

DATING DIFFERENTLY

DATING DIFFERENTLY – A Guide to Reformed Dating by Joshua Engelsma. Published by Reformed Free Publishing Association, Jenison, Michigan, 2019. Softcover, 147 pages.¹

No, this book is not like Joshua Harris's, "I Kissed Dating Goodbye." The author, Joshua Engelsma, is a minister of the Protestant Reformed Churches of America and lives in Doon, Iowa with his wife and young children. Like Harris's book, it deals with dating as practiced in our North American culture, but Engelsma does not condemn this cultural practice as such. Instead, his approach is a thoughtful and sympathetic attempt to direct this contemporary cultural practice towards a biblical viewpoint — actually a Reformed perspective, as the sub-title indicates.

Realizing that his young readers may think this book is merely idealistic, the author hopes that they realize that "as Christians, we date differently than the world around us" (Preface, p.1). He hopes and prays that God might use what he has written "to encourage godly dating relationships and strong marriages" (p.2). This theme is taken up throughout the book as young teens and older ones are led to take an approach in dating that points them to the biblical goal of dating: a godly marriage.

The author begins by persuading the young readers that they need guidance in this area because of the influence of an ungodly world which may lead to wrongful practices in dating and have a detrimental effect on their marriage. Marriage is a divine institution designed by God and described as a picture of the relationship between Christ and the church (Eph. 5:31). "Marriage is the union of one man and one woman each with different roles. In Genesis 2, God brought Adam and Eve together and he still does so today.... Marriage is not the work of the man and the woman themselves, nor is it the work of the government or of the minister. Marriage is God's work" (p.33). This means that God is involved in the dating relationship, ordaining the persons and the circumstances in meeting and getting to know one another. Preferably a couple meets in church or school or other Christian places, although the author allows that even Christian dating services can sometimes be a means used by God.

As Engelsma goes through various stages in dating, he shows

that from beginning to end marriage should be seen as the goal. Stories of real people, including himself and his wife, are used throughout the book to show how God can work. The first date is the place to start. The beginning stage is friendship and couples should not be spending a lot of time together, especially if they are young. As they progress, "It might be good to pray briefly together for God's blessing upon your time with each

other" (p.128). How old should one be to date? After confession of faith? Not necessarily, although the writer does think a certain level of spiritual maturity should be present. If you are not mature enough to think about marriage, you are not ready to date (pp. 42-44).

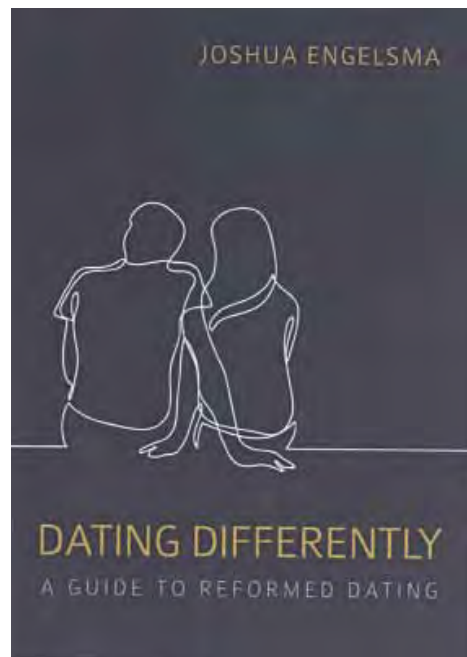
Does that mean couples cannot have fun while dating? On the contrary, two pages are used to list suggested activities, that include group and single dating, so they can get to know one other (pp.80-81).

A chapter deals with sexual contact during dating and the author is not shy to point out various activities that should be avoided because they are sinful, and often can impact future marriage. He states that some may wish they had read this book earlier and know they are guilty of over-

stepping forbidden boundaries. They are pointed to the grace of God and His power to withstand temptations.

Another chapter deals with parental involvement, giving biblical examples of how parents may give guidance. They are the authority figures, especially during teen years. "What a blessing on the wedding day when both families can say, 'We've vetted these young people and we are glad they are marrying one another! We are glad to welcome them into our family'" (p.93).

Not much is omitted regarding relationships. Even in-law connections are dealt with briefly. There is also a helpful chapter on singleness in which the author recognizes that there are those who long for a partner, but there are also those who postpone marriage for selfish reasons. He has something to say to all of them, including those who have no opportunity to marry, even pointing out that marriage can be overemphasized and marriage has its own trials. Singles are by no means second



class members, but should have an important place in the church. Quoting pastor Kevin DeYoung, he warns about postponing marriage and being too picky. DeYoung states “there is nothing like getting married and having children to make a young man and a young woman grow up into maturity. But if this is pushed back, it only prolongs immature selfish living” (p.132-34).

In chapter 2, as elsewhere in the book, the author states the Protestant Reformed view that marriage is for life and when divorce occurs, re-marriage is only allowed if one of the parties dies.² However, this in no way takes away from the value of this book for giving guidance for Christian dating as it is practiced in our culture. There are discussion questions at the end of each of the 9 chapters. This book is highly recommended for teens, parents, and church leaders.

①

Endnotes

- 1 This book was forwarded to me from the publisher for review via Dr. G. Bilkes, editor of The Messenger.
- 2 Most Reformed and Presbyterian churches are slightly more tolerant.



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