

Courtship & Marriage article 6

Dear Young People:

Before I go on in the discussion of courtship and marriage, I must answer a question I received about my statements that we ought to know a person well before committing ourselves to marriage. This is important, because if we marry in the Lord, we want to marry a person who will be a godly husband or wife and will make a good parent for the children the Lord may give them

The question is: "I suppose dating is a time to get to know the person better. So how would you actually know if that guy or girl would be a good husband/wife unless you really get to know them better while dating? The person you think you knew before dating may change after knowing him/her better while dating. Because it is normally while dating that you know the 'other side' of the person. Is this right?"

Yes, the person who wrote the question is exactly right. Dating is intended to be and ought to be a time for a young man and a young woman to get to know each other better. And, of course, by knowing someone better I mean: Is the person truly a Christian? Does the person love the Lord and love the church? Is the person one who walks in a godly way? Is a person committed to the welfare of the church and the members of the church? Does a person whom I date love God's truth? And will he/she be faithful to it?

These are the questions that need answering, because the church ought to be in the very center of a married couple's life. A young married couple has to have their priorities in the right order. Do they agree that the church is the most important priority? More important than a high-paying job? More important than a high degree in education? More important than a beautiful home? A nice car, the latest fashions in clothing etc., etc? God is not really very much interested in how much money you make; or how many degrees you have tacked on your name. God doesn't care very much about whether you use public transportation or whether you drive a BMW. He is not going to ask you in the judgment day: "How large is your bank account?"

But He is and will be very much interested in whether you did everything in your power to advance the cause of His church and to devote your life to His kingdom and covenant. And it is on these things that husband and wife have to agree. If they do not, there is always tension in the home and trouble sits down with you at the table and goes to bed with you at night.

All this does not mean that we must look for a spouse without sin. We ourselves are such great sinners that we could not even live with someone who never sinned – apart from the fact that there is no such person. And so the big question is not: Does so-and-so sin? The answer is, Of course. But the question is: When this prospective mate sins, is he or/she sorry for those sins and willing to confess them? Even if it means "losing face."

How do we learn these things?

We here come on one reason why it is always better to date in the church. When we date in the church we know a lot about a person before we date that person. We may have known that person for twenty or more years.

But sometimes we do not like to date someone we have known well. There is an old saying, "Familiarity breeds contempt." I guess, the saying means that the better we know a person, the less we like that person; and, knowledge that has come over many years makes us contemptible of that person. But I do not know why this needs to be true. We live with our husbands or wives for many years and we never get sick of it. Why does that old saying have to be true in our youth? I know it is. When we suggested once or twice to one of our children to date so-and-so, the answer was: "Oh, I knew her for 12 years in school. She's a good friend, but to date her? I think not." Well, that, it seems to me, is rather foolish. Why should not two friends begin to date with a view to marrying? One of our boys did finally date a friend of many years; they married and are now grandparents thankful for each other and for their children.

To date someone from the church is to have a pretty good idea of the spiritual values of that person before you even begin dating. And, not only do you know the person, but you know the family of that person. That is surely an advantage. Is it a true covenant family that devotes itself to things spiritual? Is the Word of God the guide by which that family walks its pilgrim's pathway? Could you imagine that a sign above the doorway of that home would read: "In this house, Christ is King"? If it is a godly family, the children are also likely to be godly young adults.

And, lest there be any doubt about what I mean, I want to add: To be a godly young person is not to be a dried up prune who never has any fun, never enjoys anything, never laughs at a good joke, and never wants to play games. Fun is not sin! Laughter is part of the happy Christian life. I would be very afraid to date someone who never laughs. I cannot imagine living with someone in marriage who never has any fun. The point is not that Christians walk around with long faces. The evangelist Billy Sunday used to say, "Some Christians have such a long face they could eat oatmeal out of the tail pipe of a car." I don't think much of Billy Sunday's theology, but he was right when he said that Christians ought to be the happiest people around.

But dating is the real time to find out whether the person whom you date is one you want for a spouse. To learn this, two who are dating must also spend time talking about spiritual things. They will talk about the sermons they heard in church on the Lord's Day; about what is important to them in life; about spiritual and doctrinal questions that arise out of Bible Studies; about priorities in life (what to them is important and what is not); about what it means to establish a home. Many young couples whom I know spend time reading Prof. Engelsma's books on marriage, especially, *Marriage, the Mystery of Christ and the Church*. Many godly couples who are dating often take time to study Scripture together and to pray together.

Such things are especially important to help getting to know each other. If the Lord is pleased to lead the courting couple to the altar of marriage, husband and wife will be spending a great deal of time together reading and studying the Bible and praying together. Courtship is a good time to begin doing this.

There are many marriages where husband and wife never learn to talk together about spiritual things; nor do they learn to pray together in times of stress, difficulty and strains

on their marriage. They never learn to talk together about spiritual things, for they feel embarrassed when talking about these things, and they would not, for anything, talk to each other about their own personal problems, fear, doubts and troubles. They never really feel comfortable talking to each other about the things that really count in life. And that is sad.

One more thing about this. There are certain matters that have to be settled before a young couple fall in love. And that is the question of the church. If a young person really believes that he or she ought to look for a spouse outside the church, and if such a person begins to date someone outside the church, the church issue has to be settled before they become too attached to each other. A relationship can be broken after the attachment has become strong, but it is accompanied by much pain and anguish. If two cannot agree on being a part of the same congregation, which is a church of Christ, then they are far better off breaking up the courtship.

As two when dating grow more fond of each other and become more sure that the one they are dating is the one God wants them to marry, they come to know each other better as well. This is as it ought to be.

Warm regards in the Lord,
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