



# Girls, Guys, and God

Responding to current trends in dating books for teenagers

by Liz Beyer and Megan Greulich

*“I don’t understand what you’re saying. God created women as helpers. Our most important purpose is to affirm the guys in our lives — to let them know that we respect them, and that we trust them as our leaders.”*

So went another conversation with a young Christian woman on gender. While in general we are observing great forward leaps on behalf of biblical equality among college students, in this conversation I (Megan) hit a wall. Where had I heard that “women are created to help men” reaction before? I wondered, and then my eyes wandered to my shelf of books written to Christian teenagers. A rush of compassion for my young friend hit me: she might well have been quoting directly from one of those books. I thought back to my high school days, remembering similar books that I had eagerly devoured. Was it any surprise that I went to college opposed to full equality between women and men?

From Justin Lookadoo and Hayley DiMarco’s *Dateable*, to Shaunti Feldhahn and Lisa Rice’s *For Young Women Only*, to Joshua Harris’ books like *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, today’s Christian books for teens on dating seem overwhelmingly steeped in unhealthy and unbiblical ideas about gender.

As believers in biblical equality, we are responsible to teach teenagers what it means to be God-honoring women and men. Parents and youth leaders need practical ways to identify and respond to these unhealthy and unbiblical stereotypes in creative and redemptive ways.

## The Problem:

### *Is it really all about dating and gender stereotypes?*

Christian dating books for teens are not difficult to find. Even a short list includes books such as: *Boy Meets Girl* by Joshua Harris, *I Gave Dating a Chance* by Jeremy Clark, *When Dreams Come True* and *When God Writes Your Love Story* by Eric and Leslie Ludy, *Every Teenager's Little Black Book on Sex and Dating* by Blaine Bartel, *10 Commandments of Dating* by Ben Young and Samuel Adams, *Dating with Pure Passion* by Rob Eagar, *Courtship or Dating: So What's the Difference* by Dennis Gundersen, and *Before You Meet Prince Charming* by Sarah Mally. While their themes and advice on dating "rules" are all over the map, they represent a Christian culture obsessed with romantic love and marriage. This brings a skewed focus on romance that often comes neatly packaged with gender hierarchy.

These books play a powerful role in the self-image of teens, particularly teenage girls. They often fuel an already growing desire for romance, sometimes suggesting that this is God's sole

design and purpose for women. Books like *Lies Young Women Believe* by Nancy Leigh DeMoss and Dannah Gresh teach teenagers that there is no higher calling for a woman than that of wife and mother. Even Alex and Brett Harris' inspiring *Do Hard Things*, though not focused on dating, still hosts a website with resources on hierarchical marriage and gender roles. While the Harris brothers are clearly open to the idea of women following God's call to "do hard things," when it

comes to dating and marriage, gender hierarchy is interwoven, unquestioned, and is, especially for girls, strongly emphasized.

This is not surprising. If teen books and other aspects of Christian culture imply that femininity is best expressed when in response and submission to a man, then it follows that our teenage girls would be so consumed with the idea of dating and marriage. What purpose does God then have for a young woman who is not in a relationship with a man? Thus, teenage girls

who desire to be "women of God" are left wondering if they can be useful to the kingdom if they are not in the context of wife and mother, with godly men to "cover" them. They have few choices but to wait for God to present that special man (which may explain the large collection of books for young women on learning patience and contentment as they wait to get married.)

No wonder that many of these teen books encourage tired stereotypes of males and females. Shaunti Feldhahn and Lisa Rice's *For Young Women Only* shares practical tips on how a teenage girl might modify herself to find a boyfriend and includes tips on losing weight, playing on the assumptions that guys are "visual" and girls are meant to be beautiful. They also assert that girls should learn to respect guys "unconditionally," fueling the popular theory in Christian circles about men's and women's supposed different needs. And Justin Lookadoo and Hayley DiMarco's *Dateable* provides tips to both sexes, arguing that guys should be assertive leaders and girls should "shut up and be mysterious."

Are we teaching teenage girls that their success as a child of God depends solely on their ability to be in a relationship with a man, who requires absolute authority and unquestioning respect? Is *Dateable's* portrayal of guys as manipulative and sex-crazed a truthful and redemptive understanding of masculinity?

## A Response:

### *Emphasize vocation*

We all know that teenagers (and most people of other ages) love to talk about dating and romance. It is a normal aspect of life, particularly in teens' stage of development. As teenagers are growing and learning how to relate to one another, it is healthy for them to have questions about, and interest in, dating.

Yet overemphasizing and overly romanticizing dating and marriage, especially when it comes packaged with gender hierarchy, can easily distract teens from discovering God's call on their lives. When I (Megan) was in high school, I was passionate about giving my life entirely to Jesus through ministry, and found myself wondering what that would look like. Immediately, I dreamed of my future role as "pastor's wife." My faith was marked not only by a love and passion for Christ, but also was intimately connected with finding a spouse. Somehow I had picked up the idea that as a woman of God, my calling was dependent on a man. Today's teenage girls (and guys) need to be taught and re-taught that their worth and ability to serve Christ are not dependent on their marital status.

We must never let teenage girls believe that they will only live out their Christian "adventure" through marriage. While no youth groups would come right out and teach this, the message seems to be part of many churches' implicit curriculum (see Dave Csinos' article on page 7). This is why parents and youth workers must emphasize that our vocation — doing and being what God has called of us — is more important and more fulfilling than romantic relationships.

How can we be intentional in emphasizing spiritual



vocation in our families and youth programs? We recommend asking the following:

1. Are we intentionally or unintentionally promoting and romanticizing dating? How can we work to encourage a more balanced perspective on life as a Christian?
2. Is our youth group highlighting examples of single men and women who are content and living their lives for Jesus in powerful ways?
3. Do we have a “self-focus” or a “God-and-others-focus?” Are our teenagers more interested in learning how to date, be happy, and be successful rather than learning how to work for justice and share their faith? As mentors and parents, are we modeling a “God-and-others-focus?”
4. Are we intentionally seeking to help both teenage girls and guys identify their spiritual gifts and utilize them?
5. Are we hosting Bible studies and events where we discuss the fundamental equality of males and females in marriage and ministry?

A Response:

### *Teach critical thinking*

Besides celebrating vocation, another important way to respond to these teen books is to encourage critical thinking. As Kevin Giles recently pointed out (*Priscilla Papers* 22.3), good Bible scholars distinguish between the authority of Scripture (which we strongly uphold) and a particular *interpretation* of Scripture. Too often we fail to help teens see that Christians have and will continue to disagree on important issues, and that our responsibility is to think hard, pray hard, and listen to God.

We need to encourage teens to think critically — a skill that will serve them the rest of their lives. As parents and mentors, we can teach teens to recognize faulty arguments. And we can encourage them to have great trust in God, but also to question our human interpretations of the Bible without fear. We can work to inspire faith, not fear, because they should never be afraid to ask hard questions of God, as Jacob did. We ourselves can welcome and be ready for difficult questions.

How do we encourage critical thinking in teenagers? One important step is to help teens understand that as much as we may like easy answers and formulas for dating and relating to each other, God has created a complex and intricate world. We also recommend equipping teens with these types of questions, allowing them to wrestle with the answers themselves:

1. Just because we observe guys and girls acting in a certain way, is this the way it should be? Is this honoring to God?
2. If something is “natural,” does that automatically make it “good?”
3. What does our culture value about men and women? How is what I am reading in these books influenced by culture? How is it influenced by Scripture?

### *More action steps for parents and youth leaders*

- 1 Have the same expectations for both guys and girls. If girls are expected to volunteer in the nursery, expect this of guys as well.
- 2 Emphasize high expectations for both guys and girls, which will increase respect between the sexes. For instance, instead of only teaching girls about modest dress, hold high expectations for guys, too. It is demeaning to guys to teach that they “cannot help but look at beautiful girls who are dressed immodestly.” If the Harris brothers’ *Do Hard Things* is representative of how our teens are feeling, they will welcome the call to high standards.
- 3 Teach discernment and wisdom. Help teens sort out questions like “Does having a physical reaction automatically mean that I am sinning? Or does it become a sin when I continue in thoughts and behaviors that use others for my own ends?”
- 4 Create an environment of love, respect, and honest inquiry. Do not shy away from difficult questions, and teach students to welcome those questions from each other.
- 5 Encourage students to study the Bible. Many of these dating books assertively state that the Bible supports their ideas. Yet how can our students critically evaluate anything if they don’t have the Bible “written on their hearts” (Jer. 31:33)?

4. How do these books encourage or discourage our call to the Great Commandment (Mark 12:29-31), and the Golden Rule (Matt. 7:12)? Does it increase or decrease the Fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-26)?

### Conclusion

As we all work to equip the next generation for leadership, we ask that you join with CBE in prayer, that those who believe in biblical equality will take up the challenge to write books which present to teenagers the complexities of living in this world. May our teenagers sharpen and develop their God-given talents like William Carey, William Wilberforce, Sojourner Truth, and Catherine Booth, whose brave hearts and great minds led a broken world to Christ.



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