

Dating and Marriage

The first wedding ceremony was in paradise. God united Adam and Eve in marriage. Centuries later our Lord said about this union, "What God has joined together let not man separate" (Matt. 19:6). With this in mind, the choice of marriage partner has always been a matter of prayer and discussion for Christian parents and their children. Whom should their children marry? Bennie de Klerk's insightful article [Christian Dating?](#) he says that being a Christian means doing things in the way of Christ: thus, going steady also in a way that Christ would approve. " Does the relationship bring the people closer to Christ or does it draw them away from Him? Christian dating means service of Christ in one's love life also." Young people who place their love life under the authority of Christ confess that they are guided and controlled by Christ, and the aim of their relationship will be to the honour of Christ. For a Christian young person the Lord determines everything. Outward appearance will not be the determining factor. Nobody can live off the outward only. What eventually binds one to another is a thing called personality, view of life, religious vitality, helpfulness, sense of humour, tenderness and maturity. What should be the criteria of a choice of partner, someone with whom you will share the remainder of your life? They include religious views, worldview, cultural background, intellectual ability and emotional supplementation of each other. De Klerk states that the opinion of other members of the family is also important He sees dating as a development of a serious relationship. He uses the phrase "courtship". This is the noun for courting, which a dictionary defines as a "process or period of 'wooing before marriage." Through their courtship the couple discovers whether or not they are suited for each other. And if they discover they are not compatible, it is better to break off the relationship. Breaking a relationship can be exceedingly painful. That's why De Kierk opines, "Sober judgment and inner strength are needed to end a relationship which is built on a shaky foundation."

Biblical Principles for a Relationship

For a Christian young person the Bible provides clear principles for the development of a relationship in courtship. Bennie de Klerk says that the all-encompassing principle is that the relationship should be to the greater glory of God (1 Cor.10:31). Thoughts, deeds and conversations will be determined by it. And everything must be done out of love for God (Mark 12:30). Every aspect of the relationship has to be guided by an all consuming passion for the Lord. When a Christian boy and girl begin to date they should keep in mind the presence of a third party. They are the property of Christ. Their attitude should show that they associate themselves with Christ, otherwise they in turn will be denied by Christ (Luke 12:8,9). Do your actions within the relationship show that you belong to Christ? A believer has a new life (2 Cor.5:17). If such a person is involved in a love relationship, he/she must consistently reveal that he/she is a new person. One vital characteristic of the new life is gratitude (Rom.12 :1). The building of a relationship and the way feelings are shown to each other should be part of this. A believer's goal is to build up the other party in the relationship. People often say, "I do not care what others think." This is the sin of me-ism. Each party in the relationship should contribute to the spiritual growth of the other.

The principles of spiritual separation should also be practiced. Psalm 1 speaks of integration with mockers. Paul teaches that we have to stay away from unbelievers (2

Cor.6 :14-18). De Klerk comments, "This principle teaches that a young person's selection of friends should be done soberly, seriously and honestly." We may not gamble with relationships. We may not tempt the Lord (Matth.4:7). Don't try to see how far one can go physically. Nobody should be so sure of him/herself that he/she can reason: "I won't fall. It won't happen to me". If a believer has any doubts about actions within a relationship the principle of Romans 14:22-23 is still valid. Everything we do must come from the conviction that it is not harming our relationship with Christ.

The application of these principles requires prayer. The wisdom of the Holy Spirit is needed for the healthy spiritual growth of every relationship.

Bennie De Klerk also gives this practical advice. He says that one of the greatest mistakes made by young people is that they get too serious too early. Often they still maintain that they are not serious, but their lifestyle tells a different story.

Marriage

A British pastor once spoke about "three times sprinkled" Christians. He meant with that, people who have contact with the church only three times. When they are baptized they get sprinkled with water. When they get married in church they get sprinkled with flowers. And of course when they get buried they get sprinkled with earth. In Canada, surveys show that the public at large continues to look to the church for services such as baptisms, confirmations, weddings and funerals. These are usually referred to as "rites of passage." A 40-year old inactive church member argued, "Just because people don't attend Church doesn't mean they don't believe in God and shouldn't be able to be baptized, married, and buried in a church, which represents God." But this is Christianity at a bargain bin price. The church is there only to provide a touch of class to an important event; but life itself remains untouched by the Gospel.

"Rites of passage" are not part of our Reformed evangelical tradition. When, for example, I am asked to perform a wedding, I must be sure that whatever I do is in agreement with the Church Order, which says, "Consistories shall instruct and admonish those under their spiritual care to marry only in the Lord. Christian marriages should be solemnized with appropriate admonitions, promises and prayers, as provided for in the official form. Marriages may be solemnized either in a worship service, or in private gatherings of relatives and friends. Ministers shall not solemnize marriages which would be in conflict with the Word of God" (CO.Art.69).

Should ministers continue to be licensed to perform weddings? In the Netherlands the church does not have the right to solemnize marriages. To get married a couple must go to the civil magistrate. Consequently, Christian marriages are confirmed by the church immediately following the civil ceremony. I believe that we too should get out of the "marriage business" and only confirm a marriage after the couple has been to the justice of the peace or some other functionary with the right to perform civil marriages.

Why marry in Church? A Christian bridal couple wishes to confess their oneness in Christ, the reality of God in their lives. By coming to church the couple seeks the blessing of the Lord upon their union. They also ask God to enable them to be a joy and a blessing to

others. God Himself is the witness of the promises of faithfulness, love and commitment exchanged (Mal.2:14). And of this covenant God is not only the witness but also the Guardian.

Premarital Counseling

Why premarital counseling? Because the family structure has drastically weakened. This is not only true in Canada but in many parts of the industrialized world. The so-called nuclear family no longer seems adequate or appropriate for some; an increasingly growing number of people are looking for alternative family life styles. Divorce is rampant with all its attendant hurts, grief and damages, especially to children. Since the family is experiencing more pressure, strain and tension than ever before, young couples should go into marriage well prepared. No premarital counseling course is going to guarantee a happy and lasting marriage. This is impossible. But the church has a responsibility toward each couple it marries. As someone commented, "The church's ministry is not to conduct weddings. Its ministry is to nurture marriages, before and during marriage. If couples cannot make a commitment to nurture their marriage prior to the event, then the church should say we cannot have your marriage solemnized here." I wholeheartedly concur.

The family was in the mind of God before the creation of the world. In paradise God performed the first wedding. He both solemnized and witnessed the ceremony. Marriage, therefore, is not primarily a social institution. It was established by God before the fall (Gen.1:28,2:23,24). The fullest revelation in Scripture on the question of marriage by both our Lord and the apostle Paul appeals to Genesis 2:24 as the definitive word of institution (Matth.19:3-9; Mark 10:3-9; Eph.5:31).

In our world dominated by self-will, self-expression, relativism and frustration, the Church should reaffirm the Biblical teaching on marriage and the family. "Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain" (Ps.127:1a).

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