

So You Want to Get Engaged?

Things to Consider Before You Put the Ring on Her Finger

By Scott Croft and Deepak Reju

Introduction

We know how to “do” weddings. We work at a church filled with a lot of 20 and 30-year-olds. Every year we marry off about 25 to 30 couples. You might say we are a *wedding factory*. After all, when you get lots of young people in a church building for worship and fellowship, and give them a chance to talk and get to know one another...well, eventually they start pairing off, marrying, and having children. That’s just the way life works.

Consequently, as pastors, we talk to a lot of couples about how to wisely and thoughtfully get engaged. It’s a daily conversation. Sometimes hourly.

To that end, we’ve written this booklet to help folks who are headed towards engagement. What things do you want to consider before you put a ring on her finger? “Before” is an important word. Too many Christian couples leave the really important conversations until *after* engagement, or even, *after* marriage. But that’s dangerous. Don’t believe us? Consider Rachel and her marital dilemma...

Rachel sat in Deepak’s office last week, and she made the comment that almost made him fall out of his chair. Her husband is indecisive and a poor spiritual leader. She said, “We never talked about spiritual things while we were dating. I just figured that would change *after* we got married.” Big mistake. Really, really big mistake. While it is true that Christians grow and change, we don’t marry someone for *who he or she might become*. No, of course not. We marry someone because we think we know who he or she is *right now*. What you get while you are dating is very likely what you will live with for the rest of your married life.

You need to talk about some things right now, while you are still dating and before you get the ring on her finger. Once the ring is on the finger, it is hard to turn back. What you don’t want to find out later is that he has \$120,000 in debt, or she was really hoping you’d change your career, or he doesn’t like your church. Don’t wait until it is too late. Talk about it *now*. Get things out in the open. Go into engagement with the confidence that you really know the person you are about to marry.

In this short booklet, we’ve included four things that we hope will be helpful to you: (1) thoughts on making the decision to get married; (2) popular myths that hurt the decision-

making process; (3) things to talk about as you try to make the decision; and (4) meeting the parents as a part of making the big decision.

Making the Decisionⁱ

How do you know if you've found "the one"? Well, in one sense you do not know until he or she *becomes* "the one." While we can't tell you who you should or should not marry, we can provide some guiding principles for making this decision.

First, realize that God won't tell you who to marry. You find out God's revealed will by simply deciding. That's right. You heard me. *You choose*. Marriage is a *voluntary* choice. There is no such thing as God writing a name in the sky. He doesn't work that way. *You* get out there, *you* meet people, *you* get to know someone, then *you* choose to commit your life to this person. So, in this sense, there is no such thing as a Mr. or Mrs. Right. Mr. or Mrs. Right is whomever you choose to marry. Keep in mind, God is sovereign in this process (Prov 16:33; 20:24; Jer 10:23). God directs your steps and He is guiding you to a spouse, but waiting around to discover God's will can be paralyzing. Don't expect a special telegram from God saying, "She's the one. Go ahead and marry her." You should pray and seek lots of counsel from church leaders, family and friends, but in the end, you find out God's will by taking personal responsibility to choose someone.

Second, consider how God might use you together in his kingdom. God has used both of you individually to do good for his kingdom. In getting married, you're going to work as a team (Gen 2:25). You are not going to just work for yourselves, but for God. So it is important to consider: will you be able, generally speaking, to serve God better together than apart? Will you be able to accomplish ministry (be it your original plan or one that you have caught a vision for together) more effectively together than apart?

Third, make sure you are confident of your boyfriend or girlfriend's Christian character. The core characteristics that you should be looking for in someone to marry are the same as those you initially wanted in someone to date. So, if you were careful and biblical in choosing who you became involved with in the first place then this shouldn't be a problem. You looked for someone who was *definitively* Christian in how he or she lives every day. What if you were not this careful, and consequently are not sure about your boyfriend or girlfriend's Christian character? Maybe he calls himself a Christian, but he doesn't act like one sometimes. Sin can do a lot of destructive things to dampen a relationship, enough so it can be hard at times to tell the other person's love for Christ. To be sure that you are confident about the other person's Christian character, take some time to look at Scripture to see how he or she measures up. Proverbs 31, I Peter 3, Titus 1, I Timothy 3, and Ephesians 5 are the descriptions of men and

women that you should consider as you determine whether or not to marry someone. What evidences of God's grace do you see in his or her life? Granted, he or she is a sinner and so will not exhibit all of these characteristics perfectly. However, is she a growing Christian? Does he have a clear desire to grow in Christ and is he taking action to affect this growth? Go ask some trusted spiritual leaders. Ask them what they think about your boyfriend or girlfriend's Christian character. Ask for an honest estimation of how the other person is doing spiritually. You might be surprised by what you hear.

Fourth, consider carefully the roles laid out for men and women in Scripture. Look at Genesis 2:15-25, 1 Peter 3, Ephesians 5:22-33. Do you desire to fulfill that role with this specific person? Do you feel that you can love her sacrificially or respect and support him? Again, speak with a pastor or another trusted spiritual leader in your life. This time, don't just ask about the other person's character; instead, ask about *the relationship*. Does it look solid to them? Does the relationship seem to be good for both of you spiritually, glorifying to God and Christ-centered?

Finally, if your relationship leads you into sin (physically or otherwise), if it dulls your interest in your church or your walk with the Lord, if you are less eager to learn, study, grow and pray because of the influence of, or interactions with, your partner, why in the world would you consider making that relationship permanent? If you can't affirm that you are better off spiritually with this person, then you must think very seriously about whether the relationship should continue. Do the two of you seem to be a good match spiritually and personally? Again, there is great wisdom in letting others get to know the two of you well, both separately and as a couple. Conduct the relationship under someone who has spiritual authority over your life, like a pastor or small group leader. It's hard to evaluate things on your own. It helps *hugely* to have someone else looking in at this stage to help you think about the relationship, provided you have been honest, and are not hiding your sin.

Popular Myths that Hurt the Decision-making Process

Let's now turn to some of the popular myths that surround engagement and dispel them so that we can think more clearly on this subject.

The first myth is that *you need a long time to gather information on someone before you know enough to commit to marriage*. Many single people (especially men) seem to believe that if they can just date long enough, get enough information about the other person, work out enough of the other person's failures or shortcomings, or even date enough people, then maybe they can find a woman, or man, or situation that will enable them to have an easy marriage. They want 100% of the information available before they are willing to make a decision.

In fact, *you don't need as much information as the world says you do*. Guess what? There is no such thing as a “perfect” or “easy” marriage. Marriage isn't easy and no amount of information will ever remove the work required for marriage. A good marriage always takes a tremendous amount of work and sacrifice. There will inevitably be little – or even big – things about the other person (and about you, by the way) that will come out *only* in the context of the vulnerability and permanence that surrounds a marital relationship. Some of those things will be undesirable, but learning those things and loving the other person *anyway* is part of marriage. Marriage is wonderful, but it is still work.

Another myth is *the need to keep your options open because the perfect woman or man could walk around the corner and you don't want to be caught settling*. Our society teaches that any sort of commitment is a narrowing of our options and is therefore bad. How many people have hesitated or even refused to commit to another person because they think that the perfect man or woman is waiting to show up five seconds after they are irrevocably committed to another?

This view is fundamentally self-centered, immature and totally contrary to the model of love and commitment that the Bible shows us. This assumes that marriage is there primarily to meet your needs and fulfill your desires, rather than the way Scripture describes marriage, as a means to serve, minister to and minister with another person in order to picture the way Christ relates to His church. If you are a godly man or woman in a relationship that seems to be moving toward marriage and you are the one hesitating, ask yourself why. Are your reasons biblical?

This is closely related to another myth, the myth that says *we must have overwhelming romantic attraction and chemistry with our partner before we “pop the question.”* You have to purge this type of thinking. Yes, you should be attracted to your spouse and be able to have a conversation with him without wanting to rip his head off. But, if you have progressed to the stage where you are seriously considering marriage, you very likely have the requisite level of attraction and chemistry to get married. Anything beyond this is best left to discovery within the context of marriage.

You must also disregard the myth that *perpetual companionship and an indefinite deciding stage are okay*. Men must be deliberate in moving the relationship forward or moving out of it, and women must make a decision too as soon as it's appropriate. Perpetual non-marital companionship for its own sake is not okay. It inevitably leads to sin. It is biblically incumbent

upon both of you (but especially the guys) to be moving toward a decision in good faith and to make it at the soonest appropriate time.

One final myth to consider is that *the logistics need to be close to perfect before you can get engaged*. If you believe that you are called to be married, and you believe you have found the person you want to marry, then get married. The logistics will never be perfect. Marriage is something that will last the rest of your lives. It will be central and controlling over whatever ministry you have. Adjust things like school, jobs, money and distance to accommodate getting married. Try to not adjust the purpose and timing of marriage for any of these logistics or other earthly circumstances.

It's unwise and sinful to have a three-year engagement and premarital sex because the logistics of getting married aren't perfect. If the logistics are so bad that you feel you just can't get married in the near future, then take a hard look at whether you should even be in a relationship.

Things to Talk About As You Try to Make the Decision

What things should you talk about when you are trying to make the decision? We want to give you a few general guidelines for your conversations and a simple framework for what to talk about.

A Few General Guidelines for Your Conversations

You need to find either *theological agreement or significant flexibility* as you discuss these topics. If you can't find agreement or flexibility on topics that matter, you should be concerned. For example, things will likely be very difficult down the road if *one* of you feels strongly called to the mission field in Machu Pichu and the other does not.

What's the *quality of the relationship*? Do you enjoy the other person? Does he help you grow spiritually? Are you more Christ-like because of her involvement in your life? Do others think highly of the relationship? If the quality of the relationship is poor, you'll know it. It doesn't take much to recognize weakness in the relationship, or even worse, foolishness. When you look at the relational sins and problems, how much do they outweigh the good? Or is the reverse true—there is so much good you can't conceive of how you could ever live without this person?

Look for the *deal breakers*, i.e. things that would end the relationship. For example, if you want to be in the marines, but she absolutely detests moving. Or you want a wife who is at home with the kids, but she wants to aggressively climb the corporate ladder. Maybe he does not have impulse control, shops on-line and runs up his credit cards. These are not minor inconveniences, but major problems that would seriously hurt your ability to have a good marriage.

Use wisdom and discernment about *what matters* (e.g., your future goals or how you work out gender roles in marriage) *and what does not matter* (e.g., if you want 2 kids and she wants lots more, that's not something that should not stop things right now). Often times, while I (Deepak) was dating my wife, she reminded me that I was too concerned with things in our future. I would dream and talk about our hypothetical future world, and dwell too much on things we could in no way be certain about right now. Some things you need to talk about now and come to agreement. Other things just don't matter as much. If you are not sure which one to fit in each category, find a mature married person who will happily tick off a list for you ("Don't worry about whether your kids will be homeschooled or go to private school." "Do think about who is going to work after kids arrive." "Don't worry about how many kids you'll have." "Do think through what careers you are going to pursue and where you want to live.")

Look for a *growing trust of your boyfriend or girlfriend's character*. Presumably, if you have gotten this far in the relationship, you trust the other person. You trust his words, and as far as you can tell, he is not making things up but is genuine with you. Granted, each of us has a tendency to be lazy about some of our words, saying things at times that we don't intend (Matt 12:36-37). Yet, if your boyfriend's daily words match up with his day-to-day life, then he has shown himself to be someone who is trustworthy. As you talk with one another, hopefully you will find yourself growing in trust for your boyfriend or girlfriend's words, actions, and integrity of life.

Make sure you are paying attention to warnings in Scripture. Does she tend to nag and bicker with you? The author of Proverbs cautions you: "Better to live on a corner of the roof than share a house with a quarrelsome wife" (Prov 25:24). Does he tend to not listen to others? "The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice" (Prov 12:15). Does she have a hard time taking criticism? "A fool shows his annoyance at once, but a prudent man overlooks an insult" (Prov 12:16). When he does something stupid does he show off? "Every prudent man acts out of knowledge, but a fool exposes his folly" (Prov 13:16). These are just a few of the many warnings Scripture gives about ungodliness and foolishness. Don't stay in the relationship if it becomes evident to you that your boyfriend or girlfriend lives like a quarrelsome spouse or the proverbial fool.

Bathe the decision in prayer. In the midst of many conversations that the two of you will have about potentially getting engaged, you shouldn't get stuck in the horizontal dimension. Fundamentally, God must be at the center of your decision, so you must show your dependence on him by consistently seeking him in prayer (Matt 6:5-15; Luke 18:1-8; Phil 4:6; Col 4:2; 1 Thess 5:17).

Finally, by taking the time to talk through these things right now (before engagement), *you are trying to purchase future peace*. You might ask yourself, why should I talk through all of this stuff right now? Why not just get engaged and deal with all of this after engagement? Quite frankly, for most people, engagement is very stressful, so you don't want to add to the pressure by having hard questions to sort through while you are planning a wedding. But more importantly, engagement is a huge emotional commitment, and once you've taken that step it is very hard (not impossible!) to turn back. You don't want to find out *after* engagement that there are things about the relationship that are unacceptable to you. So find out now, before he puts the ring on your finger, so you don't get stuck in an awful position of having to break off the engagement.

A Simple Framework for Your Conversations: The 13 F's

Often times, one of us is sitting in a restaurant, and the person across from us says, "Debbie and I are doing really well. We are starting to talk about getting married. What should we be thinking about at this stage?"

That's a great question. Here is a simple framework to help you remember the different categories you should be considering. Ready? Meet the 13 F's: *fun, friendship, faith, faithfulness, family, fidelity, finances, future, fights, foolishness, fragility, fears, and feedback*. This is our easy way to remember what to ask. So, if you find yourself in a coffee shop, and have forgotten this handy-dandy little booklet, never fear! You can start a conversation by just remembering the 13 F's.

We've provided a description of each of the F's below, and a list of sample questions for each F. The list of questions is not comprehensive but they're given to help you get the conversation started.

Let's consider the 13 F's in more detail.

Fun

Lord willing, you will get to spend the rest of your life with your spouse, so you need to enjoy spending time together. A person may be godly, but you may not mesh well together. Or maybe you get really bored when you spend time with him or her. No one ever said you need to live in a *boring* marriage.

It helps if you have common interests. But more than enjoying doing the same stuff together, ask yourself: Do I *enjoy* being with this person? If you don't, then it is okay to say "no thanks" to the relationship.

Friendship

If you get married, your spouse will be your best friend for the rest of your life. So, your boyfriend or girlfriend needs to be a good friend *long before* he or she becomes your spouse. Building a friendship means more than just enjoying hanging out together. Ask yourself, will he or she be a good partner and teammate in life and ministry?

Some other questions to consider: Do you get along? Even more than that, do you *cherish* this person's friendship? Can you see yourself become the best of friends? Can you see yourself spend the rest of your life together? What do you enjoy about your friendship? In what ways does your friendship need to grow?

Faith

In regards to your belief and faith, make sure there is basic theological agreement. Do you share the same fundamental beliefs? Do you agree on your understanding of God, the Trinity, the gospel, salvation, sin, and Christ? Do you share the same views on Scripture – that is, do you both see it as authoritative and sufficient?

Look at the person's life and start asking some questions about how he or she lives out his or her faith. Does he *deliberately* live out a life of faith? Is there noticeable fruit and godliness? Does she have a servant's heart? What do other people say about his faith? What does your pastor or pastor's wife think about her?

If you don't see clear evidence of faith, then you need to ask yourself (and the other person) some hard questions: Why is he not growing? Why don't I see clear obedience to Christ's commands? Is he a nominal Christian or is he really committed to growing in his faith?

Do you see in this person a strong commitment to church? If not, why not? Do you agree what type of church you should go to? Are there doctrinal differences or preferences that would stop you from joining the same church?

Consider an example about *doctrinal differences*. John is a Baptist and Betty is Presbyterian. John is a strong proponent of believer's baptism and doesn't see infant baptism anywhere in the Bible. Betty is committed to paedobaptism and has spent most of her life in Presbyterian churches. They dated for a long-time before they bothered to even talk about their doctrinal differences. To them baptism seemed like a secondary issue and other things, like the gospel or the authority of Scripture, were more important.

Why is baptism (and other doctrinal differences) important to consider *earlier* rather than *later* in the relationship? Two reasons: (1) If you put this off until much later, you run the risk of becoming too emotionally attached *before* you sort through these doctrinal questions. Once

John and Betty started talking about doctrinal distinctions, it was much harder to navigate because they couldn't tell if they were making choices based on emotional attachment or doctrinal conviction. (2) Your doctrinal distinctives will define where you can go to church. If you cannot agree on doctrinal distinctives, it stands to reason that you'll have a hard time picking a church together. Because the choice of where you will go to church *together* is so fundamental to your future of the relationship, you should sort this question out sooner rather than later.

Consider an example about a couple's different *preferences*. Matt goes to First Baptist. His church has traditional hymns, long prayers, and his pastor preaches hour long, dense expositional sermons every Sunday. Matt has really prospered spiritually in his church. Julie goes to Grace Church which has contemporary music, a fast-paced worship service, and well-illustrated 30-minute long sermons. Her church makes a big deal about social action as a means of engaging the community. Julie loves her church and hates the thought of ever having to leave it. Matt visited Julie's church, and Julie has been to Matt's church. They both have strong preferences (e.g., Matt wants long, dense sermons; Julie wants more contemporary music and feels social action is a vital part of her faith) and neither is willing to compromise. They have checked around and have not found a church that has all of their strong preferences. If they can't compromise, Matt and Julie need to break up. If they can't agree on where to go to church together, they can't be much of a team, right? **A shared church is a fundamental ingredient for a good marriage.** There is no reason to press forward if you can't agree on where to go to church.

Another way to put this: what doctrinal agreement is important to consider *before* we get married?

1. *Agreement on "core" evangelical doctrine* – the Trinity, the authority of Scripture, the divinity of Christ, the virgin birth, the historicity of the creation accounts are a few examples.

2. *Agreement on the gospel and what it is.* If one of you thinks the gospel is primarily about social action and redeeming culture, but the other sees it as primarily about Jesus being our substitute and atoning for our sins, then you shouldn't get married.

3. *Agreement on beliefs that allow you to be members of the same church.* For example, your belief about baptism defines what kind of church you can attend. Though baptism is sometimes described as "secondary" doctrine, it is still important because it defines church attendance and participation.

Faithfulness

A person who is marked by faithfulness is someone who is reliable and steady, and also good at following through with his or her promises.

Consistent, Reliable and Steady. Is your boyfriend emotionally and spiritually mature? Is he steady, stable and reliable? Someone who is immature and unstable will generally be inconsistent and unreliable, to greater or lesser degrees. Not surprisingly, immature and unreliable people don't persevere in relationships. They contribute significantly to the rise in the American divorce rate.

Dating an immature and unreliable person is a recipe for disaster because the relationship is often "rocky" from day one. Anyone associated with the couple like this is likely to be dragged along on a roller-coaster ride.

Stability and reliability are too often underrated in dating, but they shine like a white-hot, blazing sun in marriage. Romance quickly loses its flame when the bills are not paid, the house is not clean, debt is accumulating, and children are unruly.

Consistent with Honoring Promises. In bad marriages, there is often a division between words and actions. A wife no longer trusts her husband because he rarely fulfills his promises. His follow-through is poor. And she's had a life-time of growing to not trust his words.

People who consistently break promises don't make good spouses. Is your boyfriend or girlfriend good at living up to his or her words? Does she make inflated promises and not keep them? Have you ever challenged his inconsistent words and if so, how has he responded?

By the way, we're not just referring to the big decisions in life (change of job, change of church, moving to a new state, etc.), but also to the thousands of mundane promises that fill your daily life ("I'll be home in five minutes," or "I'll fix that tonight," or "I'll get more milk from the store on my way home"). Are his words consistent with his actions?

Family

If the Lord blesses you with marriage and children, you'll have many years of planning, praying, teaching, and shepherding your family.

What do you need to consider if you are going to have your own family one day? It is important to get some understanding of your priorities, preferences and convictions about marriage and family life; to gain some understanding of the family you came from; and also to think through issues of leaving and cleaving from your family of origin.

Priorities, preferences and convictions about marriage and family life: Does your boyfriend/girlfriend have a mature perspective on marriage? Does he/she value marriage and hold it in high regard? Is his or her understanding of marriage shaped more by worldly values and past experiences, or by God's Word?

Gender roles are a hot topic in today's society. You can't throw a stone without hitting someone or something that is affected by the cultural debate about gender—gender equality for men and women in the workplace and home, the rise of same sex marriages, a sibling or relative who has turned to a gay lifestyle. Consequently, it's really important to decipher as best you can what your boyfriend or girlfriend thinks about marriage roles and parenting *before* you start fulfilling those roles.

General questions about gender: How do you both view your gender roles? What is the biblical role of a husband and a wife? What is your vision/biblical understanding of fatherhood and motherhood? How has your understanding of gender roles been influenced in ungodly ways by your family or the surrounding culture? Do you both agree on how the Bible describes gender roles in marriage and family life? Do you both desire these things? If you got married sometime soon, what would you be giving up that would be hard to let go? (i.e., a good career? Educational goals? Your independence?)

According to the Bible, a boyfriend has no formal biblical responsibility to lead his girlfriend because he is not her husband or father. Likewise, the girlfriend is only responsible to submit to and follow her father (and more generally to submit to her church leaders, cf. Heb 13:7). Yet, in dating, part of what you are looking for are indicators of how the person will do in future marriage and parenting roles. Will he lead well when I'm married to him? Will she be willing to follow when I'm married to her? While you can't predict this *perfectly* in a dating relationship, you can get some sense of this before marriage.

Questions about the man's attempts at leadership in the dating relationship: How well does your boyfriend display the qualities of an overseer or deacon in 1 Timothy 3? Is he a servant leader or does he lord things over you? Is he more characterized by pride or humility? Is he quick to respond to your needs or the needs of others? Is he teachable and willing to be influenced by you?

Questions about the woman's attempts to be responsive in the dating relationship: In the Bible, if men are called to lead (Eph 5:25), women are called to be responsive to their leadership (Eph 5:22-24). So, naturally, we'd want to know: Is she responsive to your leadership in the dating relationship? How well does she display the qualities of a wife in Prov 31 and the qualities of a deacon in 1 Timothy 3? Is she servant-hearted towards you (and in her relationships more generally)? Is she more characterized by pride or humility? Is she quick to respond to your needs or the needs of others? Is she teachable and willing to be influenced by you?

Things to ask about your extended family: What is relevant for your boyfriend and girlfriend to know about your parents, siblings, and family background? How has your family shaped you for better or for worse? In what ways are you grateful for your family? In what ways do you struggle with your family? What is your boyfriend's relationship with his mother like? What is your girlfriend's relationship with her father like?

Leaving and cleaving: In Genesis 2:24, Moses describes the importance of a husband leaving his father and mother and cleaving to his new wife. As the new husband forms a covenantal relationship with his bride, he rearranges the priorities in his life. Outside of God, his new bride must come first in his life. Though the verse explicitly talks about the man leaving his parents, the same implication can be drawn for a woman as she leaves her parents and becomes a new wife. Her husband must become the priority in her life.

Some couples get in trouble early in marriage because they have not really prioritized their new spouse over their family. So it is important to consider: In what ways do you still cling to or depend on your parents? Are there emotional or financial attachments to parents that need to be curtailed in marriage? How does that dependence on your parents need to change before marriage? In what ways will your parents struggle with you leaving them and cleaving to another? Based on the previous question, how do you need to deal with your parents' struggle? After marriage, what are your expectations for relating to your parents and your future in-laws?

Fidelity

In Genesis 2:24, Moses describes the new husband as “holding fast” (ESV) to his wife. The word picture is of someone holding on, unwilling to let go. It’s a description of the nature of the marital bond—permanent and meant to last, not temporary and flimsy.

Is your boyfriend or girlfriend someone who is loyal and committed in his or her relationships? When things get tough, does she exit quickly, or does she tend to endure through the difficulty? If this person is not characterized by firm commitments to her relationships before marriage, what makes you think she will be after she gets married?

Finances

Counselors often talk about the “Big 3” that cause marital conflict—parenting, sex, and money. In regards to money, do you have a good sense of your boyfriend or girlfriend’s financial dealings and how he or she thinks about money? If not, consider getting a more general understanding of his or her current finances and philosophy on how to handle money.

Some other questions to consider: Does your boyfriend or girlfriend have a good job and make a decent income? Does the guy make enough to support a family? Do either of you have a lot of debt? Is it “normal” debt (mortgage, college loans) or bad debt (credit cards)? Do either of you have a budget and do you try to stick to it? Or like many singles, do you just “wing it?” How does he or she handle money? Does he spend what he has or does he plan, invest, and save? Does she faithfully tithe or give to other Christian causes? Is he quicker to give money away or to hoard it?

Future

It is important to make sure your hopes and dreams for the future line up. An important part of marriage is being a team. The best sports teams play well together because they are working

off of the same game-plan. Do your roads merge, or is there some predictable fork in the road that can't be rectified? If you are headed down different paths then beware.

What do you both want to do with your lives? What plans or dreams do you have about a future (e.g., career, family, home-life, ministry goals, church involvement, plans for where you want to live, etc.)? Do you see your two futures coming together or diverging? If your future goals differ, how are you going to reconcile these things?

Fights

The difference between good and bad marriages is not that good marriages don't struggle. No, in fact, they do struggle. They fight just as much (maybe more) than bad marriages. The difference between good and bad marriages is that the good ones know how to handle conflict in a Christ-like, respectful, and humble way.

How do the two of you handle conflict? When you fight, how do you resolve it? When you fight, when and where does it usually happen? Do you tend to leave things lingering? Are you likely to build up grudges and frustrations? Are you inclined to fight until it is done, or are you willing to take breaks when things get too heated? Do you tend to nag until the other person gets severely irritated? Do you see your nagging as the only way to get the other person to respond? If either of you struggles with anger, how do you head it off before it explodes? Are you quick to forgive the other person and keep short accounts? If not, what keeps you in a state of unforgiveness?

There are a few lucky couples who rarely fight before they get engaged. If that is the case for you, then you should talk about how you have handled conflict in other relationships and with family members.

Foolishness

Whether you've struggled with difficult sins from the past, or you are still struggling with significant sins right now, it's important to talk to your future spouse about these things. Why say something now? Because it is important that the other person actually knows who they are marrying. No secrets. Don't hide your sin. Mold grows in the darkness, not in the light. Too many couples hide sin in the midst of marriage, and that sadly inhibits their ability to build genuine intimacy. Your goal is to become one flesh (Gen 2:24), and you can't do that if you let sin get in the way.

Current Foolishness. Foolishness that is *current* and *on-going* needs to be discussed in some detail because it has huge implications for the *immediate* relationship. Wisdom is needed as to how much detail to discuss, so it is good to seek counsel from an older, wiser married person before you to talk to your boyfriend or girlfriend. Your boyfriend or girlfriend needs to hear enough to know: (1) how to be an ally with you against your on-going sin; and (2) if he or she wants to marry into this problem. Every husband and wife has problems (because everyone is a

sinner!), but one of the choices you make in picking a spouse is which set of problems you *choose* to get married to.

Past Foolishness. Past foolishness describes sins from a previous season of your life. As you take this big step of getting engaged, you want to feel confident that you really do know the person you are marrying. Sharing past sins is an important part of revealing who you are and what you've struggled with.

Sexual sins are the most common sins people need to share about their past, but a wide variety of other sins could also fit in this category (bad financial debt, drug or alcohol addiction, etc.). *Most folks are scared to share because they fear rejection.* But if we are honest, and if God has already forgiven us, we hope that with time (or hopefully immediately) your future spouse will forgive you for your sins.

Consider the parable of the wicked servant in Matthew 18. Notice how God's forgiveness of our enormous debt of sin should motivate us to forgive the much smaller relational "debts" that have come between us and another person. Compare the difference between the wicked servant's debt in vs. 24 and the fellow servant's debt in 28. Notice how much greater the debt is between the wicked servant and the king; and consequently, how foolish the wicked servant is because he is unwilling to forgive the much smaller (by comparison) debt of the other person. The principle is simple: *Those who have been forgiven much will more clearly see Godly mercy; so it's no surprise that they'll be willing to forgive others.* The fact that God has first forgiven us (Eph 4:32) overflows into our forgiving others.

When you share with your boyfriend or girlfriend, a general rule of thumb is to be more general and not specific about your past sin. There is no need to go into detail about it (with one exception, see below). If your boyfriend or girlfriend demands more detail then be careful about how much more you say because: (1) He or she might have a false notion that more knowledge will somehow give more control over your problems, and that is just not true; (2) Your sin has already been paid for once by Christ and you have received God's forgiveness for that sin. You don't need to re-crucify your sin through your future spouse's cross examination. Give him or her enough detail to understand the nature of the sin-- what it was, and when it happened in your life. After that, seek their forgiveness and move on with your life.

In regards to sexual sin from the past, we break it down into three categories: (1) Pornography – "hard" porn (magazines) or more commonly "soft" (internet) porn; (2) Premarital sex; (3) Scandalous sins – sleeping with prostitutes, going to strip clubs or massage parlors, etc. For pornography and premarital sex, be more general about your past sins. For the more

scandalous sexual sins, you need to give the other person more details (be specific, not general) and let them ask any questions they want. But just because your sins were scandalous doesn't mean the other person gets to be highly critical of you. Once you have revealed your sins and talked about them, the same Christian response is required as of other sins—forgiveness in Christ (Eph 4:32).

Being this vulnerable with your darkest sins is a very hard thing to do. Please realize, your future spouse would much more prefer *honesty* instead of *lying*. Hiding your past is basically lying to them. When you get married, you have an expectation that you know your spouse. Most boyfriends or girlfriends will be very willing to walk alongside of you and help you battle your sin, but would be very angry and disappointed if they found out you've been hiding things about your past.

Being vulnerable about past sins sets a good pattern for openness and honesty in the relationship. It also serves to protect your future marriage. If your past struggles return, a spouse equipped with knowledge about your past problems can more readily help you fight them. A spouse ignorant of the problem can't do much to help.

When you are dating, look for someone who has a good sense of their own sins and weaknesses, and who is quick to admit his own faults. Confession and honesty is good for the soul, and builds endurance in the marriage.

As your boyfriend or girlfriend confesses his or her past sins, one question to consider is: Does he live *now* in way that realistically takes into account his past sins and faults? For example, consider a young man who struggled with pornography in his past, but doesn't have any protective software on his computer or accountability with friends? Does he show himself to be foolish and ignorant about the power of sin? His girlfriend should be troubled by his superficial treatment of sin and his downplaying of past problems. She shouldn't stay in the relationship if his disposition towards his own sin doesn't change.

Fragility

There are some who will have experienced evil committed against them – like being abused by a parent or relative or some other authority figure (coach or teacher or camp director); or being raped. Abuse, rape, and other kinds of evil does great harm to our soul. It can have damaging effects on our relational, emotional and spiritual life.

If you're carrying this kind of difficult experiences into marriage, know that it can hurt the marital relationship. Ignoring your past won't do you any good. So, it's good to both: (1) work

through these difficult issues with a trained counselor who can communicate Christ's love, work thoughtfully, carefully and lovingly through the deep suffering and its after-effects on your life. And (2) be honest with your boyfriend or girlfriend about your past.

Here's an important rule of thumb I (Deepak) was taught in my training: *Let the person who was abused set the pace for revealing the hurt, shame and pain from their past.* Don't force them or rush them. Take it slow and take your time. This might slow down the pace of the dating relationship, but that's better than rushing it.

If you're the one who was abused or raped: Do you have a traumatic past that has never been dealt with before? Have you sought out help from a competent and caring counselor, who can work through these hard things with you? Have you been honest with your boyfriend or girlfriend about your fragility? If possible, have your boyfriend or girlfriend meet with your counselor and you to learn more. Help them to figure out how to be a better ally in the recovery process.

To the boyfriend or girlfriend who was not abused or raped: Do realize, when someone is honest with you about their difficult and traumatic past, it's like they're handing you the fine china of their life. It's where they're weak and fragile. You want handle this with great care, consistent love and support. You want to be careful where your questions can be shaming and could imply that your boyfriend or girlfriend did something wrong, when, in fact, great evil was done against them. So, tread carefully, wisely and lovingly as you step onto the fragile ground of someone's traumatic past.

Ideally, you'll work through these things before you get engaged. But there is also good work that can happen in marriage. Mary was married to Bill, a medical student. In the first year of their marriage a lot of her traumatic experiences from her upbringing came out and affected their relationship. They found a competent and experienced counselor and started working through issues from Mary's past and his dysfunctional family. Despite the pressure Bill faced of being a medical resident, Bill never missed a session, and they worked through these traumatic issues. In the light of the gospel, with competent counseling help and Bill's unwavering support, Mary experienced great healing from her traumatic past.

Fears

As Deepak and his wife were dating, she one day confessed, "I'm scared." Scared? Of Deepak? How is that possible, he is such a loveable guy. ☺ In reality, she wasn't scared of Deepak, but of making the big commitment of marriage.

Marriage is a big deal. It's a permanent commitment, and it lasts a life-time. Most of us only get to make this decision once, and we don't want to mess it up. It is perfectly normal to be nervous and scared about taking such a big step.

Ask each other: What fears do either of you have about getting married? Do you have fears about committing to this *specific* person? In what ways do you not trust him or her? What sins have you seen that you are concerned about? What other fears do you have about your boyfriend or girlfriend?

Finally, to what extent are your fears reasonable and to what extent are they irrational?

Feedback (i.e., Accountability)

In our culture, independence is a virtue and dependence a weakness. In the Bible, the reverse is true. Wisdom is most clearly displayed by those who know their weaknesses and know when and where to get help (2 Cor 12:9).

One quick way to grow in this wisdom is to consistently seek out counsel from the godly men and women in your life (Proverbs 15:22; 18:1; 24:6). Too many of us have too high of an opinion of ourselves, and need to be more deliberate in seeking out godly criticism and feedback. Often we don't want to hear what other people think because they might say something we don't like. Is your boyfriend or girlfriend teachable and accountable to others, especially those in his or her church? Does he often make decisions on his own, or does he seek the counsel of others?

When most of us think about dating, we think in terms of a couple, not an entire church. And yet, dating is never meant to be an individualistic endeavor, but a community affair. It is important to get the church involved. Don't try to get through your relationships without any help. That's a poor way to live the Christian life. The potential for self-deceit is too large, and the life-long commitment so significant, that you need to be humble enough to recognize that you need help. "Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety" (Proverbs 11:14). Wise advice from godly friends can be a safety-net for your life.

From very early on in the relationship, you should actively pursue having married couples involved in the relationship. Guys, take the responsibility to initiate with other couples in the church and set up time for you and your girlfriend to hang out and open up.

If you do get married couples involved, don't do this piece-meal. That is, don't meet with one couple one month, and another couple the next month, and then another couple on the third month. If you do that, then no one will have a good sense of how your relationship is progressing. Try to get at least one godly couple to track with you through the entire course of the relationship.

Presuming you have picked wise, mature, godly advisors, if someone says something that is hard for you to hear, be careful how quickly you discard it. You might want to ignore their advice. You might be tempted to just jump to another advisor until you hear what you want to hear. But that's not real biblical accountability. Seek out what you really need to hear, not what you really want to hear. For the sake of the relationship, be open to godly advice, even it is not what you were expecting.

Do you have married friends holding you accountable? The temptation for premarital sex is strong, so you need them to ask you fairly direct questions. As the relationship progresses, the accountability questions should gradually become more extensive and more intrusive. Do you have couples asking you hard questions about things like physical purity, relational time-line, emotional intimacy, and problems that you are running into?

Meeting the Parents as a Part of the Big Decision

Typically, in this last stage of dating, in addition to talking about all of these important topics, the boyfriend and girlfriend get introduced to parents. If you want to get engaged, you take a *compulsory* trip to meet the parents because it's socially the appropriate thing to do. Once the visit is done, you are relieved because you can check this off of your list!

Many times, a meeting with the parents has already happened by the last stage. But if it has not happened up to this point, then it becomes one more thing to get done before a ring slides on her finger.

Let's consider a few general principles about dealing with future in-laws.

If possible, build a relationship before you get engaged. Too many folks just ignore this part of the relationship until the very last moment. Quite understandable. Meeting your boyfriend or girlfriend's parents *too soon* might communicate a level of seriousness that you don't want early in the dating relationship. Yet, when you pass the half-way point, you're on the down slope, headed toward engagement. You are already starting to think about marriage, and maybe even talking about it. Why not try to slowly engage the parents, even if they live far away? Email, texting, skype and cell phones certainly make some level of relationship (even if it is limited) possible.

Peter knew that Janet's father was very open to having a relationship with her boyfriends. Despite the fact that he lived on the East coast, and her dad on the West, he started to make a bi-monthly phone call to get to know him and ask his advice on things. By the time he was ready to ask his father for her hand in marriage, the father already knew Peter well enough to give an emphatic, "Yes!"

Sadly, Peter is a bit unusual. Most boyfriends and girlfriends stay away from the parents until they absolutely have to meet them (e.g., parents come for a visit, Thanksgiving or Christmas holidays, or asking for the daughter's hand in marriage). Yet, a little more proactive building of the relationship (while you are dating) can go a long way to building a good long-term relationship with your future in-laws.

Try to not argue with your future in-laws. Maybe this is a no brainer, but we've seen lots of boyfriends or girlfriends *needlessly* argue with their future in-laws early in the relationship. If you are in the "I like to argue for fun" category, this particularly is a problem for you. We are not saying you should avoid or deny the truth. By all means, stand firm in your commitment to the authority of Scripture, the exclusivity of Christ and the centrality of the gospel. Usually these more vital theological topics don't come up really early in the relationship. What parents are more interested in are if you are going to be a decent partner for their child and a good parent for their grandkids. Be careful about debating them. We've seen boyfriends or girlfriends get into heated discussions about politics, baptism, the bad economy, controversial talk radio hosts, sports, and many other topics. Thoughtless opinionated statements can quickly bring offense. Consider Solomon's comment on reckless talkers: "When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise" (Proverbs 10:19). Hold your tongue. Be careful about what you say. Focus more on ways you can build them up with your words (Eph 4:29) rather than how you can debate them.

If your parents are hurtful, controlling or manipulative with their behavior, set careful and loving boundaries. While you are called to love and honor your parents (Eph 6:1-3), nothing in the Bible says you need to submit yourselves to their destructive behavior. Parents can be hurtful, insensitive, and manipulating. If they don't get what they want, some may inflict more pain by giving the silent treatment to their kids. Parents are no longer restricted to using a phone, but can text, email, skype or IM to badger, plead, belittle, and degrade children with whom they disagree. Find some wise older Christians and ask them how to set deliberate boundaries with your parents. You can still lovingly engage them, but you need to set limits.

If for any reason the parents are opposed to the two of you getting married, then move forward slowly and carefully. As pastors, we've run into this scenario on a number of occasions. Sometimes the parent's opposition is fairly explicit (racism against mixed marriages); other times it is more subtle ("You are not good enough for my daughter"). A parent's blessing is not necessary in order for you to get married, but it is wise for you to do everything you can to earn their favor. The better your relationship with your in-laws, the less pressure you will experience in your marriage. Sometimes your parents may be correct with their concerns about your boyfriend or girlfriend, and you might be blind. Honoring your parents (Eph 6:1) presses on you

the need to at least listen to your parents, and many times to heed what they say. Excluding the possibility that you might be wrong, you should work slowly and deliberately to help them to see the good qualities of your boyfriend or girlfriend that convinced you he or she would make a good spouse. If parents can see your boyfriend or girlfriend's good character then it helps to soften their opposition. In the cases where parents are being explicitly unbiblical in their opposition, consider if you should still press forward to marriage without their consent. Don't do the later without lots of counsel and guidance from pastors and close friends at church.

Lots more could be said about building a relationship with your future in-laws, but that's enough for now. Time for us to wrap things up...

Conclusion: Are You Ready to Make the Decision?

You might feel like at some point you will just magically know he or she is the one.

Fundamentally, there comes a point in every relationship, if you enjoy being with the person, if you have theological agreement on a host of issues, if you have no "red flags" that would stop the relationship, if you prayed, and if you sought lots of counsel from church leaders, family and friends, then finally, it's a matter of deciding to commit yourself. God won't give you a verse in your quiet time that says, "Marry her." As you pray, plan, talk, and prepare, "the Lord will direct your steps"(Prov 16:1). God can give you a sense of peace and joy if you are to get married. You might be nervous. There might even be some lingering fears (that's fairly normal as you make such a big commitment). But fundamentally, if God gives you a sense of peace about moving forward, then you (emphasis on YOU) have to decide that to the best of your knowledge getting married is a good thing, and if so, you commit yourself to getting engaged.

If you cast your affections on this particular person, you are committing the rest of your life to him or her. As you make this decision and enter the land of engagement, with all of its joys and struggles, remember that God will give you daily grace to sustain you.

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¹ The information from these first two sections are based on core seminar material written by Scott Croft. To find the originals, you can go to the church website at www.capitolhillbaptist.org Variations of this same material have been written for articles on Focus on the Family's boundless webzine (www.boundless.org).