

Dating Differently: A Guide to Reformed Dating, by Rev. Joshua Engelsma. Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2019. 160 pages, softcover. [Reviewed by Rev. Cory Griess]

The message of this wonderful little book is that if one is going to be Reformed (that is Biblical) then all of life will be re-formed according to the word of God. Dating too will be done differently. Rev. Engelsma covers the topic of different dating in nine chapters, each titled as a question. The first, “Is There Help?” establishes the need for help in dating and identifies the source of that help as the word of God. The second chapter, “Where’s This Headed?” sets out the end from the beginning, explaining marriage and commending it as the biblical purpose for dating. The third chapter, entitled, “When Should I Start?” covers the age and maturity necessary to begin dating. The fourth chapter explains the biblical principles that answer the question, “Who’s the One” that I should begin dating? Chapter five takes up the very practical question, “What’s There to Do on Dates?” along the way covering the related question of dating versus courtship. In chapter six, Rev. Engelsma guides young people to date differently by answering the question, “What’s the Place of My Parents and Others?” The seventh chapter answers the question, “What About Sex?” Rev. Engelsma does not shy away from this important question, giving forthright, good, biblical, and practical instruction and advice. The eighth chapter asks, “What if I’m Single All My Life?” Recognizing not only that many young people have this question when the topic of dating comes up, but also that the question is asked with some trepidation, Rev. Engelsma takes up the good and God-given place of singlehood. The pastor sensitively applies the spiritual dignity scripture gives to the single life while calling singles to holiness. Finally, the ninth chapter answers the question, “When Do I Get Married?” giving helpful advice in this regard and calling especially young men to get serious about moving things forward in dating and getting married.

The book is an enjoyable and easy read. The reason is not because it is simplistic or dumbed down. It is because Rev. Engelsma is a good writer. And it is because the approach and style the pastor takes in writing this book is fit for its intended audience. It reads like I imagine a conversation on these topics would go with a wise older brother who happened to be a pastor.

Another quality that makes the book a good read, especially for young people, is that Rev. Engelsma does a good job “getting into the head” of a young person. As the titles of his chapters foreshadow, Rev. Engelsma spends himself in the book asking and answering questions he believes young people have about dating. Repeatedly in the book paragraphs begin with phrases like, “Maybe you find yourself saying...” or “Maybe you are wondering,” or, “Maybe you are thinking...” On page 81 the pastor puts a string of thoughts into the mind of a dating couple. Young people will find that more often than not he’s right; they were thinking just that.

With regard to writing in a way appropriate to youth of the covenant, I also appreciated that Rev. Engelsma often used direct address in the book. In addition to the quotations above that display this, the book is full of phrases like, “My general advice...is that *you* should be careful not to start dating too young.” “If *you* are fifteen or sixteen....” “In turn, ladies, if a young man asks *you* out...” (emphasis mine—CG). The older brother who happens to be a pastor, is having a conversation with the youth directly.

I judge the book to be balanced and biblical guidance. Some books on dating are legalistic. Others go into the other ditch, too afraid to apply the clear teaching of scripture forthrightly. The book avoids both ditches. In the preface, and in the conclusion, and again a couple of times in between, the author states that in some points his advice is the way he deems it wise to apply biblical principles, admitting that the specifics may be open for discussion and even disagreement. At points where he is applying scriptural commands that leave no room for discussion, he applies the commands that way without apology. The tone of the book carries the same balance. Rev. Engelsma writes with humility, speaking of his own weaknesses looking back on his younger self. But he also writes with strength, speaking with a firm tone when appropriate. The book has a nice balance too of biblical exposition and practical advice that the young people will appreciate.

The book is not Reformed in its title only. There are quotations from the Reformed and Presbyterian creeds, the Reformed Marriage Form, and other Reformed writers. The book holds high the good gift of marriage, taking the view of marriage that it is a bond breakable only by the death of one of the members of that marriage. This is the good, biblical atmosphere in which the rest of the material lives.

I have one criticism. While I appreciate Rev. Engelsma’s careful approach to the role of parents in dating, that is, one where the parents are not authoritarian nor on the other hand negligent nor absentminded, I would have appreciated a clear statement affirming the parents’ right to unequivocally say “yes” or “no” in regards to who their young person wants to *begin* dating. So far as I can tell, the closest the book comes to stating this is on page 73, “Your father might step in if you, his sixteen-year-old daughter, are asked out by a twenty-five year old man, or he might tell you to put an end to your relationship with an unbelieving girl.” But in this reviewer’s opinion there is still want of a clear statement telling the young people that their parents have the God-given authority to say, “Yes son/daughter you may,” or “No, son/daughter, you may not” before day one. Even if the parents choose not to take that authority up (deeming it wise to take a different approach in particular cases), to my mind the young people should be instructed in a book on this topic that this is their parents’ God-given

right (especially when they are younger; I realize things get more complex as the young person gets older).

The book includes discussion questions after each chapter that make it helpful for parents and their young people, young peoples' societies, or even a few friends, to read and discuss together. My one criticism in no way dampens my enthusiasm at the prospect of reading and discussing this book with my own children. I just can't believe how close it is for the time when such reading and discussion needs to take place. Don't let the window close on your time to use this book with your own children!

The Lord willing, this is the first of a good number of excellent books to come from the pen of Rev. Engelsma. As a pastor and as a parent, I give my personal and sincere thanks to him for writing an excellent and helpful book on a vitally important topic. Thanks too, to the RFPA for requesting and publishing this type of material. The church of Christ needs it.