

Six Steps to Great Dating

by Steve Shadrach

I can remember it like it was yesterday. I was a freshman in love! Yes, I was a Christian as was she, but our emotions were more wrapped up in one other than in Jesus Christ. I had this gnawing feeling the Lord wanted us to break up, but I wouldn't listen. Most of my Christian buddies had girlfriends, and certainly all my fraternity brothers did. Why shouldn't I?

I carried this heavy load of rationalization around with me through the fall semester. She and I finally got enough courage to bring up the subject, talk and make a decision. Using our heads and not just our hearts, we broke up because we felt it was God's will.

That night I went and hid in a dark, empty classroom and cried for three hours. Not because I felt sad or jilted, but because 100-pound weights had been taken off my shoulders. I'm not very emotional, but that night there was a steady stream of joyous tears signaling I was finally free! Having fully obeyed, I was now willing to do *anything* and *everything* God wanted me to.

This gave me the courage to make another important decision that night. For the rest of my college years, I resolved I would develop friendships with Christian girls, not romances. Making a commitment like this may sound radical and unrealistic to some, but for me, it was a choice that allowed me to develop the personal and spiritual foundation I would need to last a lifetime.

Spending those college years building genuine brother-sister relationships with girls, along with studying the Scriptures to learn what a godly relationship looked like, aided me in piecing together a Christ honoring plan that would help me be successful in this modern day, mostly American concept we call "dating."

Just because we can't find dating in the Bible or in most countries around the world doesn't make it wrong. But I want to warn you — if you follow these "Six Steps to Great Dating", you will need to go against the grain of your culture. You'll also be pleasing to God and preparing yourself for an awesome marriage someday.

And now for the list!

1. Date Only Committed Christians

"You will marry *someone* that you date" may be one of the few original things I've ever uttered. It's so obvious that it's humorous, but still our country, where we get to choose our mates, has some of the highest divorce rates in the world. If someday you want a Christ-centered marriage (which clearly requires the commitment of two Christ-centered people), then you better start with the end in mind and take a close look at who you're attracted to. Yes, I do believe 2 Corinthians 6:14, which says, "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers" means not to marry non-Christians, but if I were you, I'd set my sights on dating and marrying someone who is more than *just* a believer.

The key is to build opposite-sex friendships with other committed Christians who have a vision and passion for following Christ, for becoming like Christ and for reaching out to others

with the gospel. The only *real* way for you to know if these values will be true of them in the future is to look at their past. Check out their track record to see if their talk matches their walk, knowing college students are notorious for changing and adapting their goals to line up with their latest flame!

2. Plan your Dates in Advance

Having the same goals is one of the essentials for any strong dating or marriage relationship. Not only does it take time (i.e. years) to develop and live out those goals, it takes careful planning too. Bill Gothard, founder of Basic Youth Conflicts seminars, says "the chief purpose of dating is to achieve spiritual oneness." If you incorporate that purpose into your dating life, it will require you to prayerfully map out your activities, helping you and your date draw closer to God through your time together. This approach is a rarity in this age of entertainment-addicted Christians where most couples seem to always end up at the local movie theatre or the couch, watching another late- night video rental.

I'd like to talk to the guys right now, because I believe you are primarily responsible for the spiritual leadership in a relationship. Cultivate your and your date's love for God, for the Scriptures and for others by planning enjoyable, but meaningful activities that will produce fulfillment and mutual respect for each other. If your dating style is just kind of a lazy "hanging out," consider transforming yourself into "the man with the plan." If you come up with the what, when, where and how it will not only communicate that you care enough to do some advanced thinking, but she will respect you as a spiritual leader who knows where he's going.

3. Save Yourself for Marriage

Here's the vicious cycle that many college couples go through each weekend: first of all he *calls up*, then of course, they must *dress up*, he then drives over to *pick up*, fully stocked to *drink up*, only to eventually *throw up*, but still later that night choosing to *shack up*, and with a headache the next morning they finally *wake up*, once again possessing a deep nagging feeling they've really *messed up*! I hate to break the news to my female readers, but many college guys show love to a girl in order to obtain sexual access. But in the same way guys give love to get sex, there are an equal number of girls who are guilty of giving sex in order to get love. Our holy God, who thought up sex, didn't say "Let the marriage bed be undefiled" in Hebrews 13:4 to rob us of physical pleasure, but instead to give it to us in fullness — and at the right time. In my counseling over the years, I've observed that to the degree a couple is sexually intimate before marriage is the same degree that they lack sexual satisfaction after marriage. Reading a classic together like *Pure Excitement* by Joe White or *Choices* by Paula and Stacey Rinehart will help you set up and stick to biblical standards, build trust and prepare you someday to have one romantic marriage!

4. Work on Communication

If you're dating someone who wants a little less talk and a lot more action, you might want to check their spiritual pulse. Getting to know a person's body has nothing to do with getting to know the person inside that body. In fact, communication vanishes as the fog of guilt rolls in. *Anybody* can kiss, but how about carrying on a meaningful conversation? In other words, if you end up marrying the person you're dating, the wedding night may be great, but what do you talk about at breakfast the next morning? And as the years slip by our beautiful bodies

have a way of sagging and wrinkling, so there better be a deep bond of friendship that outlasts temporal physical attraction.

Learn how to ask good questions, how to share facts *and* feelings, and how to listen. There may be a reason God gave us two ears and only one mouth! Get to know their past and present, likes and dislikes, strengths and weaknesses, values and dreams. Most married couples are shocked when they realize 90 percent of their dating period was activities and only 10 percent communication, and that after the honeymoon, those percentages reversed themselves. Understand that God made men and women with a spirit, soul and body, then later handed us divine instructions how to connect with one another — in *that* order.

5. Throw Out Expectations

Sometimes pressure comes from within when one partner has stronger feelings than the other and wants to always "define" the relationship. Jealousy and possessiveness dominate many couples and the only brand of relationships some students know are the conditional kind that always says, "I'll love you if . . ." or "I love you because. . . ." Give each other lots of room to roam, earnestly desiring God's best for them — even if it's not you. And why let your heart be torn in half every time there's a breakup? Let's face it, *every* relationship you get into is going to end until the "right one" comes along. Relax, go slow, build a friendship, and beware of someone who, on your first date, peppers you with questions about how many children you want!

Pressure sometimes comes from others who are flashing their engagement rings everywhere or asking not so subtle questions like, "When are you two going to tie the knot?" or "Aren't you going out this weekend?" *Having* to go on a date each Friday or Saturday night is a sign of insecurity and discontentment. Refuse to allow others to rope you into a dating pattern or relationship that you're uncomfortable with. Having been in 13 weddings before I got married, it's a miracle I was able to withstand my friends' joking and jabbing until age 28 (my wife to be was almost 27) when we finally walked the aisle. Take your time and don't force it. Let *God* develop the feelings in both of your hearts, in His way and in His timing.

6. Focus on Becoming the Right Person

Looking for love in all the wrong places, students are frantically turning to cyber dating, matchmaking services, even want ads in their search for intimacy. The guys have replaced wife swapping with wife shopping, while many females come to college to get their MRS degree and, if they're not engaged by Christmas of their senior year, hit the panic button big time. But if you'll focus on *becoming* the right person, instead of *finding* the right person, (i.e. staying on the road by "seeking first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness"), the Lord likely will bring along someone who far surpasses your little checklist.

Are you willing to spend your college years (and maybe beyond) preparing to do it God's way, instead of the world's way? You better, because statistics show that 72 percent of couples divorce if one partner is less than 21 when they get married, and if one of the partners is 26 or less when they get married, there's a 55 percent chance they'll be split up before their fifth anniversary. I've heard couples tell me, "But Steve, *we're* different. We're *really* in love!" so many times I could gag. Truly, the riskiest decision you'll ever make is who you'll marry, and if this is true, then *who* you date — and *how* you date — can make you or break you.

A final truth that transcends any list is the fact that *no* human relationship can fill our deepest needs to love and be loved. Jesus Christ *alone* fits into the God shaped vacuum in each of us. Dating, even marriage will turn out to be a cheap anesthetic for an empty life until we are *totally* satisfied in Him and can pray Psalm 73:25 back to the only *true* lover of our soul: "Whom have I in heaven but Thee, and besides Thee, I desire nothing on earth."

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