“What does the Bible have to say about dating? Nothing. And everything!” So write Rick and Sharon Phillips in this remarkably wise and careful book. They set forth a theology of dating and relationships, and then offer mature wisdom on how to put biblical principles into practice. The result is required reading for every single adult.”

—Justin Taylor, co-editor, *Sex and the Supremacy of Christ*

“A biblically based perspective on dating and relationships. If singles read and apply the biblical counsel of this book, many of the painful problems that couples might face after the wedding will be prevented.”

—Wayne A. Mack, author, *Strengthening Your Marriage*

“This book is for people who want to take relationships as seriously as God takes them. Rick and Sharon have a passion for redeeming romance and preparing both singles and couples for lives that glorify God. They take a marriage-based approach that honors the divinely designed differences between women and men. In biblical, practical, down-to-earth ways the Phillipses show how, by grace, love is really supposed to work.”

—Phil and Lisa Ryken, Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia

“Many single adults today are confused, disoriented, and frustrated with the dating scene. This terrific book brings clarity, a biblical orientation, and lots of hope.”

—John Yenchko, co-author, *Pre-Engagement: 5 Questions to Ask Yourselves*

“Finally, someone has provided biblically based, theologically sound, and practical guidelines on dating for singles. Rick and Sharon enable singles to identify and resist cultural trends that are so easily imported into the thinking of singles. I intend to require this book for my students for years to come.”

—Dan Zink, Covenant Theological Seminary
Holding Hands, Holding Hearts

Recovering a Biblical View of Christian Dating

Richard D. Phillips

AND

Sharon L. Phillips
To the dearly loved singles of

City Light

Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia
1991–2002
Contents

Preface 9
Introduction 11

Part 1: A Biblical View of Dating and Relationships
1. Love Made New: God's Design in Creation 19
2. Trouble in Paradise: The Relationship Fallen in Sin 37
3. “Put on Love”: The Relationship Redeemed in Christ 53
4. God's Blueprint for Love: The Relationship Redeemed in Christ, Part 2 69

Part 2: Biblical Wisdom for Dating and Relationships
5. Words to the Wise: A Proverbial Take on Attraction 91
6. Table for Two: The First Date 113
7. The Big C-Word: To Commit or Not to Commit? 129
8. Could This Be Love? From Dating to Marriage 139

Notes 179
Index of Scripture 181
This book is the product of many years of ministering to Christian singles. It is geared especially toward single adults rather than to teenagers. The material here is in some respects suitable for teenagers, given that it presents a biblical portrait of love. But in other respects it is less appropriate, since it assumes that its readers possess the maturity to enter into marriage and since we deliberately aim to help dating couples successfully grow into marriage.

We really began working on this book as soon as we began ministering to singles, through our counsel and prayers for so many who were struggling with frustrations in dating. Eventually, we developed a seminar that we continue to give from time to time, and that has grown into the material found in this book. We are pleased to state that we have never provided a seminar on this material without later learning that at least one couple straightened out their relationship and went on to get married. We have even had couples present us with children who were the eventual result of their understanding of God’s teaching on relationships and marriage. (To our knowledge, though, none of the children were named after us!)
We have confidence in this material not because it represents our profound insight or wisdom—although we are encouraged by our experience in offering it—but because it rests on the inerrant teaching of God’s Word. We hope it will shed biblical light on a subject that is murky to so many. We offer it with prayers that God will use it to the blessing of many Christian singles and to the glory of his name.

This book is dedicated to the singles of City Light from 1991 to 2002. It was one of the great thrills of our lives to pastor City Light, the singles ministry of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, where the two of us started our own relationship and where we were so inspired by the example of so many incredible Christians. We also thank Allan Fisher of P&R Publishing for his long-suffering patience as we worked on this book through the birth of several children, through a change of churches, and through a major relocation. We hope his patience is well rewarded. Above all, we give thanks to our Lord Jesus Christ, whose love for us is the foundation for any love that we will ever enjoy together. To him be the glory.
“WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY about dating?” That is the question we set out to answer with this book. It was also a question we were asked by numerous young-adult Christians during our years in ministry to singles. It’s a good question. It’s the right question. It’s a vital question that most singles need to ask before the far more frequent question, “How can I get a guy or get a girl?”

“What does the Bible say about dating?” There are two ways to answer the question. The first is, “Nothing.” Paul never wrote a word about what to do on a first date. The Bible is not going to give you a direct answer about whom to ask out (or to whom to say “yes”). Furthermore, the very idea of his daughter going out alone with a single man would have driven the average prophet to distraction.

The question “To whom should I be married?” is as old as humanity, but the current notion of “dating” is a quite recent experiment in human relations. With this in mind, we shouldn’t be surprised that the Bible doesn’t give much explicit guidance when it comes to dating. The fact is that the Bible has no category for dating. If you look in your concordance for the words boyfriend and girlfriend, you aren’t going to find anything. When it comes to
male–female relationships, the Bible knows only three categories: parent–child, brother–sister, and husband–wife.

Dating is essentially a twentieth-century invention. But whether we like it or not, most of us who want to get married have to figure out how to date successfully. Even if dating is a worldly notion with which some Christians will be uncomfortable, it is nonetheless something that most of us can’t simply kiss goodbye.

What does the Bible say about dating?
Nothing. And everything!
Our challenge is to think biblically about an activity that isn’t in the Bible.

The challenge before us is to think biblically about an activity that isn’t in the Bible and that may expose us to worldly attitudes and behaviors. (This, by the way, is true not just of dating but also of work, families, and a whole host of other issues.) This is where our second answer comes in. “What does the Bible say about dating?” Previously, we said, “Nothing.” There is no direct teaching on dating. But now we must answer the question by saying, “Everything!” That is, everything we read from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22 is of vital relevance to dating, as to all of life. We hope to show in this book that the Bible presents profound instruction and wisdom that may be directly applied to dating and that will help us to be blessed in dating relationships.

For instance, take what Jesus described as the two greatest commandments: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your
mind,” and “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:38–39). We need to apply those words more seriously to every aspect of life. In dating, this requires us to honor God first. Many Christians approach dating mainly in terms of pursuing romance and meeting their emotional needs. Far too few think of it as an opportunity to honor God and grow in grace. What about loving our neighbor? This commandment requires us to put our dating partner’s holiness ahead of our happiness. If you are dating someone and the relationship does not grow into marriage, the least you can do as a Christian is to ensure that dating you was a spiritually beneficial experience.

When we make this type of application, we are speaking generally about how the Bible can speak to dating. But what about more specific teaching? For those of you who will marry or who desire to marry, the Bible provides the marriage relationship as the framework from which to consider dating. The approach of this book is to start with the biblical principles of a healthy marriage and to work backwards to describe a healthy biblical dating relationship. Now, a marriage proposal does not usually happen on a first date, nor would we advise that it should. But neither does a marriage really begin with a wedding. Whether we know it or not, the patterns we establish in dating continue into marriage. Therefore, the foundations for a healthy and godly marriage begin while we are dating.

Our approach is to take the biblical principles of a healthy marriage and work backwards to a healthy dating relationship.

The foundations for a healthy, godly marriage begin while dating.
Think about the assumptions you currently hold about dating. You might even want to jot them down. To be obedient to God's teaching in the Bible, you'll probably need to challenge and confront many of those assumptions and beliefs. It is amazing how deeply and well hidden worldly beliefs and attitudes are in our minds. There could hardly be a topic more confused in our time than that of dating. As Paul wrote about life in general, we may especially say about romance and sexuality, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Rom. 12:2, NIV). We need to have our minds shaped by the Bible rather than by the world.

Furthermore, the stakes are very high. More harm comes to many of us through dating than in any other way. According to the world, dating is a way for singles to enjoy the comforts and pleasures of the opposite sex. If marriage is in the picture at all, then dating is a tryout for a potential partner. The idea is to start living as if you were married and see how things go. If one isn't finding fulfillment in the other person, then you can simply break up and move on. It's not much different from finding the right pair of shoes. At least you can have some fun along the way, or so it goes.

The problem is that the heart doesn't work that way. The intimacy of romance—both physical and emotional intimacy—is one that binds two people tightly together. If we don't treat our own and others' hearts carefully, there will be a lot of pain and bleeding. A broken heart is no small matter, as so many of us know from experience. This is the cause of untold pain in our world today, and Christians need to respond to affairs of the heart with respect, with care, and with the wisdom that God is able to give.
According to the Bible’s perspective, if you are dating you are not just holding hands, you are holding hearts. What you do with your own heart, and what you do with another’s, is a matter of great importance. God’s Word speaks clearly and powerfully: “Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life” (Prov. 4:23, NIV). If we really want to learn how to care for another’s heart, God is willing to teach us.

You’re not just holding hands. You’re holding hearts.

This book is organized into two main parts. Part One is *A Biblical View of Dating and Relationships*. This is a drama in three acts, which we will explore one by one: God’s design in creation, the relationship fallen through sin, and the relationship redeemed by God’s grace. In chapter 1, we will begin this story, and it is as great and relevant a drama as you will ever read, one that is intended to shape our whole way of thinking about relationships and love. Part Two is titled *Biblical Wisdom for Dating and Relationships*. Here, we will consider a number of important topics from a biblical point of view: attraction, first dates, commitment, and growing from dating to marriage. The book concludes with a chapter of encouragement for those struggling with contentment as singles, titled *Waiting for Love?* God calls us all to contentment and to purposeful godliness, and he gives grace for us to grow in character and usefulness in singleness just as in marriage.

Dating is one of the most important things we will ever do, and much rides on how we do it. For that reason, and as a man and a woman who once dated and whose
hearts are now bound together in the covenant of marriage, we offer this book with prayers to God that it will inform the minds and bless the hearts of all who read it. We pray especially that as you learn from God's Word regarding this challenging subject, you will find practical help that makes a clear difference in your relationships. We dare to hope—and we have seen this hope fulfilled—that if you turn to the Bible for guidance and are humbly and prayerfully willing to follow in the path God lays before you, not only will you be more godly and loving in dating, but one of your relationships may ripen and mature into the blessing of a godly and loving marriage.

As we begin this journey into the Bible's teaching on men and women together, we should remember that we are not the first to struggle with this topic. Even wise King Solomon had his biggest troubles when it came to women. He wrote in Proverbs 30:18–19 (NIV), "There are three things that are too amazing for me, four that I do not understand: the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a snake on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas, and the way of a man with a maiden." Like Solomon, we can be greatly helped by turning to God for wisdom in the way of a man with a maiden, without losing any of the wonder that makes it so romantic.
PART ONE

A Biblical View of Dating and Relationships
It was all so good. That’s what the Bible says: good, good, good. The light was good. The plants were good. The water was good. But then, in Genesis 2:18, all that changes. Suddenly we read the words, “not good.” Wouldn’t you know that it had to do with a man and a woman coming together?

You hear this from guys all the time: “Everything was great until the girls got involved!” “Everything was going well, and then he got a girlfriend.” To so many men today—including Christian men—women are the problem. But that isn’t what God says in the Bible. When Genesis 2:18 says, “It is not good,” God is talking about a man without a woman. The verse says—and this is where our biblical tour of dating begins—“Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone.’” This is where we