Betrothal: Should We Kiss Courtship Goodbye?

Contributed by Israel Wayne
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Courtship is taking the nation by storm. It seems any homeschool convention of substance has some “expert” on marriage preparation who usually explains how courtship is a wise and even “Biblical” alternative to dating. Even the secular media is jumping on the bandwagon, talking about the newest hair-brained scheme of these radical homeschoolers. “What will they think of next?!"

This may come as a surprise to many, but I don’t believe courtship is Biblical. In fact, I don’t even think it is pragmatically wise. From the beginning, I’ve had reservations about it, but now that I’ve had a chance to observe the “courtship movement” for a while, my fears are confirmed. It has created some problematic situations.

Don’t misunderstand; I’m not in support of dating! I believe the promiscuous American dating scene is definitely preparation for divorce, not marriage. The consequences of giving your heart to one person after another, only to have it sent through the meat grinder and handed back to you, is a practice that should have died out with the dinosaurs. Non-committed romantic relationships ought to be absent from a young person’s life. We all need to “kiss dating goodbye.”

The question is, however, “Is courtship the solution to America’s dating crisis?” From what I have observed, I feel I can say emphatically, “No, it is not!”

Chapter And Verse On Courtship

First of all, nowhere in Scripture do we find the term, “Courtship.” It doesn’t exist in the Bible. Actually, neither does the concept. As hard as you may look, there are no “courting couples” in the Bible. That should be our first clue that this is not a completely “Biblical” idea.

The method of marriage found in the Bible is based on covenant relationship, with commitment as the key element. I believe the return to courtship is the result of wanting to turn back the hands of time to a better, more wholesome age. In my mind, it is much like those who wish we could just get the Bible back in the government schools. Sure, that would be nice, but that doesn’t make governmental education a Biblical notion.

In the same way, going back to a simpler time may be refreshing, and certainly it is better than what we are currently seeing, but we shouldn’t settle with what is old; we should desire what is right. Let’s not fall short of God’s best.

One of the main arguments against dating is that it is emotionally damaging to give your heart to someone you aren’t going to marry. I agree completely. Yet, this can also be a problem in a courtship situation. Let me explain.

The Definition Of Terms

As with anything, we have to be clear what we mean when we use certain words. We must be sure we are speaking the same language.

Dating

Dating is a non-committed form of emotional promiscuity, where one is romantically involved with someone whom they have no certainty (and often no intention) of marrying. In most homes, it does not require the blessing or permission of the parents, and it is often unsupervised and unchaperoned. Dating most often includes “going with” and breaking up with numerous people. This is done supposedly to help the young person become accustomed to romance and relationships with the opposite sex. It is supposed to be a psychological necessity for a healthy long-lasting marital relationship.

One pastor went as far as to say that dating was needed because it causes emotional pain, and pain builds character. I feel sorry for this man’s children! Life hands us enough legitimate pain without inflicting unneeded agony on ourselves.

Courtship

Courtship is much more conservative than dating, and almost always mandates the blessing of the parents. The young couple usually meets at the parents’ home, or with a group. There is little physical contact, and usually you would never court anyone who wouldn’t be a serious candidate for marriage. Courtship is considered the interim between just being friends, and being engaged. During the courtship stage, the family tries to determine whether the relationship should progress into an engagement. The parents are usually heavily involved with each stage and often have complete say as to when and if the relationship moves into engagement.

Courting means “wooing, or seeking the affections of another person.” One dictionary even uses the term “flattery.” Unfortunately, if you are trying to gain someone’s favor (as you do in courting and dating), you may put on a false front, and not really act in a normal way. Therefore, couples who have no commitment for marriage, often have a difficult time getting to know the true personality of the person they are courting. This provides many surprises after the honeymoon has ended!

I know many young couples that have been brought together, by the Lord, through courtship (or even dating for that matter). I don’t want to imply that their relationships aren’t legitimate or God-ordained. God can choose to bring two people together using any one of these options, but some are more risky processes than others.

Courtship Gone Wrong

When it works, courtship is better than dating. When it flops, however, it is much more painful. You see, in dating, no one has false expectations. You go into the relationship knowing there is no commitment to marriage. At any time, the other person is free to break up with you. You expect it.

What makes courtship so dangerous is that the young people go into the relationship assuming that they have the

parents’ blessing and that they can move forward into marriage if they want to. They also assume that the other young person is serious about getting married, and there is little chance that the young man will get turned down when he proposes. Oftentimes, these assumptions prove to be dreadfully false.

Let me tell you about a courtship gone wrong which occurred not long ago. A young man went to the father of a certain girl and asked, “May I court your daughter?” The girl’s father knew that the homeschooled young man was a Godly and respectable fellow, so he gave his consent. One evening after dinner six months later, the two fathers of the young courting couple were reclining in the living room.

“Won’t it be wonderful if my daughter and your son get married someday?” exclaims the one father to the other.

“Yes, that will be great.”

“Can you imagine us both being grandfathers? Won’t that be great?”

“Oh yes,” declares the young man’s dad, “They will make great parents.”

“Won’t it be beautiful to see our grandbaby baptized and dedicated to the Lord in the church?” said the girl’s dad, who happened to be a Presbyterian. The other father, a Baptist, wasn’t so sure this was such a great idea.

“My grandchildren will make a confession of faith when they are older, and receive a believers baptism!”

“But, what about the covenant?!” retorted the Presbyterian. The two men began to angrily shout at each other until one of them declared, “This isn’t going to work! Our children simply cannot be married. They aren’t compatible!”

The two young people were banned from ever seeing each other again. The courtship was broken off by the fathers. Can you imagine how devastated this young couple was? They thought they had the blessing of the parents. They assumed the fathers had prayed about the relationship and had only given the go ahead after determining that it was the Lord’s will for these two to be married. This was not the case. This courtship turned out to be a carnal way for these two dads to determine who their children dated (or courted as the case may be). It had nothing to do with the will of God, but was merely regulated by the will of the parents.

Parental control in a relationship, apart from the anointing of the Holy Spirit will bring death and destruction to the beautiful plan of God.

Betrothal

In a betrothal model, there is no intermediate “trial” or “courtship” stage. There is friendship and then there is betrothal or engagement. The two young people initially get to know each other as friends, in a non-romantic setting. They may do this at family get-togethers, or in church or group functions. Ideally, in a betrothal setting, a young man will evaluate a potential wife based on an objective set of Biblical standards and criteria, and if he feels God wants him to marry a certain young woman, he submits this idea to his parents.

If his parents affirm that he should propose to a certain young lady, he then talks to her father. You may have heard the archaic term used in old English marriage ceremonies: “and to thee I plight my troth!” The word “troth” (from which the term “betrothal” comes) is an old English word for “truth.” It sounds funny, but it means the young man was pledging his “loyalty, faithfulness and devotion” to a young woman. Thus the he makes a binding covenant with her and pledges to be faithful to her as long as they both shall live. If the father rejects the young man’s offer, the young man should have the integrity to move on with his life, and not hurt the emotions of the young lady. She should never know he has even proposed.

If the young woman’s father feels that this young man is the one who should marry his daughter, he and his wife talk to their daughter, and the decision is left with her. Her reply to the young man must be one that is approached with sobriety and prayer. If she says no, the father tells the young man, and he respects the young lady’s wishes. (A betrothal is not in any way a prearranged marriage that leaves the young people with no choice in the matter of who they marry. Even the Biblical Rebekah was asked if she would go away and marry Isaac. The decision was hers.) If she is in agreement, they become betrothed, or engaged, and set a date for the wedding.

During the betrothal stage, they have the freedom to become emotionally bonded with each other, since both have committed to marriage. Betrothal is similar to courtship in that it insists that the young people must avoid inordinate physical contact. In fact, my wife and I kissed for the first time at the wedding altar.

In Biblical times, a betrothal was legally binding and in order to break off a betrothal the young man had to give his betrothed a certificate of divorce. They were considered legally bound and committed to marriage.

Prepare For Marriage, Not Divorce

You may wonder why anyone would go through this much trouble to prepare for marriage. Well, that is exactly the point. We want to prepare for “marriage” not divorce. Anytime you give your heart to someone with no commitment for marriage, you will be devastated when you break up. If a conflict of any kind comes up during a courtship, the tendency is to back out of the relationship or to withdraw emotionally. Who wants to go deeper into a relationship where you can’t get along? The reason so many courtships break up is because it is a trial relationship, not a committed one. In a betrothal, if friction occurs (which is almost inevitable as two lives merge toward one), the young couple must work out the problem, just as they will for their whole married life. Therefore it develops skills they will use for the years to come, and breaks the cycle of backing away from relationships when the going gets tough.

Do You Eventually “Fall In Love?”

Well, my wife and I have, and so has every other betrothed couple I have known. Because there is security in knowing the other person accepts you as you are, you can be yourself. That allows your fiancée the freedom to fall in love with the “real you,” not the “pretend person” you become when they are around. The betrothal is

a wonderfully romantic time, because there is safety in knowing where you stand with the other person.
After marriage the relationship is very romantic, because you have avoided all of the pain and hurt that usually comes with dating or emotional manipulation. The couple is free to give and receive love, rather than artificially “winning” their spouse’s affections. Yes, you “fall in love.” The difference is that your emotions follow you; you don’t follow your emotions. If the romantic feelings begin to wane during marriage, it doesn’t shake you.
You have built on commitment, rather than a feeling. By being committed to each other you don’t divorce when the going gets tough. The good news is, if you hang in there, the feelings come back around. In fact, they grow deeper because of serious love and covenantal commitment.
As someone who is happily married as a result of following a betrothal pattern, I highly recommend it to anyone who desires a long lasting, and, yes, romantic relationship with their spouse.

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