Teen intimacy, orphanages, and abortion

As you begin Lindvall's article on "An Alternative to Dating," you may wonder, *What is this doing in a publication whose focus is abortion and other life and death issues?* It's an appropriate subject despite any initial misgivings you may have.

In our age it's not uncommon to hear of ten and twelve year olds "going steady," or to see thirteen and fifteen year old girls carrying around a baby of their own. Despite these facts, many Christians have a response that can be characterized as cynical or downright disdainful when it is proposed that they forbid their children to date. *"That's not practical,"* is the message that comes across almost without a word being spoken.

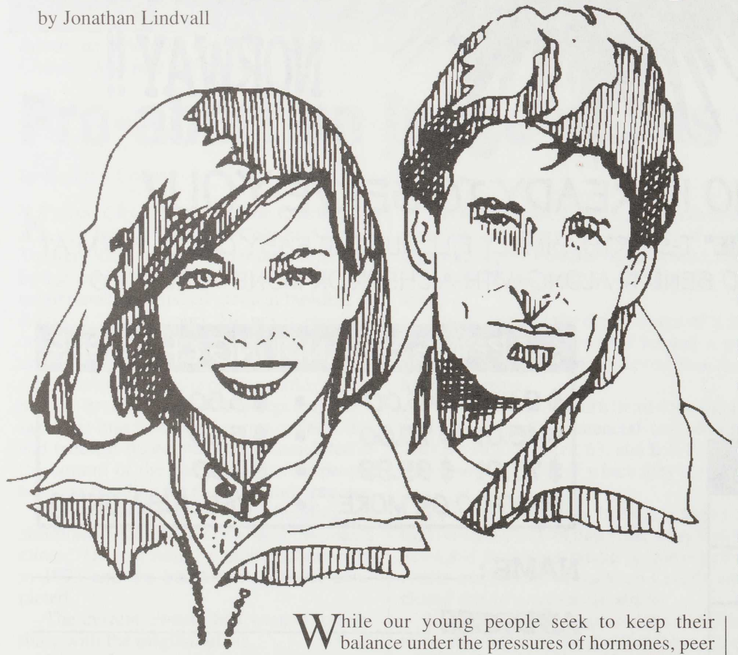
Dating has become an institution in America. In fact, almost anyone asked would probably insist that dating is an age-old custom and no doubt founded upon a pattern in Scripture . . . somewhere . . . But the reality is that it is not a God-ordained institution. And while it is also not readily apparent that dating is God-forbidden (we don't find specific commands), the incredible rise in teen sexual activity (fornication) stands as testimony to what some would argue is a biblical principle against it.

Dealing with the subject of dating is akin to dealing with the subject of homeless children these days. There is the tendency to believe that our modern day institution of dating, like foster care, is part of a superior social order. In fact, dating is relatively new and has arguably culminated in the breaking down of natural barriers between teens; premature involvement in acts of intimacy; and a teen birth rate that has only increased our use of other failed institutions like government-supervised foster care.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with asking the question, *"Should we abandon the system of dating?"* any more than it's wrong to ask if it is time to return to the institution of caring for abused or parentless children by once again establishing orphanages. There are simply some institutions and practices that will not stand the test of time. And when there is no biblical substantiation for them, Christians ought to be among the most willing to reexamine them and offer sound biblical solutions to today's problems. ■

An alternative to dating

by Jonathan Lindvall



While our young people seek to keep their balance under the pressures of hormones, peer acceptance, and the conviction of the Holy Spirit, it seems that the Church looks on benignly, assuming that multiple dating experiences are healthy preparation for later marital stability.

The problem is that dating is a temporary romantic relationship. This kind of relationship logically leads to a conclusion—"breaking up."

Western culture has, for some time, been experiencing an epidemic of broken marriages. Is it possible that, although "breaking up is hard to do," the more you do it, the easier it is to do? Years ago as a young youth minister, I came to the conclusion that dating was preparation for divorce rather than marriage.

Romanticism and emotional unfaithfulness

Questioning the institution of dating is a rather novel notion to most Americans. After all, how else would one ever get married? Few realize that dating is a relatively recent phenomenon. It arose out of the eighteenth century philosophical movement we call "romanticism," which emphasized passion rather than logic.

Writers, such as Jean Jacques Rousseau, lamented that Western civilization had fallen into the "error" of exalting reason over feelings. He proposed making decisions based on emotion, not intellect.

This philosophy had a far-reaching impact on the arts, literature, government, and many other areas of society. Of interest to our discussion, though, is its effects on relationships between men and women.

Love between husbands and wives has not always been perceived as a prerequisite for entering marriage. Rather, it was understood that married partners would grow to love one another. Other factors were considered to be more significant in weighing marriage decisions.

Throughout history Christians have taken the scriptural command to love their spouse (Ephesians 5:25; Titus. 2:4) as implying words; you should love the one you have married. Romantics taught the converse: you should marry the one you love. There may not appear to be much conflict between these ideas. But there are significant differences in the long-term fruit.

Some Romantic philosophers proposed that one might have, and appropriately cultivate emotional love-feelings for one who was not their spouse. This might take place before and after one was married.

Those who continued to hold to the sanctity of the physical relationship within marriage portrayed emotion-only love affairs as noble, extolling secret romances in which the parties fanned the flame of their passions without giving release to physical affections.

Breakable ties and the broken-heart syndrome

The church has rightly rejected the proposition of being married to one person while harboring romantic feelings for another. However, we have largely accepted the practice of emotion-only romance between nonmarried partners prior to marriage. We have taught that it is acceptable for Christian singles to cultivate and express such feelings toward one another without any permanent commitment as long as there is no physical involvement.

Jesus taught us to pray to our Father, "Lead us not into temptation" (Matt. 6:13). Yet by accepting the world's dating patterns, we lead our young people into serious temptation.

Marriage involves certain rights. Husbands and wives belong to one another. This applies to more than simply the physical relationship. My wife must not only save her body for me, but her emotions as well. I would be devastated to find that while my wife was physically faithful to me, she had romantic feelings for another man. My wife and I owe one another emotional as well as physical fidelity.

Why, then, would we teach our young people that they must save themselves physically for the one God has chosen as their lifelong partner while giving their emotions to first one then another dating partner? Privileges that God intended to be reserved for His ordained institution of marriage are lightly given to others in the recent man-made practice of dating.

Young unmarried Christian couples who have an understanding that they are "going out" regularly with each other enjoy the seeming security of emotional ownership rights once reserved for marriage. But as this perceived security is demolished in the "breaking up" of the relationship, our young people develop jaded perspectives and calloused hearts.

This "broken-heart syndrome" is the all-too-typical experience of many Christian young people. Our children are being wounded, sometimes irreparably! Does God have an answer?

A time to love

Almost universally, Bible scholars note that while biblical betrothal was similar to our engagement in some respects, it was quite different in some significant points.

In the story of Christ's birth, we have an interesting illustration of the practice of betrothal. Joseph was deliberating what he should do with Mary, his betrothed wife, having learned that she was pregnant. Because he was "a just man," he determined to "put her away secretly" (Matt. 1:19). He and Mary as a betrothed couple, were committed to marriage. Joseph could only break this commitment by legally "putting her away" according to Deuteronomy 24:1. The only other alternative was to publicly accuse her as an adulteress and let her be executed by stoning.

Scripturally there were three categories: unmarried, betrothed, and married. Although betrothed couples were not permitted to be physically intimate, they were considered married in the sense of owning each other.

For example, if a man seduced or raped a virgin who was not yet betrothed, he was required to pay the bride-price to her father and (if the father so desired) marry her (Ex. 22:16-17; Deut. 22:28-29). However if he did the same with either a married or betrothed woman, he (and in some cases she) was to be executed as an adulterer (Deut. 22:22-27).

Although betrothed couples were not yet married, the woman was already referred to as the man's wife (Luke 2:5). If the groom died during the betrothal period, his betrothed bride was considered a widow even though the marriage had never been consummated.

In Scripture physical relations were reserved for marriage and still forbidden during betrothal. What purpose could be served, then, by an officially binding betrothal? What special provision for the problem of marrying someone you don't yet love?

The betrothed young people were officially authorized to cultivate their emotions of love toward one another. Could this be God's provision for the problem of marrying someone you don't yet love?

I have concluded that God's best is for me to teach my