

Courtship & Marriage article 4

Dear young people,

I have described the institution of marriage as it is discussed in Scripture. Scripture tells us that marriage is an unbreakable bond between a man and a woman. That bond is a bond of life and love, and it is a physical union to produce children. It is a bond that belongs to life in this world, and, therefore, death breaks that bond. But death is the only power that can break that bond. Not divorce and not remarriage can break that bond; only death can do this.

In this letter I want to begin a discussion of dating. I am not going to base what I want to say on what my father says in chapter 2 of his book, *"Leaving Father and Mother."* It would be good if you would read it. I wanted to tell you what Scripture says about marriage first of all, because our understanding of marriage will make a huge difference in how we look at dating. If, for example, marriage is not a lifelong commitment of a man or a woman to each other, but is rather a relationship that can be broken by mutual agreement, or even by the desire of a husband or a wife without the consent of the other, then we do not have to be so fussy about whom we date, for the door is open to get rid of our mate as soon as we weary of him or her. Divorce is an open door to get out of a marriage.

I was made acquainted with a man who considered marriage to be only a temporal relationship. He was extremely wealthy and did not want to share his wealth through alimony paid to divorced wives. So he told his prospective brides that they had to sign a pre-nuptial agreement in which they would promise not to take him to court to claim some of his money when and if he divorced them. It was obvious, even if he did not tell them, that he had no intention of staying married to them, but wanted to be free to get rid of them when he wearied of them. He assured them, however, that while they were married to him they could have anything money could buy. He had only recently divorced his 6th wife. Obviously, neither of them was dating with a view to a permanent marriage.

One criterion for marriage according to one way of thinking is that a young man and a young girl must fall in love and love each other before marrying. It was not always that way. In Biblical times a father found a wife for his son, but had to gain the consent of the father of the girl before a marriage could be arranged. Neither the young man nor the young woman had much to say about whom they would marry. There is something good about this. All too often young girls are looking for a handsome man with bulging muscles and skilled in athletics, and young men are looking for a pretty girl with a great shape. Or a young girl may be attracted to a young man because he has a good job, is in a position to inherit a lot of money, and can provide for the girl anything in this life she wants. Such girls are motivated in looking for someone to marry by outward appearance. To judge a suitable mate by outward appearance is wrong and will lead to trouble. The Chinese used to have a saying in which was to be found some truth. They said something to this effect: A kettle does not start boiling until it is set over a fire. By this they meant that a young man and a young woman need not love each other before marriage, but can learn to love each other after marriage

It would be impossible today to force young people to allow their parents to choose their spouse. My wife and I found it just the other way: if we would suggest a nice girl to our boys, they would immediately strike that girl off their list of possible girls to date. And the same with the girls. We had only to suggest a young man to convince our girls that he was not the one to date. Parents with experience behind them are in a much better position to choose a life mate for their children. But it isn't going to happen and nothing can bring us back to the old days. So we shall leave dating and marriage be as it is. But this does not mean that we need not be guided by Biblical principles.

This matter of falling in love is not all bad. There is something to it and it really does happen. I fell in love with my wife before our first date – at least I thought I had. And eventually, I think, she fell in love with me. The big question is: What do we mean by “love”? That strikes me as a pressing question. If falling in love simply means physical attraction, falling in love is all wrong. If falling in love means sexual attraction, falling in love is still more wrong. This is what the worldly people consider falling in love to be. But in God's covenant it is not so. Falling in love means seeing someone of the opposite sex who would be a spouse with whom I can live the rest of my life and fulfill my calling before God in the church, the home and life.

But it is not necessarily a sin for a young man to be attracted to a young woman because of her looks; nor is it wrong for a young woman to be attracted to a man because she thinks he is handsome. I remember years ago I heard a sermon by Rev. Herman Hoeksema in which He was preaching to the congregation on I Peter 3:1-6. The theme of his sermon was, “Spiritual Cosmetics.” In the course of his sermon he was explaining that the true beauty of a young lady is her inward holiness. But he added that it was not always so easy for a girl to attract a young man; so it was perfectly pleasing to God if she made herself as pretty as she could to help attract him. I think that is true. But in the long run, young men and young women must look beyond outward appearance.

Dating must always be done with a view to marriage. People in the world start their children dating at a much earlier age, sometimes when they are only five or six. But among unbelievers, dating is a sort of game. Here in America one will read sometimes of what the wicked people call, “the dating game.” This not only makes a mockery of dating and marriage, but it also leads to immorality.

If dating is not for the purpose of finding one to be our spouse, it has no good use at all and ought to be abandoned. But it is, when carefully used, a wonderful way to find one with whom you can live in holy wedlock.

We will discuss a few more things about dating in the next letter

With Christian greetings to you all,

Prof. Hanko