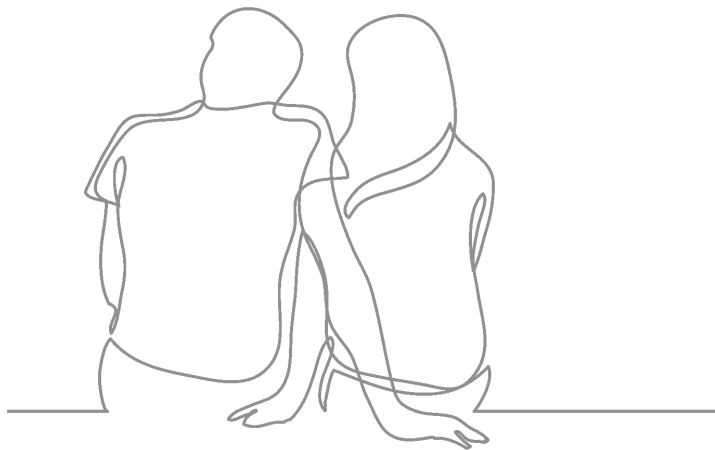


# DATING DIFFERENTLY



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A GUIDE TO REFORMED DATING



**JOSHUA ENGELSMA**



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*To Courtney,  
beloved wife and selfless mother,  
and the one with whom  
all these lessons were learned.*



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## PREFACE

A note about the title of this book: *Dating Differently*. The title is not intended to convey that I've discovered some new method that will revolutionize dating forever. I haven't. It simply expresses the thread that ties the whole book together: as Christians, we aren't governed by the attitudes and thinking of the world in any area of life, this one included. That is, we date, but we do so differently, as those guided by God's word.

I believe this book has value, if for nothing else than to get you thinking about this important subject. Perhaps you'll disagree with some of the practical suggestions I make. No problem. I realize that in some ways what I write might be considered "idealistic." But I do hope this main thought sticks with you: as Christians, we date differently than the world around us. And I hope that what I've written here gets you to stop and think carefully about what that means in your life.

This book is short. Intentionally so. No doubt there is much more that could be said about dating from a Christian perspective. The reason for it being so brief is not that I'm selling you short and thinking that today's youth can't handle

something longer. I'm sure you can. But I think there is value in a short book that gets right to the point, that hits some of the highlights of dating, and that gets you thinking.

There are plenty of other books on dating on the market, some worthwhile, others not. In part what makes this book unique is that it is written from the viewpoint of the biblical, historically Reformed view of marriage as the union of one man and one woman for life, with divorce permitted only in cases of fornication and all remarriage forbidden while one's spouse is living. This precious truth, still maintained in the Protestant Reformed Churches in which I serve, is applied in the pages that follow to the practical subject of dating.

My prayer is that God might use what I've written here in a small way to encourage godly dating relationships and strong marriages.

One final note: all of the names and some of the details in the stories I reference have been changed to protect the identity and privacy of those about whom I'm speaking. Consider these examples to be just that, examples, as you might make use of their themes and underlying principles to inform your own dating life.

## CHAPTER 1



# IS THERE HELP?

**E**very young person could use help in the area of dating. Some might need it more than others, but all need it. No, I'm not talking about needing help getting a date (although maybe some of you feel that way). What I have in mind instead is that everyone needs help thinking properly about dating.

I hope you've taken this book in hand because you are conscious of your need for help and you desire that help. I hope you are already asking the right questions and looking in the right places for the answers.

But I'm guessing that some of you really don't feel like you need help. Maybe you aren't thinking seriously about dating. Maybe you have a touch of overconfidence and find yourself saying, "What's the big deal? Do I really need a book to tell me how to date? I think I can figure this out on my

own.” I hope that’s not true, but I’m not so out of touch as to think that’s impossible.

In this opening chapter, I hope to establish the need for a proper perspective on dating, and then to lay out in broad terms what assistance we have. For those who already know their need, I trust these are things you have been thinking about. And for those who don’t think they need help, I hope this introduction whets your appetite for what follows.

### **OUR GUIDE: NEEDED**

The way I see it, there are three reasons why the Christian young person might need help with the subject of dating.

#### **1. This guidance is necessary because of the influence of the ungodly world.**

The world in the twenty-first century has adopted certain practices for dating. A young man and young woman start to date because they sense an attraction to one another. There is no consideration of age or where the other person is at spiritually. There is no consideration of where this relationship is headed. It is based almost exclusively on hormones and feelings.

If this first relationship doesn’t end up working out, the young person quickly moves on to someone else. In the course of their time in high school and college, young people might date dozens of different people, leaving a string of breakups in their wake.

## IS THERE HELP?

In worldly dating, the main interest is sex. It is expected that at some point in high school a young person will lose his or her virginity. It is not a question of if but a question of when, and the world does not see this as a problem. The main problem they see is if a young woman has an accidental and unwanted pregnancy. For that reason their concerns in “sex education” are merely to warn against unprotected sex, to hand out condoms, and to pressure young women to start taking birth control.

After a couple has been exclusive for a while, they are encouraged to live together. Maybe they view this as a trial run, in order to be sure that they really want to get married. Maybe they feel like they aren’t ready for marriage yet because they are in college or because they aren’t financially secure. Maybe they view marriage as an outdated institution that has outgrown its use. So they share an apartment or even buy a house and move in together.

The world’s view of dating is essentially lawlessness. In this area also they show themselves to be a “crooked and perverse nation” (Phil. 2:15). They are not governed by the objective standard of God’s word. They aren’t even governed by old-fashioned traditional values or by the wishes of their parents. They are ruled by their wants, desires, and emotions. They are their own god in the sphere of dating.

This attitude toward dating is spread by heavy propaganda. The stories are trending on social media and can be found splashed across the covers of gossip rags in the

checkout aisle. Neighbors and coworkers promote it through their actions and conversation. Movies, music, and literature encourage it.

There is no denying that the world's attitude toward dating has an influence upon Christian young people. The world creeps closer and closer to the church, especially through technology, particularly social media, and this creates pressure upon the youth of the church to conform to the thinking of the world. Conformity to the world might come consciously, but also unconsciously. Without even knowing it, we can begin to think and talk and act like our peers in the world.

The reality of this pressure and influence requires that we have our thinking rebooted and reset. Romans 12:2 says, "Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind." So that we are not conformed to the world's ideas for dating, we need our minds renewed. In this, we need help. As you progress through this book, you will find that turning to scripture is the way God would have us renew our minds.

## **2. This guidance is necessary because of the difficulty of dating.**

Entirely apart from the influence of the world upon you as young people, there is need for instruction on this subject because of the difficulty of dating. To radically understate the case, dating is not easy.

## IS THERE HELP?

A young person might have questions about “the right time” to start dating. Sixteen? Eighteen? Should I date in high school? Should I start dating when I have four more years of college to go?

Or you might have questions about whom to date. What should I be looking for in a boyfriend or girlfriend? What if I’m dating this person but I’m not sure they’re “the one”? What should I do if I’m asked out by someone I don’t really have an attraction to?

Some other difficult questions might arise while considering dating. Is “dating” even appropriate? Should I consider courtship? What even is courtship? Where are we going to go? What are we going to do? What are we going to talk about all night? And then, what about sex? Where are the boundaries? How far is too far? How do things change if we’ve been dating for several years or are engaged?

Other questions matter more once you’ve been dating for a while. When is the right time to get married? What if I’m in college? What if I have a lot of debt? What if I’m ready but he’s not? What will marriage be like?

This is just a small sample of the questions you might face regarding dating. And that doesn’t even begin to address all the questions and concerns that parents might have in the business of dating.

The difficulty of dating is evident from the great harm that can be done through it. One Reformed pastor was spot-on when he wrote, “More harm comes to many of us through

dating than in any other way.”<sup>1</sup> Think about how many people walk away from dating with deep regrets, guilty consciences, or the emotional pain of a bad breakup.

The fact that dating is difficult makes it a subject of great interest for young people (and their parents). It is something that young people regularly ask to discuss in Bible study societies, something they want to read about in blogs and articles, and something they talk about frequently with each other. It is something that parents also discuss between themselves and with others, and it is one of the great fears that they have as their children get older.

The difficulty of dating itself, especially with the pressure of the world added to it, means that we need help thinking properly about dating.

### **3. This guidance is necessary because of how monumental marriage is.**

The decision to get married is one of the most significant decisions that a child of God could ever make. It is far more important than deciding what college to attend, or what career to pursue, or what city to live in. The only decision that is possibly more important is the decision about what church to attend. But other than that, the decision about whom to marry is the most momentous decision you can make.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard D. & Sharon L. Phillips,  *Holding Hands, Holding Hearts: Recovering a Biblical View of Christian Dating*  (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006), 14.



## IS THERE HELP?

There are many reasons why this is true. One reason is that marriage is for life. You might struggle to decide where to live or what career to pursue, but those things can always change. Not so with marriage. This is a choice that, once done, cannot be undone.

Another reason why marriage is so momentous is that the person you marry will shape and mold the person that you become. A young woman who marries a spiritually weak young man might find herself becoming spiritually weak as well. A young man who marries an independent, domineering wife might find that he is no longer the head of his house. In contrast, a young person married to a spiritually-minded spouse might find himself or herself growing in faith and godliness. Our spouse is one of the most powerful tools God uses in our sanctification.

The person whom you marry will also play an important role in shaping and molding your future children, if the Lord gives them. The young man you marry will one day be the father of your children and be called upon to lead them spiritually. The young woman you marry will one day be the mother of your children and be called upon to nurture and care for them throughout the day.

Marriage is not a joke. It is not some careless decision to be made on a whim or at the spur of the moment. Marriage is serious business!

Because marriage is so important, by implication dating is also serious business. The process of seeking a spouse and

determining the Lord's will regarding marriage is equally as important. For that reason it's important that we think carefully about dating.

### OUR GUIDE: IDENTIFIED

It should come as no surprise to the Christian young person that the place where we turn for help in our dating is the word of God. The inspired scriptures must be our guide as we look for a spouse.

But perhaps this does come as a surprise to you. Maybe you're wondering, "How can the Bible help? It never says anything about dating. This is just a matter of Christian liberty, right? Which means that we just have to figure things out on our own."

Yes, it's certainly true that the Bible never mentions the word "dating" or describes anything remotely close to modern dating. But that doesn't mean that the word of God should sit on a shelf collecting dust while we search for answers to our dating questions. Without directly addressing the subject, the word has much to say that applies to dating.

In Reformed theology we refer to this as the truth of the sufficiency of scripture. This means that the Bible contains everything that we need to know for what we believe (faith) and how we conduct ourselves (life). The Bible is sufficient to address every need of the child of God. Second Timothy 3:16–17 says, "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable...for instruction in righteousness: that the

man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works.”

The Bible lays out fundamental principles in many areas of life, even though it does not address them specifically. It does not specifically address watching TV, but it certainly has something to say about the amount of time we spend in front of it and the things we watch. It does not specifically address smoking, but it certainly has something to say about addictions and idolatry and harming our bodies. Many more examples could be given, but the main point is this: the word is relevant for all of life, which includes dating.

The Bible does address the all-important question of whom we are to marry. It gives guiding principles for the involvement of parents in the dating of their young people. It provides clear instructions and warnings about sex in dating. It holds before the young person the ultimate goal of dating: marriage. Let's not sell God's word short.

In the following chapters, I hope to spell out the main principles of God's word that ought to guide us in our dating. I will include practical implications and advice along the way, but the main thing to consider is how the scripture shines its light upon the pathway to marriage.

## **OUR GUIDE: TIMELESS**

If we have these principles of scripture to guide the way, the things we say here ought to hold true for every generation.

If the word is timeless, its basic principles concerning dating ought to be timeless as well.

There are always going to be specific things that change in dating, as has been the case throughout history. We see evidence of this in the different practices spoken of in the Bible. For example, the Bible mentions arranged marriages. Think of Abraham sending his servant to find a wife for Isaac (Gen. 24). There was no such thing then as our modern concept of dating. Often, the father of a young man would approach the father of a young woman, the two would haggle over an appropriate dowry, and then they would arrange the marriage of their children. The son and daughter were often informed of the arrangement after the fact.

However, arranged marriages were not the rule. It was possible for a young man and young woman to develop an interest in one another and then look to their parents for approval. Think about how Jacob approached Laban for Rachel's hand in marriage.

The Bible also mentions being "espoused," such as with Joseph and Mary (Matt. 1:18). This was much more than an engagement. The two were considered married and even spoke vows to one another to that effect. But they then waited a year before consummating their marriage sexually. They prepared a home for themselves, and after a year had passed they consummated their marriage and were considered husband and wife.

The differences in dating practices over time are some-

thing we can especially see from the last century in America.<sup>2</sup> A very different kind of “dating” was practiced during the 1800s and the early 1900s. A young man might have a special interest in a young woman, but he had to make that interest known to both sets of parents. Then he needed an invitation to “call” on her at her home. Either the couple would attend a church or community function together, or they would spend time at her home under the watchful eye of her parents.

Then things changed during the 1920s and 30s. More young people had access to automobiles, and therefore dating gradually shifted from the private sphere of the home to the public sphere.

Another dramatic shift took place during the middle of the twentieth century, especially after the end of World War II. At this time there was a dramatic increase in the availability of transportation, entertainment, and disposable income. These things made it even easier for young couples to spend time outside of the parental home. Dating came to mean spending time alone with just each other and without the oversight of dad and mom.

The 1960s saw the development of the sexual revolution, which had a powerful influence on dating. Dating became equated with sex, which could happen without the fear of an

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2 For more on the history of dating, see Alex and Marni Chediak, *With One Voice: Singleness, Dating, and Marriage to the Glory of God* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2006), 13–25. Chediak is dependent on Beth Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).

unwanted pregnancy due to the increased availability of birth control and abortion. In addition, dating was disconnected from marriage and characterized by rebellion against the authority and oversight of parents.

Today it's not uncommon for a young man and young woman to start dating without their parents' knowledge. Only after they've dated for a while are their parents informed. They might spend several years dating, usually by going off on their own without parental oversight. Eventually there is an engagement, followed several months later by the public event of the wedding.

As this brief summary shows, there have been many different "dating" practices throughout history. Undoubtedly, things will continue to change in coming years. But amidst all these changes, what ought to guide us is not what our emotions or modern culture dictates. We must have the word as our timeless guide. It will not address every how-to of dating. Some things are left to sanctified common sense. But the main principles of God's word ought to hold true. In the next chapter, let's look at one of those principles.

*DISCUSSION QUESTIONS*

1. What are some of the things that make dating difficult?
2. Why is getting married one of the most important decisions in your life?
3. What is one thing in this chapter that taught you how to date differently from the world?
4. How is the Bible a guide to your dating? Before you begin the next chapter, find two or three Bible passages that speak to modern dating. Why did you choose these passages? What do you learn from them?