

Should Christians Date?

The couple appears straight out of a romance novel, but not necessarily in the way one would expect. He's the department chair of the College of Business at Oral Roberts University, and she's a prophetess.

They're a bit older. He's balding and her eyes are creased in the corners. But oh, how youth sparkles in their eyes! Their affection radiates in the distance between them. The thrum of their connection pulses with the power of the Holy Spirit as they begin to tell their story.

Jim Russell was driving home when the Lord spoke to him, telling him to turn right into a shopping center. At the corner of the center was a little church. He went in. The moment Jim saw her, he heard the Lord speak: "The Lord said, 'You see that woman over there?' And I said, 'Yes, Sir.' And He says, 'That's your wife.' It was as straightforward and simple as that."

The connection was immediate when Jim introduced himself to Sophia.

"I started to feel something in my inner man, in my belly, something began to shake. ... It really was a spiritual experience," she said. "And I heard the Holy Spirit say, 'This is going to be your husband.'"

Once they began dating, they prayed before each outing. But what started as a romantic gesture became a symbol of the Holy Spirit's power. Every prayer time would end with the two covered in gold dust. Yes, gold dust—straight from heaven. In fact, the flecks of gold still cling to the delicate petals of a rose Jim presented Sophia on their first date.

Within two months, they went from strangers to spouses. How can anyone question what God wants when He speaks directly and

miracles manifest to guide a man and woman together?

Stories like the Russells' are reminders that God participates in our lives today. Sure, He's in the business of healing and miracles, but He can also resurrect dead hearts and orchestrate romance better than any novel ever could. The Russells' story is phenomenal, but the truth is, literal gold dust and the crystal-clear voice of God aren't apparent in every romance.

Perhaps you're like me. As a 25-year-old, never-married single, I left our meeting with the Russells with a pang in my soul, fighting off jealousy as I thought about how God gave them gold dust to lead them to each other while I'm left with the crumbs of the Internet. Surely I'm not the only one feeling left out.

'Playing God' With Online Dating

I'm not one to whine about life and not do a lick to fix what I want to see changed, so like many Christians these days, I took to the Internet to "find me a man." Singles should be aware, though, of the stigma of online dating.

The Single Woman author and blogger Mandy Hale explains why there is a stigma: "I think there's the idea people think you're playing God and interfering with God's plan."

Hale transformed her life from a public relations specialist to a popular blogger and says God used the Internet to spread His message to other women through her.

"You know what? If the Internet can be used in such a powerful way to change my life and the lives of women who follow my message ... who's to say it can't bring me the man of my dreams?" Hale asks.

In some cases, dating sites did bring women the men God intended for them. Take Alabama's Bill and Sallie Garvin, who

met through eHarmony in 2005 and married in 2006. Both had children from previous marriages and were a bit hesitant to give their love lives over to the Internet. But through online dating, the couple felt the Holy Spirit guide them to each other.

“I prayed a lot through this process,” Sallie says. “I also saw God’s perfect provision for me of the right person.”

The Garvins are one of many online marriage success stories. Meet Courtney Rodgers, a former middle school teacher who is now a stay-at-home mom, and her husband, Geoffrey Rodgers, a software engineer. The Rodgers met online in 2007, but they didn’t have a shining-light-from-above moment.

“I experienced a lot of Holy Spirit guidance as I was getting to know Geoffrey,” Courtney says. “It wasn’t an instant soulmate connection for me. I felt the Holy Spirit leading me to patience when I would have normally bailed on a relationship that had some minor challenges. And I felt reminded to focus on the ways that we were the same instead of fearing our differences.”

Though Courtney wasn’t Geoffrey’s first online relationship, he knew God was involved step by step.

“God’s peace was measurably felt on the journey (to meet a date in person), and I walked away feeling that the time spent getting to know the girl was well worth it,” Geoffrey says.

“The second person I met was Courtney. I fell in love with her almost instantly. Everything from the bounce in her step walking toward me the very first time we met to the way that she challenged me with gentle strength to become a better man told me this was a meaningful relationship. We got married about one year later, and every day has been a blessing. With three kids at this point, I can’t imagine a better mate.”

Online dating for these two couples was “freeing,” even

“courageous.”

“There was a definite shift from waiting for God to bring me a husband to trusting that He would be with me as I took a step toward my desire,” Courtney says. “It was very freeing to be courageous. I felt that I had His permission to be bold and unashamed of my longings. So in the long term, the impact was a deeper sense of trust—that I wasn’t going to miss His plan for me by taking this perceived risk.”

But others haven’t met with the same relational success.

Kelsy Black is an assistant producer for Cornerstone Television Network (CTN). When she moved to CTN’s headquarters in Western Pennsylvania, Black tried online dating as a way to meet new people. While she met new people, they weren’t always the right people.

“There definitely have been times when I felt like the Holy Spirit was guiding me away from certain people,” Black says. “Last fall, I fell hard for someone who was emotionally not compatible with me. I felt like God was telling me to fast (from) dating for three months after that, which proved to be really healthy and helpful. I basically just try to follow God’s voice as I go through dating decisions.”

Black’s stories echo my own. I can entertain you with tale after tale of less-than-appropriate pick-up lines, horrifying photos and gag-inducing comments.

What’s a Christian girl to do? Some in the church say to choose courtship over dating.

Discerning God’s Will in Courtship

In a traditional courtship, men and women pursue friendship within boundaries established by the couple with advice from their families and pastoral leaders. They put their focus first on God and friendship.

The courtship movement resurged in the late 1990s with books such as Joshua Harris' *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* and made headlines with reality TV stars like the Duggar family.

Jenny Rose Curtis, a 23-year-old copy editor at Charisma Media, advocates this approach to pursuing a spouse.

"God has used the courtship I'm in right now to teach me things about His heart in a way I hadn't seen before," Curtis says. "It's brought to life truths about God's romantic heart for His bride, the purpose of self-control and waiting, delayed gratification, putting others' spiritual well-being ahead of my own desires and not simply 'following my heart.'"

Some say those in a courtship intend to marry, so if the couple breaks up, the courtship process has failed. Curtis says that's not necessarily the case.

"If a courtship ends with the couple saying, 'You know, I don't think it's God's will that we get married,' that doesn't mean it's a failed courtship," Curtis says. "That's still a successful courtship because the goal is not strictly to get married but to discern and follow God's will."

But courtship isn't a magic love potion either. The process has affected some adversely, such as *The Single Woman's Hale*.

"I don't look back necessarily with regret because I think everything happens for a reason, but I do feel like I missed out on important dating experiences," Hale says. "I would love to think the way it works is we just magically bump into our significant other, and he'd be the only guy we'd have to date, and then we live happily ever after."

Hale believes dating is necessary in most cases.

"We need that opportunity to refine our standards and figure out what it is we're looking for," she says. "I feel like dating is designed to be iron sharpening iron, and I think

‘kissing dating goodbye’ in my 20s could potentially be why I’m (37) and still single.”

No matter what process singles use to find a spouse, the Holy Spirit needs to be present in the pursuit. Whether you date online or take the old-school approach, pursuing God should be primary. Without Him, the process promises to be a heart-breaking mess.

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