

Approaches to Courtship and Betrothal
The Differing Teachings on Courtship and Betrothal
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Introduction

What is Christian courtship? What is betrothal? It depends somewhat on whom you ask. Definitions and guidelines differ from teacher to teacher. A lot of the same points are made, but significant differences remain. The purpose of this article is to acquaint you with some of the differences so that you can better choose for your own family. I will compare the teachings of nine different authors and speakers:

- Bill Gothard
- Jonathan Lindvall
- Joshua Harris
- John Thompson
- Douglas Wilson
- Jeff and Marge Barth
- Eric and Leslie Ludy
- Jeff and Danielle Myers
- Don Raunika

This is not an exhaustive list of folks teaching in this area, but these are some of the main ones and those whom I have had opportunity to research.

A little history

Where did this teaching originate? I can only tell you what I have pieced together from brief mentions in a number of books and speaker presentations. Bill Gothard was teaching a “biblical dating” back in the early 1970s that advocated all young men being approved by the girl’s father before ever having a date and again before marriage was ever discussed with the girl. Gothard indicates he was influenced in his early adulthood by a Christian speaker (perhaps even the same one Elisabeth Elliot mentions influenced her during her Bible School days).

Jonathan Lindvall was influenced by Gothard’s teachings and went a step further in defining something called “courtship” with which he challenged the youth group he was leading. Gothard then appears to have picked up some of Lindvall’s ideas and began teaching “courtship” as opposed to dating. From there I see many cross influences between the different teachers. Joshua Harris, the Myers, and the Ludys appear to have all learned some from each other. Harris was also significantly influenced by Elisabeth Elliot’s book (*Passion and Purity*) and by Michael Farris’ book (*The Homeschooling Father*) having a chapter devoted to courtship. Lindvall later revised his teachings to urge replacing courtship with betrothal, and some other teachers adopted at least part of this new teaching.

Definitions

The following teachers have defined “courtship” or “betrothal” as follows:

- Gothard: Courtship “A father’s agreeing to work with a qualified young man to win his daughter for marriage.”

- Lindvall: Courtship: “A romantic relationship between a young man and woman in which both are of marriageable age, have the full blessing of their parents, and are seriously contemplating marriage.”
- Thompson: Courtship: A stage or period in “scriptural romance” prior to betrothal. Courtship constitutes the process of investigating a person with marriage in mind by evaluating character, values, beliefs, practices, interests, and life purpose to ensure a godly match. There is to be no physical contact and no developing of romance/emotional ties during this period. Parents first investigate followed by more detailed investigation by the young people themselves, generally within family settings.
- Harris: Courtship: “Dating with a purpose, friendship plus possibility, and romance chaperoned by wisdom.” A relationship with a clearly defined direction. “A reformed version of dating under the supervision of parents between a man and a woman who are ready for marriage in the near future.”
- Myers: Courtship: Consists of three main elements:
 - 1) Accountability to parents and other trusted adults,
 - 2) Building each other’s character rather than focusing on physical attraction, and
 - 3) Waiting to develop serious relationships until you are ready to get married.
- Raunika: Courtship: A relationship/process begun with full approval of both sets of parents (or an accountability couple if not possible) with the intent to consider marriage and to become acquainted through family and group activities.
- Barth: Courtship: “A process by which a mature young man or young lady of marriageable age, along with their parents, seek to discern their God-given life partner. It involves the parents or authorities on both sides and yet allows for feelings and discernment from both of the young people involved.”
- Lindvall: Betrothal: “An irrevocable and publicly announced commitment to marriage (terminated only for infidelity) during which the cultivation of a romantic relationship is permitted. Betrothal is instigated by the young man and woman with the full approval of parents. No physical contact occurs until after the wedding.
- Thompson: Betrothal: “A stage/period in scriptural romance following the stage of courtship. It is a binding commitment to marry, approved and supervised by the fathers, attested by a bridal provision (bride price/dowry) and by witnesses and/or a document. It follows a careful investigation that occurs during the courtship period.

Note the above similarities and differences. Concerning courtship, parental authorization and guidance appears in all to varying degrees. A purpose of considering marriage is present or implied in all. A degree of readiness for marriage is stated or implied. Some stress investigation while others stress the cultivation of romance. Lindvall’s definition of betrothal defines a binding

commitment to marry without a period of courtship investigation or any romantic involvement preceding. In Thompson's, betrothal is a stage that follows courtship.

Major areas of difference

There are numerous minor differences but only a few major ones. The most obvious major difference is that between "courtship" and "betrothal," yet even here the root of the difference comes down to the same few key areas that differentiate one courtship teaching from another. These include:

- 1) The degree and form of parental involvement,
- 2) How to choose whom to court/betroth,
- 3) The timing of romantic emotions, and
- 4) The timing of forms of physical contact.

Parental involvement

While universally acknowledging the importance of a parental role, the role advocated varies widely. Some present courtship/betrothal as primarily youth led with the advice and consent of parents (Harris, Ludy, Myers, Raunika). Others see courtship/betrothal as more of a parent led process with parental approval being primary and parents significantly directing the courtship process (Thompson, Lindvall, Barth, Wilson, Gothard).

The more youth-led approaches are prone to treat parents as only one set of many counselors who sometimes should be ignored in favor of other wiser or more godly counselors. When parents are non-Christians, some argue that no parental approval should be required concerning either the person selected or the timing of marriage.

With the parent-led approaches, parental approval is usually sought whatever the spiritual condition of parents. Parents are encouraged to talk to other parents of "prospects" and sometimes initially propose a courtship to their son or daughter. However, none teach that a courtship or betrothal should take place without the agreement of the young people involved. Also, to the extent parents are able and willing, they are expected to do some initial investigation of the "candidate" and his or her family prior to agreeing to a courtship. Thereafter, they actively guide and supervise the courtship process, including ending the courtship when it seems advisable.

Choosing whom to court/betroth

The differences in choosing relate to the degree to which one seeks direction from the Lord versus makes the decision solely on the basis of careful investigation and wisdom. For example, the Barths put much emphasis on seeking to hear from the Lord but also on validating guidance through careful investigation and not rushing to a decision. On the other hand, Thompson does not believe God provides guidance in matters such as these and so would have you rely solely on the teachings of Scripture and the application of scriptural principles by wisdom.

Barth, Lindvall, Ludy, Gothard and Raunika seem to envision that God has a best/perfect choice for your mate and encourage much prayer and seeking God's will in making this

choice. Thompson, though advocating wisdom to make the best choice over the second best choice, does not seem to believe that God has picked a certain one for you (or at least not one that you need seek His will concerning). Wilson's position is less clear but seems to be somewhere between these two.

Those advocating more of a parent-directed courtship encourage looking for mates through other families with which the parents become acquainted—that is, families similar to your own with many of the same beliefs and convictions. Those teaching more of a youth-directed approach speak mostly of finding candidates at Bible school, at church groups for college students or singles, or at work or ministry activities.

Timing of romance/emotions

All of the teachers are concerned about emotional purity as well as physical purity. The ideal is to avoid giving yourself emotionally to someone other than your future spouse. The differences concern when and under what conditions emotional involvement should be allowed or even encouraged. Lindvall is very concerned about courtships where strong emotional bonds develop and then the courtship is broken, so his solution is betrothal with absolutely no emotional involvement or even opportunity for emotional involvement prior to an irrevocable commitment to marry.

Thompson similarly would restrict emotional involvement until betrothal but would risk unapproved emotional involvement occurring during the courtship process. Though the intent is to guard hearts and hold back emotionally until after the decision is made, this does not always work.

Other teachers would allow or even encourage a gradually growing emotional involvement during courtship. They encourage great care to not allow emotions to become engaged too early in the process, both so that they will not cloud one's judgment and so that the chances of defrauding the other (if the courtship is called off) are kept to a minimum. To avoid the risk of defrauding in a courtship relationship, they advise: 1) Being very sure before starting a courtship or letting it get beyond a casual friendship, and 2) Not allowing emotions and expectations proceed ahead of the commitment level and the likelihood of marriage. Once the decision to marry is close, the young man may be encouraged and helped by the girl's father to "win her heart" prior to proposing marriage.

Physical contact

All are concerned about temptation in this realm and being careful not to stoke passions before their time. Also, early physical involvement risks clouding one's judgment. Some, such as Thompson and Lindvall, urge absolutely no physical contact before marriage. Others seem to support the same but without so strong an insistence. Still others are more receptive to some physical shows of affection prior to marriage while being careful not to encourage lust or temptation towards fornication.

Some allow the holding hands as early as the later stage of courtship when a young man is seeking to win the young woman's heart. Joshua and Shannon Harris decided that holding hands and light hugs would be permitted before marriage but to delay and kissing or cuddling

until after marriage. Harris urges couples to set their own boundaries wisely, considering that some may be more or less affected by different physical shows of affection. The Myers did something similar but decided to kiss for the first time at their engagement. Raunika, in dealing with older and previously married couples, is less strict in his advice in this area, mentioning some possible kissing even prior to engagement.

Betrothal teachings: Lindvall's betrothal

Jonathan Lindvall teaches an approach that he calls "betrothal." He believes this is the biblical pattern and a much better safeguard against defrauding than courtship (whether due to the young people or the parents breaking off the relationship). Other teachers have not accepted this approach nearly so well as his earlier courtship teaching. The major objection is the absence of a period for the young people to get to know each other well to thoroughly investigate each other's beliefs and convictions first hand or to develop any emotional attachment prior to a firm commitment to marry.

Most will grant that there are cases when a true courtship period is unnecessary. For instance, if the young people and their families have been close for a long time, there may be little need for much further evaluation or for concern over whether the two will quickly grow fond of each other. However, many (if not most) situations are otherwise. The young people may have had very little and only superficial contact. The parents may also be new acquaintances. A betrothal without opportunity to become well acquainted might prove a foolish decision. Before marriage decisions, many seek the confirmation that comes from a prior period of growing friendship and the beginnings of affection.

Those not supporting Lindvall's "betrothal" also point to the problem of a so-called irrevocable marriage commitment. In reality, a betrothal remains very revocable as it is not supported either in law or by strong tradition and ostracism. Even marriage is easily revocable in this country. Betrothing couples have been known to not marry, however much the betrothal was spoken of as irrevocable.

Betrothal is considered by some to be an overreaction to occasional problems of defrauding within courtship. When a courtship is carefully chosen and wisely managed by parents, the risk of a breakup after much emotional involvement should be very slight. No method or set of rules can perfectly protect against defrauding. Do we not need to place our faith more in God than in a particular set of manmade rules?

Other teachers also disagree with Lindvall's claim that his version of betrothal is more biblically supported than other courtship teachings. It is true that the term "betrothal" appears in the Bible while the term "courtship" does not. However, "betrothal" is purely an English word used to approximate Hebrew and Greek biblical terms. Neither does a mere name make one approach more biblical than another. Little biblical guidance is available for the Hebrew practice of betrothal or virtually any information about what preceded it. Much is inferred from what is not said and from those who have written about ancient customs. Inferences are drawn from a very limited number of examples; we do not have guidance as to the full range of options God would approve.

Betrothal teachings: Thompson's courtship/betrothal

John Thompson published an extensive series of eight articles entitled "God's Design for Scriptural Romance" in *Patriarch Magazine* a few years ago. These are still available on the Internet at both Thompson's site (<http://www.ChristianCourtship.com>) and at <http://www.Patriarch.com>. Thompson offers very complete lists of biblical passages to consider, questions to ask potential suitors, and very detailed guidelines/rules for courtship and betrothal. His approach seems to be a synthesis between Lindvall's betrothal with the courtship teachings of others. Like Lindvall, all emotional bonding is to occur after a binding commitment to marriage (betrothal). Unlike Lindvall, his approach includes a pre-betrothal courtship period for the purpose of the young people carefully investigating each other to determine if this would be a wise match. Thus this approach seeks to overcome many of the criticisms of both courtship and Lindvall's betrothal.

However, Thompson's approach does not fully meet the objections to either the courtship or betrothal perspective. Those taking issue with Lindvall's betrothal still see: 1) A reliance on an irrevocable commitment to marriage that in actual practice remains very revocable, and 2) A requirement for an irrevocable commitment at a point when affection for one another has yet to develop. Those supporting Lindvall's approach point to the risk of emotional entanglement prior to betrothal due to the degree of interaction.

Thompson's approach is also a bit unique in some other regards that some support and others criticize. A key aspect of Thompson's teaching is his approach to decision making, based on the teachings of Gary Friesen (*Decision Making and the Will of God*). Friesen's teachings in this regard are fairly controversial, being well accepted by some and adamantly opposed by many others. The essence of these is that there is no "individual" will of God, only a "moral" will of God and a "sovereign" will of God. God's sovereign will is secret, but God's moral will is 100% contained within the Scriptures. Therefore, we should not seek or expect any direction from God apart from Scripture in our daily life decisions, including such ones as a choice of occupation or a spouse. We are simply to make the best choices possible using wisdom and complying with biblical commands and principles.

This viewpoint permeates Thompson's teachings, as demonstrated in the emphasis given to an exhaustively thorough evaluation (sounding at times like a *Fortune 500* executive search, with arranging interviews and carefully checking references with church elders, family members, and long term family friends); his website for matching up like-minded families searching for mates for their children; and the absence of appeals to prayer, spirit leading, or any divine guidance. So the extent of your agreement or disagreement with this issue regarding decision making will impact the degree of your agreement with Thompson.

Thompson's approach also comes across to some as very rigid, inflexible, and perhaps too idealistic. Few allowances seem to be made for common differing conditions, for less than perfect circumstances, or for God choosing to work in slightly different ways.

Thompson believes it is almost impossible to do courtship unless both young people are still living in their father's home. Though it is a great advantage for both to still be at home, this has repeatedly been proven not to be a necessary condition, especially in the instance of a young man living and working away from his parent's home.

Thompson also appears to require chaperoning at all times and in every situation. Many other teachers encourage fathers to be reasonable, not making chaperoning an absolute requirement for every situation. Good judgment and a reasonable assessment of the young people and the relationship might indicate chaperoning to be quite unnecessary for daytime trips running errands, traveling to a church ministry, etc... When the young people are clearly committed to purity and the risks of the situation appear very low, an inflexible chaperoning rule may be unnecessarily burdensome.

A less common aspect of Thompson's teaching is the encouragement of a bride price/dowry. Douglas Wilson also teaches about this biblical practice but applies it mainly to ascertaining the young man's financial stability and ability to support a wife. Thompson takes this a bit further, encouraging the exchange of a "bride price" at the time of betrothal. Much of his teaching on this comes from extra-biblical sources concerning Hebrew culture, as he himself says that the term only appears four times in Scripture and in some confusing contexts.

Conclusion

One can see that the decision to "do courtship" requires some thought and prayer concerning how to do it. When parents speak to another family about courtship or betrothal, or when a young man and young woman speak of the same, they need to define just what they mean by these terms. Though certain principles are widely accepted as being a part of courtship or betrothal, the differences between teachings are still significant. Take the time to discuss the details before beginning this road. Expect the other family to have a few different ideas than you may have. Normally the process is greatly defined by the girl's family due to the special protective role of a father towards his daughter. Yet both families should discuss these matters with a spirit of humility and accommodation towards one another.