Him!", Atlantic Monthly, March 2008.