

HER HAND IN MARRIAGE

Biblical Courtship in the
Modern World

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For Ben and Bekah, whom the Lord
has blessed with covenant grace . . .
vinculum matrimonii

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Introduction

There are three things which are too wonderful for me,
Yes, four which I do not understand:
The way of an eagle in the air,
The way of a serpent on a rock,
The way of a ship in the midst of the sea,
And the way of a man with a virgin

Agur, son of Jakeh
Proverbs 31:18-19

We like holding hands and pitchin' woo. . . .

Merle Haggard

Sittin' on the front porch just a swangin'. . . .

Stevie Ray Vaughn

Everyone dates. Or at least, everyone is supposed to date. Or, if they don't date, then something is wrong, or someone is ugly, right? But in America today, relationships between boys and girls, men and women, husbands and wives are a stretcher case. The fact that pride exists at the heart of this problem can be seen in our various responses to the difficulties. The worse our troubles get, the more faith we have in our methods and procedures. Like the woman in Luke's gospel, the treatment we receive from our physicians does not really touch or heal our condition. And like that woman, our livelihood is now up and gone (Lk. 8:43). The starting point for most of our marriage relationships, the modern recreational dating system, can be safely considered as bankrupt.

Consider how our system works. A young man notices a girl who attracts him. He asks her out, and she agrees. They start going together, and one of two things happens. Either they like each other or they don't, and both possibilities bring problems in their train. If neither one likes the other, then they both have had a bad experience. If they both hit it off, then the eventual temptation to immorality is strong, *especially* if they happened to pair off young—fourteen, say. “Glad you kids like each other! Now don't touch anything for eight more years!” “Okay, Mom!” And of course, if one is interested in staying together and the other one isn't, the possibilities for emotional snarls and interesting complications are almost endless.

If the young man and woman see one another more than just a few times, it is very easy for them both to drift into what can be called the *zone of vulnerability*. This zone of vulnerability is that place where one cannot leave the relationship without being hurt. At some point in a relationship, the man or the woman will come to the place where, if they break up, they get hurt. Once people are inside that zone, they are vulnerable. As long as he or she is outside that zone, they are not threatened at all by the relationship—it is still only a potential relationship. And, of course, in a relationship, the *degree* of vulnerability they feel toward one another will depend upon a number of factors. If a couple only went out three or four times, there may not be much damage—that will come after they each have seen twenty people three or four times. Some things accumulate. With another couple, if they have dated for three years, have been good friends, and have not behaved themselves sexually, a break-up is nothing less than a divorce without attorney's fees.

This means, of course, that a married couple is as far inside this zone of vulnerability as they can get. There is no way a couple can divorce without devastating both of them in some way. God hates divorce; His Word naturally provides the protection against the kind of damage which proceeds from disobedience. Consequently, God does not permit us to get into

this zone without building a fence of protection around us. That fence is a covenantal oath; it is what we call a *marriage*. A covenant of permanent and faithful sexual union is made before God and numerous witnesses; the man and woman each declare that they are going to go together into this zone and *stay* there. They will live there for the rest of their lives.

But in our culture, men and women are trained to harden themselves so they may go readily from relationship to relationship. Sometimes there is a marriage oath made and broken, and sometimes not. Going from one relationship to another has become a national pastime. People start very early with recreational dating, and, protests notwithstanding, most dating today leads to a sexual relationship. In this regard, the pattern of behavior among young people who are professing Christians is not much different from that of the world. Because the church has largely adopted a worldly system of dating, the walls of protection for our children which God designed have been broken down. We have provided our children with enough Christianity to ensure their guilt when they fornicate, but not enough to ensure their purity.

Our system of recreational dating has broken down; it is time to return to the biblical pattern for getting together. Apart from *biblical* dating or courting, there are many destructive consequences—emotional, sexual, and spiritual. But if a young man seeks to initiate a relationship, and takes full responsibility for the relationship under the woman's father, there is scriptural accountability and protection. It is the purpose of this small book to define, defend, and describe how biblical dating or courtship works.

Objections to this assessment of the modern dating system may tend to come rather easily. Why can we not point to the successes, the happy endings in the modern dating system? Besides, this whole thing seems to work on television. Three responses come to mind. First, it is certain that everyone with good will rejoices when a godly Christian couple dates, behaves themselves, and then marries. The success stories within the modern recreational dating system, *which certainly*

exist, are not the problem with it. Nothing said in the following pages should be taken as directed against godly Christians who came together within the dating system. The criticism is directed against the system generally considered *as a system*. People survive plane crashes too, some of them without a scratch, and we should all be happy about it. But this acknowledgment does not disqualify us from opposing the general habit of crashing airplanes.

This relates to the second point. Generalizations are legitimate if they honestly describe an overall pattern. Generalizations are consequently *not* refuted through particular and individual counter examples. Honest Pharisees lived at the time of Christ, and they were not an embarrassment to Christ's scathing denunciations of their religious sect as a whole. Indeed one indication of a Pharisee's honesty would be his willingness to acknowledge the justice of Christ's sarcasm. Thus generalizations about recreational dating will not be universally true (they *are* generalizations). What we should ask from a generalization is whether it is honest and fair, not whether it is true in any given instance.

Third, "success stories" are not as abundant as may be assumed through briefly glancing around at church. Christians are not as open about their sexual behavior as pagans, and the tight lips can be deceiving. Our tendency is to judge based upon the outward appearance, and everybody at church sure *looks* moral. But many pastors in their premarital counseling go beyond such a cursory glance. Tragically, many pastors are now surprised when they find Christian couples who are behaving themselves sexually—"You *are*?" The *objective* data concerning unmarried Christian couples in the modern dating game is *not* heartening.

Our dating system, considered as a system, does not biblically prepare young men and women for marriage—at least for marriage as God designed it. A few basic reasons should at least introduce the subject addressed in this book. The modern dating system does not train young people to form *a* relationship. It trains them to form a *series* of relationships, and

further trains them to harden themselves to the break-up of all but the current one. At the very least, this system is as much a preparation for divorce as it is for marriage. Whenever the other person starts to wear a little thin, you just slip out the back, Jack.

Further, the modern recreational dating system encourages emotional attachments apart from the protections of a covenant fence. This has been accurately called emotional promiscuity. A man and woman cannot function within a romantic relationship without becoming emotionally vulnerable to one another. Nothing is wrong with this vulnerability; it is just that we are delicate enough at this level to require protection before we enter into such a state, a protection which the Bible says is covenantal.

Moreover, the modern dating system also leaves the father of the young girl almost entirely out of the picture. The father, who ought to be protecting his daughter's sexual purity, sends her off into the dark with some highly-interested young man, and then does what he *thinks* is his job, which is to worry. "Well, dear," he says to his wife, "we can only pray. It has come to that." And he should worry, because the modern dating system *expects* a certain amount of physical involvement. True, the evangelical Christian version of this system allows only enough foreplay to get everybody concerned all messed up without any lawful release. We somehow think a godly Christian is one who can pre-heat the oven without cooking the roast.

Is there a better way? In the pages to come, we will address the underlying biblical principles involved in the pattern called biblical dating or courtship. In modern America, recreational dating is taken to be a positive good, like food, air, and sunshine, and is considered to be a necessary, inescapable activity. It is considered to be a normal and natural part of growing up—what could be more wholesomely *American* than taking a girl to the prom? It makes us think of the fifties, when things weren't so fouled up in our society. In reality, recreational dating is a custom which began in this century,

and was entirely unknown at the time the Scriptures were given to us. This means that for those who take the biblical teaching on the family seriously, we should consider what the Bible has to say on the *formation* of families.

Men are created and called to initiate, and women are created and called to respond. But we are not mechanical robots—God does not want us to initiate foolishly, or respond foolishly. First, the Bible calls men and women to fulfill their respective roles in courtship, and secondly, they are called to fulfill them *with wisdom*. Such wisdom requires that we follow God's revealed design.

When people are taught that all single men and women are solitary agents, that the two sexes are exactly the same, and that they each approach a potential relationship in the same way, those who listen to this are going to get into trouble very quickly. This is because women are built to *respond*, and men are built to *initiate*. This is not just true at the beginning of the relationship during the courtship. Initiation and response provide a pattern a man and wife will follow throughout marriage until they die. This pattern of initiation and response is so deeply ingrained in us that a fence of protection is constantly necessary to guard against a foolish, instinctive use of it. That fence is called courtship; the absence of such a fence is typified in the modern dating system.

Women hate one thing more than having to initiate themselves, and that is when no one initiates. If there is a vacuum of leadership, women will be tempted to fill that void. This should not be mistaken for a feminine desire to initiate; they will be unhappy that they had to step into that role. This pattern of *fenced* initiation and response is clearly seen in the biblical pattern of authority and submission to a father prior to marriage, and to a husband through marriage.

Headship in marriage does *not* mean that women submit to men; it means *one* woman submits to *one* man. Her submission to her husband protects her from having to submit to other men. Prior to marriage, her submission to her father protects her from having to submit to other men. There is no

overall biblical requirement that women be submissive to men in general. The biblical pattern is that a wife should respond to the initiative and leadership of her husband, and only to him. She is prepared and trained for this in her submission to her father.

If a woman were responsible to submit to men in general, her life would be unbearable—no one can serve two masters. But a woman who is responsive to a godly man is protected from having to submit to other men, most of whom are less than godly. She consequently has a great deal *more liberty* than a woman who not protected in this way. Thus the so-called “independent” woman is not under any kind of protection. She is truly on her own, but with the result being that she is buffeted about by all sorts of men. But if her father were doing what he ought to do, or if she were in a marriage relationship where the husband was doing what he ought to do, she would be protected from the insults and harassment of men in general. This explains why some of the most “independent” women are so insecure, and why some of the most submissive women have a real security and strength of mind. Women inescapably need godly masculine protection against ungodly masculine harassment; women who refuse protection from their fathers and husbands must seek it from the police. But women who genuinely insist on “no masculine protection” are really women who tacitly agree on the propriety of rape. Whenever someone sets himself to go against God’s design, horrible problems will always result. The Bible says that we find the way to true self-discovery through self-surrender. Those who exalt themselves are humbled, and vice versa. In the feminist movement over the last several decades, women have been looking for (and have not yet found) themselves. This is because they have been trying to find and identify their role apart from God’s design. The beauty of biblical courtship is that *it never leaves women unprotected*.

Men are designed by God to initiate and lead, and women are designed to respond. In the formation of marriages, men are designed by God to initiate to the father of the woman

who interests them. Women are designed to respond to an interesting suitor while in submission to their fathers.

For an example of such protection, if a man expects a woman to respond to something when he has not yet initiated, he is like someone who expects a tennis partner to return the serve when he has not yet served. This is an “easy way out”—young Christian men often abdicate in this way. They want to find out what the woman’s response would be *if* they initiated—without actually having to take the risk of initiation. Once the man knows that the woman would respond positively, *then* he initiates. This is the coward’s option, leaving the burden of the initiation on her. When the man abdicates in this way, the woman is being conned into taking the initiative. Having to deal with the girl’s father prevents all this. This means that a man who is initiating in a relationship must take quite a risk in talking to her father. But God has designed it so that the man is the one who is to take such a risk. He initiates, and, if she has received her father’s blessing, she responds. *This is biblical courtship.*

But before considering the biblical arguments which establish this as a pattern for courtship, we must first delay a moment in order to issue a few preliminary warnings.

The first has to do with the profoundly important distinction between *principles* and *methods*. Because our contemporary practice of recreational dating has failed so miserably, many Christians are hungry for alternative methods. “Just tell us what to *do!*” In this arena, as elsewhere, the Christian life is approached as though it were a paint-by-numbers kit. But nowhere is this kind of “connect the dots” thinking better calculated to bring disaster than in the realm of courtship. We are men and women with sons and daughters, not social engineers playing with interchangeable, interconnecting tinker toys. This simplistic but destructive mentality is revealed in questions like, “How many times must a young man come over before the young girl’s father should allow him to sit next to her at the dinner table?” The author of this small book frankly confesses that the answer is none of his business, and that he

doesn't really care. Seek to understand the principle, and appropriate methods will follow.

The second concern relates to terms. Already I have spoken of biblical courtship or dating, and I have spoken of recreational dating. What do such terms mean? In a book like this, we must not only deal with the denotations of the terms, but also with the connotations. For some, the whole thing is quite simple. A *date* is when a young man and woman go out together on their own, and *courtship* is when a young man goes through the young woman's father. As far as this goes, fine. But what are the connotations? For some Christians, dating calls to mind a series of bad experiences in the back seat of a car somewhere, and for some others, it recalls a number of pleasant and happy memories leading up to a wonderful marriage. The term courtship is even more problematic. As more and more Christians respond to the problems created by our unbelieving culture's method for pairing off, they are adopting the pattern of "courtship." But they are also bringing in some extra-biblical connotations as they do so. For some, courtship means that we must all become retro-praire muffins. The one being courted wears a gingham dress and bonnet, and he rides his horse over from the Taylor Ranch after church on Sunday. And there they sit on the front porch swing, as Stevie Ray Vaughn mentioned earlier, "just a swangin'."

Others go even further back, with the phrase *courtship* making them think of Camelot and maidens in distress. This is actually a little closer to the origin of the word courtship. Courtship originally derives from the Latin *cobors*, from which we get *cohort*. It meant an enclosed yard, and included the retinue of men which would assemble in such a yard. Through obvious processes, we get words like *court*, *courtier*, and *curtsey*. We also get *courtesy*, which is behavior polished enough for court, and *courtesan*, a loose woman thought high-class enough to service the court. Courtship is related to the practice of medieval courtly love—the practice of waiting upon and serving a lady, seeking her favor. In the chivalric ideal, the

lady in question was usually married to someone else. Courtship *as a term* has its etymological origin in a practice just as unbiblical as modern recreational dating. The one being “courted” was the woman, not her father. The one being “courted” was probably already married. Huh.

We live in a fallen world. One of the evidences of this is that we really have no adequate term to describe the way in which young Christian men and women should get together. Perhaps some time after Christians return to a more obedient practice, we will have been doing it long and well enough to be able to name whatever it is we are doing. In the meantime, we must use such terms as we have, hence, biblical courtship or biblical dating. We must reject the pattern of abdication, disobedience, and sexual immorality which we see all around us; hence, our rejection of recreational dating, or the modern dating system. But in doing this, we are bound to use whatever terms we select in a *qualified* sense. Some couples who “date” are in closer conformity with biblical principles than other couples who embrace the “courtship” model. So in this book I shall routinely refer to courtship, or biblical courtship, and sometimes to biblical dating. If a courting couple goes on a *date*, we should not all panic and relegate this horror to the same category as nation rising up against nation, or kingdom against kingdom. The end is not yet.