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## **Solomon in Love:**

Why a 'Banned' Book of the Bible is Being  
Rediscovered — and What This Might Mean  
for the Future of Courtship

**Council on Families**  
**Institute for American Values**

## SOLOMON IN LOVE

*Why a 'Banned' Book of the Bible is Being Rediscovered –  
and What This Might Mean for the Future of Courtship*

Three years ago, a person walking into an evangelical bookstore probably would have had to request special assistance to find resources devoted to dating and courtship issues.

Sure, titles like “Dating, Waiting, and Choosing A Mate” existed. But they weren’t exactly hot sellers. And they didn’t typically push any envelopes, spark any debates, or stir any passions.

My, how times have changed!

Over the last three years, two different books about dating, courtship, and romantic love have taken the evangelical world by storm.

One is the brainchild of a twentysomething single guy who spent his teen-age years launching a youth magazine for homeschoolers. The other is the work of a middle-aged married minister who is widely credited with helping evangelicals rediscover a “banned” book of the Bible.

Both of these works deserve closer examination – especially from people troubled by what Leon and Amy Kass have called “the decline of courtship” in America. In fact, studying current evangelical thinking on this topic is important for two reasons.

First, no revival of courtship in America is likely to occur without the enthusiastic support and participation of evangelical Christians and other religious people. Evangelicals are not only a large (and growing) population group, but they are – or at least should be – among the Americans most apt to work to improve marriage preparation in this country. Indeed, their concern for the health of marriage stems not just from a doctrinal belief in the permanence of marriage, but also from a recognition that the Bible’s grandest metaphor for describing the relationship between God and His people is the love relationship between the bridegroom and the bride.

Second, no revival of courtship in America is likely to occur unless “new” courtship rituals and practices are highly accessible and attractive to people who have no apparent interest in religion. In other words, just as it isn’t necessary to understand the spiritual significance of marriage in order to be attracted to it or to participate in it, it should not be necessary to understand the spiritual significance of “new” courtship practices in order to be attracted to them or to participate in them. Helpful, yes. Essential, no.

This paper, then, is divided into two major parts. The first part looks at each of these two new books and seeks to describe what all the fuss is about. The second part seeks to explore how the discussion currently taking place within evangelical circles can inform efforts to revive courtship in the wider culture. It makes some general observations and specific recommendations.

## **'I Kissed Dating Goodbye'**

Even if Joshua Harris wanted to date, he'd be hard pressed to find the time to do so. These days, the twentysomething writer from Gaithersburg, Maryland is frequently out on the road speaking to church youth groups, homeschooling conventions, and television audiences about the perils of dating.

It's a topic many believe Harris knows something about, judging at least from the interest his book, "I Kissed Dating Goodbye," has generated since its release in April, 1997. To date, the book has sold more than 420,000 copies, has been featured in USA TODAY Weekend magazine, and has helped Harris land appearances on a number of leading secular and religious broadcast programs – including NBC's "Dateline," the Fox Family Channel's "700 Club," and ABC's "Politically Incorrect."

Now, at first blush, Harris' provocatively-titled book might appear to be further evidence of a movement away from "coupling" or "courting" in America today. But, in reality, Harris is a big believer in courtship (or "principled romance" as he frequently calls it). It's dating he has a problem with. Or, more precisely, it's the dating "lifestyle" or exclusive dating culture to which he objects.

As Harris sees it, today's dating culture encourages young people who aren't yet ready for marriage to pursue emotional and physical intimacy divorced from any serious long-term intentions or commitments. The use of the word "divorced" here is appropriate, for Harris says "dating as we have come to know it doesn't really prepare us for marriage; instead it can be a training ground for divorce."

Indeed, according to Harris, today's dating culture encourages couples to "play marriage" – to establish an exclusive intimate relationship before they are prepared to move towards a lifelong marital commitment. When these intimate attachments almost invariably break up, young people often feel emotionally wounded – not just because a relationship has soured or they have been "dumped," but because they have "given away a part of their heart," a part that Harris believes was meant to be reserved for their future spouse (i.e. their "one true love"). Moreover, Harris says that when young people then move on to new "dating" relationships – and to new break-ups – they begin to fall into a pre-marital pattern that closely resembles the kind of "serial monogamy" to which many divorce critics have rightly objected.

"We cannot practice lifelong commitment in a series of short-term relationships," Harris says. And the key, he believes, to bringing some sanity to the world of pre-marital relationships is to "kiss dating goodbye."

Harris knows this sounds extreme. And he admits that he used to scoff at critics of America's dating game. But Harris says he now understands the problems of emotional intimacy without commitment. (In fact, his book is filled with anecdotes – some from his own life, some from others – which illustrate the problems he sees in the dating lifestyle.)

Having stepped off the dating treadmill, Harris says he now wants to follow a path that leads to marriage – and leaves him without regrets on his wedding day. He believes others should consider doing the same.

Now, it is important to note that Harris does not believe “dating in and of itself is a sinful activity.” Instead, he likens it to eating at a fast food restaurant – “it’s not wrong to eat there, but something far better is available.”

It is also important to note that Harris’ beef with intimacy without commitment isn’t exclusively – or perhaps even primarily – motivated by a concern about premarital sex. Yes, Harris strongly supports saving sex for marriage. And, yes, he believes typical dating relationships encourage young people to “give themselves away physically.”

But perhaps because he is writing for an evangelical audience that is already apt to agree with his support for sexual abstinence before marriage, Harris goes to great pains to argue that emotional intimacy divorced from lasting commitment is a serious problem – even when there is no physical intimacy between the dating couple.

Indeed, Harris believes part of the problem with today’s dating culture is that it often makes it easy for one to fall victim to a warped (and terribly self-interested) view of love. “All of the world’s deceptions flow from the belief that love is primarily for the fulfillment and comfort of self,” Harris writes. “When we evaluate the quality of our love for someone else simply by our own emotional fulfillment, we practice selfishness.”

Accordingly, Harris challenges young people to avoid using dating relationships as a way of boosting their status or ego. And he pointedly challenges young men to avoid manipulating women’s hearts in order to gain sexual favors.

Instead of “using” and “manipulating” romantic partners, Harris encourages young people to pursue both “casual” and “deeper” friendships with people of the opposite sex. In so doing, he is careful to distinguish between “friendship” and “intimacy,” drawing upon an observation by C. S. Lewis that “we picture lovers face to face, but friends side by side; their eyes look ahead.”

“The key to friendship is a common goal or object on which both companions focus,” Harris writes. “It can be an athletic pursuit, a hobby, faith, or music, but it’s something outside of them. As soon as the two people involved focus on the relationship, it has moved beyond friendship.” And moved into a potential danger zone – unless the couple is prepared to “court” with the intention of seeing their relationship head towards marriage.

That’s right, Harris acknowledges that it is unrealistic – and unwise – for couples to go straight from deeper friendship to engagement. So, he calls for a “transitional stage” of “principled romance” which is “purposeful in its pursuit of marriage, protected in its avoidance of sexual temptation, and accountable to parents or other Christians.”

To Harris, this “transitional stage” is quite different from what some might call “going steady.” For couples that “go steady” usually don’t go anywhere – and don’t usually intend to go anywhere. They are just playing around – and, Harris believes, playing with fire.

Harris says that young people interested in “principled romance” must understand that “intimacy ‘costs’ commitment.” He writes, “If I am not in a position to pay in the cold, hard ‘cash’ of commitment, I have no business ‘going shopping’ for my future mate.”

Yet, this is precisely what many young people often do. Harris says, “The timing of many dating relationships is equivalent to going shopping for an outfit when you don’t have any money; even if you find the ‘perfect fit,’ what can you do about it?”

So, what’s a young person interested in the opposite sex but not ready for commitment supposed to do? In addition to building guy-girl friendships, Harris says young people should focus on becoming the kind of person who is ready to go the distance (marriage) in a romantic relationship. His message is: if you want to have intimacy, direct your energies towards putting your personal house in order (academically, vocationally, financially, spiritually, etc.) so that you will be ready to have God bring someone into your life.

Harris believes this makes far more sense than getting caught up in today’s dating culture, which often fosters a prolonged (or perpetual) adolescence and distracts young people from other, more important pursuits.

When couples are ready to court, Harris says that this stage should be entered into very obviously and deliberately. He advises the man to say to the woman something like: “We’re growing closer in friendship, and I need to be up front about my motives. With your parents’ permission, I want to explore the possibility of marriage. I’m not interested in playing the game of being boyfriend and girlfriend. I’m ready to be tested by you, your family, and those who are responsible for you. My desire is to win your heart.”

Harris acknowledges that some of his male peers balk at the seriousness of this presentation. But, in Harris’ mind, that’s the whole point. “A woman’s heart and future are not things to toy with,” he says. “We [guys] do girls a great disservice by first pursuing romance before we’re ready to commit, and then by hesitating when we should commit. Enough is enough! Let’s grow up.”

## **The Book of Romance**

It is an old, old love story set in a faraway place which features romantic poetry, dramatic conflict, and the kind of erotic imagery that would presumably make a church lady blush. Yet, none of the folks involved in the most prominent re-telling of this dramatic story were featured during ABC’s coverage of the Academy Awards last March. In fact, some were attending church services instead.

That's because the love story in question isn't "Shakespeare in Love" – it is, so to speak, "Solomon in Love." And its recent rediscovery is creating quite a stir among a most unlikely group of people.

Just ask Tommy Nelson.

Several years ago, Nelson agreed to do a six-part lecture series on love, sex, dating, and romance for a group of Dallas-area singles. A Shakespeare buff and evangelical minister, Nelson decided to build his presentation around an often-ignored Old Testament book of poetry called, "The Song of Solomon" (or "Song of Songs"). This book traces the love story of the Hebrew King Solomon and his Shulamite bride from their initial attraction to their wedding day – and beyond. On the first night of Nelson's series, about 1,000 young singles showed up and heard Nelson wax poetic, quoting passages such as, "Like a lily among the thorns, so is my darling among the maidens" (Song of Solomon 2:2). Soon, word spread throughout the Dallas area about the series. And by the time Nelson gave his sixth and final presentation, more than 4,000 singles were in attendance – including a female stripper from a Houston night club who had traveled more than 250 miles to see what all the buzz was about.

The response initially caught Nelson by surprise. After all, the Song of Solomon is a rather obscure book which few ministers preach from – and some deliberately avoid. In fact, Nelson says that at several points in history, some religious leaders have refused to teach the book to young men because of its erotic imagery. "The Song of Solomon has the distinction of being the only book of the Bible that seems to have been edited and censored by the Christian church," Nelson observes.

Nevertheless, Nelson has become convinced that "The Song of Solomon is the book [of the Bible] for this generation." And there is little doubt that Nelson's teachings on this subject are striking a chord with evangelical audiences.

Indeed, in recent months, as word of Nelson's teachings has spread, he has been inundated with requests for materials on the Song of Solomon. After distributing nearly 50,000 video and audio tape packages of his sermons on the subject, Nelson put his expository teachings on the "Song of Songs" into a book which was released in January, 1999 (and is already in its third printing). "The Book of Romance," as it is called, has caught the eye of several leading mainstream publications, including The Wall Street Journal, as well as several leading religious broadcasting programs, including the widely-syndicated radio show, "Family Life Today."

In addition, more than 20,000 people are expected to attend weekend conferences this year (in cities like Washington, Atlanta, Indianapolis, and San Diego) to hear Nelson's teachings on the Song of Solomon. And many others are now using "The Book of Romance" as a study guide for small group Bible studies on the Song of Songs – especially since it includes a number of discussion questions designed to help readers apply the Song of Solomon's lessons to our contemporary context.

For his part, Nelson isn't prepared to advise young people to kiss casual dating goodbye – but he does encourage them to keep it casual. Specifically, he advises young people to establish a "no-

strings attached” policy when dating. And to avoid premature romantic attachments (and, for that matter, sexual temptations), Nelson encourages couples to double or triple-date and to stay in public places.

In addition, Nelson provides a practical checklist to help young people determine whether they are ready to date and to marry. It includes statements like:

\* “You are ready to date when you are ready to begin the process of choosing someone to marry or when you have convictions you will not compromise.”

\* “You are ready to date and marry when you do not have to compromise any aspect of your relationship to God in order to be with the person to whom you are attracted.”

\* “You are ready to date and marry when you are willing to be single rather than to make a bad choice of a marriage partner.”

While Nelson believes it is important for him to offer such advice to his readers, he is under no delusions that the primary reason people are snatching up copies of the “The Book of Romance” is to get his opinions on dating and courtship. Instead, he says they are buying his book because they want to understand the Song of Songs.

And just why exactly are people attracted to the Song of Solomon? At least five factors appear to be at work.

First, the message is aspirational. Nelson says that part of Song of Solomon’s appeal is that it not only addresses a wide array of “relationship issues” with which our society struggles, but it does so with a romantic grandeur and an erotic honesty that many people are surprised to find in a book of the Bible.

Cherie Harder, a 29 year-old Harvard graduate now serving as Kansas Senator Sam Brownback’s legislative director, agrees. Harder says she found Nelson’s tape series on the Song of Solomon to be a very welcome contrast to the manner in which marriage is often discussed in academic and public policy circles. “Look, I’m glad the social science literature shows that marriage helps men settle down and behave responsibly,” Harder says. “But I am not particularly captivated by the idea of marrying ‘a project.’”

Harder says that Nelson’s materials, which she has given to a number of her single friends, offers an “aspirational model” of marriage rather than a functional one.

And it is an aspirational model which even a romantically-challenged young man can appreciate. Indeed, Nelson believes one of the reasons the Song of Solomon appeals to young men is that it openly – and provocatively – celebrates the sexual union in marriage.

For example, at one point the husband says to the wife:

“How beautiful and how delightful you are,  
My love, with all your charms!  
Your stature is like a palm tree,  
And your breasts are like its clusters.  
I said, ‘I will climb the palm tree,  
I will take hold of its fruit stalks.’  
Oh, may your breasts be like clusters of the vine,  
And the fragrance of your breath like apples,  
And your mouth like the best wine!”

*Song of Solomon 7:6-9*

Second, the message is **practical**. Nelson says another reason the Song of Solomon resonates with his audiences is because “this book beautifully illustrates God’s interest in the practical, nitty-gritty areas of life” that concern us so.

“The Song of Solomon contains all sorts of practical wisdom about the appropriate interplay of the sexes at every stage in a romantic relationship,” Nelson says. “It beautifully complements other biblical teachings about love, sex, marriage, and even conflict resolution.”

In fact, one of the most interesting things about this love story is that it depicts marital conflict and shows how the couple works through their problems to achieve greater intimacy.

Third, the message is **demonstrative**. Part of the Song of Solomon’s appeal is that it is a rich and powerful love story which reads much more like a screenplay than an advice manual. Indeed, the entire book is devoted to dialogue (mostly between the two lovers, but occasionally with other parties).

As such, the book instructs more by showing than by telling. It offers readers a romantic model to follow and make their own. And it keeps the focus primarily on the love relationship, not on the “rules” which undergird and support this relationship.

This isn’t to say that evangelical readers would balk at the prescribing of rules. Or that the book is void of prescriptive language. (Indeed, at several points, the young woman is instructed to not “stir up or awaken love until it pleases.”) But it may very well be that part of the Song of Solomon’s appeal stems from the fact that it enmeshes “the rules” in the context of a love relationship.

Fourth the message is **comprehensive**. Another reason for the Song of Solomon’s appeal is that it presents premarital relationships as part of a lifelong story. In the Song, romance is not a tool used to win someone over, it is an outgrowth of a genuine love that continues to deepen and grow after the wedding day.

The book's comprehensiveness means that it appeals simultaneously to people of all ages – albeit for different reasons. “Singles tend to be fascinated by the couple's purity, by their resolve to rein in sexual desire before their wedding day,” Nelson says. “Conversely, marrieds tend to marvel at the couple's passion, at their ever-deepening intimacy and yearning to be together even after they have settled into married life.”

Indeed, some of the book's biggest fans are couples who have been married for many years. For example, one retired Air Force general credits the Song of Songs with “saving my wife and me from loveless co-existence.” He recently began sending tapes of Nelson's six-part series to military chaplains around the world to help them rekindle dying marriages.

While the passages dealing with married life may seem to have little significance to the contemporary courtship debate, Nelson believes part of the reason singles like the book so much is that it inspires confidence in lasting love. It offers singles hope that they can have more than just a “good enough” marriage – that they can experience a married life characterized by what Nelson calls “deeper intimacy.”

This is significant, because the premarital decision-making of many young people today is strongly influenced by their lack of confidence in the likelihood of a lifelong, fulfilling marriage. For example, most cohabitating couples today – unlike those from a generation ago – are more “anti-divorce” than they are “anti-marriage.” That is, they don't view cohabitation as an long-term alternative to marriage so much as a short-term “trial arrangement” designed to guard against divorce.

Fifth, the message is authoritative (and accessible). Nelson believes much of the reason for the Song of Solomon's “rediscovery” by evangelicals is due to the fact that it is a book of the Bible. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a book of this kind stirring so much interest and discussion within evangelical circles otherwise.

But it is important to note that the Song of Solomon's potential appeal is by no means limited to evangelical Christians or, for that matter, people of other faith traditions that draw heavily upon the teachings of Solomon.

In fact, Nelson believes the Song of Solomon is the kind of book apt to engage the wider culture – especially since it addresses many salient issues surrounding romantic love in a manner that people are surprised to find in the Bible.

For example, Nelson loves to tell the story about the time that he taught his series at the Theta Chi fraternity house at the University of North Texas. “As I began to describe the details of one particularly steamy passage,” Nelson says, “I looked out and saw this guy on the front row partially close his book so that he could double-check the front cover and make sure that he was, in fact, reading from the Bible.”

## Some General Observations

Whatever one may think of Joshua Harris' decision to "kiss dating goodbye," or Tommy Nelson's teachings on the Song of Solomon, it is clear that many evangelicals are troubled by the state of pre-marital relationships today. And that they are looking for some fresh thinking on the subject.

It is also clear that there are some potentially-important differences of opinion within evangelical circles about certain pre-marital issues, such as casual dating. It may be that these differences would largely disappear if people were to kiss the term "dating" goodbye – since "dating" is currently used to describe both exclusive "going steady" relationships (which Harris and Nelson both find problematic) and non-exclusive guy-girl relationships (which might ought be considered "friendships" since there are "no strings attached").

It is more likely, however, that at least some differences will persist since Harris appears to object to any form of romantic role-playing prior to courtship, while Nelson does not.

Whatever the case, the problems surrounding the use of the term "dating" have significant implications for those interested in stimulating a courtship revival in the wider culture. Since the term is used to describe a wide array of very different sorts of relationships, it probably ought not to be used without a modifier of some sort ("casual," "exclusive," "non-exclusive," etc.).

Moreover, since the term is now being used in a disparaging fashion by a portion of the evangelical world, it may be advisable to find a different term or phrase to describe "non-exclusive romantic role-playing prior to courtship" for those who believe this to be an important step in the marriage preparation process.

While the term "dating" presents denotational problems, the terms "courting" and "courtship" may present connotational problems. Indeed, Harris largely avoids using these terms – opting instead for "principled romance" or "purposeful intimacy with integrity" – apparently out of a concern that the terms "courting" and "courtship" are too antiquated for even his evangelical readers.

Given the importance of language in presenting ideas, this question ought to be explored further in focus group research with young people from across the cultural spectrum. It may be that the terms "courting" and "courtship" are lost and would require too much capital to retrieve. Or it may be that Harris simply underappreciates the romantic potential of using these terms. Or it may even be that "courting" and "courtship" are the kinds of words that can be used effectively by members of one generation, but not members of another.

For example, Harris gets away with some lines in his book – like "ready for the sack, but not the sacrifice" – that an older person probably couldn't get away with without running the risk of setting off former Congresswoman Patsy Schroeder's Hokum-Meter. (For many years, Schroeder very effectively lampooned a sexual abstinence curriculum for expecting kids to listen to corny sayings like, "Pet Your Dog, Not Your Date.")

But this only serves to underscore the importance of diligently working to find the best terms to communicate courtship-related ideas – and, for that matter, the best spokespersons to communicate those ideas. Indeed, one of the interesting things about the amazing success of Joshua Harris’ book is that the idea of “kissing dating goodbye” is not actually “new” to the evangelical world. Oh, it has never been articulated so provocatively. But in recent years, several middle-aged married men (most especially, Home School Legal Defense Association President Michael Farris and former Olympic track star and current U.S. Congressman Jim Ryun) have advanced these basic ideas. And a generation ago, a well-known and highly-respected evangelical writer, speaker, and teacher named Elizabeth Eliot (whose own love story with a Christian missionary named Jim Eliot probably ought to be made into a Hollywood movie) wrote a book called, “Passion and Purity,” which championed many of these ideas.

It may be that part of the reason people are now paying so much attention to Harris’ book is because he speaks from the perspective of a young single man facing many of these issues in his own life – and as a young single man who must live with the unpleasant consequences of foregoing intimacy in the short run. Moreover, Harris is perceived to be speaking more from the perspective of one seeking to describe his own decision to “kiss dating goodbye” rather than to prescribe this course for others. In essence, instead of saying, “You Should Eat Your Peas,” Harris says, “Here’s Why I Eat My Peas.”

These factors – along with the provocative titling of the book and its obvious timeliness – may help to explain why Harris is reaching such a wide audience with a message that isn’t really as “new” as it might appear.

Before proceeding to some specific recommendations that are informed by the work that Harris and Nelson have been doing, some attention probably needs to be given to the fact that Joshua Harris is a former homeschooler (whose dad, Gregg Harris, has been a pioneer in this area, leading seminars around the country to help equip families to homeschool).

Now, it may be that this is a trivial matter – and certainly too much could be made of it since the ideas Harris presents are by no means representative of all homeschoolers or in any way limited to homeschoolers. But homeschoolers – particularly those who have more of a “locker room mentality” of equipping their children for the wider world as opposed to a “storm shelter mentality” of shielding their kids from the wider world – may be a particularly important subgroup for courtship revivalists to watch.

For starters, homeschooled youth are far less captive than conventionally-schooled kids to the existing peer-obsessed, MTV-driven youth culture. They tend to be more willing than other youth to “think outside the box” and to respect the wisdom of their elders. Indeed, the frayed ties between generations that author Patricia Hersch describes in her provocative book about American adolescence, “A Tribe Apart,” are not as common in homeschooled families as in conventionally-schooled households.

Moreover, homeschoolers are helping to blaze the trail for “educational expressways” that allow interested students to complete their required academic studies sooner in life than would be possible if they were to follow the conventional system. Since one of the greatest problems now

facing pre-marital relationships is the extraordinary time lag between the onset of puberty and the age at which one is financially independent (and, at least in that sense, ready to marry), these efforts to provide “accelerated” learning opportunities could have highly-beneficial social consequences for both homeschooled and conventionally-schooled kids.

Again, one must not make too much of all this, for no courtship revival is likely to occur unless it is highly attractive and accessible to conventionally-schooled youth. But in the same way that evangelical Christians and other people of faith may be particularly apt to help restore some sanity to pre-marital relationship patterns, “counter-cultural” homeschoolers may be as well.

### **Some Specific Recommendations**

Success in any cultural movement requires that deliberate efforts be made to maximize the common beliefs and ideals that people share with one another and to minimize the real or potential differences between various groups. It also requires as much harmony as possible between the “message” and the “medium” that carries that message. (Indeed, this is part of the reason why evangelicals perceive the Incarnation to be so significant – because God’s message that He desires a relationship with man was communicated through the medium of relationship with man.)

At any rate, in the interest of maximizing common ground and translating “message” into “medium,” here are five specific recommendations which closely parallel the five keys to the Song of Solomon’s success:

#### **1. First, Romanticize Marital Love and Stigmatize “Playing House”**

Rather than getting sidetracked by the intramural debate over whether to stigmatize “dating,” it might be more constructive for all of those who want to see a courtship revival to join together and stigmatize “playing house.”

I am told that this term is already being used in a disparaging way in some inner-city neighborhoods. And it certainly captures the essence of “intimacy without commitment” rather well. Moreover, because the term does not have a long history and a well-established meaning, it could be used narrowly by some parties interested in limiting their critique to illegitimacy or cohabitation and used broadly by other parties interested in also raising concerns about behaviors like early sexual activity and exclusive dating.

Of course, no effort to stigmatize any pre-marital behavior is apt to succeed unless it can be argued that this behavior hinders the quest for a fulfilling, lifelong marriage (which is part of the reason why it is so important to make use of recent marriage-related research summaries compiled by the National Marriage Project, the National Institute for Healthcare Research, the Institute for American Values, and others – and why more “dating and courtship” research, in particular, is needed).

Moreover, no effort to stigmatize any pre-marital behavior is apt to succeed unless courtship revivalists can convince young people growing up in our instant gratification society that ever-deepening intimacy in marriage is an attainable prize worth holding out for. That will not only require skill in speaking to the longings and aspirations of the human heart, but it will also require lots and lots and lots of repetition.

1. **Second, Hold Dances and Other Celebratory Events Which Give Young People Practical Opportunities to Learn Gender-Based Romantic Roles Without Exclusive Pairing.**

One of the reasons for the growing popularity of swing dancing among the young is that it has form and structure and is not purely improvisational. There are prescribed steps to follow and prescribed roles for each partner. While these roles mirror the appropriate roles in romantic relationships – men pursue, women respond – they can be “played” in a dance setting without there being any romantic expectation or exclusive pairing. Indeed, one of the responsibilities that men are supposed to carry in social dance settings is to see to it that all the young ladies have an opportunity to dance.

Thus, dances provide a practical way for young people to learn gender-based romantic roles without having to “date.” And this “role-playing” does not even have to occur exclusively among peers. Indeed, Father-Daughter Dances (which groups like the Girl Scouts often sponsor) can be very effective ways for men to show their daughters how they should expect to be treated by men who seek to “date” or “court” them. (And they have the added bonus of giving fathers and daughters a “shared special activity” much in the way that hunting, fishing, or tinkering with cars historically have been “shared special activities” between fathers and sons.)

Now, given Garrison Keillor’s observation about conservative Protestants – that the reason they object to premarital sex is because they’re afraid it will lead to dancing – it may be difficult to convince some to accept this recommendation. But the enthusiastic response evangelicals have given Nelson’s teachings on the Song of Songs should give one hope that all things are possible.

2. **Third, Create Opportunities for Young People to See Older Couples’ Romantic Love in Action.**

In some ways, this is an extension of the last recommendation, for the social dances envisioned there should, whenever possible, be multi-generational or “open to all ages.” But beyond dances and other celebrations that involve obvious opportunities for older married couples to engage in demonstrative romantic activity, there are a host of other social activities – wedding anniversary parties, dinner parties, karaoke parties, banquets, Valentine’s Day parties – that often provide opportunities for young people to be “drawn into the story” of an older married couple or to catch glimpses of an older couple’s romantic love.

Now, the point here is not for grown-ups to do something contrived – for that will almost invariably backfire. The point is that young people need to see older married couples having a good time together. Indeed, no revival of courtship in America is likely to occur so long as

the prevailing assumption among youth is this: “If you want to follow rules, listen to grown-ups; if you want to have a good time, listen to the M-TV youth culture.”

3. Fourth, Revive and Transform the Role of “Chaperones” from One of Being Wallflowers and Cops to One of Being Mentors and Match-Makers.

While there is much that parents can and should be doing to help their children navigate the often-turbulent world of premarital relationships, other grown-ups are needed to help in this process. Indeed, Marriage Savers and other programs that encourage marriage preparation for engaged couples frequently find that an engaged couple benefits from the advice and counsel of a “mentoring” couple that has no direct stake in the outcome of the romantic relationship (unlike the engaged couple’s parents).

No doubt pre-engaged couples would benefit from similar input. Indeed, in situations where young people are growing up in broken homes, it may be especially important for “mentoring” relationships to be established.

Moreover, given the difficulty that many post-college singles have in meeting prospective mates these days, grown-ups need to give greater attention to creating social situations in which singles might meet. For example, I know of a married couple in Manhattan that regularly holds dinner parties in their home for the purpose of giving young people a chance to meet prospective mates. Now, the “matchmaking” done at these affairs is very low key. Indeed, guests are not even told that most of the others in attendance are single. The point is to create a social situation where something might happen – not a “blind date” or some other contrived situation that is apt to be awkward and may convey to unmarried friends that they have some sort of “problem.”

Indeed, one of the keys to helping bring some sanity to the world of romantic relationships is to recognize that the ultimate goal is not “marriage” so much as it is “ever-deepening marital intimacy” (like that depicted in the Song of Songs). So long as that is understood to be the ultimate goal, married couples will have their own work to do and will (hopefully) be of matchmaking help to their single friends without becoming busybodies.

4. Fifth, Create Community-Based Councils To Facilitate Both Inclusive and Exclusive Activities.

There are many community-based organizations already in existence which give some attention to cultivating healthy dating and courtship practices – churches, synagogues, youth organizations, abstinence groups, homeschooling associations, etc. But there is no community-based organization which exists primarily for this purpose. And given the fact that many of the social celebrations which provide some of the best opportunities for romantic role-playing, match-making, and modeling require a great deal of advance preparation, too often the dances, banquets, parties, and other activities never take place.

Thus, as interest in reviving courtship spreads, it may be well for community-based councils to be created for the expressed purpose of spearheading a wide range of manners-cultivating,

multi-generational, participatory social celebrations that help people of all ages move appropriately toward what Nelson calls “deepening intimacy” in marriage.

These councils could be modeled loosely after college fraternity councils in that they would provide a mechanism for community leaders from different religious groups (“fraternities”) to join together and coordinate their efforts to promote a revival of courtship and lifelong romantic love in their community. Periodically, this council could sponsor “inclusive” community-wide celebrations that are accessible to everyone. More frequently, each of the different “all-ages fraternities” would host their own “exclusive” events (since many will want to limit their marriage prospects to those of their own faith).

Moreover, this community-based layperson’s council could serve as a complement to (or extension of) community-based pastors’ councils which are cropping up around the country to adopt “community marriage policies” through the work of Marriage Savers. At any rate, the possibilities are exciting. It will be interesting to see how the revival of courtship proceeds.