

METHODS OF ENTANGLEMENT

Ah, romance! That wonderful, elusive feeling of love that fills our hearts, fuels our songs and poetry, and drives us into various types of insanity. Where can a young man or woman find instruction in this matter? We wonder if the greatest source of wisdom in the world could provide understanding. So we turn to the prominent teacher in the New Testament church to learn of his instructions in the subject of love. We quickly determine that Paul must have been a really odd sort. Some of the statements that he made sure capture our attention. Especially the one where he instructs the church that it is better to marry than to burn. The first time we read this, it seemed he was saying the choices were limited to marriage or hell. Then he went on to say that it would be better not to marry at all and the waters get even muddier. When we read though, that no one who is called to be a soldier should entangle himself with the affairs of this world, things began to clarify themselves somewhat.

Professional soldiers don't begin families or accumulate possessions. They serve only one master. They must be able to travel instantly to wherever their services are needed without taking time to secure or store possessions they may never return for. Neither do most begin families, knowing well they would most likely leave behind widows and orphans. Their lives are forfeit to the will of their masters and their eventual end is death. This is acceptable to them and a choice they have made. But they usually make it for themselves alone.

Paul was instructing those who had committed themselves to Christ to view their lives in the same fashion. In order to be totally free to follow the leading and will of God, possessions were to be kept to a minimum. Jesus instructed his disciples to carry no money, coat, or food with them. Likewise, it was better, if a servant of Christ could bear it, to remain alone. That way, their commitment, devotion, and service could be given wholly to God. Only, if they burned with God instilled passion toward another, it was perfectly acceptable, and indeed better, that they marry the one they loved. Paul had the wisdom to understand fundamental truths about the union between a man and a woman. Truths that our families, customs, and society, with its practice of "dating", have largely missed.

There is a concept described in scripture as "one flesh". This is a brief description of what occurs when a man and woman come together in the consummation of a marriage. It is not the act, it is the result of the act. From the time that Eve was created, a piece has been missing from every man who dwells alone. She was brought to Adam as a helpmate, or as it is rendered in other translations, a "completer". Man is not truly complete in the way he was when created, until he has been united with a woman. What happens in the act of love is more than an overlapping of bodies. It is an overlapping, and to some degree, an exchange of the souls. This is why, after the act, the man is usually caring, more sensitive, more "feminine", if you will, while the woman has become a little more "masculine", or assertive. This is also why, over the life span of a marriage, a man and wife will grow to become more and more like one another. They are gradually acquiring more bits and pieces of the other's soul, will, and intellect. They become so attached and bonded by those acts of love and the exchange of themselves that separation is always painful and damaging. As when separating pieces of wood glued together, there is a tearing and ripping away that occurs, rather than a clean break. It is this pair, bonded by marriage, that God no longer views as two people, but one flesh. They serve Him, live for Him, and die for Him as two parts of one entity.

Entering into the contract of marriage is a rearrangement of priorities. The lives of one or both partners may have been totally committed to God before the union. Afterwards, the first priority of both must be to each other, and the priority of the union toward God. The Bible goes so far as to say that the man who does not provide for his own is worse than an infidel. What a difference from

our instruction as disciples of Christ to take no heed for the morrow. In the married version, if we fail in our responsibilities to our spouse and children, the heathens who never knew God are better than we are. We have suddenly substituted entanglements of this world for pure service to God. But we have done it in an institution ordained and blessed by God that results in a more complete version of ourselves being given to God's work. There is no such blessing on the practice of dating.

Dating is our answer to the seemingly unnatural state of being alone. It often becomes a way to enjoy some or all of the pleasures of marriage without the commitment. What typically occurs on a date is one or all of three things. The first is an effort to impress or interest the other partner to the point where they desire and enter into some type of a commitment to the relationship. This is attractive from the standpoint that they are no longer viewed socially as unable to attract a partner. It is also a response to a deeper desire to mean something to someone else, to be needed by them, and to complete them. Another activity is simply to enjoy the company of each other in lieu of being alone (which can better be done in the context of a shared friendship, rather than a romantic date). The third and increasingly more common activity is to take as much physical pleasure from one another as is allowed. The first and third of these activities are training grounds for failed marriages. Essentially, what is happening is the setting of a pattern. I will try out this partner for a while. If they fail to keep my interest, impress me, or give me the pleasure that I want, I will drop them and move on to someone else. Furthermore, I will do this over and over until I find one that, for one reason or another, seems like a good fit and marry them. What difference does it make? If it doesn't work out, I will just - you guessed it - drop them and try again. In a society where acts of love ordained for marriage are routinely part of dating, is it any wonder that so many who play that game are no longer sure of who they are? With so many pieces of others' souls in them, how could they be?

This longing to be complete, this desire to share life with another, seems to be an understandable reason for the practice of dating. Especially for those who feel incomplete whenever they are by themselves. It is an even better justification for betrothal. Betrothal is an old term, but a concept that has been around since the beginning of multiplication upon the earth. In light of escalating divorce rates, even among Christians, it deserves a second look. Contrary to modern notions of love, it works very well. It probably contains many answers to the questions you will have to deal with.

The teen years are full of turmoil as decisions are being made that will have an effect on the rest of life. They are training years. Training for the area of ministry towards which God is directing you. Regardless of what this calling may be, time will be spent in school or college, fine tuning the talents God has given you and preparing for life on your own. Time will be spent making developing friendships and learning social skills needed to be a part of society. As more and more decisions are made on your own, they will hopefully lead to a deepening of your commitment and your relationship with Jesus Christ. Essentially, in these years, you will be defining who you are, what you want to do with the rest of your life, and what must be done to make those goals a reality.

The friends you choose are one of the most important decisions you will make. When one of these friendships is changed by "dating," the rest of your life can become off balance. Instead of trying to learn who you are and what it takes to please God, it is easy to focus on trying to learn who your partner is and what it takes to please them. We all desire to be liked, loved, and accepted. This is as we were created to be. The problem with dating is that we have taken the decision out of God's hands on when He will send us a "completer". It is more pleasurable to conduct a search on our own. If we have put all the aspects of our lives under the dominion of our Lord Jesus Christ, why are we so quick to assume that He can not supply the most basic of needs with which He created us? In His own good time for our lives.

The concept of betrothal offers an alternative. Young people are encouraged to develop friendships of both sexes. However, an individual partner is not singled out to “go with”, go steady with”, or to date. These exclusionary practices all serve to prevent the continuing development of friendship with others and are based on a premise of ownership that is ordained by God only in the context of marriage. Rather, friendships are developed in the company of family and friends in public circumstances. In this setting, it is easier to learn who the other person really is than through an image put forth merely to impress a date. There is also ample opportunity to truly evaluate the depth of another’s commitment to the service of God. This is often the last thing that is discovered in the traditional form of dating. The success of betrothal is ultimately dependant upon both parties seeking the will of God for a mate, and trusting God to direct them to the one unique partner He has created to complete them.

When a young man believes that he is ready to take on the responsibilities of caring for a wife, and / or children, he has probably already begun looking toward a young lady he feels would be a good “helpmeet” for him and his ministry to God. Someone whose company he is already sure he will enjoy. Someone he would be willing to love. A set of actions, rather than emotions. After obtaining the advice and permission of his parents, the parents of the girl are then approached with a request to permit betrothal, preparatory to marriage. If the parents and the young lady are in agreement, supervised visits between the two are allowed for the purpose of deepening friendship and compatibility, not as a tryout. Unless definite problems or incompatibilities arise, under additional guidelines, the marriage is allowed to proceed. The primary difference in the betrothing relationship is that both understand, up front, what they are deciding is whether to enter into a life long commitment to each other. A fulfillment of God’s purpose for their creation.

What are the benefits of such an archaic practice? The first is that it is possible to maintain friendships. If Dad is the one who says no, for whatever reason, the rejection has not occurred between the two young people. Their friendship can continue in a way that never occurs when two lovers cease dating. If Dad was prompted in his decision by the daughter, no one need know. A second advantage is that the parents will not be terribly impressed by physical attributes that sometimes cloud the judgments of the young. They will be looking instead for the attributes that lend themselves to the creation of successful husbands or wives. The third benefit is that any young man willing to have his case presented or present it himself to a young woman’s parents is probably a cut above the rest. He definitely has some degree of personal courage and fortitude. Almost certainly, he is very serious about what he is undertaking and has probably already begun thinking about and preparing for his role as a father and provider. Young people who submit themselves to the authority of their parents and to the will of God for His plan for their lives, already have a good grasp of the principles and attitudes necessary to be successful in marriage and service to God. Probably the most significant blessing of betrothal for those who have committed their lives and trust in this area to God is the loss of distraction. If you are trusting God to lead you to the man or woman you are to marry, a tremendous amount of time, attention, and resources can be turned to the establishment of your ministry in the will of God.

Did we date when we were younger? Oh yes! If we had it to do over again, would we choose to date again? Not knowing what we know now. Would we choose to enter into an espousal relationship if we were lonely? Probably! But we are no longer young. And we do not have to make that choice. Our children do.

Understand though, that what you are choosing between is really two ways of fulfilling God’s intention for the union between a man and a woman. One way is man’s method and always produces scars that will be carried into marriage. The other, to some extent, is an act of faith. It is

beautifully described in the arrangement of the marriage between Isaac and Rebecca. One can work out relatively fine and hopefully leave you only mildly scarred and battered from the pain involved. The other leaves you free for the service of God until such time as you choose to join with another in that same service. Is dating evil and out of the will of God? Well, it almost certainly violates the precepts that can be drawn from the admonition in 1 Thess 4:7 not to defraud another man or the command in 1 Timothy 5:2 to the young men of the church to treat young women as sisters. It is doubtful that most behavior in dating emulates a brother and sister relationship. The concept of dating is also not mentioned anywhere in God's Word, positively or negatively. It is a recent invention of man alone that upon inspection, seems to produce fruits that are neither pure, nor good, nor lovely. We do know that marriage and espousal are types and shadows of both salvation and the union between God and His church. And that our jealous God, who demands purity and fidelity from His people, (who, by the way, He also has arranged to marry in a betrothal relationship) has never shown a casual interest in any other partner. At least, not to date.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What do you think Paul meant by marriage being better than burning?
2. Have you ever known anyone to consciously choose to remain single in order to devote their whole life to God? Would you consider someone making such a choice to be weird? How many forms of religion have you heard of that require this from their leadership?
3. What kind of freedom would you have to minister in the cause of Christ if you were totally alone with no possessions to worry about?
4. The phrase, "amicable divorce," is often used to describe uncontested separations of couples. How many pain free and friendly divorces have you observed?
5. Have you ever observed that the more intimate a relationship is allowed to become, the less likely it is that friendship will remain after the relationship is ended? Why does this happen?
6. Given the fact that your soul is comprised also of your mind, would it be true that every time you interact with someone else, to a small degree, you become a part of their memories and a part of their soul?
7. Is it sobering to think that you will bring into your marriage, everyone you became intimate with to any degree? How will your future mate feel about that? Does it matter to you? Does it matter whose souls they will bring with them and unite to yours?
8. If your priorities are toward God now, do you think that will stay that way after marriage?
9. What are some of the negative aspects of dating, from a personal, group, church, and Christian standpoint? What are the positives? Which positives have historically been reserved for marriage? Why?
10. When historically did the practice of "dating" begin? Are there any examples of it in the scriptures? How about any time before recent history? If not, who probably authored it? Man, Satan, or God?
11. Of the marriages that you know of that have worked well and stayed intact for many years, how many of the people involved dated large numbers of partners beforehand? Is the opposite true?
12. How many youth groups do you know of that have had the unity of the group absolutely destroyed by dating and the venom generated by rejection, failure, and the taking of sides? How much potential good for the Kingdom of God is lost through the destruction of the unity?
13. Have you ever wondered how God intended for a couple to find one another? Have you ever discussed the concept of betrothal?
14. Do you believe that you were created to be the completer for one other specific and unique person? That God has one true match for you somewhere?

15. If God has promised to supply all of your needs according to His riches in glory, and you believe that He loves you, are you content to wait till He brings that one person into your life? What if all your friends marry long before you do? Would they feel that you are somehow defective and unwanted? Would you feel that way?
16. What if His perfect will for you is for you to live and die for Him alone? Could you accept that?
17. When we take matters into our own hands and try out several in order to pick out a mate out that appeals to our sense of beauty or self esteem, and we marry them, does God give up on His perfect will for our life in this area? What about His will for the one He created for us? Their mate? The one we married under our own terms?
18. Have you ever thought about what you want to accomplish with your life and if your choice of friends might change those plans?
19. Is it common to exclusively date one person and still meet and develop friendships with other members of the opposite sex?
20. Is the person you meet on a date the same person you would meet if they were part of a larger group with you? How much role playing occurs on a date? Is it safe to say that for the most part, you try to act like the person you think your date wants you to be?
21. At what point in the modern path to marriage do most people discover the real person they have married? What options are available if they are disappointed?
22. Does the concept of betrothal presented sound archaic? Foolish? Too old-fashioned to work? What advantages can you see in it? What disadvantages? Have you ever known anyone to pursue this path or a similar one to marriage? How stable does that marriage seem?
23. Would you have enough trust in your parents to place such control over your future in their hands?
24. Do you think their authority over you extends to decisions over how you will find a mate? If you have been called of God to a particular ministry, then began dating, how has your ministry fared as a result?
25. How much faith do you have that God will order your life in such a way that you will be truly happy? The scriptures tell us that the steps of a righteous man are ordered by God. Do you trust Him to direct your steps?
26. If you take a "first time" from your date that should rightfully belong to a husband or wife, with no intention of entering into marriage, have you defrauded a brother or a sister? What about their future mate? Have you stolen something that should have been theirs?
27. Can you imagine getting a mate at the marriage altar that had never given their love to another, never held, kissed, petted, or made love to any one but you, before, or forever? Every discovery about love and intimacy that you make would be made together. Does that idea appeal to you?