

# CHRISTIAN EDUCATION IN THE HOME: HELP! MY DAUGHTER WANTS TO DATE

by Greg L. Price  
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## DEDICATION AND THANKS

Much love and appreciation to my beloved wife, Lonna, a pearl of great price (as well as a pearl of Greg Price), and to the straight arrows in my quiver: Larry and Jennifer (for your submission to the truth of God's Word even when it was difficult and for your commitment to raise up a godly heritage through Jackson Dabney Birger, the first of my children's children), Kristen, Joshua, Nathaniel, and Anna (for the earnest desire I see in each of you to be faithful to the Lord and to His Word). "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth" (3 John 4).

I also thank Larry Birger and Reg and Shelly Barrow for their invaluable help in editing and encouraging this project forward; and Kristen Price for her unselfish labor in typing this manuscript.

Eternal praise to the God of grace whose covenant faithfulness to a sinful father like me continually renews within me a steadfast hope that He will bring a world-wide reformation through the faithful obedience of Christian parents who honor Him above all people (even above their own children) and above all earthly possessions.

Know therefore that the LORD thy God, he is God, the faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations; and repayeth them that hateth him to their face, to destroy them: he will not be slack to him that hateth him, he will repay him to his face (Deut.7:9,10).

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Appendix B, "Are Headcoverings Cultural In 1 Corinthians 11:2-16?", has been removed (1997) at Greg Price's request (thus footnotes jump from 34 to 41).

# CHRISTIAN EDUCATION IN THE HOME: HELP! MY DAUGHTER WANTS TO DATE

As those who are primarily entrusted with the responsibility of training their children, Christian parents will come face to face with the issue of dating. With pregnancies, venereal diseases, AIDS, date rapes, and rampant sexual promiscuity on the rise among teens and even prevalent in Christian families, Christian schools, and Christian churches, isn't it about time we reevaluated the "institution" of dating? There is good news! As in all areas of life, God speaks with infinite wisdom through His Word about this critical issue.

Our children belong to God, and that is why the Lord lashed out in righteousness indignation against His covenant people of old when they treated **His** children as if they were their own to do with as they pleased:

Moreover thou hast taken thy sons and thy daughters, **whom thou hast borne unto me**, and these hast thou sacrificed unto them to be devoured. Is this of thy whoredoms a small matter, that thou hast slain **my children** and delivered them to cause them to pass through the fire for them (Ez.16:20,21, emphases added).

God has given us **His children** to educate and to train on His behalf.<sup>1</sup> Are we protecting God's children from sexual temptation or are we putting a stumbling block before them? Are we leading God's children into temptation or are we delivering them from evil?

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1. I highly recommend the article "Secular Education" by the renowned Southern Presbyterian theologian, Robert L Dabney (*Discussions: Evangelical and Theological*, Vol. 3, pp. 272-294, Banner of Truth Trust, reprinted 1982). Dabney strongly believed that the education of children is the God given responsibility of parents and that this education must be distinctly Christian. Concerning the responsibility of parents to educate their children he asserts,

Is the direction of the education of children either a civic or an ecclesiastical function? Is it not properly a domestic and parental function? First, we read in holy writ that God ordained family by the union of one woman to one man, in one flesh, for life, for the declared end of "seeking a godly seed (Mal. 2:15—GLP)." Does not this imply that he looks to parents, in whom the family is founded, as the responsible agents of this result? He has also in the fifth commandment ("Honor thy Father and Mother..." Ex. 20:12—GLP) connected the child proximately, not with either presbyter (elder—GLP) or magistrate, but with the parents, which, of course, confers on them the adequate and the prior authority. This argument appears again in the very order of the historical genesis of the family and State, as well as of the visible Church. *The family was first* (emphasis added—GLP). Parents at the outset were the only social heads existing. The right rearing of children by them was in order to the right creation of the other two institutions. It thus appears that naturally the parent's authority over their children could not have come by deputation from either State or visible Church, any more than the water in a fountain by the derivation from its reservoir below (pp. 290-291).

And regarding the distinctly Christian nature of education, Dabney declares, "... a non-Christian training is literally an anti-Christian training." (p. 285, emphasis his). Furthermore "For a church or for parents," says Rushdoony, "to have no regard for the fact that their children are receiving a godless education is a mark of apostasy" (*God's Plan for Victory: The Meaning of Postmillennialism* ([Fairfax, VA: Thoburn Press, 1980], p. 30). See also Reg Barrow, "Godless Public Education and Sin" *Christian Reconstruction Today* (newsletter, Still Waters Revival Books, revised 1994) and Christopher Klicka. *The Right Choice, The Incredible Failure of Public Education and the Rising Hope of Home Schooling — An Academic, Historical, Practical, and Legal Perspective* (Gresham, OR: Noble Publ., 1992). *The Right Choice* is must reading for anyone interested in Christian education. Klicka is Senior Counsel of the Home School Legal Defense Association.

The underlying presupposition in giving our children what we call “a Christian education” is that as Christians we have a very distinct way of viewing all areas of life — distinct, that is, from unbelievers. We are to look at the world through God’s eyes. We are to think God’s thoughts, speak God’s words, and perform God’s deeds. And it is in the Bible where God’s thoughts are made known. Therefore, there is nothing our children might be taught that can be taught in some “neutral” way as if that subject was not under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, or as if God had nothing at all to say about that subject. Jesus Christ is Lord of all—Lord of all people, Lord of all creatures, Lord of all circumstances, and Lord of all knowledge (in Christ “are hid **all** the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” Col. 2:3, emphasis added). And dear ones, that is why God calls you to trust in the Lord with all your heart, and to “lean not unto thine **own** understanding” Prov. 3:5 [emphasis added]. In fact, we are to distrust our **own** understanding (cf. Prov. 3:7: “Do not be wise in thine **own** eyes”; Prov. 28:26: “He that trusteth in his **own** heart is a fool”; Is. 55:7-9: “Let the wicked forsake **his** way, and the unrighteous man **his** thoughts”, “For my thoughts are not **your** thoughts, neither are **your** ways my ways, saith the LORD.” [emphases added]). Our understanding as finite and fallen creatures is not reliable about any subject, that is why we are not to acknowledge the Lord in **some** of our ways or even in **most** of our ways, but in **all** of our ways (Prov. 3:6).

What does that have to do with teaching our children about love, dating, courtship, engagement, and marriage? Everything! If we are not giving our children God’s thoughts in the area of dating and courtship, we have failed to give them a distinctly “Christian education” in that area of their lives. We have acted as though Jesus Christ was not Lord in their relationships with those of the opposite sex, and that there is in fact neutral ground in this subject for both Christians and non-Christians.

Children raised in Christian homes, who attend Christian schools and Bible believing churches are daily becoming the spoils of the army of our enemy, succumbing to a multitude of his sexual temptations, (perhaps the same temptations we ourselves gave into at their age while involved in the dating game). Oh, the dreadful consequences of yielding to these sexual temptations: heartaches, suicides, murders, revenge, resentment, teen pregnancies, venereal disease, AIDS, sexual violence, and the trampling of one of God’s greatest pearls a bride and a groom can present to one another on their wedding night—the pure gift of their virginity (Paul declares that it is his jealous desire to present the Corinthian believers to Christ “as a chaste virgin” 2 Cor.11:2).<sup>2</sup>

My own children have benefited greatly in their understanding of these principles through the practice of taking covenant vows to remain chaste until marriage and of receiving from my wife and me a covenant ring which they wear as a continual reminder of the vows they have taken before God. On her wedding night, my oldest daughter presented to her husband her wedding gift: a covenant ring which signified she had kept herself a virgin and now offered herself unto the one for whom she had prayed and waited.

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2 . Historian, Philip Schaff, in contrasting the heathen family with the Christian family during the ante-Nicene period (prior to 325 A.D.) has observed, “Chastity before marriage, in wedlock, and in celibacy, in man as well as in woman, so rare in paganism, was raised to the dignity of a cardinal virtue and made the corner-stone of the family. Many a female martyr preferred cruel torture and death to the loss of honor.” Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, (AP&A) II:163. Also, concerning the major subject of this paper, I commend to you a valuable work that I have found very helpful, *Christian Courtship vs. The Dating Game* by Pastor Jim West, Christian Worldview Ministries, P.O. Box 603, Palo Cedro, CA 96073-0603.

Could the “institution” of dating have become a tool which we have unwittingly placed in the hands of the enemy to expose God’s children to temptations that they should never have been subjected to in the first place? Let’s consider what God has to say about these critical issues.

## I. Definition Of Terms And Historical Overview

### A. What is Dating?

Dating is a shared event between a male and a female who have made no binding, biblical commitment to one another and who are themselves primarily responsible for their own supervision while on the date (to a lesser or greater degree). They may be given a curfew, but they are entrusted with the enormous responsibility of supervising their own conduct while on the date.

Dating, as we now know it, is really a twentieth century innovation. It replaced the tried and proven practice of courtship because men and women began worshipping at the feet of the false god, Freedom (e.g. “free love”, “free sex”, “reproductive freedom”, “abortion rights”, “homosexual rights”, etc.). Couples came to believe they really were not free while under the supervision of a loving father (incidentally many unbelievers criticize Christianity for the same reason, i.e. one cannot truly be free while under the Lordship of Jesus Christ). To the contrary, God makes it abundantly clear that one is actually **enslaved** to his own sinful passions (Rom. 6:17,18) and held **captive** to do the will of the devil (2 Tim. 2:26) **until** he takes the yoke of Christ upon himself (Mt. 11:28-30; Jn. 8:36), and by the power of the Holy Spirit delights himself in the law of the Lord (1Jn. 5:2,3; Ps. 119:47), which is the “perfect law of liberty” (Jms. 1:22-25). Then and only then will one know true freedom. Ellen K. Rothman, no friend to biblical Christianity, has noted:

A first-class revolt against the accepted American order took place among American youth in the 1920’s. This was not a sudden eruption, but rather a series of seismic tremors that occurred with increasing intensity and frequency through the 1910’s and 1920’s. By 1930, the terrain through which young Americans passed en route to marriage would be almost unrecognizable to their parents. In 1900, middle-class courtship was more carefully supervised; by 1930, the supervision and formality had given way, like a poorly designed dam, and many of the familiar landmarks were swept aside. What they [the young people—GLP] did was to develop a systematic, peer-controlled approach to the social and sexual relationships of late adolescence and early adulthood.<sup>3</sup>

The youths of the 1920’s in the words of historian, Paula Fass, “elaborated two basic rituals of social interaction — dating and petting.”<sup>4</sup>

What were some of the innovations that contributed to such a radical change in attitude and practice in regard to male-female relationships?

- The rise of feminism and egalitarianism (in the name of “equality” young women were permitted to leave home and to attend coed universities and live on campuses with young men).
- The movie theater with all of its romantic expressions of “love” (i.e. lust).
- The accessibility of the automobile to youths (a means of greater freedom from the direct oversight of parents).

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3. Ellen K. Rothman, *Hand and Hearts — A History of Courtship*<sub>2</sub> (Basic Books, Inc., 1984), pp. 289, 290.

4. Paula Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920’s*, cited in Rothman, *Hand and Hearts*, p. 262.

- New dances that were no longer group oriented but couple oriented and involved holding one another very close.
- The Industrial Revolution and World War I which drew more and more young men away from the oversight of parents, church and community.
- And most significantly, the descendency of the role of the father in supervising male-female relationships. Fathers abdicated their God-ordained responsibility of overseeing their children in male-female relationships and peer-supervised dating stood up to fill the void.

As a result of the changes just mentioned, relationships between young men and women became more intimate in much shorter periods of time (from watching romantic relationships in the movies, to romantically dancing cheek to cheek, to “necking” in the “rolling parlor” [i.e. the car], to as many “no strings attached” relationships as possible, to “why wait till we are married”). The effects of the revolution of dating at the present time can be observed in how marriage itself has become to many nothing more than a glorified date which can be jettisoned when a couple “falls out of love.”

## B. What is Biblical Courtship?

Biblical courtship is a relationship between a man and a woman which is entered into **with a view to** engagement and one in which the fathers of the couple exercise loving oversight. Again, Ellen Rothman says concerning courtship: “In Puritan New England, the law had given parents the care and power...for the disposing [of—GLP] their children in marriage.”<sup>5</sup> Thus historically, that which primarily distinguished courtship from dating in the early period of America concerned the question: Who exercises oversight in the relationship?

Now a father-supervised courtship did not imply he arranged the relationship unilaterally without the consent of his son or daughter.<sup>6</sup> Had you as a Christian father lived at this time and a young man had become interested in your daughter, it would have been your responsibility to see that he was a godly suitor. How would you determine that? You would give him a thorough interview concerning his faith in Christ, his knowledge of God’s Word and obedience to it, his intentions to marry should God bless this courtship, his political views, his work ethics and means of livelihood, his reputation in the community, his submission to his own parents and to the elders of his church, and his willingness to joyfully submit to your oversight in the courtship.<sup>7</sup> R.J. Rushdoony has noted the importance of the Hebrew father’s role in determining the spiritual condition of a potential husband for his daughter when he writes:

... the Hebrew word for bridegroom means “the circumcised,” the Hebrew word for father-in-law means *he who performed the operation of circumcision*, and the Hebrew word for mother-in-law is similar. This obviously had no reference to the actual physical rite, since Hebrew males were circumcised on the eighth day. What it meant was that the father-in-law ensured the fact of *spiritual*

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5. Rothman, *Hand and Hearts*, (Basic Books, 1984), p. 26.

6. Marriages arranged from infancy or childhood by parents are not biblical, for unless God supernaturally reveals the character of a child to parents (as when God revealed the character of John the Baptist to his father, Zacharias, in Lk. 1:15-17) there is no way that a parent can be assured that the child of another family will be a godly spouse for one’s own child when he/she reaches maturity (he may even be raised in the home of an Isaac and Rebecca and yet turn out to be an Esau). In this case, parents are entering into sinful contracts which may bind together a believer and an unbeliever in marriage, thus breaking God’s command that believers should marry “only in the Lord” (1 Cor. 7:39). If parents should enter into such a contract, they are obligated to break their agreement for unlawful vows and oaths are not binding (“No man may vow to do any thing forbidden in the word of God, or what would hinder any duty therein commanded,” *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, “Of Lawful Oaths and Vows”, XXII:VII). If parents should insist that their Christian daughter marry an “Esau” through such an arrangement, it would be her duty before God to “respectfully” disobey her parents and refuse to marry “Esau” (“We ought to obey God rather than men” Acts 5:29).

7. In APPENDIX A, I have included a sample of the kinds of questions that should be asked in the course of the interview with a prospective suitor.

*circumcision*, as did the mother-in-law, by making sure of the covenantal status of the groom. It was their duty to prevent a mixed marriage. A man could marry their daughter, and become a bridegroom, only when clearly a man under God [emphases his].<sup>8</sup>

If you were then satisfied with the young man's faith and godly character, and if your daughter was agreeable to being courted by him, you would give your consent to proceed with courtship. Thus, biblical courtship should not be viewed as denying a son or a daughter their freedom, but rather as granting them the freedom to grow in their love for one another under the **protective** wings of a loving father and in a safe and secure atmosphere.

Could a father abuse his authority? Of course he could, just as husbands, pastors, or civil magistrates can and do abuse their authority. But the possibility of one abusing his authority does not deny the God-ordained place of human oversight in our lives. Otherwise, there would be no rulers in any area of life and everyone would simply do what was right in his own eyes. Because police officers have abused their authority in some cases is no reason to take the law into our own hands, nor is the abuse of some fathers in courtship warrant for leaving the matter in the hands of the young people.<sup>9</sup> The possibility of abusing a good gift of God is no reason to deny the appropriate use of it, whether it is food, sex, money, family, guns, wine, cars, clothing, or even authority.

## II. Differences Between Dating And Courtship

### A. What Is The Role Of The Father?

In **biblical courtship**, the fathers oversee the relationship of the couple. Consider the following examples of fatherly oversight in the Scriptures. Before the fall of man into sin, God, as the ideal Father, exercises fatherly oversight in bringing Adam and Eve together and in "giving Eve away" to Adam as a creation paradigm for all fathers to follow (Gen.2:22). Abraham considers it his responsibility to seek out a wife for his son, Isaac, through a faithful proxy (Gen.24:2-4). Before Jacob can marry Rachel, he must first obtain the permission of Laban, her father (Gen.29:18,19). We learn that a father in certain cases may even refuse to give his daughter in marriage if such a marriage is not in the best interests of his daughter (Ex.22:16,17).<sup>10</sup> Samson's father, Manoah, provides a deadly example for fathers to avoid at all costs when he sinfully abdicates his place of fatherly oversight and irresponsibly caves in to his son's wicked desire to marry an unbelieving Philistine (Judg.14:1-10). Saul gives his daughter to David in marriage (1 Sam.18:17-21). As we consider what the New Testament says about fatherly oversight, we are confronted with the same truth which we have learned from the Old Testament, namely, that a father may give his daughter in marriage when it is in her best interests or he may refuse when her welfare will be jeopardized (1 Cor.7:36-38). Thus, it is abundantly clear that fatherly oversight over sons and daughters in male-female relationships prior to marriage is not a cultural arrangement of the Old Testament — it is the clear teaching of all Scripture. Therefore, when a father is asked at his daughter's wedding, "Who gives this woman to be married to this man?", he is not going through some meaningless ritual. A father is actually giving his daughter to her new head with his permission and blessing just as God did in the Garden of Eden. The father is acting on behalf of God, for it is **God's child** that is being given in marriage. A legal transfer of oversight has occurred from the father to the new husband. The oversight of the father is not merely one of rubber-stamping the plans of a couple, nor simply one of acting in an advisory role. To the contrary, if the father has the authority to give or not to give his

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8. Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, (The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1973), p. 344.

9. Many are using the same argument today with regard to the physical abuse of children in the home. Because some parents have physically abused their children in a fit of rage, the social engineers want to restrict or outlaw the biblical use of all corporal discipline by parents.

children in marriage as the Scripture teaches (which is the greatest expression of oversight and authority), then he certainly possesses from God all lesser forms of oversight in the lives of his children prior to marriage.<sup>11</sup> Courtship is covenantal, whereas dating is noncovenantal. Though covenant vows are not exchanged in courtship as in engagement; nevertheless, courtship, like engagement, recognizes the covenant authority and oversight of God as delegated through the father. Dating permits noncovenantal oversight to be administered by the couple (to a lesser or greater degree). And, lest there be any doubt as to the validity of this model, we must remember that it is the divine arrangement in salvation as well. For it is God the Father who exercises oversight in calling a bride to be united to His Son (1 Cor.1:9; Jn.6:37), and the bride is graciously given the willingness to come into this union by the power of God (Jn.6:44,65).

However, in **dating**, this kind of fatherly oversight is deemed unnecessary, and even resented by the dating couple as an intrusion of their “rights” to privacy, freedom, maturity, and individuality.

### B. What About Physical Affection?<sup>12</sup>

In **biblical courtship**, physical expressions of romantic affection are **not** permitted. Since no binding covenantal vows have been made as of yet (as in engagement and marriage), “sexual” touching is prohibited (whether holding hands, romantically embracing, kissing, petting, or intercourse). All romantic touching implies covenantal vows have been made. If one is not ready to make such a binding vow of

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<sup>10</sup>. This commandment is given by the authority of God. It delegates to the father the authority to veto his daughter’s marriage. Such an authority sounds strange to the modern ear, but nevertheless is biblical. This is not a cultural consideration, but rather a commandment that is based upon the authority of God in bringing Adam and Eve together and in giving Eve to Adam in the Garden of Eden. That same authority has been delegated to the father in order to protect his son or daughter. But how should a godly son or daughter respond to an abuse of authority by an ungodly father who will not allow his son or daughter to marry a Christian? For a Christian son or daughter who does not possess the gift of celibacy (Mt.19:11-12; 1 Cor.7:7), the effect of such a prohibition by a non-christian father is that he is **requiring** his Christian son or Christian daughter to marry a non-christian. But this is an **unlawful** command which a Christian cannot obey, for God specifically commands Christians to marry “only in the Lord” (1 Cor.7:39; cf. Ezra 9:1,2; 2 Cor.6:14). In such a case, a Christian must obey God rather than man (Acts 5:29). He/she must disobey the father’s explicit command, but only after a period of time (perhaps a year or more) in which the son/daughter has fervently prayed and demonstrated to the father that he/she desires to be submissive to all **lawful** commands. A couple should not independently agree to elope against the father’s wishes. Rather the couple should go to the elders of their church and submit to their authority, permitting the elders to pray for and go to the father on their behalf. If there is no change of heart after such an extended course of action, then the elders should act on behalf of the unwilling father (taking the couple through all the necessary steps in courtship and engagement). When the elders themselves can approve of the marital union, then they should give the bride to the groom in marriage. This is an extreme example of the abuse of authority by a father. In cases where a father (Christian or non-christian) is concerned about the maturity of a prospective son-in-law or daughter-in-law and desires to postpone wedding plans for a period of time, the couple is obligated to follow all such **lawful** commands of a concerned father. Waiting and receiving the blessing of parents is to enjoy the very blessing of God.

<sup>11</sup>. There is a good discussion concerning fatherly oversight in the book by Jim West, *Christian Courtship vs. The Dating Game*, (Palo Cedro, CA: Christian Worldview Ministries, 1993), pp. 19-22.

<sup>12</sup>. Question 139 of the *Westminster Larger Catechism* asks: “What are the sins forbidden in the seventh commandment [‘Thou shalt not commit adultery’—GLP]?”

The following detailed and illuminating answer is given:

The sins forbidden in the seventh commandment, besides the neglect of the duties required, are, adultery, fornication, rape, incest, sodomy and all unnatural lusts; all unclean imaginations, thoughts, purposes, and affections; all corrupt or filthy communications, or listening thereunto; wanton looks, impudent or light behavior, immodest apparel; prohibiting of lawful, and dispensing with unlawful marriages; allowing, tolerating, keeping of stews [brothels—GLP], and resorting to them; entangling vows of single life, undue delay of marriage; having more wives or husbands than one at the same time; unjust divorce, or desertion; idleness, gluttony, drunkenness, unchaste company; lascivious songs, books, pictures, dancings, stage plays; and all other provocations to, or acts of uncleanness, either in ourselves or others.



commitment, he/she is not to muddy the waters by sending out an unclear signal of commitment through any form of romantic touching. If a couple is not ready to express **in word** through vows a covenantal commitment, that couple is not ready to express such a commitment **in acts** through romantic touching. The Scripture forbids romantic affection to all who are not covenantally bound as husband and wife: “It is good for a man not to touch a woman. Nevertheless, to avoid fornication, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband” (1 Cor.7:1,2). Now God is not simply forbidding sexual intercourse (but permitting necking, petting, and watching stag films) to those who have no husband or wife. For necking and petting are sins of sexual immorality (Mt.5:27,28) which are only appropriate with one’s “own wife” or one’s “own husband” (1 Cor.7:1,2). The rest of Scripture as well teaches that sexual touching cannot be limited to intercourse, but rather involves any romantic affection. God powerfully restrained Abimelech from sensually touching Sarah (Gen.20:6); but God does not mean that He allowed Abimelech to do everything short of intercourse to Sarah, preventing only the act of intercourse itself. No, Abimelech was prevented from sexually touching Sarah at all, for he “had not come near her” (Gen.20:4). When Boaz commanded his male servants “not to touch” Ruth, he not only forbade them from having sexual intercourse with Ruth, but from romantically laying a hand on her at all (Ruth 2:9). When Solomon warns his son that whoever “touches” his neighbor’s wife shall not be innocent (Prov.6:29), he does not simply mean one is to refrain from having intercourse with his neighbor’s wife, but permitted the freedom to kiss her and neck with her. On the contrary, God prohibits any kind of sensual touching with a neighbor’s wife. In fact, Paul exhorts young Timothy to treat all older women as mothers and all younger women as sisters “with all purity”, a principle which condemns all romantic involvement with anyone who is not Timothy’s wife (1Tim.5:2).

However, in **dating**, sexual touching (at least holding hands, kissing, and embracing in most cases and even petting and sexual intercourse in other cases) is permissible, if not desirable. Let no one deceive himself, once those glandular engines get started in sexual touching (or sexual looking), it takes “an act of God” to turn them off.

If the Scripture does not draw the line at “no sexual touching” before covenantal vows are taken (in engagement and marriage as cited in the passages above), where does God clearly draw the line? Does God have anything specific to say about intimacy in male-female relationships prior to engagement and marriage? What are the boundaries parents can confidently and authoritatively give to their children? No sexual touching!

### C. What About Being Alone Together?

In **biblical courtship**, the couple is chaperoned—they do not spend time together alone in parked cars, empty houses, isolated bedrooms, lonely beaches, or other solitary places—absolute privacy is *not* permitted. Christian parents who oversee their children in courtship should look for opportunities to invite the young man or young lady to dinner, and to other family gatherings. There is nothing a couple who are courting should talk about in a parked car that they shouldn’t be able to talk about in their parent’s livingroom or backyard. A matter too private to talk about in a public setting, is a matter that should be avoided altogether at this stage in the relationship.<sup>13</sup>

In **dating**, absolute privacy is permitted and even encouraged. Sociologist, Robert Angell, points out in his 1928 study of college campus life: “In seeking a means of diversion together, there seem to be two principal aims [in dating—GLP], to have as much privacy as possible, and at the same time as much

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<sup>13</sup>. Telephone conversations and letters (and now electronic mail in the computer age) may certainly be exchanged between a young man and a young lady who are courting. However, none of these forms of communication should be considered so personal that parents cannot overhear them or read them.

excitement as possible.”<sup>14</sup> One of the chief characteristics about a date is that it takes place away from home. Angell’s interview with a young coed prior to 1928 revealed her view of privacy: “Cars were our private space, a rolling parlor, the only place we could relax and be ourselves.”<sup>15</sup>

But ask yourself, what is the purpose of absolute privacy? Would you allow a Christian young man to take your daughter to a deserted island to “just talk and get to know one another?”<sup>16</sup> Today’s version of the deserted island is the deserted car, the deserted house, the deserted bedroom, or the deserted beach. A young man who finds a father’s loving oversight too restrictive to his own independence is not thinking of God’s glory or your daughter’s honor, but rather of his own selfish desires. Fatherly oversight should be a real encouragement to a godly young man, for if the young lady in whom he is interested has joyfully submitted to her father’s oversight, he has every reason to believe she will submit to her husband’s oversight in marriage. Submission in the home and in the church on the part of a man or a woman is one of the best tests of character. One who is not presently submissive to parents, elders, or employers may look like a beautifully wrapped gift, however, one is not quite sure what “surprise” is inside just waiting to be revealed when he/she is unwrapped. But the one who is characterized by **joyful** submission (not the kind of “submission” that says, “Well, if you’re going to make me go through this, I guess I’ll have to do it.”) is always “a pearl of great price” with no hidden “surprises.”

How is the courtship to be managed when the couple do not live geographically near their parents?<sup>17</sup> The fathers carry out their oversight by phone, by mail, and most importantly through the elders of the church where the young couple attend, just as Abraham faithfully supervised his son’s relationship with Rebecca through a faithful proxy, his most trusted servant (Gen.24:2). The young couple who are separated from their parents should court under the supervision of a godly family in the church. Such is the care a covenant community of Jesus Christ has for its unmarried children. Jesus taught that covenantal relationships within the church should be even stronger than mere blood relationships (Mk.3:31-35; Jn.19:25-27).

#### D. What Is the Goal?

In **biblical courtship**, all one-on-one relationships are entered into **with a view to** marriage—not just to have a good time, nor to date a beautiful woman. Young people should get to know one another in a general sense within group settings through home school activities, the Christian school and church. But when a Christian young man grows to appreciate the godly virtues he sees in a certain young lady, has thoroughly checked out her reputation, and is himself ready to narrow his focus to one girl with a view to engagement and marriage, then he is ready to seek the consent of her father to court her. The two most important questions to consider in biblical courtship are these: First, Is he/she unwaveringly committed to God’s Word? Second, Is he/she a godly person with a proven track record?

On the other hand, **dating** encourages many one-on-one relationships. Sociologist, Willard Waller has written that dating “is not true courtship, since it is supposed not to eventuate in marriage; it is

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<sup>14</sup> Robert Angell, “The Campus: A Study of Contemporary Undergraduate Life in the American University“, 1928, cited in Rothman, *Hand and Hearts*, p. 292.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 292.

<sup>16</sup> The “deserted island“ analogy is borrowed from Jim West, *Christian Courtship*, p. 33.

<sup>17</sup> West, *Christian Courtship*, p. 31, gives sound biblical advice in counseling mature Christian families to consider “adopting“ a young single woman whose parents are not geographically near enough to oversee her relationship with a suitor.

a sort of dalliance [flirtatious—GLP] relationship.”<sup>18</sup> It is precisely the “no strings attached” relationships that young people like about dating. It is this “freedom” that gives dating its appeal. In dating, the goals are prestige, good times, image building, and sexual exploits rather than mate selection, and plural rather than exclusive relationships. This excitement of being in many different relationships is often carried into marriage, and many decry the fact that they are now “tied down” to one relationship. The many unsupervised one-on-one relationships in dating tend to encourage the indulging of the flesh. They focus more on “falling” in love rather than “growing” in love, and they inevitably focus on outward beauty. But hear what God says is of supreme importance in a woman: “Favor [i.e. charm—GLP] is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised” (Prov.31:30).

### E. What Is The Next Step?

In **biblical courtship**, the next step contemplated is the covenantal relationship of engagement/betrothal. Engagement brings about a relationship in which a woman becomes an espoused wife and a man becomes an espoused husband. According to the Scripture a woman who is engaged to be married has an espoused “husband” and for that reason if she lies with another man, the engaged woman incurs the same penalty as a married woman who lies with one who is not her husband: death, for the engaged woman like the married woman has broken her covenantal vows to her “husband” and has committed adultery. For God declares in Deuteronomy 22:23,24:

If a damsel that is a virgin be betrothed unto a **husband**, and a man find her in the city, and lie with her; then ye shall bring them both out unto the gate of that city, and ye shall stone them with stones that they die; the damsel, because she cried not, being in the city; and the man, because he hath humbled his neighbor’s **wife**: so thou shalt put away evil from among you [emphasis added].

The Apostle Paul speaks of the Corinthian believers as having been betrothed “to one husband,” even Christ (2 Cor.11:2). Mary, the mother of Jesus, when betrothed to Joseph is called his “wife” even as Joseph is called her “husband” (Mt.1:18-20). Thus, there should not only be pre-marital counseling for every couple, but even before pre-marital counseling there should be pre-engagement counseling, for once a couple are engaged and make covenant vows to become married, God considers them **husband** and **wife** (though without conjugal privileges, without headship responsibilities, and without obligations to provide for the material needs of the “wife” until the man leaves his father and mother and they become married). Betrothal is “a covenant to covenant”—a binding vow to be united in holy matrimony.<sup>19</sup>

However, in **dating**, a young lady and a young man who are out together may have no intention of becoming engaged or married. There is no commitment necessarily contemplated. “Dating is a relationship expressing freedom, [and—GLP] lack of commitment or public obligation for any sort of future action,” so wrote Samuel Lowrie in 1951, a sociologist not writing from a Christian perspective, but simply making an observation from his own study of dating.<sup>20</sup> When no covenant is contemplated, and when unsupervised time and relationships are permitted, sinful human beings are more likely to treat their partner as merchandise to be used and to treat the relationship as expendable if one does not get what he or she wants from it.

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<sup>18</sup> Willard Waller, “The Rating and Dating Complex,” *American Sociology Review*, 1937, cited in Rothman, *Hand and Hearts*, p. 290.

<sup>19</sup> Jim West, *Christian Courtship*, p. 39.

<sup>20</sup> Samuel Lowrie, “Dating Theories,” 1951, cited in Rothman, *Hand and Hearts*, p. 300.

Many Christian young people are unclear as to where they stand with a young man or a young lady and what the romantic boundaries are in a dating relationship. This uncertainty breeds confusion (“Does he love me or not?”), unhealthy rivalry, manipulation (“If you love me you’ll go to bed with me”, or “Bill and Judy have gone all the way, they must really love one another”), and multitudes of crushed hearts. The beauty of God’s arrangement is that the couple know where they are in their relationship (whether in courtship or in engagement), and what behavior is appropriate in each stage of their relationship. Young adults who are most stable and secure in life are those who from childhood have had absolute ethical boundaries clearly drawn for them by loving parents who faithfully applied the law of God to all areas of life.

### III. Differences Between Biblical Courtship, Engagement, and Marriage

#### A. What Is Engagement, Betrothal, And Espousal?

**Engagement** comes from *gage*, a Middle English word meaning “a pledge”.<sup>21</sup> Thus, engagement is a solemn pledge into which a man and a woman enter.

**Betrothal** is derived from the Middle English word *troth* which means “truth, truthful, faithful.”<sup>22</sup> “I plight thee my troth” has the sense of making a solemn promise to be faithful to the betrothed one alone.

**Espousal** is the act of giving oneself to another as a spouse. The Latin verb from which espousal is derived, *spondere*, means “to pledge oneself to, promise solemnly, vow.”<sup>23</sup> What we learn from the derivation of these words is that in each case a solemn promise, vow, or covenant is given to become the faithful husband or wife of the one loved.

The etymologies presented above are consistent with the biblical usage and meaning of these words as well. For example, in Deuteronomy 22:23,24, a **betrothed** virgin is found to have voluntarily lain with another man. Both are commanded to be put to death because in the case of the woman she did not cry out for help, and in the case of the man he humbled “his neighbor’s **wife** (emphasis added).” Though not yet joined in marriage, a betrothed woman is considered by God to be the **wife** of the man to whom she is espoused. This is especially significant in light of the fact that a man and a woman not betrothed and who yet lie together are not to be put to death (Ex. 22:16,17; Deut.22:28,29). The distinction made between the two cases and the punishments required can only be explained on the grounds that one who is betrothed is the **wife** of another. It is adultery (Lev.20:10). Again, in Matthew 1:18-20 we learn that Mary was **betrothed** to Joseph (“before they came together” in sexual union, i.e. before marriage, Mt.1:18), and yet the Holy Spirit refers to Joseph as Mary’s **husband** (Mt.1:19) and to Mary as Joseph’s **wife** (Mt.1:20). The angel spoke to Joseph in a dream reassuring him not to be afraid “to take Mary thy wife” (there is no infinitive phrase, “**to be** thy wife” nor is there a subordinate clause, “**as** thy wife” in the Greek text).

Betrothal is a binding covenantal relationship (“a covenant to covenant”), and yet betrothal is distinguishable from marriage (cf. Deut.20:7: “And what man is there that hath **betrothed** a wife, and

<sup>21</sup> *The Random House College Dictionary*, ed. Laurence Urdang (New York: Random House, Inc., 1980), p. 438.

<sup>22</sup> *The Random House College Dictionary*, ed. Laurence Urdang (New York: Random House, Inc., 1980), pp. 129, 1409.

<sup>23</sup> *Cassell’s New Compact Latin Dictionary*, compiled by D.P. Simpson (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1971), p. 211.

**hath not taken her** [in matrimony—GLP]? Let him go and return unto his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man take her [emphases added].”). What specific distinctions exist between engagement and marriage? The following marital responsibilities and privileges are absent in engagement:

1. Headship is not yet transferred from the father to the espoused husband (Gen.2:24; 1 Cor. 7:36-38).
2. Responsibility to materially provide for the espoused wife has not yet passed from the father to the espoused husband as long as the espoused husband has not yet left his father and mother and become married (Gen.2:24), and as long as the espoused wife is yet under her father’s roof (1 Cor.7:36-38).
3. Sexual union is not yet enjoyed by the espoused couple (Gen.2:24; Mt.1:18; Heb.13:4).

### **B. What Is The Purpose Of Engagement?**

Why not simply move from courtship to marriage and skip over the engagement altogether? For the following reasons:

1. Time is needed to make preparations for the covenant ceremony of marriage. It is to be a time of great celebration with many guests in attendance to act as witnesses to the covenant vows that will be taken (Gen.29:22; Mt.22:1-14, Jn.2:1-11).
2. Time is needed in order for the betrothed couple to receive the counsel of family and church.
3. Time is needed to make plans for their future life together
4. Time is needed should some unknown breach of contract (which amounts to fraud) be discovered in the past or present life of either the espoused man or the espoused woman which would provide a biblical warrant to forbid the marriage.<sup>24</sup>
5. And most importantly, engagement is a biblical stage in the relationship between a man and a woman as they proceed to marriage.

A daughter should be instructed **not** to give an answer to any proposal to marry until the suitor has first asked the father for his daughter’s hand in marriage and received his approval. In fact, during the interview for courtship, the father should make it clear to the suitor that he is **not** to propose marriage to his daughter until he has first received his (i.e. the father’s) approval to proceed to engagement.

### **C. What Is The Role Of The Father?**

During the engagement, the fathers continue to exercise their godly oversight over the espoused couple since they yet retain the responsibility of oversight under God until headship is transferred to the husband in marriage (Gen.2:24; 1 Cor.7:36:38). Fathers should be “training” the espoused husband to lead his espoused wife in daily family worship by allowing him to pray, to read the Scripture, to catechize the children, or to lead in the singing of psalms. In so doing, fathers will be laying the covenantal foundation for the engaged couple to be faithful in discipling their own children. This is an investment of time (at no financial sacrifice to you at all) that will pay rich dividends to your “children’s children.” Fathers should seek to schedule regular meetings with the espoused couple to counsel, to advise, and to give direction in any area that may be needed.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>. “Adultery or fornication committed after a contract [engagement--GLP], being detected before marriage, giveth just occasion to the innocent party to dissolve that contract [engagement--GLP].“ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, “Of Marriage and Divorce“, Chapter XXIV:V. Cf. Mt.1:18-20. This “exception clause“ permits the dissolution of the engagement because one has been unfaithful to his/her covenant vows.

<sup>25</sup>. Jay Adams has used the concept of “the conference table“ to benefit many marriages. Those interested in knowing more about this important tool in counseling should see his discussion in *Competent to Counsel*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1970), pp. 231-236.

#### D. What About Physical Affection?

We have learned that during courtship physical affection is not permitted because covenant vows to become husband and wife have not yet been made (1 Cor.7:1,2; 1 Tim.5:2). But where do we draw the line after a couple are engaged? Since an engaged couple have taken covenant vows to become married and are called “husband” and “wife” by God (Mt.1:18-20), can they show the same kind of affection that a married couple can? Absolutely not! “Marriage is honorable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge” (Heb.13:4). It is not the **betrothed bed** that is undefiled, but rather the **marriage bed**. The Spirit of God uses the Greek word *koite* (from which “coitus” is derived) for the word “bed” in Hebrews 13:4. Elsewhere *koite* refers to sexual intercourse (Rom.13:13), or the conception that results from sexual intercourse (Rom.9:10). Thus, sexual intercourse and child bearing are clearly reserved for marriage.<sup>26</sup>

Since God clearly reveals that coitus is for the marriage bed alone, are other forms of physical affection that stop short of intercourse acceptable for the engaged couple (e.g. kissing, holding hands, necking, petting, etc. )? What do we find in God’s Word to guide the engaged couple through the muddled maze of worldly thinking and to make clear the will of God in this matter? The Scripture uses certain phrases which do not explicitly refer to coitus by name, and yet describe sexual activities that either lead to coitus or are synonymous with coitus (“see the nakedness”, “uncover the nakedness”, “find some nakedness”). Note that Ham **saw the nakedness** of his father by sexually gazing upon a drunken and naked Noah, and he was swiftly cursed through his son, Canaan, who in some way also participated in the wicked deed (Gen.9:21-23). Priests were commanded by God not to **uncover their nakedness** by going up the steps to an altar that was raised above the people (Ex.20:26), but rather were to make linen trousers to cover their nakedness (Ex.28:42). God warns Babylon that He will bring shame upon her by removing her skirt and **uncovering her nakedness** for others to see (Is.47:1-3). The phrase, **uncover the nakedness** occurs some 23 times in Leviticus 18 and Leviticus 20 and surely indicates some kind of sexual activity in each case. Furthermore, Deuteronomy 24:1 speaks of a married woman who finds no favor in the eyes of her godly husband because he “hath found some uncleanness” (literally **some nakedness**) in her .

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<sup>26</sup>. For an in depth discussion of birth control from a biblical perspective see Charles Provan’s thought provoking book, *The Bible And Birth Control*, Zimmer Printing, 1989. This book may be ordered through Still Waters Revival Books. The following is taken from the back cover of Provan’s book.

#### A Birth Control Quiz

1. What Church Synod issued a Bible commentary which stated that contraception was the same as abortion?
2. What theologian declared in the 1500’s that birth control was the murder of future persons?
3. What priest in the 1700’s, declared that taking “preventative measures“ was unnatural and would destroy the souls of those who practiced it?
4. Who declared that birth control was sodomy?
5. What church group ruled in the 1600’s that a church official found guilty of [using—GLP] birth control was no longer allowed to hold his position?
6. What well known theologian said, “We do not believe in what is termed ’birth control’“?

If you think that the above statements were made by Roman Catholics, then your quiz score is “Zero.“

The answers are:

1. The Synod of Dort; 2. John Calvin; 3. John Wesley; 4. Martin Luther; 5. The Pilgrims; 6. Arthur W. Pink.

If you are shocked, that really is not too surprising, because Protestant opposition to birth control has largely been forgotten in our decadent Twentieth Century. If you want to know about Biblical principles which oppose contraception, or wish to know what the Reformers and their heirs thought about this important subject, we certainly hope that you’ll get this book!

It would appear that the phrases to **see the nakedness**, **uncover the nakedness**, or **find some nakedness** may refer to coitus but not necessarily so. Noah did not perform some sexual activity upon himself when he was **uncovered** in his tent (Gen.9:21), for Shem and Japheth resolved the problem of Noah's uncovered body by walking backwards so as not to sexually gaze upon their father (unlike Ham and Canaan), and by covering his naked body (Gen.9:22,23). Nor should we presume that more than sexual gazing is in view in the case of the priest (Ex.20:26; Ex. 28:42), or in the case of Babylon (Is.47:1-3). Surely God does not intend to define incest (Lev.18 and 20) only in terms of the act of coitus, thus permitting one to do anything he desires to do with a relative as long as he stops short of sexual intercourse (e.g. taking pornographic pictures, fondling, petting, romantic kissing, etc.). Such reasoning is ridiculous. Clearly, whatever the **nakedness** is that is found in the wife by her husband (Deut.24:1), it can not be coitus with another man for such an act would certainly be classified as adultery, thus issuing in divorce by death rather than divorce by certificate (Lev.20:10). In this case (Deut.24:1), we again observe that the **nakedness** in view must indicate a serious sin that stops short of intercourse. Paul's admonition to Timothy teaches that it is sinful to **uncover the nakedness** of anyone to whom you are not married (1Tim.5:2). God curses anyone who makes his neighbor drunk in order to **look upon his nakedness** (Hab.2:15).

The normal Hebrew expression to indicate the act of coitus or copulation is **lying with another**. Why then has God used such phrases as **see the nakedness**, **uncover the nakedness**, or **find some nakedness** in the context of sexual sins? I submit that the Lord would have us realize that it is not only the precise act of sexual intercourse that is sexual immorality, but anything that **uncovers** those parts of the body that are intended to be covered with clothing.<sup>27</sup> Those parts of the physical anatomy that biblical modesty dictates should be clothed at all times in public should not be **uncovered** with one's mind, one's eyes, or one's hands. The covered parts of the body are not to be romantically touched by another until those covered parts may be **uncovered** in the marriage bed. The Lord declares that to even mentally **uncover the nakedness** of anyone to whom you are not married is an adulterous act (Mt.5:28; 2 Pet.2:14). How much more true is this when one **uncovers the nakedness** of another with his eyes or hands (even though coitus has not occurred)? If the mental **uncovering** is adulterous, how much more is the visual or physical **uncovering**?

Thus, I would submit that God declares the following sexual activities unlawful for an engaged couple: (1) Coitus; and (2) all sexual activities wherein is involved the thinking, gazing, or touching of those parts of the body, which according to biblical modesty, are to be covered. However, I would also submit that since an engaged couple have taken covenantal vows to be united in marriage, and that since they are called "husband" and "wife" by God Himself (Mt.1:18-20), that therefore, some limited forms of sexual touching (such as holding hands and exchanging short kisses) are permissible<sup>28</sup> provided it is touching that does not involve parts of the body that are to remain covered in public at all times. Holding hands and exchanging short kisses would involve forms of touching with parts of the body that are

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<sup>27</sup>. This being the case, biblical modesty would require that fashions should not be worn that either expose any parts of the body that should be covered or draw attention to parts of the body that should be covered. The tight fitting fashions worn by many today are as contrary to biblical modesty as those fashions which actually expose the nakedness of one. Christian men, women, and children should strive to dress in such a way that the eyes of others are not distracted from the face (eye contact). The primary issue with biblical modesty is that one's clothing should not be worn so as to draw attention to the body, but rather worn so as to draw attention to the "hidden man of the heart" (1 Pet. 3:3,4; 1 Tim.2:9,10).

<sup>28</sup>. I am in no wise suggesting that an engaged couple are **commanded** to romantically touch in the ways mentioned. They may believe that it is in their best interests and that it would bring greater glory to God to refrain from all forms of romantic touching until they are married. I would simply submit that these forms of touching are *permissible* in light of the biblical principles expounded above.

**normally uncovered** in public and which in all biblical modesty are not required to be covered.<sup>29</sup> However, let me be quick to add that the engaged couple must be ever vigilant that even these limited expressions of affection do not become an occasion to indulge the lusts of the flesh (particularly in men who are more easily stimulated by sensory involvement). If the mind is leading the rest of the body to become sexually stimulated, it is time to stop all romantic touching! Proverbs 27:12 exhorts us: “A prudent man foreseeth the evil, and hideth himself; but the simple pass on, and are punished.”

### E. What About Spending Time Alone?

Again, the relationship has passed from courtship (no covenantal vows yet made) to engagement (covenantal vows have been made) which give to the espoused husband and espoused wife greater privileges and greater responsibilities. Though there is not the same reason to be chaperoned, they must be careful to avoid at all costs all solitary places that could easily become a seedbed for sexual temptation (“And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil” Mt.6:13; “Flee also youthful lusts” 2 Tim.2:22).

## IV. Objections To Biblical Courtship And Engagement

### A. Trust

Parents, you will probably hear the following: “But Dad, don’t you trust me?” God says in Jeremiah 17:9, “the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?” Thus, the young courting couple that is godly realizes they cannot trust themselves alone. Furthermore, as parents, we should honestly tell our children, “It’s true I don’t trust you, but neither would I trust myself alone with another man/woman in a parked car.”<sup>30</sup> Dear ones, it is our responsibility not to lead our children into temptation, but rather to deliver them from evil. It is true that we cannot deliver our children from evil as God delivers His children from evil, for He is omniscient and omnipotent, whereas we are limited in knowledge and power. But we must remember that our children are **God’s children** and thus we are responsible (within our own human limitations) to seek by God’s grace to deliver **His children** from temptation to do evil.

### B. Independence

Another objection to biblical courtship that is mentioned by some is that “dating teaches children to be independent.” The problem with this objection is that man’s sense of independence is one of his greatest spiritual problems. By nature we worship freedom and independence. The evidence of God’s work of grace in the life of a Christian is his dependence and godly submission to all God-ordained authority. And that godly submission is given many opportunities to be evidenced in biblical courtship.

### C. Geography

There may be concern on the part of some parents that they can’t supervise their son/daughter because he/she is away at college. Because one can’t exercise the same degree of oversight is no reason to completely ignore the parental responsibility of supervising the courtship of a son or a daughter. Ask the elders of the church that he/she is attending to assist you in fulfilling your calling. Let a mature

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<sup>29</sup>. There may be Christians who would take exception to the inference that the face of a woman is not required to be covered in public. However, I find no biblical warrant for women to cover their heads in any public setting **except** in corporate worship (cf. 1 Cor.11:1-16). For a biblical overview of the headcovering in corporate worship, consider the discussion in APPENDIX B.

<sup>30</sup>. Jim West, *Christian Courtship*, p. 18.



Christian family who shares the same view of Christian courtship open their home for the courting couple (cf. Abraham's oversight through his trusted servant in Gen.24:1-4).

#### **D. Old Maid Syndrome**

Your daughter may be inclined to argue, "Dad, if you enforce this courtship stuff, you will scare away all the men, and I'll never get married." To the contrary, dads will screen out all the undesirable young men or young ladies. Only the most godly and most committed will joyfully submit to the high and holy calling of biblical courtship. God will see that the news gets out about such a quality son or daughter. Such a son or daughter will neither be viewed as a cheap toy nor as an uncertain risk, but rather as a "pearl of great price" and one with a "proven track record." Furthermore, if it means waiting for the right person, it is so much better to be married later in life than to be married earlier in life to an unfaithful person and then to face the anguish of a divorce and custody battle.

#### **E. Old Fashioned**

If by God's grace you decide to implement biblical courtship in your family, Christian friends and family members may even say, "Do you really practice courtship? Man, you are hopelessly backwards. That practice went out with the horse and buggy." God's truth is never obsolete. It is forever settled in the heavens (Ps.119:89). The theories and practices of men continually change. Novelty is worshipped as a god in the twentieth century. What is considered new and innovative today is simply a repackaging of the same old lies ("there is no new thing under the sun" Eccl.1:9). However, Scripture declares, "Thus saith the LORD, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the **old** paths, where is the good way, and walk therein" (Jer. 6:16, emphasis added).

#### **F. Cultural**

"Courtship may be biblical but it is not binding upon those living in a different cultural context from that of the ancient world. Courtship is as cultural as greeting one another with 'a holy kiss.'" This kind of objection has become a familiar ploy to avoid the hermeneutical consequences of any undesirable doctrine or practice. The issue of male headship in the home and in the church is brushed away with one single stroke: "Male headship is a cultural rather than a morally binding consideration." However, whenever one is seeking to determine whether a practice in the Bible is cultural or not, let him consider the following questions. (1) Is the practice founded upon a creation paradigm? (2) Is the practice based upon a greater theological truth that exists among the members of the Trinity or exists between God and men? (3) Is the practice limited to one cultural context (Jewish), or is it invoked beyond one culture to many cultures (Greek, Roman, etc.)? (4) Is there historical evidence that such a practice was continued by Christians beyond the age of biblical revelation? The practice of courtship succeeds on all four counts listed above.

(1) Biblical courtship is predicated on the creation paradigm that as God the Father exercised fatherly oversight in giving Eve to Adam in holy matrimony, even so a human father is responsible to exercise godly supervision over his children in all of their male-female relationships, ultimately culminating in giving his daughter in marriage to an approved man (1 Cor.7:36-38 authorizes that a father having brought his daughter into the world may either give or not give his daughter in marriage). When God created Adam and Eve, He did not first allow them to date for a while, and then grant them the absolute freedom (freedom from His authority) to decide whether they wanted to marry or not. Nor did God create several Eves from which Adam could choose a wife (independent of His oversight), even though Adam was sinless and would have had "perfect" women from which to choose. God brought Eve into the world and "gave her away" as her Father. And Adam received Eve as the will of his Father. Certainly, if a father is responsible to exercise fatherly oversight in giving his daughter in marriage, the most sacred of earthly relationships, he is likewise responsible to exercise fatherly oversight in all other

male-female relationships (i.e. courtship and engagement). In other words, if fatherly supervision is required for the most significant of male-female relationships (i.e. marriage), then it is required for all lesser male-female relationships which lead to marriage (i.e. courtship and engagement).

(2) Biblical courtship is likewise based upon a greater theological truth that exists between God and His people. Courtship follows the divine arrangement that is found in salvation. It is God the Father who sovereignly calls those He has chosen into fellowship with His beloved Son: “God is faithful, by whom ye were called unto the fellowship of His Son Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Cor. 1:9). It is by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit that those chosen by God are graciously granted the desire and willingness to become joined together with God’s Son (Jn.6:37, 65: “All that the Father giveth me shall come to me . . . no man can come unto me, except it were given unto him of my Father.”). Furthermore, God’s people are pictured as the betrothed bride of Jesus Christ, betrothed to Christ by a faithful proxy of God the Father, namely the apostle Paul (2 Cor.11:2). Therefore, we are to see that in all earthly courtships, betrothals, and marriages, the paradigm for these relationships is that of Christ and His church. As with our heavenly Father, earthly fathers are given the responsibility of bringing their children into marital union and communion with approved men and women.

(3) The principles upon which biblical courtship are built are not cultural. God as Father brings Eve into the world and gives her to Adam in a perfect environment even before there existed various cultures, tribes, or nations (Gen.2:18-25). Abraham (who was not the father of one culture or nation, but rather “a father of many nations,” cf. Rom.4:17, and even “the father of all them that believe,” cf. Rom.4:11) sends his faithful servant to seek an approved bride for Isaac, his son (Gen. 24:1-4). Reuel, a Midianite, exercises oversight in giving his daughter, Zipporah, to Moses as a bride (Ex.2:21). The Jews at the time of Nehemiah bind themselves by an oath that they would neither give their daughters to the pagan sons of the land, nor take the pagan daughters of the land for their sons (Neh.10:29,30). Paul admonishes Gentile fathers in the church of Corinth that they have the biblical responsibility to oversee their daughter’s relationships with men (1 Cor.7:36-38). This fatherly oversight is not limited to one period of time or to one culture, but rather transcends all ages (from the perfect age before the fall to all sinful ages after the fall), and all cultures (from the Jewish culture to all Gentile cultures).

(4) Finally, there is abundant historical evidence that courtship was practiced throughout the world (amongst non-christians but particularly amongst Christians) until the twentieth century. From the ancient church father, Tertullian (150-ca. 220 A.D.), who viewed fatherly oversight as such an obvious truth to all that “even upon earth, indeed, sons do not legitimately marry without the consent of their fathers”,<sup>31</sup> to the Puritan pastor, Richard Baxter (1615-1691), who assumes the oversight of parents in marriage to be a self-evident truth, “if the consent of the parents be necessary, much more is the consent of God”,<sup>32</sup> to Puritan New England where “the law had given parents the care and power...for the disposing [of—GLP] their children in Marriage”,<sup>33</sup> there has been the universal practice of fatherly supervision in all male-female relationships. Even within “The Directory For The Public Worship Of God” issued by the Westminster Assembly in 1645 we find the following: “Before that publication of such their purpose [to marry—GLP], (if the parties be under age,) the consent of the parents, or others under whose power they are, (in case the parents be dead,) is to be made known to the church officers of that congregation, to be recorded. The like is to be observed in the proceedings of all others, although of

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<sup>31</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (AP&P), II:164.

<sup>32</sup> Richard Baxter, *A Christian Directory* (Ligonier, Pennsylvania: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1990), p. 395. Baxter also says concerning the parents involvement in marriage, “the command of parents signifieth the command of God.” (Baxter’s most useful counselling manual is now only available through Still Waters Revival Books, in the “Bound Photocopies of Rare and Hard to Find Items” section of their catalogue.—ed.)

<sup>33</sup> Rothman, *Hand and Hearts*, p. 26.

age, whose parents are living, for their first marriage.” Thus, the principles of courtship have been practiced by God’s people outside biblical history as well as within biblical history, at least until the twentieth century.

### **G. Older Singles**

Those who are widowed, divorced, or who have never married may opine, “This practice of courtship is very wise in directing young singles, but it is obviously unnecessary for older singles. I have not been under my father’s roof for thirty years.” The principles presented in this outline concerning male-female relationships are not limited to a specific age group (young people). All male-female relationships should pass through courtship and engagement on their way to marriage. God’s plan is that all male-female relationships be governed by these biblical principles. All people (regardless of age) are in need of godly oversight in their relationship with the opposite sex. We must be careful that we not deceive ourselves into believing we have matured beyond the need of supervision in male-female relationships. Sexual thoughts and desires are not exclusively the lot of the young. We are taught by God to view the heart of man as deceitful and unworthy of trust, especially when it is our own heart (Jer.17:9; Is.55:7-9; Is.65:2). Scripture teaches that a father resumes responsibility for a daughter who loses her husband through death or divorce, unless she has older children who can provide for her (Gen.38:6-11; 1 Tim.5:8,14-16). There was no welfare state to fall back on when a woman became destitute in biblical times. There was the family and then the church (1 Tim.5:16). It would appear that the bridal gift given by the espoused husband to the father of the espoused bride was a trust (an ancient insurance policy) to be held by the father of the bride and to be used to support the bride and her children should she ever become the father’s responsibility in the future (Gen.29:18; Gen.34:12; Ex. 22:16,17; Deut.22:28,29; 1 Sam.18:25). Older singles should set an example for those who are younger by submitting to the same biblical principles that are appropriate for younger singles. It is always the divine arrangement that those who are younger should learn godliness and submission from those who are older and more mature (Lk.12:48; Lk.17:1-3a; 1 Cor.11:1; Titus 2:2-5; Heb. 6:12; 1 Pet.5:1-3).

## **V. Conclusion — Which View Is Correct? Dating or Courtship?**

Ask yourself the following questions.

### **A. Which View Is Biblical? Dating or Courtship?**

Try this exercise. Write down all the biblical passages that you can find to support the practice of dating. Are you having a difficult time thinking of even one? Something must be wrong. Reread the first two pages of this paper concerning an exclusively Christian education.

### **B. Which View Promotes Sexual Purity? Dating or Courtship?**

When is sexual promiscuity most likely to occur? When you send your children off to “deserted islands” (i.e. places where there is no fatherly supervision), or when you lovingly supervise their conduct within the context of your family (or under oversight of a trusted proxy)?

### **C. Which View Prepares One For A Godly Marriage? Dating or Courtship?**

One important goal of male-female relationships is to prepare young people for the binding covenantal relationship of marriage. Dating (or “going steady”) tends to institutionalize broken promises and romantic affection with many partners without covenantal commitment. Courtship is entered into with one person and only after much thought, time, and deliberation has gone into it. Courtship teaches a couple the binding obligation of covenants (like engagement and marriage) and that love is not essentially romanticism, but commitment—not falling in love, but growing in love.

#### **D. Which View Prevents God’s Children From Being Led Into Temptation? Dating or Courtship?**

The Lord taught His disciples to pray: “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil” (Mt.6:13). If we are to pray that our Father in heaven would not put us into situations that would tempt us beyond what we can endure, then how can we as Christian fathers put our children into situations that would tempt the most godly Christians? The Lord Jesus delivered a most sober warning: “It is impossible but that offenses [stumbling blocks—GLP] will come: but woe unto him, through whom they come! It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones. Take heed to yourselves” (Lk. 17:1-3a). Are we unwittingly throwing stumbling blocks of temptation into the paths of God’s children, or are we doing everything in our power to remove all stumbling blocks?

#### **E. Is It Too Late To Begin?**

No! There is always hope in the God of grace. “Whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed” (Rom.10:11). When my wife and I came to believe that the Scripture taught courtship rather than dating, we implemented the practice in our home when our oldest daughter was 18 years old. She had been dating for two years, and her initial response was not one of joyful submission. But my wife and I determined that we would be faithful to God in this matter. We prayed for our daughter, patiently instructed her, and lovingly yet firmly stood upon the Word of God. She was married to a godly young man (who joyfully submitted to our supervision) a year and a half later. Both Larry and Jennifer believe that biblical courtship was a wonderful blessing they would never trade for a bankrupt dating game.

#### **F. Where Do We Begin?**

Fathers, we must assume our biblical role as loving guardians. We must love our children enough to implement what may be very unpopular at first. It is our fatherly responsibility to give away in marriage those whom we have brought into this world even as God gave Eve to Adam. This responsibility involves far more than simply answering, “I do” to the minister’s question, “Who gives this woman to be married to this man?” God closes the Old Testament with a prophecy concerning a revival that will be evidenced by the hearts of fathers being turned to their children and the hearts of children being turned to their fathers (Mal.4:6).<sup>34</sup> The fulfillment of this prophecy is to be realized in the age of the Messiah as the angel declared in Luke 1:17: “And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” When God brings a revival to a land, He promises He will do so by reviving the family. Fathers, what are you doing to contribute to that revival? Revival in the home begins with you assuming your loving leadership in the home. Are your present dating practices preparing a new generation for revival or for judgment in which the Lord will come and smite the earth with a curse (Mal.4:6)? What glorious blessings from God our Father await families where fathers will dare to swim upstream against the ungodly culture of this age and to lovingly lead their children into the paths of righteousness.

Dad, if you would see revival in your family, you must not only love your children, but you must love the mother of your children, your wife. It has been a heartbreaking experience to see parents invest everything in their children, and then when the children leave home to realize they are living with strangers (and in many cases strangers they do not even like, but have merely tolerated “for the sake of

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<sup>34</sup> For an inspiring yet convicting treatment of this passage as it relates to parenting, see Robert Lewis Dabney’s article entitled “Parental Responsibilities” in his *Discussions: Evangelical And Theological* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1992), I:676-693.

the children”). You can do nothing more important for your children than to show them how much you love their mother through your affection in word and deed. The best sex education and the best pre-marital training you will ever give your children is to love your wife, “even as Christ also loved the church and gave himself for it” (Eph. 5:25).

## APPENDIX A

### **The Interview**

This list of questions is only suggestive of the knowledge a father should have of a potential suitor for his child. Many of the following questions are designed with a male suitor in view, but they may be altered to include a young lady your son desires to court as well. In many cases, the father will be so well acquainted with the potential suitor that many of the following questions will be unnecessary. However, the father should be assured that his knowledge of the potential suitor encompasses the breadth of knowledge assumed by these questions. The father should also make phone calls to the suitor’s parents, elders, and friends to verify information. This is important because once an emotional attachment has occurred between the courting couple, it complicates matters dramatically.

There are four major categories to which questions should be directed: (1) Background; (2) Faith and Biblical Convictions; (3) Character; and (4) Intentions/Goals. If in asking questions there should be conflicting answers, do not neglect to resolve the inconsistencies as soon as possible. Fathers, you should conduct the interview, but mothers should be permitted to sit and listen as well (it is better to have the mother ask any questions she might have through the father rather than firing questions simultaneously). Mothers should excuse themselves when the section on Character is reached due to the sensitive nature of these questions. It would be very wise to set aside at least three hours for the interview and have any small children supervised and phones taken off the hooks. I am thankful to my congregation at the Puritan Reformed Church of Edmonton for suggesting a sample list of questions to be used by fathers, particularly the first time through this process.

#### **A. Background**

1. Where were you born?
2. When were you born?
3. Tell me about your parents (ages, health, marital status, employment, residence, citizenship, education).
4. Tell me about any brothers or sisters you may have (ages, marital status, employment, residence, citizenship, education).
5. Where have you lived and what schools have you attended (public schools, private schools, or home school)? How have you done academically in school? What academic degrees are you working toward and what academic degrees have you earned?
6. Where do you work? How long? What other jobs have you held?
7. What recreations or hobbies do you enjoy?
8. What books have you recently read? Who are your favorite authors?
9. To which magazines or journals do you subscribe?
10. Do you watch TV? What programs do you enjoy? How much do you watch?
11. Do you watch movies at a theater? What movies have you seen in the last year? How often do you go?
12. What kind of music do you enjoy?

13. What period of history do you most enjoy studying?
14. Do you have a savings account? What percentage of your income do you put into savings (the purpose of these questions is to gain some insight into his view of stewardship and saving for the future)?
15. Of which organizations are you a member?
16. What is your political affiliation? In the last election for which candidates did you vote?
17. Have you talked to your parents about courting my daughter/son? What do they think? If you haven't talked with them, why not? Have you talked to the elders of your church about courting my daughter/son? What did they think? If you haven't talked with them, why not?

## **B. Faith and Biblical Convictions**

I strongly encourage parents not to allow too much latitude in theological disagreement between the potential suitor and your own theological convictions. The Scripture declares that Christians are to marry only "in the Lord." However, different theological perspectives amongst Christians should not be casually passed over as acceptable, for true unity in a home, as in a church, is built upon a foundational agreement of biblical truth. Some significant differences to be aware of between professing Christians are the following: infant baptism vs. believer's baptism, exclusive psalmody vs. hymnody, instrumental music in worship vs. noninstrumental music in worship, a woman's head covered in worship vs. a woman's head not covered in worship, no use of birth control vs. the use of birth control, a Presbyterian form of church government vs. a congregational or episcopal form of government, Calvinism vs. Arminianism, defined biblical roles for men and women vs. egalitarianism, covenant theology vs. dispensational theology, sabbatarianism vs. nonsabbatarianism, noncharismatic vs. charismatic views, theonomic vs. nontheonomic ethics, etc.

1. What is your relationship to Christ? What is a Christian? On what do you base your salvation? How long have you been a Christian? Did you grow up in a Christian family? What is the chief end of man?
2. What churches have you attended and of which churches have you been a member? How long have you been a member of the present church? What are the theological distinctives of your church?
3. How often do your parents have family worship? What is your practice with regard to private worship (prayer, studying the Scripture)?
4. What is your view of and involvement in evangelism? Are you involved in any cultural efforts to bring the knowledge of God to society? Are you involved in any diaconal ministry?
5. What are your convictions about the Lord's Day?
6. What are your convictions about tithing?
7. What is worship? What are your convictions about issues related to worship (e.g. headcoverings, instruments in the worship service, singing psalms, women elders, choirs and special music, drama, altar calls etc.)?
8. What do you believe concerning creation?
9. What is the role of a husband/father in the home? What is the role of a wife/mother in the home? Should wives/mothers work outside the home?
10. What do you believe concerning the use of spanking?
11. Is holiness optional in the Christian life?
12. What is your view of children? Do you believe birth control methods are biblical? How many children would you like to have as the fruit of your marriage?
13. Is abortion ever biblically justified?
14. Give a biblical evaluation of the present status of our nation?
15. Is divorce ever biblically justified?

16. What is courtship, engagement, and marriage? Thoroughly discuss the contents of this paper with the potential suitor. Proceed to courtship only after you are satisfied that there is a willingness to joyfully submit to your loving oversight.

### C. Character

If a young man/young lady has had a problem in any of the following areas, I would not necessarily write him/her off as undesirable. God's grace may be especially evident in such a person. A sincere honesty about the past problem, a confirmed track record of godly living for a few years, and a verified history of willing submission to parents, elders, and employers will indicate that God has been merciful to deliver one from a besetting sin. What you are looking for in a desirable suitor is not perfection, but patterns of godly or ungodly behavior. It would be appropriate for the mother to excuse herself at this point due to the explicit questions about past or present sexual practices.

1. Have you ever been sexually promiscuous (petting, intercourse, homosexuality, masturbation, etc.)? When was the last time you were sexually promiscuous? Have you repented of this sin? Did you seek the forgiveness of the people involved? Were you biblically counseled through this experience afterwards? Who can verify this?
2. Have you ever been drunk or used drugs recreationally? If yes, how did you use them (orally, intravenously)? For how long? When was the last time? Did you repent of this sin? Did you seek the forgiveness of those involved? Were you biblically counseled through this experience and to whom were you accountable afterwards? Who can verify this?
3. Have you ever been tested for sexually transmitted diseases (particularly AIDS)? If yes, would you be willing to be tested again? If no, would you be willing to be tested? (Though no covenantal vows have been made, I submit that if such issues are not resolved before courtship begins, emotional bonds between the couple will have been established and will only complicate matters later if a proposal of marriage should be brought by the suitor.)
4. Have you exhibited a problem with angry speech toward others? Have you ever struck anyone, or destroyed the property of anyone in anger? When? What were the circumstances? When was the last time this happened? Did you repent of this sin? Did you seek the forgiveness of those involved? Were you biblically counseled through this experience and to whom were you accountable afterwards? Who can verify this?
5. Have you ever purchased pornographic material (books, magazines, movies, video tapes etc.) or attended places where there is nude dancing, strip dancing etc.? When? When was the last time this happened? Did you repent of this sin? Did you seek the forgiveness of those who were involved? Were you biblically counseled through this experience and to whom were you accountable afterwards? Who can verify this?
6. Have you ever been arrested, charged, or convicted of a crime (misdemeanor or felony)? Describe the circumstances.
7. Is there a situation in which you believe you would be justified in deceiving someone? Describe such a situation?
8. Have you ever courted? Have you ever been engaged? Have you ever been married? Have you ever been divorced? Are you presently married? Do you have children?
9. What is your view of biblical submission? Does biblical submission imply that one must always agree with those in authority?
10. What is biblical love? How is it demonstrated?
11. Can a promise, vow, or oath ever be broken (cf. *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter XXII, "Of Lawful Oaths and Vows")?
12. What is a leader? What are the responsibilities of a leader in a family?
13. When is humor appropriate and inappropriate?

14. Should a biblical principle be compromised for the sake of expediency or unity (in a family, church, business, or civil government)? Does the end ever justify the means?

15. If you are offended by others, how should you respond? If you sin against others, how should you respond?

16. What is your view of debt (personal, family, church, business, or civil government)?

17. What is your view of work?

18. What is your view of recreation?

19. Are you a good listener?

20. Are you teachable?

21. Do you aspire to become an elder or deacon in the church?

22. Do you think men should honor women by opening doors, pulling out chairs, offering their seats when there are none available, etc.?

#### **D. Intentions/Goals**

1. What are your intentions in desiring to court my daughter/son? The most important intentions should be: (1) to glorify God; (2) to find a godly companion together with whom you will fulfill God's calling in your life; and (3) to raise many holy offspring unto the Lord.

2. In which career do you believe God has called you to labor?

3. What further training or education is required?

4. How much time will that career permit you to spend with your family and church?

5. If I should approve of your courting my daughter, and you should come to believe that she is the one God would have you spend the rest of your life with in marriage, will you come and discuss this with me first, seeking my approval even before you proceed to propose marriage to her?

### APPENDIX B

#### **Are Headcoverings Cultural In 1 Corinthians 11:2-16?**

**has been removed at Greg Price's request (thus footnotes jump from 34 to 41).**

### APPENDIX C

#### **The Account of Ruth and Boaz**

Since it has been stated as a biblical principle that men and women not betrothed to one another should not express romantic affection nor spend unsupervised time with one another in isolated places (cf. pp.7-9), the biblical narrative of Ruth (particularly Ruth chapter 3) might cause no little stir as to the propriety of Naomi's advice and of Ruth's actions. Let us consider what actually occurred between Ruth and Boaz in light of the principles set forward in this book. A brief overview will set the stage for the incident between Ruth and Boaz.



Naomi's husband, Elimelech, moved his wife and two sons to Moab when a famine hit their hometown of Bethlehem very hard. While in Moab, Elimelech died and sometime afterward Naomi's sons married Moabite women. After ten years, Naomi's sons died as well, leaving Naomi and her two daughters-in-law alone. Naomi determined that she would return to Bethlehem and urged Ruth and Orpah to remain in Moab and to remarry. Orpah remained in Moab, but Ruth urged Naomi with those beautiful covenantal words, "Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God ..." (Ruth 1:16). Upon returning to Bethlehem, Naomi was faced with the desperate issue of how to survive without property or without a husband or son to care for Ruth and herself. The account that follows unfolds the glories of God's grace of redemption to those who cannot redeem themselves.

Naomi had sold her property and thus it was to remain in the hands of the new owner until the Year of Jubilee (Lev.25:8-17) or until a kinsman-redeemer had mercy on her and purchased the property back for her (Lev.25:23-34). In addition to the loss of her property, Naomi had no male heir through whom her husband's name and line could continue. God had provided that in such cases, a brother of the deceased should marry his brother's widow, and the eldest son from that union would become the legal heir to the deceased (Deut.25:5,6). Apparently, there was no brother of Elimelech through whom an heir might come, nor was Naomi able to bear a child herself. Thus, the responsibility devolved upon Ruth to bring forth an heir to carry on the name of her father-in-law and husband.

One day Ruth returned from gleaning in the fields of Boaz, a wealthy relative of Elimelech. When Naomi heard of the particular kindness he had shown Ruth, Naomi realized how God had provided both a kinsman-redeemer to regain her property and an heir through whom her husband's name might be carried on, and all in one man — Boaz. This background then sets the stage in chapter three for what some commentators have seen as problematic in the area of biblical modesty and propriety between males and females.

Naomi, recognizing her responsibility as a single parent who was covenantally bound to Ruth, sought out a godly husband for Ruth ("Then Naomi her mother-in-law said unto her, My daughter, shall I not seek rest [i.e. marriage — GLP] for thee, that it may be well with thee? And now is not Boaz of our kindred, with whose maidens thou wast?" Ruth 3:1,2). Matthew Henry comments, "It is the duty of parents to seek this rest [i.e. marriage — GLP] for their children, and to do all that is fit for them to do, in due time, in order to it."<sup>41</sup> Ruth, being a submissive daughter, carefully followed the instructions of Naomi ("All that thou sayest unto me I will do." Ruth 3:5). Ruth was told to prepare herself for the celebration that was to be given by Boaz at the time of the threshing of his harvest (Ruth 3:2,3). When the time of celebration was completed ("And when Boaz had eaten and drunk, and his heart was merry..." Ruth 3:7) and Boaz lay down to sleep, Ruth removed the covers from his feet and placed them over herself (most likely he was not the only one sleeping in the threshing floor area for the text states, "and she rose up before one could know another. And he said [unto a servant — GLP], Let it not be known that a woman [literally "the woman" i.e. the specific woman, namely Ruth — GLP] came into the floor." Ruth 3:14). Though, admittedly, the circumstances that surround this scene seem peculiar to say the least, and though I find it difficult to justify the counsel of Naomi and the actions of Ruth, carefully note that this scene did not occur in Boaz's bedroom behind closed doors, but on his threshing floor with others present (Ruth 3:14). Furthermore, Ruth did not snuggle up beside Boaz with any romantic affection intended, but rather at his feet — hardly a romantic position (Ruth 3:7,8).

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<sup>41</sup> Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible* (McLean, Virginia: MacDonald Publishing Co.), II:266.

My concerns about the seeming impropriety of this action may be summarized as follows:

1. Could Naomi not have approached Boaz on behalf of Ruth in a formal meeting thus avoiding the appearance of guile (cf. Rebecca's scheme to obtain the birthright for Jacob in Gen.27)?
2. Could Naomi not have directly spoken to Boaz about Ruth since she was Ruth's mother by covenant and thus avoided an appearance of immodesty on the part of Ruth ("Abstain from all appearance of evil" 1 Thess.5:22)?
3. Was it wise to send Ruth to lie at the feet of a man whom Naomi knew would be "merry" with wine for even a godly man can do foolish things when his heart is merry with excessive wine (cf. Noah uncovering himself and the events that followed in Gen.9:20; or Lot's incestuous relationship with his daughters in Gen.19:30-38)?
4. Would not Ruth have escaped the appearance of being rather bold had Naomi spoken directly to Boaz herself (cf. Jacob taking the initiative to speak with Laban concerning a proposal to marry Rachel, rather than Rachel initiating the discussion by proposing marriage to Jacob in Gen.29:18-19)?
5. Sound biblical commentators do rally to the defence of Naomi and Ruth, but the evidence they cite is solely extra-biblical in nature (i.e. there is no biblical evidence that Ruth's actions were an acceptable custom for proposing marriage to a man).
6. Though the ends which both Naomi and Ruth sought were righteous, the ends do not justify the means (i.e. we are not to do evil, that good may come, cf. Rom.3:8). The presence of this account in Scripture does not necessarily indicate God's stamp of approval upon the questionable means employed to achieve the righteous end (there are many individuals in Scripture whose desired ends were righteous, but whose means in reaching those ends were far from righteous; eg. Rebecca's scheme in Gen.27; Gideon's use of the fleece even after God had promised him victory in Judg.6:36-40; Jephthah's vow concerning his daughter in Judg.11:31,34,35 etc.).

Now having stated my own concerns about the actions of Naomi and Ruth, it must be noted that biblical commentators (*Commentary of the Old Testament* by Keil and Delitzsch, *Matthew Henry's Commentary On The Whole Bible*, *The Biblical Expositor*, *An Historical Survey of the Old Testament* by Eugene Merrill, *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, and *A Commentary: Critical, Experimental, And Practical On The Old And New Testaments* by Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown) have stated that Ruth and Boaz were not acting in a promiscuous manner, but rather following a recognized custom of that time. Robert Jamieson has noted in regard to this "custom":

Singular as these directions may appear to us, there is no impropriety in them, according to the simplicity of rural manners in Bethlehem. In ordinary circumstances these would have seemed indecorous to the world; but in the case of Ruth, it was a method doubtless conformable to prevailing usage, of reminding Boaz of the duty which devolved on him as the kinsman of her deceased husband. Boaz probably slept upon a mat or skin; Ruth lay crosswise at his feet — a position in which Eastern servants frequently sleep in the chamber or tent with their master; and if they want a covering, custom allows them that benefit from part of the covering on their master's bed. Resting, as the Orientals do at night, in the same clothes they wear during the day, there was no indelicacy in a stranger, or even a woman, putting the extremity of this cover over her.... To spread a skirt over one is, in the East, a symbolical action denoting protection. To this day in many parts of the East to say of any one that he put his skirt over a woman is synonymous

with saying that he married her; and at the marriages of the modern Jews and Hindoos one part of the ceremony is for the bridegroom to put a silken or cotton cloak around his bride.<sup>42</sup>

Furthermore, those who would hold this view would cite from the text that Boaz was initially startled by Ruth's presence at his feet (Ruth 3:8), but he does not accuse her of any impropriety at all, but rather praises her (Ruth 3:10) when he realizes the symbolism of what she has done and the words which she has spoken ("spread therefore thy skirt over thine handmaid; for thou art a near kinsman" Ruth 3:9). Ruth indicated by her words and her actions that she desired Boaz to fulfil his biblical duty in taking her as a wife in order to redeem Naomi's property and in order to raise up an heir to her deceased father-in-law and deceased husband. It must also be noted from the text that Boaz responded in declaring that "all the city of my people doth know that thou art a virtuous woman" (Ruth 3:11).

Why did Ruth perform this symbolic act under the cover of darkness? Either to prevent a scandal throughout Bethlehem or to prevent others from knowing precisely who had lain at the feet of Boaz, until Boaz had a chance to present his case to the elders, for there was a relative nearer to Ruth than Boaz himself (cf. Ruth 3:12-13). It would then appear that even if the view of some biblical commentators is correct (namely, the view that no indiscretion was committed by Ruth because Ruth's action was an acceptable custom at that time) that due to the uniqueness of the period of redemptive history in which Ruth lived (e.g. the duty of a kinsman to redeem the property of a poor relative and the obligation of a brother to marry a widowed sister-in-law in order to raise up an heir to the deceased brother's name) that the same actions taken by Ruth would not be warranted today. However, I am inclined to think that the counsel of Naomi and the actions of Ruth were not appropriate then, and certainly are not appropriate now. In the words of Matthew Henry:

We found it easy, in the former chapter, to applaud the decency of Ruth's behavior, and to show what good use we may make of the account given us of it; but in this chapter we shall have much ado to vindicate it from the imputation of indecency, and to save it from having an ill use made of it; but the goodness of those times was such as saved what is recorded here from being ill done, and yet the badness of these times is such as that it will not justify any now in doing the like.<sup>43</sup>

This biblical account initially may seem to violate the biblical principle that those not bound together as husband and wife ought not to romantically touch one another (1 Cor.7:1-2), but regardless of the view taken of this incident, it must be remembered that Ruth and Boaz did not exchange any romantic affection as Ruth lay at the feet of Boaz the whole night, nor was this performed in an isolated location where no one was present within the threshing area. Thus, the most that might be said by way of objection to the events in Ruth chapter 3 is not that something immoral occurred, but rather that something peculiar occurred. Certainly what is most significant about the account of Ruth and Boaz is that through this union, God brought forth the sinless Kinsman-Redeemer (Mt.1:5,16) who purchased with His own blood the paradise of God that Adam had forfeited and much more, and who graciously bestowed the glories of eternal salvation upon unworthy poverty stricken sinners like you and me who were unable to rescue themselves from certain destruction.

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<sup>42</sup>. Robert Jamieson, *A Commentary: Critical, Experimental, And Practical On The Old And New Testaments*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. ), Volume I, Part 2, pp.131-132.

<sup>43</sup>. Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary On The Whole Bible*, (McLean, Virginia: MacDonald Publishing Co.), II:266.