

Guys, Girls & God

Dating & Relationships That Work



The History of Dating

Ever wondered what dating was like a century ago? Read this article to gain historical insight regarding arranged marriages, courting and how current dating practices evolved.

by Amanda N. Stiver

It's October 1896. A nervous young man arrives at the door of a majestic brownstone townhouse. He carries a small wood box containing a silver bracelet and ring, and a bouquet of resplendent wild flowers. He raps on the door, squares his shoulders and runs through the words of his speech. The door opens and he is ushered into a large, well-furnished room. Growing more nervous as the minutes pass, he sets his items on the table and tries to adjust his tie.

Suddenly, two doors open. A lovely young woman wearing a long, elegant dress gracefully enters and stops a few feet from the young man, directing him to a chair. In the other doorway stands the young woman's mother and father. They cordially greet the young man then retreat through the door, leaving it slightly ajar.

The young lady seats herself and the young man picks up the bouquet, clears his throat and . . . drops the box. As he reaches to pick up the box, he remembers that his tie is still askew and he tries to fix it, dropping the bouquet in the process. Tie adjusted, box and bouquet retrieved, he clears his throat again. The young lady smiles at his nervous display and finally he begins his monologue . . .

Dating or courting?

What is he doing? Reciting Shakespeare? Testing his slapstick comedy act for the local drama club? No, he's getting ready for the culmination of months of planning, supervised outings, amiable family dinners, walks in the park with the young lady, conversation in a parlor warmed by an autumn fire and, lastly, a brief, but serious chat with the young woman's father. In short, he's courting.

Within the confines of courting,



appropriate one-on-one dating played an important role; two people of marriageable age got to know one another better, their personalities, interests and so forth, before they made a more serious decision regarding marriage.

Recently courting has been getting a second look by some who see pitfalls in today's dating scene. Steady one-on-one dating at too young an age with no goal of marriage in sight can lead to problems and temptations. (Of course, courting isn't the starting place for those not of marriageable age. The natural alternative today is a group outing with less stress, less emotional attachment and still enough time to chat and compare personalities.) A date, if approached with the wrong attitude, is reckless frivolity, while courting aims at marriage.

A date with history

The history of dating is based on old-fashioned courtship, which itself

developed in a variety of ways from the traditional arranged marriages of much of human history. To court means to woo and to woo means to seek the love of another with marriage in mind. Imagine a 13-year-old girl and a 15-year-old boy sitting down to discuss their marriage plans. Laughable perhaps, but several hundred years ago that was a common reality. The dating process of today is different in structure and purpose than it was in the era when "courting" was the operative word.

Courting wasn't something young people did merely for a good time; it was a serious family business proposition. Surprisingly, the main players in the marriage process often weren't the bride and groom; they were the parents of the bride and groom.

Courting was rooted in the era of arranged marriages, though the couple and their feelings often played an important role. Still, families often met to discuss how this marriage would benefit not only the bride and groom, but the respective clans. The point is, a marriage is a joining of two families as well as two young people.

Few choices and no time to date

People may assume that arranged marriages were loveless matches, with frightened young people forced into lives of emotional pain and forbidding loneliness, but such was not always the case. In Northern European Jewish culture from the Middle Ages until even the 20th century, families arranged marriages where the love of the two young people was a prominent factor.

However, not every couple was so lucky, and this may be one reason courtship

developed. How else would a young man and a young woman, meeting perhaps for the first time at the betrothal ceremony, get to know each other? The betrothal could consist of a simple announcement, much like an engagement party, or something more complex like a partial marriage ceremony with the exchange of rings, a ceremonial kiss and a meal.

Often following the betrothal were a few weeks to a few years of courting or dating. In some cases, however, the first meeting of the couple might be the very day of the wedding. The courting then took up the first month of marriage. Through courting, the couple became acquaintances, then friends, gained mutual respect and hopefully the love that would sustain them through married life.

This is quite different from the freedoms experienced by young people today. We have more options now; “love” is almost always the universal premise for marriage, particularly in Western cultures. There are, however, still many parts of the world where arranged marriages are the rule.

In French Canada during the era of settlement in the 17th century, the luxury of free time to spend on courting didn't exist. Male settlers came by themselves and when they needed wives, the French crown sent over women by the shipload. When the ship arrived at the port, men would meet their brides and become engaged, if not married on the spot.

The colonial government penalized those who did not marry with prohibitions on hunting, fishing and trading—the very livelihoods of these settlers. There was no time for frivolity—practicality was of the essence. Similar circumstances occurred in the United States as the West was being settled and many adventuresome young women made the journey as “mail-order brides.”

A new era and a new business

During the Victorian era, spanning nearly 70 years of cultural prominence from the 1830s into the early 1900s, dating and courting as we know them found their roots. Blossoming wealth in Britain and the United States caused by the Industrial

Revolution provided the upper and middle classes with such luxuries as spare time for leisure activities like courting.

More men and women devoted more time and money to dating, and wily businesspeople learned to cash in on this trend. In the Victorian era a plethora of books were offered to the public covering every element of courtship. A young man could even buy a book full of “sweet phrases” to whisper to his girl, if he wasn't poetically inclined.

In our era the business of dating has accelerated into a lucrative enterprise that can prey on young people. There are thousands of books on the dating process, but are they all full of beneficial advice? With excess spare time and increased knowledge comes the unfortunate but predictable twisting of the truth, and the results of misdirected dating can be devastating.

Our early 21st century life is defined by luxury and the time to make choices or to waste time by making bad choices. Young men and women have the opportunity to make large amounts of money before marriage. Houses and especially kitchens are full of labor-saving devices that translate into extra time on our hands. We have cars that hurry us to our destinations at speeds Roman chariot drivers could only dream of. The common lifestyle has changed greatly over the centuries and it affects the dating/courting process.

History lessons

Clearly we enjoy much more freedom to pursue romance. The Bible reminds us, “For everyone to whom much is given, from him [or her] much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more” (Luke 12:48). Young people have the freedom to court, develop friendships and, hopefully, focus on the one person who will become their mate for life. Arranged marriages are no longer the custom in Western society.

However, with this freedom have come dangers. A lack of self-control, surging hormones and the effects of a society with declining moral values threaten to ruin the positive future of true love. Wrong choices

by many today have, all too often, led to devastating emotional scars. Children born out of wedlock without the loving surrounding of a happy family are but one example of what a lack of self-control and a lack of understanding of God's Word and way of life can bring.

This is where much is expected. God made something that is so beautiful that we often compare it to a jewel—a loving marriage relationship that results in the growth of two people together to support future generations of their family and God's family. Honestly, how many people want to wear a jewel that has been dipped in acid, eating away at the beauty and resulting in an ugly, tortured mess? Clearly there are some important choices to be made.

For the best historical understanding of how God intended love to grow and young people to act, consult His textbook on life and eternity, the Bible. The lessons of how humans have tried to go about the dating/courting process are useful as examples. There they are—the good and the bad, various methods and attempts. And the results are there as well. When God's way was applied, success and happiness abounded; without Him it did not.

So what choices have our friends in 1896 made?

... After hobbling to one knee and taking a deep breath, the young man presents his proposal of marriage to the seated lady. Taking both bracelet and ring, and with eyes streaming happy tears, she accepts. The door bursts open and in rush her parents ready to congratulate the couple and begin planning for the ceremony that will launch them into married life.

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The Dating Debate

With all the bad results, should a Christian give up on dating altogether? Or is there a better way?

by Ken Treybig

From *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* to *I Gave Dating a Chance*, the books about dating in the Christian realm run the gamut, with all of them saying they have biblical backing for their approach. Which is truly right in God's eyes?

Dating in the United States and most other developed countries is in serious trouble. Don't misunderstand—the practice of dating is very much alive. The problem is what has happened as a result of current normal dating practices. Teenage pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, emotional scars and a host of other problems often result from modern dating practices.

Beth Bailey's book, *From Front Porch to Back Seat*, chronicles the dramatic changes that took place in the world of dating and courtship during the 20th century. As the title indicates, the automobile has played a part in those changes. By giving young people more mobility, one-on-one boy-girl contact has gone from a public almost family setting in the parents' home to a private and intimate setting. This often leads to sex before marriage in defiance of God's command about keeping sexual activity within the bounds of marriage (Exodus 20:14; 1 Corinthians 6:18).

God has consistently told His people to be different from the people around them—from His commands to ancient Israel to statements like the one in 2 Corinthians 6:17. Christ said those who follow Him are the "salt of the earth" and the "light of the world" (Matthew 5:13-14). He inspired Paul to call Christians lights that shine brightly in a crooked and perverse world (Philippians 2:15).

As dating practices from the 1960s on became more focused on physical intimacy before marriage, authors familiar

with Scripture began to draw attention to the fact that modern dating practices were going against God's Word.

Joshua Harris grabbed a lot of attention with his best-selling book about kissing dating good-bye, published in 1997. In 2000 he wrote a sequel book after his courtship and marriage, titled *Boy Meets*

Girl. As the back cover of the book says: "*Boy Meets Girl* is an honest, romantic, and refreshingly biblical look at relationships. It's about dating with a purpose."

So despite what might appear to be a prejudice against any kind of dating by the first book's title, the book is really about avoiding the wrong kind of dating.

So if his first book is not really against all dating, what's the point? Was it just a catchy title for marketing purposes? Perhaps a quick review of the book will help.

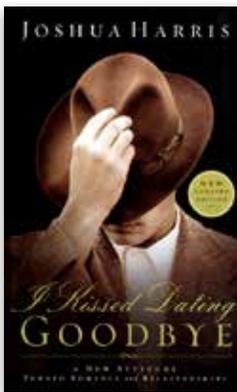
The first chapter deals with the importance of doing what is good, not just doing whatever feels good. Having a series of short-term relationships that include physical intimacy not only means you give away part of your heart to many partners before marriage, it also sets a person up to view marriage as a potential short-term relationship instead of the lifelong commitment God intended (Matthew 19:6).

Chapter 2 gets to the heart of what's wrong with the typical dating scene by focusing on the negative tendencies of defective dating—that is, dating the way most people have done it for decades. He points out that the wrong kind of dating can have the following negative effects:

1. It leads to intimacy but not necessarily to commitment. When couples eventually break up, they

simply move on to another similar relationship.

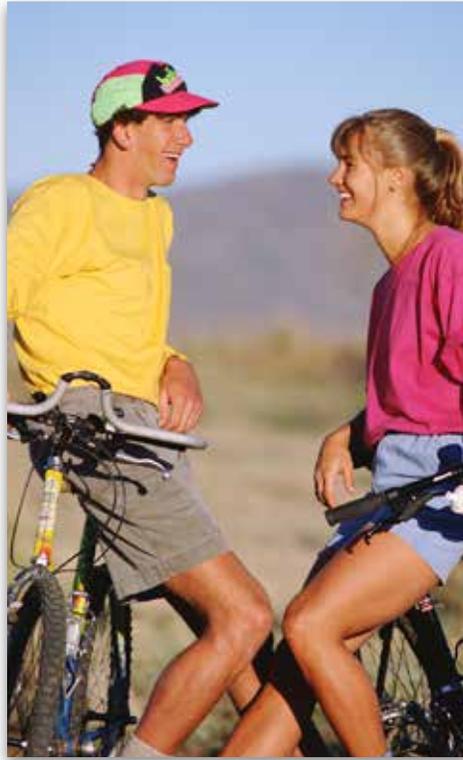
2. It tends to skip the friendship stage of a relationship. Friendship can be described as two people walking side by side toward a common goal or interest. Typically dating tends to focus on being a couple with the goal of intimacy.
3. It often mistakes a physical relationship for love. A later chapter talks about looking up "love" in God's dictionary to see what it should entail. Sex does not equal love, yet it is often mistaken for love. The excitement of the physical relationship is intoxicating.
4. It often isolates a couple from other vital relationships. Many authors have noted the importance of making a lot of friends of both sexes while young so you have a good idea of what others are like. Often when a breakup comes, other friends have been or will be alienated, leaving the former couple isolated and lonely at a time when they really need friends.
5. In many cases it distracts young adults from their primary responsibility of preparing for the future. The most obvious thought might be of higher education, but even developing skills and talents can be stunted when one's attention is focused on steady dating.
6. It can cause discontentment with God's gift of singleness. Some might disagree with the choice of phrasing, but the focus is that being single means you have opportunities for growth, learning and service that will be more difficult if not impossible when married. The author urges people to use their time as a single to its maximum capacity.
7. It creates an artificial environment for evaluating another person's character. Being fun on a date doesn't necessarily say a lot about how a person will be as a husband or wife. Real-life settings around family and



other friends show much more of what a person is really like.

The rest of the book focuses on how to avoid these negative effects. It focuses on godly love. Harris accurately points out that Christ said if we love Him, we will obey Him. So true love always expresses itself as obedience to Christ and service to others. In contrast to that, the focus of defective dating is usually gratifying self and going against God's commands concerning righteousness and purity in our lives. There is a chapter on putting past mistakes behind and realizing that even if you have made mistakes, you can live a pure life from now on.

There are also suggestions on how to keep your focus on being singles and truly friends in a "couples" and "just do it" world. The final section includes some thoughts on what really matters in a life partner—the character and attitude issues that will be a blessing to one's spouse.



The book ends with a chapter encouraging readers to be sure their stories of how they came to marriage are ones they will be proud to tell.

So the dating debate is not really about giving up on dating completely. It's about giving up going out exclusively with one person until you are ready to marry. It's about being sure that your dating practices are godly and done at the right time and in the right manner. It's about rejecting the kind of dating that is so common in society and making sure that you follow God's instruction about purity and holiness in everything you do.

True Dating: What Guys & Girls Want

Like a perfect rose blooming in a pockmarked battlefield is the fine art of true dating. Most of what you've learned about dating in popular culture is like the battlefield. Want to keep your emotions, body and spirit flying safely above the bombs bursting in air? Then read on!

by Randy Stiver

What's the general goal of much or most of dating today? That's right. It's all over the sitcoms, lots of the "chick flicks," R-rated movies and conversations among teens and young adults in school hallways and social hangouts. There's just one primary message about what too many guys and girls want of each other—and it's not good conversation, fine friendship or eventual marriage.

What's the endgame of wrong and promiscuous dating? Right again. Ragged and jaded emotions; sinfully violated bodies (both genders); a haunting, sad-eyed, brokenhearted, guilty conscience; premarital pregnancies ending in either the weary and lonely existence of single-mom-misery or tiny aborted lives snuffed out before they can even cry for help.

Need we even mention sexually transmitted diseases and the statistical tendency of sexually active young people to engage in other risky behavior like smoking, drinking and illegal drug use with the related criminal paths that can lead to? That's a crummy kind of dating.

Two questions

Now what about you? Consider two questions. First, what kind of dating does the loving God who made you expect you to do? Correct—a better kind of dating than that described above. Second, what as a guy do you want in a girl, or what as a girl do you want in a guy?

Remember, whether you're in your teens or 20s (or later), dating often leads to marriage. Right dating provides you the opportunity in the meantime to build good character and polish your personality as you get to know a variety of people, until ultimately you find your own true love.

The most famous British leader of



the 20th century, Sir Winston Churchill, observed it this way: "Where does family start? It starts with a young man falling in love with a girl. No superior alternative has yet to be found."

Or ever will be. That's why God made us male and female. Marriage and family are God's way. The book of Proverbs frames the beauty of dating and true romantic love like this: "There are three things which are too wonderful for me, yes, four which I do not understand." The fourth one, perhaps most wonderful of all, was the way of a man with a young woman (Proverbs 30:18-19).

So what should a guy want to see in a girl, and what should a girl want to see in a guy? This reporter recently posed that question to a group of more than 20 teens and young adults, mostly singles with a handful of young married couples. Their answers proved most insightful and instructive.

Ladies first: What girls want in guys

Gentleness and kindness, genuineness

and sincerity. No interest here in the broody, hot-tempered and rough or the obsessively jealous. Easy to communicate with. They were silent on the silent type. Maturity on demand. Fun-loving is fine, but foolish is out. Chivalrous, respectful and eager to serve. A fellow who opens doors for them and keeps his armor of honor well shined.

Appropriate self-confidence with a strong work ethic, finding joy in his work. When this kind of young man matures, he can and will provide well for his wife—and children. That's a serious concern on girls' minds, guys—girls who are thinking, that is. Self-control with money, toys and temper. There are few things worse than being shackled to a broke, hot-tempered goof-off.

Patience with women and with womanly behavior they don't fully understand. This is very important when dating and in marriage. Not self-centered; interested in all types of people. This is the kind of guy girls love to be around. Thoughtful and appreciative—one "thank

you” goes a long way. The females of the species get far too little credit for all they do, gentlemen.

A positive attitude when facing the challenges and trials of life. This is a sign and act of leadership. Tamed down heroism in the daily details of life. This means he brings flowers, sends cards, etc. Creative attentiveness; he knows what to do and when (or at least takes such advice well). Takes initiative in making decisions. Remember, fellows, God made the man to be the primary leader of the family (see Ephesians 5).

Then came the guys’ turn to comment on girls.

What guys want in girls

Honesty with diplomacy—a girl who kindly speaks her mind. Uncomplicated, and says what she means. Too much feminine mystique can be a mistake. Thinks for herself and is not clingy. A girl who fosters intelligent opinions and has the confidence and poise to pose them.

Gracefully polite and courteous. Manners matter to good guys. Graceful in damage control. She adroitly resolves difficulties and keeps her cool. Graceful in posture; fit and strong. Did you know that, all the girls’ sports programs notwithstanding, American girls statistically stop exercising at age 13? Guys can’t help but notice the fit and strong ideal girl/woman of Proverbs 31:17.

A good sense of style and modesty in dress. Bugs and guys that sting are attracted by bare skin; not the kind of guy you want to win. Cleanliness in person and housekeeping. This reveals much

about who you are inside (and it applies to guys too!). Empathetic; notices the needs of others and is willing to serve. This is the essence of Christian love for fellow man. Desire to teach children. Remember, dating eventually leads to marriage, which leads to kids.

Good cook and good driver. Trust guys to think of the practical. Joyful, happy personality with a good sense of humor; a complete person. The girl who is balanced, comfortable with herself, emotionally healthy and who doesn’t take herself too seriously is the kind of girl that guys are drawn to. Strong in the faith and dedicated to God and His ways. High spiritual standards may not make you popular with a lot of fellows, but they’re not the ones you want to date anyway.

Then a funny thing happened in our discussion—the girls decided that they needed to add to their list of what they want to see in guys. Perhaps it’s not surprising, though, because communications experts say that the average man speaks about 15,000 words a day, but the average woman intones closer to 30,000. So speak on, ladies.

More of what girls want

A good cook and a good eater. Lasses like lads who won’t starve when they’re on their own and who can lend a hand in the kitchen. Emotionally secure, with absolute trust and trustworthiness. Someone who is steady at the wheel and loyal to the core. Ability to compromise on practical matters (and who doesn’t pout when he doesn’t get his own way). Common sense and intelligence. These are vital when a girl

seeks to follow a guy’s lead on a date or in life.

Willingness to change when needed. Stubbornness is unattractive in both genders. Ability to rightly prioritize his life. This kind of a fellow can get some traction. Right kind of ambition; a go-getter. This applies to education and career, and wise girls notice it. Most importantly, a strong belief in God and His way of life. Spiritual wishy-washiness is a danger sign to girls with eyes to see.

It was a fascinating discussion. It was straight-up, vertical thinking from a perceptive group of your peers. Why not give this list a vertical thought or two of your own? It may prove most useful in making your true dating experiences in family, group and couple settings come alive with value.

Don’t sell yourself short. Don’t give your heart—or body—to the wrong kind of person or at the wrong time. Right dating is a fine art that builds life skills with practice. In the middle of that emotional battlefield of the sexes, called modern dating, grows a single, perfect rose. Ask God to lead you to it, and when the time is right, with His blessing, to carry it home and make it your own.

Randy Stiver is the pastor of United Church of God congregations in central Ohio.

Sex, Dating and You!

Misunderstandings about God's instructions are contributing to some tragic heartaches. Learn how you can enjoy life to the fullest—God's way

by Thomas Clark

It is no shock to you when I say that we live in a world and society today that is obsessed with sex. Sex is used to sell everything from cars to soft drinks to chewing gum to a new football league. Magazine covers feature barely clothed young women, and the article titles say things like “50 Ways to Drive Your Man Wild in Bed.”

We find graphic depictions of sexual activity in novels, science fiction, music, movies and television. In fact, current statistics show that 2/3 of all network prime time television includes sexual content—averaging more than five scenes an hour!

It has been well documented that exposure to large amounts of sexually oriented content changes the way a society views sex—especially how the young people view it. The result is that, on average, 46 percent of high school students have had sex at least once (www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/sexualbehaviors/index.htm). The United States, where the largest proportion of sexually-explicit movies are produced, has the highest rate of teen pregnancies in the industrialized world—nearly a million a year. Additionally, young people aged 15-24 years acquire nearly half of all new STDs (www.cdc.gov/std/stats09/adol.htm).

Where are the boundaries?

The common belief among many youth today is that sex is something to be experimented with freely. Some have reasoned that only sexual intercourse is actually sex and so anything else is OK because it isn't really sex and so it isn't really wrong. These teens conclude that as long as both of you want to do it, what's the problem?

Living in such a society, even teens regularly attending church can be confused about what is right and what is wrong. If you want to live a life that is pleasing to God, what is acceptable to do on a date and what is not? One young person told



me, “We were always told not to have sex before we are married ... but no one told us how to do that. No one told us what the boundaries were.” Do you know what the boundaries are?

In order to understand where the boundaries are, we need to understand something about how and why God created sex.

How God made us

When God created human beings, He created them male and female (Genesis 1:26-31). Sex was not a surprise to God; rather it was something He created on purpose! And as Genesis 1:31 records, He looked at it all and called it “very good”!

God made the sexual relationship to be very enjoyable—a wonderful pleasure for a husband and wife to share together. But have you considered that God didn't have to do it this way? He could have designed us to reproduce like plants or so that sex was just another biological function and nothing special or pleasurable. But God had something else in mind.

Scientists recognize the sex drive as one of the strongest drives in human beings. And they have also been able to determine that the sexual union creates a bond between a man and woman that is created in no other way. God created the sexual

union to bind a husband and wife ever closer together—making their marriage stronger as the years go by!

The same research has also determined that this bond exists only in a monogamous relationship (an exclusive relationship between one man and one woman). If sex is shared with another person, that bond is shattered! And this is no surprise to God. He has written throughout the Bible that we are to avoid any use of sex except within the confines of marriage.

But we still haven't answered the question. Where are the boundaries? What is acceptable behavior for teens and single young adults sexually? What does God expect?

As we've already mentioned, many people today feel that sex refers only to sexual intercourse and, therefore, not fondling and petting. And thanks to an ex-president of the United States, even oral sex doesn't count according to this view. But nothing could be further from the truth! There is a reason all these other things are called sexual activity! Long passionate kisses, fondling, petting and so forth are all part of the act of sex. They are designed to prepare a husband and wife physically, mentally and emotionally to consummate the act with intercourse.

When to awaken love

The Song of Solomon says, “I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem . . . do not stir up nor awaken love until it pleases” (2:7; 3:5; 8:4). Don’t allow yourself to be drawn into a situation where you get your body and your passions “stirred up” before it is proper! You run the risk of damaging yourself and destroying the precious gift of virginity that rightfully belongs to your future mate!

When it comes to sex outside of marriage, Paul told us to “flee fornication” (1 Corinthians 6:18, King James Version)—not just resist it or try to avoid it, but to flee, run away, get out of there! The temptations are too strong and the desires too intense to go part way and then think you can stop.

In spite of some people’s objections to the contrary, premarital sex does carry an emotional and psychological penalty. Those who engage in sex before marriage are statistically less likely to have a lasting marriage because they have weakened the special, unique bond God intended the sexual union to provide between a husband and wife.

Practical advice

So what should you do? Here are some suggestions from one who used to be a teen and then a single young adult and who now is the father of teens. These are concrete ways to help you avoid the heartache, misery, disease and unwanted pregnancies plaguing so many young people today.

Don’t pair off in a quiet or secluded place. When others are around (especially responsible adults), we are naturally more inhibited and less likely to get involved sexually. So make it your goal to keep other people around—until you are married!

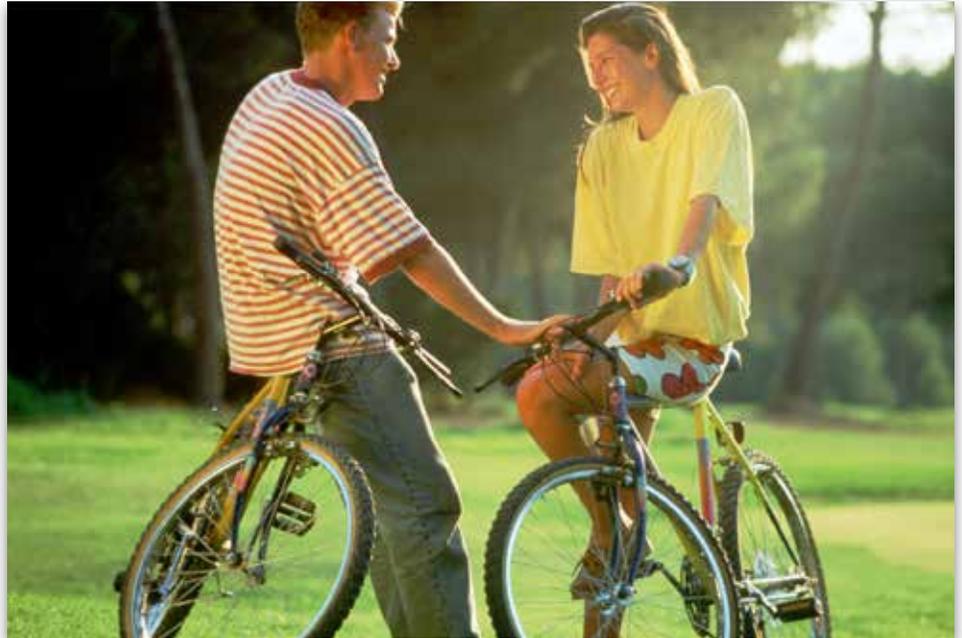
Don’t think you must give in to sex to have friends or be popular. If another person doesn’t want to be with you unless he or she can get something from you sexually, then realize this isn’t the kind of friendship you need! God respects

you more than that and you can certainly respect yourself more than that!

Don’t get caught in the “kissing trap.” Despite what others may tell you, now is not the time for passionate kisses. If you are truly in love and are marrying for the right reasons, neither you nor your mate will be overly worried about being a good kisser. You will have the rest of your lives to practice and get better at it—and practice you will! But a kiss now

This, of course, is not true. While it is always best not to have sinned in this way, God will forgive those who sincerely ask Him for forgiveness and who, with God’s help, change their ways. While some penalties may still be involved because of the sin, God always respects the character shown by people when they repent.

With the help of God, you don’t have to get caught in the “sex trap” that so many



will lead to something else tomorrow, and even more, later. Stop it now by setting the boundary before the first kiss.

Commit yourself to God’s way and ask Him for help. Make a decision right now and in prayer, ask God to grant you the strength to follow through. Ask Him to help you make your body off limits to everyone in every way until you are married. You may not know or have met him or her yet, but there is a very special person to whom you can be very happily married one day. And that wonderful person deserves you pure, clean and unused!

If you’ve sinned, ask God for forgiveness and start over. Some people mistakenly believe that if they have had improper sex, they might as well continue.

youth today experience. Sex, with all its excitement and wonder, was designed to be your wedding gift—a wedding gift from God! Don’t share that gift with anyone before the wedding. And if you’ve unwrapped this gift ahead of time, carefully put it back for the right occasion. And remember, this gift will last a great deal longer than a toaster!

A Touchy Subject: Hand-holding, Hugging, Kissing and More...

The time to make decisions about physical contact is before you get in a touchy situation. Making a decision on the fly with no forethought is a recipe for going too far.

by David Treybig

Biologically, it is called the sense of touch. For those dating, it can be exhilarating—actual, real-life, skin-to-skin contact with someone of the opposite sex. And while it isn't sexual union, it can definitely be sexy. Just ask any red-blooded male or female who has had a close encounter with Miss Good Looking or Mr. Hunk.

Hand-holding, hugging, kissing or any other similar contact can be oh so delightful.

But is all this contact good, upright and moral? Is it in our best interest to engage in these practices prior to marriage? How does one decide? For those who have adopted the standards of behavior endorsed by today's entertainment industry, these are stupid questions. In fact, they are non-questions—meaning they just aren't asked. When people believe it is OK to have sex before marriage, a little (or a lot of) touching doesn't really mean anything.

Consider the blockbuster movie *Titanic*. Two young people fall in love and, before they are married, they decide to have sex. Even though current stats show that the majority of high school students don't have sex, many movies like this present this scene as the norm for young people before they say "I do." The way it unfolds is true to life. It all starts with physical contact—touching, hugging and kissing. And then comes full sexual intercourse. But this isn't what the Bible teaches.

In Genesis 2:24, God explains how and when a sexual union between a man and a woman should take place: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (emphasis added throughout).

"One flesh" means to have sexual intercourse (1 Corinthians 6:16) and, according to God's instructions, this is to take place after a man and woman have been joined together in marriage. Having sex prior to marriage is immoral and, according to God's Word, we are supposed to "flee sexual immorality" (1 Corinthians 6:18). Flee means to run away from or avoid. So we're supposed to run away from premarital sex and things that could entice us to be immoral.

An important point to note in God's instruction is that abstinence doesn't have to be forever. It just must wait until two

decided that you are going to wait to have sex until you are married. That's great! You've made a good decision. But what about this touchy stuff? Are you going to hug, kiss, hold hands or more? The Bible doesn't specifically address these areas. It does clearly say that we aren't to have sex prior to marriage (1 Corinthians 6:18) or to even lust after another person (Matthew 5:28), and that love is not to be awakened until the appropriate time (Song of Solomon 2:7, New Revised Standard Version). Human history shows that these "touchy" activities often lead to lustful desire and sex. Unfortunately, many young people have engaged in these forms of physical contact and then lost their virginity because their emotions overwhelmed their sense of judgment. They just couldn't stop because it felt so good.

So how can you decide what you will do? Some have asked, "Just how far can a Christian go without sinning?" The time to make decisions about physical contact is before you get in a touchy situation. Making a decision on the fly with no forethought is a recipe for going too far.

To help you establish godly standards, consider the following advice given by a panel of young American Christians between the ages of 20 and 30. Some are married and some aren't. While the names are changed to preserve each person's identity, the comments are genuine.

Should you hold hands?

Hand-holding according to 20-year-old Sarah is "OK if you plan to marry him or her, when you both feel like the other is the right one for you." Continuing, she said, "I wouldn't hold hands with someone who I felt to be 'just a date' or someone I was mildly interested in, or even just plain had



people are married. Then, God says, sex is good (Hebrews 13:4). Because abstinence has been described in such negative terms, some educators are now choosing to use the word postponement to describe the process of delaying sex until marriage.

How to decide

Many of you reading this have already

a crush on. I think holding hands is a sign that ‘this is the one for me’ to all the world, and that is just not something I want to do with just anyone.”

Bill, 28 and married to Sue, said that he didn’t have a rule about holding hands before he was married but realized that “those first thrilling physical touches when one is young can often open the door to premature intimacy and big life mistakes.” Continuing, he remarked, “If I could do it all over again, I would refrain from hand-holding until becoming engaged (and then make sure the engagement was brief enough so as to minimize any potential problems). Individual tolerances to holding hands or other touching may vary, so there’s no hard-and-fast rule. But I would have done better erring on the side of strict conservatism in this area.”

Kate, 28, who is married to Luke, wrote: “We didn’t hold hands till almost a year after we started dating. (We started dating a year or more after we had known each other as friends with the understanding that we were potentially interested in marriage and wanted to spend time together to find out.) Luke asked me if he could hold my hand initially. Looking back, it was a good thing, even though I questioned it at one point because it became a distraction for me for a short time—either wanting him to hold my hand, or having a difficult time reigning in my thoughts when he did. However, he explained to me that he felt like it was important that there be a physical means of communicating with each other and expressing the closeness that we felt. I think that he was right.

“One thing that both of us learned was that before marriage, if you are pursuing marriage with a person, anything has the potential to be physically exciting and distracting. In the midst of the excitement, you have to take your thoughts captive and make decisions about enjoying emotional closeness and small amounts of physical contact based on whether the relationship is deep and solid enough to benefit from these added dimensions, or whether it will only serve to cover up a lack of real communication. For Luke and me, hand-holding was a positive thing that physically manifested some of the feelings and ideas that we had already verbalized.”

What about hugs?

Once you become good friends with someone, it seems as though hugs become part of the way many people say good-bye before long intervals apart or hello when they reunite. While the majority of this panel felt these kind of short hugs were appropriate, they did offer a few cautions about regular and lengthy hugging with the opposite sex.

Sarah said, “I think the thing is, the longer two people of the opposite sex hug,



the more tendency there would be to kiss. So if that sort of thing is affecting your mind, where it’s like you’ve been hugging this person and all of a sudden you just have to kiss them, then uh-oh! You’d better rethink your actions, because the godly way is to go in the direction of ‘flee from immorality,’ not see how close you can come to it!”

Bill agreed with Sarah, saying, “Hugs between two people who know they are attracted to one another should be brief ... Hugs involve even more physical contact and can be misused if one is not careful and/or has a weakness in this area.”

Cheryl, 23 and married, said her “main concern was finding the person that I could continue a relationship with until the end (marriage). If he didn’t meet my qualifications enough to that end, I would remain friends but never make any more physical contact than a hug here or there.”

Before Kate and Luke married, they said, “We got into the habit of giving each other a brief hug coming and going sometime during the first year of dating. It was good to acknowledge the way we cared for each other with something warmer than a ‘Hi.’

“It felt a bit stiff to us both as we grew to care for each other more, but anytime you are holding back feelings for the right time, things can feel awkward. “We liked to sit close to each other, but it was not until a few months before we were engaged that we sat together with his arm around me. At first, we only did this in my [Kate’s] parents’ home when they were near. A little later we also sat like this when we were alone as well—often in the context of a conversation that was on a deep emotional level, and especially after we were engaged and began talking through more personal things ... We didn’t ‘bear hug’ until a month before we were engaged, and we were careful with that.”

And kissing?

Kissing, according to our panel, is definitely more intimate than hand-holding or hugs and should be avoided prior to engagement. After you are engaged, a brief kiss seems appropriate.

As Sarah put it, “I know it is hard to resist kissing someone, especially if they mean a lot to you, or are very attractive. But you have to remember, if God hasn’t picked this person for you, your lips are on another person’s mate. If you were married already and someone kissed your wife/husband, you’d be pretty mad! So think ‘fourth dimensionally,’ as Doc Brown would say, and know that this other person is not your mate.”

“One can argue that the former two items (holding hands and hugging) can be shared in a more casual and ‘harmless’ way,” said Bill. “However, mouth-to-mouth kissing is actually one of the beginning stages of sexual intimacy and is an easy way to fast-forward to more explicit sexual contact. Young, single people should avoid mouth-to-mouth kissing at all costs except maybe just prior to marriage (even then they must be careful to avoid lustful behavior).”

Explaining how they first kissed, Kate said, “I had told Luke what a kiss meant to me as we started to grow closer. He honored that understanding and never took

advantage of any vulnerable moment. I respected him deeply for that and still do, even as I sometimes wanted him to kiss me. To me, a kiss meant, 'I love you. I want to be your husband.'"

Continuing, she recalled, "I had asked my mother when I was young if it was all right to kiss before you were married. She said that it was as long as you both understood what that kiss meant. As I thought about that, I began to feel that I didn't want the memory of any man's kiss except my husband's, and that for me (very cautious and slow to give myself), a kiss was a seal of love and possession. Hand-holding is like that to an extent—it implies exclusivity and mutual ownership to a degree.

"To me, a kiss on the lips between a man and a woman implies this ownership in a sexual way that is beautiful and powerful. Luke asked if he could kiss me a month before we were engaged. Because I knew his character and because he was aware of what that meant to me, I knew that he wanted to marry me ... We did have to limit our kisses, because it is fun and intoxicating—meant to lead to more. We limited our kisses to coming and going so that they did not take over our time together, or prevent our growth in communication. This was a good decision. It did get harder and harder to finish our good-byes!!"

More?

Physical contact that is more intimate than the above is often described as petting. According to our panel, this category of conduct clearly exceeded the safe boundaries Christians should maintain.

As for petting before marriage, Kate wrote: "With exceptions only of his hands on my hair or face and vice versa, we didn't go here. I think that the temptations would not have been fair to either of us. As well, we had resolved that we did not want to feel guilt for anything that we did with or to each other in this area, so we kept away."

Concluding advice

Summarizing her thoughts, Sarah said, "The decision to stay totally pure before marriage is ... hard because of all the feelings humans have, but try to look at it in a big sense ...

"Do you want to be guilty of defiling someone else's special person? Do you want to feel guilty that you are defiled? Do you want your mate to have been close to sex with lots of others before you? The Golden Rule is 'do unto others as you'd have them do unto you.' So put it into practice, and not only will you be happier for it, but God will bless you!"

Sometimes being godly is the most challenging when you meet the person you plan to marry. According to Cheryl: "When I did find the person that I felt I could marry someday, it was then that I had to be very careful. Small things can turn into big things very quickly. Comfort zones are quickly reached and expanded when you are with someone you love and trust. My best advice is not to date exclusively until you find that person. Group dates with trusted friends can be a very fun way to get to know and spend time with someone you are interested in but with less pressure or temptation."

Continuing, she said: "And when you are on a date with someone alone, it really helps to be careful not to put yourself in a situation where you are alone and unseen for a long period of time. If you [stick to] lighter environments, you don't have to come up with reasons to be uncomfortable if your physical limits don't match up with his."

Offering concluding advice to singles, Bill wrote: "Do not allow yourself to be alone, or at least alone in situations where sexual contact is possible and the privacy necessary to engage in it exists (i.e., parked cars, in a house or secluded room alone, in the woods or a wooded park, etc.). The temptation may just be too great ... Think of physical contact the same way you might think about virginity. Once the line is crossed, there's no going back. You cannot reverse the current 'touch status' you have with someone else (i.e., we've held hands, we've kissed, we've slept together, etc.)."

Kate put it this way: "Know yourselves and set limits wisely with this knowledge. Involve your parents if you can by asking them their opinion and/or letting them know your limits. Follow the limits that your parents set or advise. God gave them to you for a protection and commands you to honor them. If you disagree with their ideas, discuss this with them in a respectful way.

"Don't let physical contact take over or lead in communication—it can feel good and when this happens, you may not know what it meant to either of you in the end ... Use common sense. Don't let feelings control your actions. Acknowledge feelings without serving them, or you will make miserable mistakes. Don't be engaged too long—it gets harder [to refrain from premarital intimacy] after you are more committed—but take enough time to talk about things that were too personal before ... Physical contact is powerful. God made it so. Respectfully use it as a tool in His service."

What to say when you're uncomfortable with someone's advances...

- "I'm not interested in doing that. I don't think that is a good idea."
- "I don't believe in doing this before marriage. Why do you?"
- "Whoa ... Easy on the touchy-feely."
- "Stop that!"
- "I gotta go. Excuse me." Then leave the room for any reason you can think of.
- Back off (put physical distance between you) and say, "That is too much."
- "I'm flattered that you feel that way, but I think if you and I both take a step back, we will see that this is not a good idea and is against God's law."
- "I'm not ready for that yet, but I may be one day. Let's take it easy on that stuff until then, OK?"

Find Out More...

What's Going On Under the Skin: What Touch Can Trigger www.ucg.org/vertical-thought/whats-going-on-under-the-skin-what-touch-can-trigger

The Big Deal About Dating

Some don't think it matters whom one dates. What about you?

by Whitney Creech

Every culture has its own unique approach to dating. Regardless of how traditional courting takes place, seeking to develop a relationship is a common practice throughout most of the world. As arranged marriages decline in some cultures, meeting and interacting with the opposite sex by dating as a means of finding a marriage partner is becoming more and more universal.

Dating is exciting! It provides opportunities for going out to dinner or to movies or other various activities with enjoyable company. While it seems most parents are wary of the question, "When can I start dating?" it's only natural for teenagers to want to begin this thrilling experience.

Testing the dating waters

I began dating when I was 16 years old—right around the time my family began returning to the Church of God. I wasn't ready to change the way I looked at dating simply because my parents had decided to follow a different path. But as I began to change my views about the Church, I started to seriously look at how my relationships influenced my beliefs.

I wasn't dating terrible, evil guys—just ones whose beliefs were different from my own. But what I didn't consider was that their beliefs could influence mine. Then after dating the same guy for about eight months, he began to ask questions—questions that were challenges, not inquiries. In his view, my beliefs restricted our relationship.

I took time off from dating to focus on understanding what I believed. I didn't want to be in a relationship where I would be challenged and not have the answers.

Focused on beliefs

The Bible's words in 2 Corinthians 6:14 began to resound louder than ever: "Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has

righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness?" It became clear to me that not being "yoked" to another person means more than not marrying him or her. It also means that we should not seriously date someone with whom we have conflicting spiritual beliefs, since dating is a gateway to marriage.

Looking back now on my experiences, I would recommend to younger girls (and guys, for that matter) to seriously consider how important your beliefs are to you before dating somebody with different beliefs. Relationships are built on having things in common. If what is most important to you is different from what is most important to your boyfriend



or girlfriend, it will be very difficult to ever see eye-to-eye.

God knows best

Hanging out with friends from school in groups is a great way to learn about different personality traits and quirks that we might find attractive (or completely unappealing!). But since their beliefs and values are in conflict with yours, it shouldn't go further than that.

I've heard the complaints that there are "too few options in the Church" or that "the guys in school are just as nice." In the end, it comes down to knowing what

is truly important to you. In Matthew 6:33 Jesus Christ tells us to "seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you." God will provide for you if you truly are seeking His Kingdom.

Obedying God's instruction in 2 Corinthians 6:14 and then trusting Him to provide a relationship—and later a spouse, if it is His plan for us—takes faith. Dating a person who does not follow your beliefs is risky. On rare occasions this has worked out when the unbeliever has come to live God's way of life, but you cannot expect to convert somebody. Only God can call people to His truth (John 6:44). Dating someone who shares your spiritual beliefs is always the wiser approach.

When you choose this path, dating will still be fun, and you can have many opportunities to connect with those who share the same core beliefs as you do. This kind of dating produces such an incredible feeling and blessing! Coming to the realization that a relationship cannot continue

because of conflicting beliefs will hurt an incredible amount if you have already developed an emotional attachment. Avoid putting yourself in that position by putting confidence in God and following His guidance to not date an unbeliever.

Whitney Creech attended Ambassador Bible College in Milford, Ohio, and now works at the home office of the United Church of God.

Dating Outside the FAITH

Some don't think it matters whom one dates. What about you?

by Cindy Gore Harper

“Why can't I just go out, for fun?! Just for a movie? It's not like we're going to get married.” I was so frustrated with my parents. This was the first guy that I would actually enjoy getting to know better. How embarrassing it was to have to turn him down because my parents wouldn't let me date outside the Church. I could not understand it. There were good guys in “the world.” A few of them really seemed to be of higher character than some guys I knew in the Church. I felt this was my decision to make.

This was not the first time my parents and I had disagreed over this, and it was not to be the last. Somehow they always won, and I never dated anyone outside the Church through high school. I did go on a lot of group outings with friends from church, and also spent time alone with guys in the Church. Camps, Feasts and big church activities were the highlights of my high school years. But for a long time I never completely understood why my parents kept me from dating in high school.

An older friend of mine shut down my main argument one evening during my senior year. I was complaining to her about my parents' decision relating to dating guys in high school. I told her about a few guys that seemed awesome at my high school. They seemed to have very high morals and were smart, kind and interesting. I told her that there were some guys “in the Church” that I could not respect because of their attitudes or their hypocrisy in going to church but not living God's way. I told her: I have not found anyone in the Church that I could see myself marrying—and besides that—what are the chances? There's one guy my age in my area, but he is more like a best friend than a marriage candidate. Church sizes had decreased, church activities were few and far between, and young people were all so spread out. How can you date

someone who lives three states away?

I had so many objections and I was at a loss for understanding how one could possibly find a mate against all those odds. I pondered aloud, “What if God has chosen for me someone from outside the Church?” She calmly but deliberately asked, “Why would God do that to you?”

She helped me to see what I already knew but did not want to face. We should trust God, looking to Him, not our own reasoning. He wants us to be happy and fulfilled in marriage. If we ask Him in faith, He will find the right person for us who will be compatible with our beliefs.



Marrying outside the Church brings with it many problems to overcome from the start—problems relating to worship, prayer, the Sabbath, Holy Days, Feast times, holidays, children, foods and more. God does not want us to bring upon ourselves more challenges than are already there by choosing a mate who does not live His way. It was hard for me to accept, but I finally did understand and commit myself in faith that God would choose someone for me in the Church.

It's not hard to date someone outside the Church, but dating is the precursor to marriage. I did not want to start a relationship that I could not finish. I did not want to date someone that I could not marry. It was not worth the pain that it would cause that other person and me. I decided to stick with this decision as I started college. I feel this is one of the best

decisions I have made.

During college, when I was out with a group of friends, I met the man that I was eventually to marry, and he wasn't in the Church. Daniel soon became a great friend. He taught me to swing dance, we studied together, and sometimes we had lunch or dinner together. We didn't hang out with each other frequently, but we kept in touch and would talk and spend some time together. After a while he told me that he was interested in me, but I told him right away that it would not work, and I was interested in someone in my church. Over time we talked about how important it was to me to marry someone of the same faith. It was very hard for him to understand, but after much discussion he came to respect my decision and remained a great friend.

Over our many talks we discussed music, world events, history, travel and even religion. He asked a lot of pointed questions about my faith. I answered his questions as best as I could, striving to show how the Bible was the foundation of my beliefs. I never tried to convert him. I knew that was God's job for those that He chooses. All I could do was represent His truth the best that I could.

One day I mentioned our church Web site so that he could learn more about the Church. I never thought that God would use me to call him. I'd had friends in the past who seemed interested but never would follow through. We live a very different way of life, and it is very difficult for most people to accept the way God commands. One day he said he would like to come to church with me. I was happy but as always, very cautious. I was afraid he might be coming only because of me. It made me very wary about getting too close in our relationship, and I remained steadfast in my resolve that my future mate would live God's way.

Daniel did come to church. He came

again a few weeks later. He asked fewer questions of me, because now he could find the answers himself. Daniel began to follow the food laws, keep the Sabbath, attend on Holy Days and study the Bible more. As he came into the Church, I struggled within myself. I tried to be discerning and cautious in case it was not a genuine and long-lasting conversion. I prayed often that God would do His will and give me the strength and wisdom to see and accept that will. If Daniel was not being called, I wanted to know as soon as possible. If he was, I wanted to know that too. Over all this time I had begun to truly love him, but I knew I could not be happy long-term if we did not share the same faith.

Over time, and through many trials, Daniel showed that his conversion was true and his dedication to God unwavering. It was after one particularly severe trial with his parents that I felt I could be pretty sure that he was serious. We became closer. He attended his first Feast alone in France, as he was studying there for a fall semester. The fact that he went by himself was another test that he passed. I began to really believe that God was truly calling him.

Since those early days he has remained true to God and His way. We attended

ABC together in 2003, where he made the final decision to counsel for baptism. At that point we knew for sure. We married in the fall of 2003 and are now incredibly happy living God's way. We pray together, worship together and, one day, will bring up our children in the truth together.

So, what would I tell you?

I learned many lessons in this relationship, and I would like to pass along a few of those to you:

- Never assume that God is calling the person that you are interested in. It is safer to assume that He isn't, so that you maintain your distance in the relationship until you can be absolutely sure. This is hard, but possible if you pray about it and commit yourself to this decision before you are in the situation.
- Maintain the friendship, but don't let it progress. Don't start something that you can't finish. It is very hard to break away from someone you've gotten close to but who does not come into the Church. During this time you could miss out on other great converted people. It is possible, if you make the choice, to end up with the wrong person and miss out on someone more fitted for you. Do your best to let God

choose someone who is just right for you.

- Never use a dating relationship as a means to convert someone. Some guys or girls might come to church and not eat pork or keep the Sabbath just to be with you—if they believe that will keep your relationship going. It is not necessarily true conversion. God makes that decision and calling, not us. I have a close friend whose boyfriend felt so strongly about her that he said he would “join the Church” and be baptized for her. He would live the way of life that she chose. She recognized the trap and made the right decision, even though it was the hardest thing she had to do in her life.
- Go to camp, go to the Feast, go to big events in God's Church and have fun! Make a lot of friends and trust God to show you the right one.

How Do You Recover From a Costly Mistake?

When a broken bone heals, the body creates an area of increased density and strength at the site of the break. Godly repentance from sexual sins can strengthen your life.

by Bonnie Greider

At a Christian Living class at Camp Pinecrest in Missouri, campers and staff were discussing the topic of morality and dating. There was a great deal of conversation regarding the need to remain pure and chaste while dating. Most agreed that young men and women should enter the marriage union without having engaged in premarital sexual activity.

But what if you already have? What if you have already had sexual relationships in the past? Maybe you have had a child out of wedlock or an abortion. Are you no longer capable of a happy, healthy marriage relationship? How does God see you? How do you see yourself?

No one can argue that the age in which we live isn't filled with promiscuity. Sexual activity and conversation punctuate virtually every prime-time television show. Movies, music and even video games are filled with the subject. It is no wonder that premarital sexual activity among young people occurs, even within the Church of God.

God allows us to make choices. Sometimes we make good ones, sometimes we don't. Some decisions we make have ramifications that last for a few seconds, while others last a lifetime. If God loves us so much, why doesn't He stop us from making decisions that could jeopardize our future happiness? Why doesn't He intervene and keep us from engaging in activities that will affect the rest of our lives?

As a mother of four children, I realize how difficult being a parent can be. Children learn things in different ways and stages. I vividly recall one adventuresome child who was determined that she could jump off of the top bunk bed and not get hurt. After several admonitions, I left the room knowing exactly what would occur within the next few seconds. Thump. Then

came the yelp of pain that I was expecting.

I quickly reentered the room, comforted her and reminded her that sometimes it is better to listen to the voice of experience than to experiment on her own. However, it took two more attempts before she got the point. Sometimes we learn from a soft voice of admonition, but when we refuse to hear it, we pay a penalty. The lesson learned from firsthand experience may be a great teacher, but it is also the one that causes the most pain.



Not all of us are willing to take admonition from a cautionary word of correction. Some do, but many do not. When we look at the world around us, we see people dating anybody they please. We see unmarried people holding hands, kissing and engaging in sexual activity. These people appear to be happy. They have somebody who makes them feel wanted and needed. Why wouldn't this be a good thing? Why would God not allow us to engage in something that feels so good? If He loves us so much, why does He forbid us from taking part in some activities that seem to be so enjoyable?

Have you ever babysat a small child, maybe a 4- or 5-year-old? If you opened the cupboard or refrigerator and asked the child what he would like to eat for dinner, would he choose steamed broccoli with a side of sautéed carrots? Or would he zero in on the ice cream? Little children don't know what is good for them. They know what they want and what they like. Older children, and even adults, are often the same. There are things God has designed that are good for us but other things that

would cause misery in a way that we may not be able to see.

For this reason, God has made some things out of bounds at all times and other things out of bounds only at certain stages in our lives. In the case of sex, He has created an environment

where the right relationship at the right time of life is a beautiful blessing. When engaged in at the wrong time, sexual activity causes problems and difficulties—sometimes with results that last for a lifetime. AIDS, pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases are only a few of those effects.

So what if you have already engaged in sexual activities outside of marriage? What does the future hold for you? How can you have a right relationship with a future mate and with God?

One of my children broke a bone in her hand playing sports. When the doctor

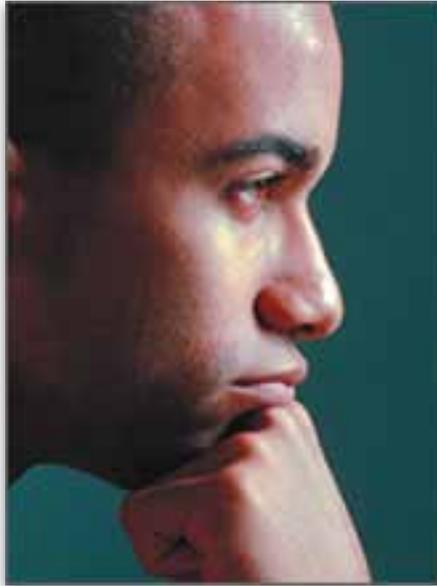
was putting the cast on her hand, he told me that the bone would heal in about six weeks or so and that the place where the break had occurred would become the strongest part of her hand. When a bone heals, the body creates an area of increased density and strength at the site of the break. However, if an X-ray of the location is taken, there will always be a deformity in that spot. In other words, there would always be a scar.

When we break God's laws, there are always scars. Sometimes they are not visible to those around us and sometimes they may not show up for some time, but they are still there. They may be physical, but they could also be emotional or psychological. However, as with a healed bone, areas that were previously flaws can become our greatest strengths.

Learning lessons the hard way is painful but often very effective. The humble repentance that ensues when a critical lesson is learned can be lifelong and profound.

Once this type of true, godly repentance is reached, the action that led to it is seldom repeated. Not only that, but one who has had to learn this way is often a very effective teacher helping others avoid

the same sin. But how does God view us after we have made such a mistake and repented of it? The Bible shows us some examples of how God, the ultimate loving Parent, receives one of His children who comes to Him in a humble and repentant attitude. The story of the "prodigal" son, found in Luke 15, is a sterling example of how a loving father welcomed his



repentant son back.

Another beautiful example of a love story is found in Ezekiel 16. In this account, God speaks of finding His bride as an infant, cast away to die. He took her in and protected her, providing everything she needed to grow into a beautiful woman. But her pride and vanity caused her to defile herself with other lovers and to commit fornication.

However, in time she became

ashamed of her actions and repented. God then took her back and renewed His covenant with her. We know that this is speaking about His people, Israel, who rejected His laws and became involved in the political and religious system of the world. God was foretelling their repentance and His loving forgiveness.

The marriage union is called a great mystery that symbolizes Christ and the

Church. Jesus Christ will come to marry His Bride at His return. His Bride has not always been faithful to Him and has had to repent. The blood of Christ was shed for our sins, and those whom He has called are cleansed by that miracle.

Why is this so important? Because every single human being has sinned. Every one of us has had a need to repent and must do so on a daily basis. But our loving Father hears our prayers and is quick to forgive and remove our sins. Our sins, once scarlet, become white as snow. Every sin brings a penalty, but thankfully the ultimate penalty—death—was paid by Jesus Christ. No matter what the sin, once true, godly repentance has occurred, God forgives it totally.

Does that mean it is better to make mistakes? Not at all. If you can take advice and admonition from parents, family, friends and from God's Word, life will be much easier. But when painful mistakes are made and real repentance occurs, a happy and rewarding life, with a powerful lesson learned, can still be achieved.

How to Treat Your Date's Parents

How can you get on the good side of your date's parents—and stay there?

by Ryan Hornor

To meet and get along with a friend's parents can be an intimidating challenge—especially when you show up at the door to take their son or daughter out for dinner. After all, they may see their child, not so much as a young adult, but still their little baby barely able to walk. Naturally, their instinct is to protect their child from bad influences. However, if you make a good impression, eventually you will find that not only are they comfortable with you dating their son or daughter, they may actually encourage him or her to spend more time with you because of the Christian example you provide.

Whether you're male or female, friends or engaged to be married, here are a few key tips to help you create a good impression with your date's parents.

Respect

Respect is absolutely critical when you meet the parents. As mother and father, they expect their child to honor them. You want to show them that you will not be an obstacle to that relationship. When you meet them, shake hands and introduce yourself. Refer to them as Mr. and Mrs. unless they ask you to do otherwise. Always be polite, and if they give a curfew, stick to it.

As an example of respect, my wife frequently makes cookies for other Church members. While we were still dating, she would always give the most (and best) cookies to my parents. Giving them preferential treatment—even over me—was a way of showing them respect. (And did it ever work!)

Confidence

When you seem nervous, it can at best make you look shy. At worst, it can appear that you have something to hide. If you can show the parents a quiet, assured confidence, they are more likely to trust you.

Confidence is not arrogance. Confidence is when you look someone straight in the eye, smile and pay him or her a

compliment. Arrogance is when you look at someone's jacket and say that yours is more expensive. See the difference?

"I see you're polishing your shotgun, sir"

Confident or not, there are times when a date's parents are strictly out to intimidate. A friend of mine was once threatened by a girl's father with a shotgun! Most intimidation, however, is not so life-threatening. In such situations, it's good to do three things. 1) Evaluate how serious the person is. 2) Stay respectful. 3) Refuse to be intimidated.

Remember, someday you may actually marry this person you're dating and start your own family. Then you and your husband or wife will be in charge

parents. Not all parents will "buddy up" with you. Take the initiative and time to get to know them and share a little of yourself. They will understand you better and know that they can trust you with their son or daughter.

To learn more, download or request your free copy of *Marriage & Family: The Missing Dimension* (especially chapter 3). Remember, as a Christian the key to earning the trust of your date's parents is simply being someone they can trust!



of making your own decisions. If you respectfully refuse to let anyone intimidate you, while showing that you have only the best Christian intentions, you will demonstrate that you are worthy of the task.

Build a relationship

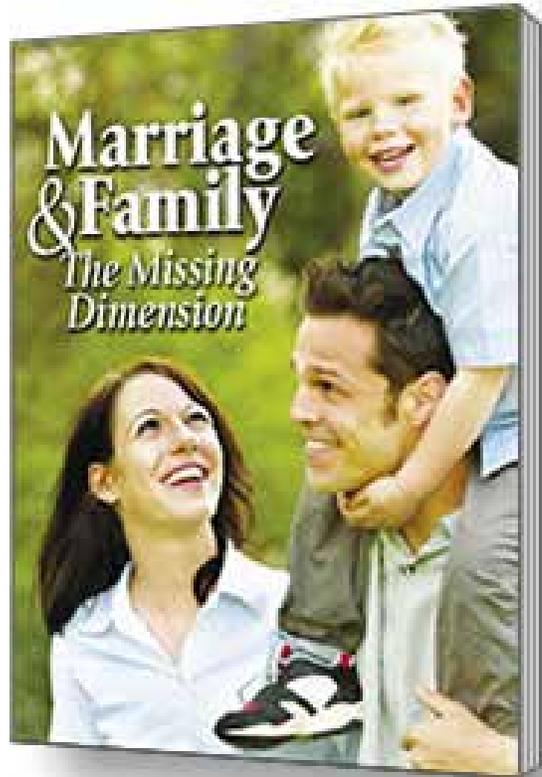
Perhaps the most challenging and helpful way to create a good impression is to become friends with your friend's

So you've figured dating out. **What now?**

If you've finished reading this booklet, you know that dating is just a gateway to something bigger—it's meant to offer a glimpse into how two people would work as husband and wife. But you're also left with a question. No matter how much you stick to the godly advice offered here, you'll eventually need to ask, "What now?"

That's where *Marriage and Family: The Missing Dimension* comes in. You'll find an entire section on "Dating Dos and Don'ts" along with a trove of advice and instruction on married life. Learn why God created marriage and what it points to, understand how to avoid the pitfalls many encounter and discover God's way for making this important relationship the most successful it can be.

Interested? This booklet, like all our literature, is provided free to you both online and in print thanks to the voluntary contributions of the members and coworkers of the United Church of God, *an International Association*. Visit www.ucg.org/booklets/FM to read or order your free copy today, or www.ucg.org/about/ to learn more about the organization behind this e-booklet.



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