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The True Path to Love? Sorting Out the Options

The issues of dating, courtship, and marriage have become hot-button concerns among American evangelicals—and especially among young people, their parents, and those who would minister among them. This much is clear: The model of dating, “hooking up,” and romantic involvement that prevails in the larger culture is incompatible with the Christian understanding of marriage, love, sex, and romance.

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So, what are Christians to do? In one sense, Joshua Harris lit the fuse on the current discussion with the publication of his book, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* in 1997. Since the publication of Harris’s book, writing books on courtship and dating has become something of a cottage industry among evangelicals.

Now, Alex Chediak attempts to clear the air with the publication of *Five Paths to the Love of Your Life: Defining Your Dating Style*. Chediak hopes to assist parents and young people as they try to determine a truly Christian model for the development of romantic relationships in preparation for marriage.

Chediak is currently an apprentice at The Bethlehem Institute in Minneapolis, Minnesota under the direction of Dr. John Piper. While serving in Nevada as a pastoral intern, Chediak had presented a series of messages on singleness, romance, and biblical wisdom to a local congregation. In the process of preparing those messages, he encountered the very confusion he now attempts to clarify.

Chediak has pulled together a top-rank team of writers, each of whom has given serious thought to these questions. Some are already publicly identified with these concerns, while readers may be introduced to at least some of these authors for the first time.

In *Five Paths to the Love of Your Life*, Chediak brings together authors Lauren F. Winner, Douglas Wilson, Rick Holland, Jonathan Lindvall, and Jeremy and Jerusha Clark. Through these authors, the book introduces the reader to five different “paths” toward romance, love, and marriage. This much is clear—*Five Paths to the Love of Your Life* will plow new ground and prompt many energetic conversations.

“Deep down inside, many Christians are frustrated with their dating experiences,” Chediak advises. “They’ve been wounded. They’ve given in to sexual temptation. They’ve compromised their standards to avoid being lonely. They know, instinctively, that it should not be this way. Most do not desire to position themselves for lifelong singleness, but very few know how to go about finding true, lasting, committed, exclusive love.” Thus, “This book is here to help.”

The structure of the book allows each of the five “paths” to be presented with both theoretical explanation and practical application. Readers are almost certain to find some questions unanswered in these presentations, but this book offers a fair and informative analysis that will inform and prompt further thinking.

Lauren F. Winner argues for what she calls “the countercultural path” to love. Winner is perhaps the most interesting writer to be included in this collection. Just a few years ago, her writings on the issue of unmarried sex sparked

considerable controversy in evangelical circles. Her new book, *Real Sex: The Naked Truth About Chastity*, offers a truly counter-cultural perspective on human sexuality. Clearly, Winner has been thinking seriously about these issues, even as she has spoken openly about her own spiritual pilgrimage and intellectual path.

From the onset, Lauren Winner offers the most comprehensive cultural analysis of dating, courtship, and the big picture. In a very helpful section of her chapter, she traces the historical development of dating, offering the interesting insight that dating has served to weaken the role of girls and women in the romantic equation. When the female (or her parents) held the power to determine whether young men would be allowed to come “calling” on her at the family home, the young woman had considerable protections, as well as considerable opportunities to make certain that the relationship did not get out of control. Dating, defined in contemporary American life as a couple going out and spending money—with the romantic context now explicitly outside of the home and the male in almost total control of the setting—changed the picture significantly.

Winner’s “countercultural path” is based in an embrace of chastity, community, love, and marriage. Chastity, she admits, “is one of those uncomfortable, old-fashioned, exceedingly churchy words.” Nevertheless, “it is unavoidable when talking about Christian dating.” She acknowledges the pervasiveness of sexuality within the ambient culture, but insists that chastity stands at the very center of a truly Christian vision. Chastity, of course, “means reserving sex for marriage and safeguarding marital sexuality.” Thus, Winner’s path to true romance, love, and marriage starts in a rebellion against the promiscuity of a generation now accustomed to “hooking up” and to references such as “friends with benefits.”

Winner also pushes her countercultural agenda by insisting that community must also be involved. She roots this in a Christian vision of the church as the believing community, drawn together in obedience to Christ and encouraging one another to faithfulness. “Our surrounding society tells us that marriage is a private endeavor,” she acknowledges, “that what happens between husband and wife behind closed doors is no one else’s concern. But in Christian terms, marriage is not merely for the married, it is also for the church, because marriage hints at and reminds us of the eschatological union between Christ and the church.”

Love, she reminds, “is not merely—or even primarily—an emotion.” That is a profoundly countercultural (and profoundly biblical) assertion. Looking beyond the initial experience of love, Winner acknowledges that all dating “involves, at least implicitly, the question of marriage.”

Yet, beyond her incontrovertibly countercultural guidelines, the reader is likely to be left somewhat confused about what Winner would have Christian young people to do. She clearly wants them to be motivated by the Great Commandment, understanding that our primary duty is to love God and then to love our neighbor, but Winner does not suggest any particular structure for dating or courtship. She does state that “breaking up or even dating for the sake of dating isn’t necessarily improper.”

The very next chapter indicates just how controversial that assertion has become. In “The Courtship Path,” Douglas Wilson, of New St. Andrews College in Idaho argues for a more traditional model of courtship. In Wilson’s understanding, “courtship is the active, involved authority of the young woman’s father in the formation of her romantic attachments leading to marriage.” Wilson’s vision is rooted in a biblical understanding of patriarchy and will take the reader into an even deeper rebellion against the prevailing culture.

“In the everyday biblical circumstance, sons leave and daughters are given,” Wilson explains. “A Christian father, therefore, has the duty to live for his wife and daughters in such a sacrificial and Christlike way that they see that he always has their best interests at heart, and having their best interests at heart means that he has a biblical responsibility to look sideways and squinty-eyed at any suitor that comes around.”

Why? Wilson understands the nature of male desire and the romantic equation. “When a guy singles out a young woman in some romantic fashion, this means one of two things is happening. Either he is trying to get her into bed dishonorably, or he is attempting to get her into bed honorably. In either case, there is a sexual element involved.”

Wilson understands that his patriarchal approach runs into head-to-head conflict with the contemporary egalitarian values of the culture. But what he is calling for is represented by parents who genuinely love and respect their children, and want the very best for them—not an overbearing patriarch who exercises his will by whim.

Rick Holland, pastor of College and Student Ministries at Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, California, argues for what he calls “the guided path.” Holland, who also teaches at the Master’s College and Seminary, writes out of vast experience in working with young people and their parents. His wise advice that Christians should avoid endless debates over terminology is grounded in his pastoral experience and in the fact that he is certain that the Bible speaks adequately to how Christians—both young persons and parents—should understand the challenge of romance and love.

Holland offers “ten principles for a God-centered relationship” that he uses to guide those in his own ministry. His principles cover the waterfront from character and the involvement of parents to contentment and the proper relationship between men and women according to Scripture. His principles protect the integrity of marriage and are intended also to guard the moral purity and emotional integrity of the young people involved in establishing romantic relationships.

“We live in a world stained by sin,” Holland reminds. “No relationship system can undo the personal and cultural consequences of our depravity. The only hope for us is in the death of Jesus Christ and the gift of His righteousness.” Therefore, given the fallenness of the world and the sinfulness of human beings, young people should be guided by Scripture (and by their parents) in applying biblical principles to courtship.

Jonathan Lindvall, a well-known proponent of homeschooling, house churches, and presenter of “Bold Christian Youth Seminars” around the nation, proposes the most tightly structured option found in the book. His “betrothal path” is rooted in his conviction “that God ordained betrothal and marriage to reveal something about His heart that no other metaphor reveals.”

Lindvall helpfully defines biblical betrothal as “a covenant relationship that defines the process between singleness and marriage.” As in the Bible, this covenant is as irrevocable as marriage but does not yet authorize sexual union. “The betrothal period is a season of preparation for marriage—particularly for preparing one’s heart,” he explains.

The betrothal path requires the active involvement of parents, who protect their children until they are ready for covenant commitment and an irrevocable commitment to marriage. The goal is to present a husband and wife who are sexually undefiled and free from the emotional damage of previous entanglements.

Jeremy and Jerusha Clark argue for the least structured option, “the purposeful path.” They urge that Christians should not adopt a definition of dating that is so restrictive that they must “turn down opportunities to enjoy the company of the opposite sex” simply because the context does not fit their definition. Nevertheless, they also argue that Christians should not accept such a broad definition of dating that would serve to excuse “worldly ways of interacting with the opposite sex.” The Clarks insist that teenagers should accept the authority and rules set by parents, but their main concern is that young people should exercise “forethought, good judgment, and good communication” in order to date wisely.

Until the publication of *Five Paths to the Love of Your Life*, readers were required to assemble a small library of individual volumes in order to consider the arguments represented by these five positions. Of course, these five “paths” are only a hint of how this issue is being debated, discussed, and developed among evangelical Christians. Nevertheless, it is an invaluable introduction.

I am greatly encouraged to see this discussion emerge, and now is the time for Christians to address these questions seriously, soberly, and scripturally. The rejection of the prevailing secular model of dating and the emergence of a Christian conversation about courtship is a sign of hope. *Five Paths to the Love of Your Life* will be helpful to young people, their parents, and church leaders. The book is almost surely to become text for group study in many local churches and student ministries. But this discussion shouldn’t start or stop there. Parents should read this book, put it in the hands of their teenagers and young adult children, and use this framework in order to define and develop their own biblical understanding — even as they exercise their responsibility to lead their own children into maturity.

