

CHRISTIAN COURTSHIP

by Charles J. Clarke

Clarke's practical guide to Christian courtship and marriage, offering biblical principles for romantic relationships, the choice of a spouse, and the foundation of a godly marriage.

6 Chapters

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000 - Introduction

Introduction

Charles J. Clarke: On our village green a circle of children are playing 'Choose your lover'. One player is going through a series of pantomimic actions while the others sing the appropriate words. Now he has stopped in the center of the ring as his playmates sing: 'Now choose the one you love the best.'

Adolescent life is like that game. If it goes according to the Creator's plan it works up to a choice of a life partner. To most young people it is a thrilling game played with great zest. But older people often shake their heads and wonder if the rest of life will be as exhilarating as the romantic 'teen years.

Sometime a touch of cynicism marks even the young. 'I will never get married,' a sharp-witted lass of eighteen said to me one day. 'Whatever makes you say that?' I asked. 'I've seen enough of married life in the home where I've been brought up,' she answered. I know the home. She was brought up by childless relatives who had been kind to her and given her a splendid education. But her foster mother had unwisely revealed certain intimate difficulties of her married life and had frightened the girl. I tried to persuade her to change her mind by telling her some of the things I've written in this booklet, but didn't succeed. The evil work had been done too successfully.

It is tragic that marriage should be treated so cynically by so many people. It is the butt of so much untasteful humor and the subject of so many jokes that young people must often wonder what sort of sinister ghost it is that lurks in the matrimonial cupboard. The reason for cynicism is that so many people are disappointed with marriage - not because it is a bad and illusory institution, but because they themselves have bungled it. They have been like children playing with the delicate, intricate interior of a watch and are surprised when all the works fall into confusion. Much more than merely 'being in love', is needed to create the marvelous harmony that makes the bliss of married life.

Understanding what you are doing is the great requisite. Young people need to be trained, not merely in the art of marriage, but also in the art of courtship. It needs to be mastered as an apprentice must master his trade. All the delicate and intricate aspects of courtship need to be understood, and the ability to handle them must be learned. All your life will be affected by your skill in choosing your partner now.

Moreover, Christian young people do not accept all the standards of the world in this matter. Our standards are higher, and both marriage and courtship are regarded as gifts from, and offerings to, our Lord. There is a great need, therefore, for some Christian leader to write a book on this subject that will speak an authoritative word to Christian young people. I have not the competence to write such a book, but while we wait for it, I humbly offer to my young Christian friends this little booklet.

Christian Courtship

01 - Friendship

Chapter One

Friendship

During the second seven years of life children like to play with members of their own sex. The boys may be seen at their marbles or football, and the girls at their skipping or rounders. Often they will mix together in their play, but the tendency is to divide according to age and sex. The boy or girl who is especially fond of the opposite sex is abnormal and the literary example of such abnormality is found in the nursery rhyme:

Georgie Porgy, pudding and pie, Kissed the girls and made them cry, But when the boys came out to play, Georgie Porgy ran away. At about the age of fourteen, however, a change is noticeable. The opposite sex becomes attractive, and the growing youth and maiden begin to enjoy each other's company. This change may be accompanied by certain social difficulties. The boy may feel awkward in his approach, and stammer and stutter his words of friendship. The girl has fits of giggles, and some easily blush and become self-conscious. All this is because certain natural instinctive powers are awaking which the Creator intends shall eventually lead to the choice of a life partner, and to the consummation of that choice in marriage and family life.

It is important at this stage of a young person's life that he or she is guided aright by wise and sympathetic elders who have not forgotten the difficulties and joys of their own 'teen years. Young people need to be helped to mix together happily in social and recreational activities, and in Christian worship and service. The parents have the greatest responsibility, and the home should be the center of social life. Church leaders also can put young folk in immense debt to them simply by intelligent care in leading them together in Christian activity. The point is that, there should be fellowship together. It is by happy mixing that this period may be passed through pleasantly and safely. If this experience is normal; out of it will grow that special attraction to one member of the other sex which may lead to the choice of a life-partner. Here are one or two guiding rules that may be helpful at this period.

(1). Respect the personalities of your friends of the opposite sex. There are old rules of chivalry which we would do well to bring back into use. Some are fortunate in their early home life. They have not seen or heard quarrels between father and mother. They have not heard one sex disparage the other. They have noticed that father is courteous in treatment of mother, and mother is thoughtful and affectionate toward father. All this leaves an indelible impression. It has been said: 'You can tell, by the way a fellow treats a girl, what sort of a mother he has.'

(2). Control instinctive passion. Powers awaken in us at this time of our life which we must learn to control. In Christian life especially do we repudiate the habits and customs of the world concerning our sex life. Therefore, we eschew the doubtful story, the erotic novel, and the sex appeal stuff of the films. We do not allow our minds to accept the idea that kissing, cuddling, and caressing are the supreme pleasures of adolescence. Indeed it is right and wise for us to make it a rule to cut

these things out at this stage. They can wait for later on, and even in courtship they should be the sign, not of passion, but only of that growing love which we are becoming sure is leading to betrothal and marriage. The reason for this guidance is that we may easily awaken feelings in ourselves and our friend that may be difficult to control, but which would otherwise have lain fairly dormant. Especially is this true of girls. It is very cruel of a boy to seek selfishly his own pleasure even in what he thinks is a harmless flirtation, and then leave a girl with an emotional problem which will torment her for many years. Not only so but in matters of the heart one party may take certain actions much more seriously than the other. How often persons have been hurt in this way is reflected in the lines of a popular song:

You wanted someone to play with, But I wanted someone to love.

So, cut it out, Christian lads and lasses, and grow up into the later phases of young manhood and womanhood healthy in mind, spirit, and body. It is a discipline that will make for strong character, and after all, this period soon passes. Now is the time for fun and fellowship together, and, until you are fairly sure that you are really being attracted and led to a life partner, remember the old adage, that there is `safety in numbers`.

02 - Courtship

Chapter Two

Courtship

If the first period of adolescent life has been happily passed in a growing understanding of and fellowship with the members of the opposite sex, there will be no difficulty in passing on to the next step in the serious game of choosing your partner. Among your friends will be someone who attracts you more than the others, and in your later 'teen years he or she is likely to become your special friend. So quite naturally, friendship should lead to courtship. The natural basis of this kind of friendship is sex attraction. It is that which impels you to select one friend from among all the others. It fills the friendship with that beautiful and exhilarating emotion which we call 'being in love'. You feel that your heart has already chosen your destined mate. This is natural and right. Nothing I shall say later on the importance of compatibility is meant to disparage the value of being in love. That wonderful experience is the primary element in courtship.

Among young people courtship is thought of and talked about as 'great fun'. There is no human experience more exhilarating to mind and body than falling in love. Even the prospect of such an experience makes life a thrilling adventure for most young people. But what needs to be pointed out is that it is much more than 'great fun'. It is one of the most serious issues of your life. During these critical months and years you are choosing your life-partner, and therefore, you are choosing your destiny. You yourself are choosing your own happiness or misery. You are choosing whether the rest of your life is to be lived in the heaven of perpetual 'keeping in love' or, may be, in the hell of disharmony and perpetual friction. Other people are not choosing for you. You would be indignant if they attempted to. You insist that this is your choice. And so it is.

How important therefore, that you choose aright! How important that you are careful yourself and that you get careful and prayerful advice from your parents, and friendly elders! For this is the great factor to notice about Courtship: it is a time and an experience in which you choose. Of course, you can't choose without knowing fairly intimately the one upon whom your preference has fallen. That is why Courtship is good and necessary. There must be a special relationship between you which makes possible private talks, and sharing together of interests and activities. You 'go places' together. You are invited to each others homes. You worship together and take part in Christian service together. In all these experiences you can observe each other in different circumstances and notice each others reactions. It is a good thing for this experience of Courtship to take a long time so that by the time your choice is made you are quite sure that you have chosen aright.

Here are four guiding principles to help you to choose:

(1) Choose a Christian

`Can two walk together except they be agreed?' The warning of the apostle not to be unequally yoked is not only an authoritative word to the Christian believer; it is a wise human word that it is fatal to ignore. An unequal yoke is bound to chafe. Do not think that being `in love' is enough and that after marriage you can win your partner to discipleship. It may not be so. Besides, Christian marriage is a sacrament made before God. You must both start from the same place. The two must be one in Christ.

What wonderful possibilities there are in Christian marriage of fellowship and ministry!

`Our Lord's marvelous promise to two who are agreed gives a thrill to married couples who are one in Him, for all the resources of God are placed at their disposal for the healing and reconciling of a world astray. That is what imparts to Christian marriage its far vistas' (A. Macbeath).

(2) Choose a Kindred Spirit

It is not enough that your friend is a Christian. He or she must have a personality that harmonizes with your own. The word to describe this essential element in life partnership is Affinity, and is defined in the dictionary as `relationship by spiritual attraction'. Negatively it means that the one must be free from anything that would offend the other's tastes. Positively it means that the mind, intellect, speech, habits, and tastes of the one are pleasing to the other. Especially must this be true of mind and soul.

`You see, we are both artists,' said a man to me the other day, when he was describing how his wife's way of arranging the home was so very satisfying to his soul and mind. `He satisfies my intellectual hunger and seems to fit my mind,' said a girl who described to me a new boy friend who had come into her life. That's it! - Affinity. `We cannot keep apart, Adam,' said Dinah Morris, `my soul seems knit to thine.'

(3) Look for Character

Mrs. Smith is a white-haired widow who lives in a little cottage in our village. I was surprised when I found that she was not much more than fifty. Her face is calm now but deeply lined with the marks of past sorrow. She sat rocking herself in her chair as she told me the most hair-raising story of an unhappy married life. Her husband was unspeakably cruel. `How came you to marry him?' I asked her. `Oh, he was such a fine young man,' she said, `his voice was deep and vibrant, and as we walked along the country roads he quoted miles of poetry. My courtship was like a beautiful dream. I was enchanted. It was after we married I noticed defects in his character. We were kindred spirits, but that wasn't enough. I should have looked for character.'

Take warning then, and look for character. Does he always keep his appointment? What sort of excuses does he make if he doesn't? What are his habits like? Is he an abstainer? On the other hand: Does she always tell you the exact truth? Is she fickle in her affections? Does she want her mother to wait on her hand and foot? Is she vain?

`You want me to marry an angel,' said a boy to whom I pointed out these things. Well - that's not a bad ideal. The trouble is that love is blind and we always think she is an angel when we are courting. It is not unwise to make quite sure before marriage, and while it is foolish to expect perfection, it is very wise to put high value on character.

(4) Look for Accomplishments

I do not mean those abilities that need an academic training, but the sort of things that any wise mother will teach her daughter. The young man is preparing for his responsibilities mainly by his diligence in his trade or profession. A young woman should prepare by learning all the practical tasks which make for efficient wifedom and motherhood and home-making. She is a fortunate girl whose mother regards it her duty to give this kind of homey training and teaches her daughter, for instance, the art of cooking in all its varied and interesting branches. The use, of the [sewing] work-basket is necessary too, as well as so many other aspects of home-making.

If a girl is not fortunate in her mother, she can determine to make use of classes for domestic science which are held in most towns during winter evenings, and so train herself in these elemental womanly arts. What a pathetic waste of golden 'teen years to spend evening after evening at frivolities, when life's true happiness awaits all those who will prepare for it. Even if marriage is not her destiny the girl who trains herself in this practical way has not wasted her time. Anyway, let every girl remember that the best type of boy will not merely be attracted by a pretty face, but will have heeded his mother's warning: Can she cook, and can she sew, Billy boy?

[The same advice goes for boys: carpentry, car mechanics, electrical work and plumbing are always useful skills, but especially so in marriage.] The guidance of God is the underlying principle for the Christian youth or maiden, in choosing a partner. God will guide those who seek His leading. But even so, He will do it through your own wits and also by the wise advice of Christian friends. If you are in Christian fellowship and prayerfully follow the four guiding principles you will not make a mistake.

03 - Betrothal

Chapter Three

Betrothal When an attracted couple, after an adequate time of courtship, are quite sure that they love each other deeply; that in every way they were made for each other, and God's seal is upon their union, then the natural result is to prepare for marriage. This definite contract to marry is called by the beautiful Christian name Betrothal. In our common English usage we say it is an Engagement, for each party has engaged to marry the other. Let us keep in mind this simple meaning: it is a promise to marry. The engagement ring is a sign that such a promise has been given.

(1). In the eyes of the [English] law an engagement is looked upon as a binding contract upon all persons who are of age. Either party can sue the other for breach of promise to marry. We do not expect this to happen in the Christian fellowship, but it is well for those who enter into this contract to remember how seriously the secular law regards it. It is much more than the privilege to display an expensive ring. It is a serious contract.

(2). Christian young people should be taught to regard it as a sacred bond. There are no `ifs' and `buts' about it. If you are engaged you have promised to marry. You belong to your lover as he belongs to you. `Let your yea be yea.' If the Christian young man finds himself attracted by a girl, but then notices the ring upon the `fourth finger of the left hand', that is enough for him. He knows she doesn't and cannot belong to him. She is betrothed - promised. No honourable man encroaches upon that sacred engagement. Not by the slightest look, word, or action would he detract her heart from her pledged loyalty. On the other hand a betrothed person having pledged his or her heart to another, never allows that heart to be tempted from its loyalty. If there must be long separation before the arranged marriage can take place, the heart should be guarded carefully. The Christian is loyal above everything. Especially is he and she loyal in regard to this sacred contract. Keep your love and guard your heart.

(3). It will be clear now that there should not be any engagement to marry until both parties have fully made up their minds that they intend to be married, and it is good not to make promises to each other until you are old enough to make up your minds. It takes time to know another person: take time. And, if you seek Divine guidance, give God time.

(4). Engagement should be of short duration. The Christian idea of betrothal comes from the Hebrew custom, according to which the wedding ceremonies had begun with betrothal. Mary is described in Matthew as Joseph's betrothed wife. She was regarded by law as his, although the marriage was not consummated. He could not have broken the betrothal without a bill of divorcement (Matthew 1:19). Usually only a few days elapsed between the betrothal and the day when the bride's father took her to the house of the bridegroom for the final marriage ceremony. Of course, the modern institution of engagement is not as binding as that. The Early Church abandoned the Jewish betrothal and telescoped it into the Marriage Service, but it is significant

that the modern custom of engagement grew up and that it is defined in the dictionary in the same way as betrothal. While it is true that a broken engagement is better than a miserable marriage; yet engagement is a promise to marry which should not be made until mutual love and loyalty can be promised with certainty.

04 - Marriage

Chapter Four

Marriage

Eileen Mackintosh sat in my study nervously twisting her wedding ring. Tears of grief and anger rolled down her cheeks, and every now and then angry words poured from her lips. Her husband had written to say he had finished with her because he had found someone he liked better. He had asked Eileen to divorce him.

'I don't care for myself,' she said, 'I wouldn't want him any more, anyway. I'm angry because he doesn't think more of his baby.' Then she said a strange thing: 'Apart from the baby I would release him, because we agreed when we got married that if either of us found someone else we liked better, that we would be willing to release the other.'

'But,' I protested, 'that is not Christian marriage.'

Just think of it! They had come to God's house and made solemn vow before God. Each had contracted to take the other: For better for worse, For richer for poorer, In sickness and in health, Until death us do part, According to God's Holy Law. And yet they had made an agreement between themselves, which gainsaid the very vows they so solemnly made. And now Eileen was humiliated and angry because her husband was recalling for his selfish ends the foolish agreement she had made.

It cannot be emphasized too much that Christian marriage is a sacred life-long contract. We all know what sickness and health means. But do we all realize what 'for better or worse' means? Do we know what 'until death us do part' means? Or has the English language no meaning? The English [and the American] law, it is true, has arranged for the marriage contract, in certain circumstances, to be legally terminated. But Christian law has not. The pagan, in his registry office, does not say the words quoted above. But the Christian says 'for better or for worse'. In some cases this ideal is very difficult to maintain, but in spite of that it still remains the ideal. That is why training for marriage is so necessary and why I have taken the trouble to write this booklet.

Once marriage has been contracted by Christian man and maid the great task of 'getting wed' begins. Just as courtship should take a long time, so getting really wedded takes a long time. To weld two human beings into one is no easy task, however much in love you may be. It is essentially the task of two individuals finding perfect harmony on the three levels of personality.

(1) Physical Harmony

Both bride and bridegroom need the will and knowledge to find this level of harmony. There are many good books written by Christian doctors which give the necessary instruction.

(2) Mental Harmony This probably has already been largely achieved during courtship. You will already have discovered your identity of interests and have found much intellectual pleasure in

pursuing those interests together. But now in the closer fellowship of marriage you will find there are still higher levels of harmony to reach.

(3) Spiritual Harmony

`It takes three to make a good marriage,' Dr. Buchman used to say to his friends, `your two selves and God.' In the Christian marriage service the whole meaning of the ceremony is that God is joining two individuals together in Himself. It is the burden of all the prayers of the service, and it is the one prayer of all Christian friends of the couple who kneel before God.

O perfect Love, all human thought transcending,
Lowly we kneel in prayer before Thy throne,
That theirs may be the love that knows no ending
Whom Thou for evermore dost join in one.
But this wonderful spiritual harmony does not come by a magical act of God. It must be achieved by each partner receiving a spiritual ministry from God and contributing to the other. It means an utterly unselfish surrender of each individual life to God which develops into an active fervent prayer-life. Then it means that these two fervent God-devoted souls pray, much together until at last they see the vision of God's will together. God is able to make His revelations and pursue His personal purposes through both as if they were one. Oh, what glorious possibilities are here!

Don't be discouraged. God gives this blessing to those who mean to have it. And there are glorious examples in the past: John and Elizabeth Fletcher, David and Mary Livingstone [missionaries], Catherine and William Booth [Salvation Army], Thomas and Mary Champness. It may take time, but if you give God time He will lead you to the bliss of Heaven upon earth.

05 - Epilogue

Epilogue

I have written this booklet because I cannot bear to leave it unwritten any longer. I constantly see laughing boys and radiant girls rollicking into courtship and betrothal almost entirely ignorant of where they are going; then I see some of them later with broken hearts and ruined lives. `Why didn't someone guide me?' is what each experience of that kind says to me. Then I remember that no one offered me any real guidance. No one even put into my hands a little booklet which would have revealed the outline of a safe pathway through this important period of life. But I was what the world calls lucky. There were difficulties, but I have come through them, like many others, into happy married life. I know, however, that it is cruel of responsible adults to assume that all young people will stumble through somehow. The risks are too great. So, very humbly, I offer to my young friends the Christian ministry of this booklet.

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