

World Christian Love Life

By Roberta Winter

I am always amused by the look of shock on the faces of young people when, in some meeting or other, Ralph casually drops the comment that some day he hopes to set up a computerized dating system for young World Christians. It's obvious that this statement from him just doesn't compute with them. I can almost read their minds: *How can a spiritually-minded, world-famous missiologist stoop to engineering computerized dating?* People have cornered me afterward and asked, "He isn't serious, is he?" and have been further shocked when I answered, "Yes!"

The dating years, though exciting, are never easy. We know. We had four daughters. But how important to the later lives of young people. Whom they marry makes all the difference in the world as to whether their dreams will come true, whether they will count in the Kingdom or not, whether they will become part of the solution or part of the problem of this world. And all too often those already married, even Christians, maintain a "hands-off" attitude, "That's their problem; they have grown up now." And those who are dating often have a "keep hands off" attitude. Yet in spite of an attitude which seems to announce "I can handle this; keep out of my business," often there is inside an uncertainty, almost fear, that they will make a terrible mistake which they can never rectify.

Non-Christians have an easy answer: "Just know how to get out of a marriage as soon as you realize it's wrong." Or worse still: "Just try things out for awhile." There is no such easy option for the earnest Christian. On the other hand, World Christians have a tremendous advantage. To be a "World" Christian means that you have already committed not only your heart but your whole life to the Lord. You are under His orders. You've relinquished your "rights" to make your own decisions. He is the One in charge. Sounds great, but perhaps awfully theological? How does this affect dating and marriage? Let's give some personal examples.

First of all, the *sine qua non*: Although you can be friends with non-Christians, dating (and romance) with such is automatically out. Why? For one thing, God commanded: "Be not unequally yoked together with unbelievers." Therefore, you avoid the temptation itself by not allowing yourself to get romantically involved with non-Christians. Simple obedience to this rule saves a lot of heartache. Believe me.

Right now a very close friend of one of my daughters is really hurting. Sometime ago she started dating a wonderful non-Christian, hoping he would become a Christian. He still has not, but by now she has fallen in love with someone she cannot conscientiously marry. And it hurts.

As a World Christian, she should have looked for someone who was not only a Christian but also concerned about the world. Perhaps she did, for a long time. And then perhaps she gave up, thinking that there just weren't enough World Christian fellows to go around. Lots of wonderful girls do give up. The fellows take so long to decide to get married that by the time they do (often after age 30) the girls have already married someone else who is not nearly as well qualified. It is easy for guys to get married after 30; but for girls it is a different story. The girls need to have enough faith to wait; the guys enough faith to move. Both need the counsel of people who've gone that path before and who know the persons being considered.

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I think it would take a great deal of the pressure off if young people could be more involved in group activities. Paradoxically, a romantic-type situation is not the best way for a young person to find out what someone of the opposite sex is like. A girl needs to see how he relates to others, what they think of him, whether his faith is just for show or for real. There's a lot to be said for moving slowly. But having four daughters, I can add that it is especially hard for the girls since our society more or less expects the boys to make the first move.

Thus my first principle is: Don't get anxious. Trust in the Lord. Seek His kingdom first, and He'll give you what is best for you.

But my second principle is equally true: If you are heading for Boston, go to the station where the Boston trains are. In other words, if you feel God has called you to missions, go where other mission-minded young people are. The fellow shouldn't have to go on a treasure hunt just because the mission-minded girls don't want to appear forward. Be sensible. Don't rush off to the field before you give God (and the guys) a chance! My husband has tried to help our daughters to see the boys' side. I don't know how many girls he has challenged with "What right have you to force some good guy headed for missions to marry a girl who isn't at all capable of being a good missionary?"

"How can you say that? I haven't done anything like that," they always remonstrate.

"Oh, yes you have. If you deliberately go where you know you are unlikely to meet World Christians, then by default you have forced guys headed overseas to marry the wrong girls."

Then there's prayer. There is no decision in life that requires more concentrated prayer than the decision of whom to marry (and thus, whom to date). Pray a lot; get your friends to pray for you. And hang on to your common sense that God gave you. If she/he is the one for you, you'll probably have a natural drawing that way to validate the conclusions of your prayers. If you don't, it may be that that person is not God's choice for you, no matter how godly, etc., he/she seems. I must add, however, that we personally know a couple of very good marriages where the wife was not at all drawn to the one who is now her husband. It took several years, much patience and a lot of prayer before he won her.

I take dating very seriously, I admit. I'm sure at least one of my daughters must have told me more than once, "Mother, I'm not going to marry him just because I'm dating him." And my answer is always the same: "You tend to marry someone you are dating." Thus, my rule is, "Do not date anyone that you would be ashamed or unable to marry." It is true that dating is not the same as marriage. But you usually fall in love while dating. This is why it is important, before you fall in love, to decide whether that particular person is marriageable or not – for you.

This means that if you feel the Lord wants you to be a missionary, the person you seriously date must not be the kind that has no intention of ever being a missionary. I would even suggest that if you feel you would be willing to be a missionary, but would rather not, and your boyfriend (fiancé) is definitely headed that way, you should either give him up or sort out your own heart. Love is strong and makes one able to surmount all sorts of difficulties. But in a pioneering cross-cultural situation, the two need to be agreed on God's call.

"If you love him, let him go," is what I say. And yet there is another way. You may be right for him. In fact, you just might make the better missionary of the two. So try it out. Go on a short term somewhere before you get married, and preferably before you are engaged. God

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might be calling you through the one you love, but to really succeed on the field, you should also be called, not just go along because you love your mate.

We often have smiled to think of how many wonderful young men today are involved in missions – either abroad or in mission mobilization at home – because of dating one of our four daughters. “I think we were very wise to have daughters,” Ralph often says. “They have had an influence that I could not have.”

“I think it’s important to go into a dating relationship with the attitude of how can I help this person to be all God would have him to be,” one of them said. “For one thing, you’re more able to relax and just be yourself. And then you don’t have to feel guilty about breaking up. Your reasons for dating are not romance but friendship as Christians. I think that’s important.”

“But how do you maintain a dating relationship,” you may ask. “In today’s society, most young people become romantically involved right away.”

Our family has found several principles to be of value here. One can be stated this way: Once you start a physical relationship, there’s no road back. You either go forward or you have to break it off. So the way of wisdom is to shy away from physical contact, even kissing or holding hands. For one thing, it’s awfully hard to hear what your head is telling you when your emotions are all tangled up. There’s plenty of time for physical relationships once you are married. So cool it. Listen to your head.

In this vein, I have warned my daughters to steer away from lengthy conversations about “our relationship.” It’s a fascinating topic when both partners really like each other. But it’s dynamite, and it leads very quickly into tangled emotions and then ultimately (unless great caution is taken) down that one-way road of physical involvement.

Interestingly enough, that topic which is so fascinating during the dating stage is not sufficient to glue the marriage together afterward. Once all the private secrets are known, there has to be more than the relationship.

I had dated several wonderful Christian young men before I met Ralph. One in particular tried hard to please me on our dates. But I was bored with the “entertainment.” It didn’t seem “real.” I fell in love with another, unwisely so, since he had not committed his life to missions as I had. We didn’t go out alone very often. But whenever we talked, it was inevitably about “our relationship,” which had no future. What a bitter-sweet experience. We never even held hands, but it took me years to get over him.

I began to despair of ever finding someone who was going to be a missionary. (There weren’t nearly so many around then.) Friday nights in particular were very lonely, especially when driving down the freeway behind a couple sitting close. But I finally came to a place where I told God that whatever He wanted would be fine with me. I was willing to be an unmarried missionary, if that was what He wanted.

I didn’t realize at the time that the prayer of renunciation often releases God’s resources. It did with me. That very week I met Ralph. I was relaxed because I had decided I wouldn’t be married. So I took him at face value and no more. He was not a potential mate. Not at first, at least.

I was, however, fascinated with his conversation. He didn’t try to entertain me. He talked about the world: about Afghanistan, where he intended to go some day, about Chiapas,

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Mexico, where he had gone on a short trip, about the world in general and missions in particular. He asked me what I thought about simple living. And without realizing it, he demonstrated his lifestyle by the dates we had.

Our type of "simple" dates were more satisfying to me than any other dates I had ever had. Perhaps because Ralph was fascinating. But also, perhaps, because instead of observing games or movies or whatever together, I was learning what it was that thrilled him. I was finding out what kind of person he really was, even some things that he thought I might not like (such as his radical lifestyle).

As our daughters, one by one, began to date and then to marry, I have found this same pattern in their lives. The fellows they eventually married were not the ones who spent a lot of money on them, nor who tried hard to entertain them in the usual way. Rather they were the ones our daughters enjoyed being with just because of who they were, their aspirations in life, their goals for the Kingdom. And, I must say, each one of our daughters married a gem.

So how do World Christians maintain a healthy dating relationship? By building it around common interests in God's concerns. Stay away from the "relationship" topic until God has made it clear that this person is the one. On dates, go out with others couples, seldom by yourselves alone. Let your relationship bring honor to God in its purity its concern for the world. Don't get anxious. Believe that God is in the matchmaking business (isn't He), and that He knows what He is about. In the meantime, relax and glorify Him. There is an old maxim which is very true: God gives the best to those who leave the choice with Him. I have found it true. Our four daughters have found it true. I would recommend this for all World Christians. You can trust Him.

Roberta Winter was associate founder and director of the US Center for World Mission along with her husband, Dr. Ralph Winter.

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