

Dear brother or sister in Christ,

This is the final installment in our series investigating what God has to say about single men and women relating to each other with a view to finding a suitable marriage partner. Last month I set forth a few of the guiding principles we have adopted both in our family and in our counseling of young people during our 31 years of vocational ministry. This month I'd like to apply those principles to teenagers still living at home and then to young adults. I will repeat what I said last month: these principles and these actions I am relating are not God ordained but rather an attempt to apply the biblical principles that we have discussed. You may agree with the biblical principles I've discussed but disagree with how I am applying those principles. What I and those who disagree with me must remember is that all of us will answer to God for how we've sought to apply the biblical principles (Romans 14:9-12) and we must accept one another as brothers and sisters in Christ and not act as though our way is the only God approved way of doing these things (Romans 14:1-23).

We have sought to talk with our children about masculinity and femininity and about their sexuality in age appropriate ways throughout their childhood. Hopefully, we have modeled Christian behavior in our relationship and in relationship to others of the opposite sex. So as we've come into the teen years we have a foundation upon which to build. When our children turn 13 I have taken each of my boys camping for the purpose of discussing sexuality and appropriate relationships with girls. Jane has done the same with our girls, though in a more civilized setting, i.e. a hotel. While I'm not sure how much content they have remembered from these getaways it has established a pattern of frank discussion about these issues.

Our main concerns for them during their teen years are encouraging them to pursue Christ personally, maintaining quality relationships with our family, getting an education, participation in extracurricular activities and developing a network of friends within the church and/or the broader Christian community. We have not permitted them to date at all. They have been involved in a wide range of events and social gatherings, always in group settings. We have sought to monitor and evaluate their emotional attachments and to help them think through how to be friendly with all people and yet maintain an appropriate aloofness and reticence in relation to the opposite sex. Our most painful and difficult moments have come as we have sought to help our children pull back from relationships that we felt were becoming too intimate. We have not always responded with the gentle, firm and wise counsel that befits Christian parents. So as we seek to help our children fight their sin we must also fight our own sin. Every parent needs to remember that God gives us children as instruments in our own sanctification. Also we must remember to not panic. Christ came to redeem sinners and so when our children prove to us they are sinners, we should not fear but seek to help them see Christ and the beauty of his salvation.

As our children enter into young adulthood they come to that place in life where marriage becomes a real possibility. Our relationship with young adult children, whether in the home or out of the home changes in that we no longer have much coercive power over

them. Our ability to guide them is much the same with them as it is with other believers; it is the power of wise counsel. We have made it clear that we do not feel that a person needs to date widely in order to find a suitable marriage partner. There is no need to enter into multiple exclusive romantic relationships in order to find the “right one.” Finding God’s will in the selection of a marriage partner is not like looking for a needle in the haystack. As the Christian pursues Christ and a life that is worthy of him in the context of meaningful involvement in the community of faith God will lead his children to one another.

One of the biblical principles that does come into play at this time of life is the principle of male leadership. Although our culture denies and scorns the idea, young women should not be taking the initiative in discovering the interest level of young men. Young men have to live courageously, by faith in Christ as they take the risk of finding out if a young woman may or may not be interested in them. This “investigation” should take place in the company of family, both biological and spiritual and with much wise counsel from older and trusted Christians. Young men must take the lead in keeping the relationship above reproach at every stage of the relationship. Young men and women who are not married should not act like they are married either sexually, financially, socially or emotionally. Until the wedding, there must remain a restraint between the young couple, which they willingly invite others to help them maintain.

Romantic feelings are a good gift from God and should be part of every dating/courting/engaged (and married) couple’s experience. Yet, couples must have the wisdom to recognize that those romantic feelings are not what give a solid foundation to a marriage. There must be an ongoing openness to the counsel of those who love them and whom God has placed in their lives to help them discern what is best. More than one divorce or one conflicted marriage could have been prevented if young men and women would have remained open to counsel during their dating/courtship experience. So young couples, with the man taking the lead, must seek out both the counsel and the participation of others to help them discern God’s will and to maintain a God-honoring pre-married relationship.

Obviously there is much more that can be said about these matters. I trust that this and the previous articles give a good foundation for all of us as we think through and live out these very important relationships.

In the mercy of Christ,