From https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/an-interview-on-sex-dating-and-relationships/

An interview with Gerald Hiestand on [*Sex, Dating, and Relationships: A Fresh Approach*](http://www.amazon.com/Sex-Dating-Relationships-Fresh-Approach/dp/1433527111/thegospcoal-20)(Crossway, 2012), co-authored with Jay Thomas.

**Your book looks at three fundamental male/female relationships: (1) the *family* relationship, (2) the *neighbor* relationship, and (3) the *marriage* relationship. But many add another category: (4) the *dating*relationship. Why do you find this last category problematic?**

As you’ve noted, in our book we argue that Scripture recognizes three distinct types of male-female relationships—the “family” relationship, the “marriage” relationship, and the “neighbor” relationship (by “neighbor” we mean anyone who is neither a blood relative or a spouse). We mark these as distinct relationships based on the observation that each relationship carries with it an explicit sexual ethic. The Levitical sexual codes ([Leviticus 18](https://www.esv.org/Leviticus%2018/)) clearly prohibit sexual relationships between blood relatives. And all throughout Scriptures (Proverbs, Song of Songs, [1 Corinthians 7](https://www.esv.org/1%20Corinthians%207/)) we see that sexual relations within marriage are not only permissible, but commanded.

Likewise, the sexual ethic of the “neighbor relationship” is detailed in [1 Corinthians 7:9](https://www.esv.org/1%20Corinthians%207%3A9/) and [1 Timothy 5:2](https://www.esv.org/1%20Timothy%205%3A2/)—namely, that sexual activity is prohibited. We go into this in more detail in the book, but the crucial observation here is that *the sexual boundary for all non-married relationships is complete abstinence*. And this doesn’t mean only abstinence from sexual intercourse, but abstinence from all sexual activity. So in chart form, it looks like the below.

The problem with viewing a dating relationship as its own distinct category of relationship is that—being a modern invention—it lacks any explicit scriptural boundary regarding sexual relations. Feeling left to our own devices, we have invented our own guidelines of sexual purity. And those guidelines are all over the map. Some are fairly conservative, while others are not. In either case, the legitimization of dating relationships as a distinct category of male-female relationship has introduced an enormous amount of subjectivity into Christian pre-marital relationships.

A main problem with contemporary dating relationships is that they tend to grant license to sexual activity that we would otherwise intuitively deem inappropriate. For instance, most Christian women won’t make out with just any guy; but they will make out with their boyfriend. And that, we believe, is a category mistake. The chart below illustrates the confusion.

In our book, we argue that a dating relationship is really just a subset of the neighbor relationship, and thus must be governed by its sexual guidelines. In short, we can’t slap the label “dating” on a male/female relationship and then justify engaging in sexual activity that we would otherwise deem inappropriate between unmarried men and women.

**So if  “the bounds of the neighbor relationship are binding until marriage” (p. 139), what tensions will Christians experience who asking: How far is too far before marriage?**

In many respects, the entire book is a theological and exegetical attempt to answer this question. Pastors and parents have, I think, dropped the ball here. We’ve tended to push the burden of this dilemma back onto teens and singles. Our typical line goes something like this: “The Bible doesn’t really speak about sexual boundaries in dating relationships, so you’ll have to prayerfully develop your own standard.” But this has been a disaster in our Christian sub-culture. Telling teens and singles to develop their own sexual ethic is not pastorally responsible.

Our conclusion in this matter is pretty countercultural, and so my temptation here is to provide a prolonged defense and justification. But since that would require an entire chapter’s worth, let me briefly state the argument and then hope people will go to the book for the details.

We work primarily from [1 Corinthians 7:9](https://www.esv.org/1%20Corinthians%207%3A9/), where Paul instructs non-married individuals to pursue sexual fulfillment exclusively in marriage. The implications in this passage are clear: sexual activity is to be reserved for the marriage relationship. So far, not very groundbreaking.

But how do we determine which physical activities are sexual?

Clearly some physical activities (like shaking hands, a kiss on the cheek) are not inherently sexual.

And other physical activities (oral sex, fondling) are clearly sexual.

But what about something like passionate kissing? Is passionate kissing a sexual activity? A great way to judge the sexual nature of a physical activity is to consider the activity against the backdrop of the nuclear family. We call it the “family test”: if I wouldn’t engage in x activity with a biological relative because it would be sexually inappropriate to do so, then that activity is, by definition, a sexual activity. In other words, whatever activity would be sexually inappropriate between a brother and sister reveals what constitutes a sexual activity.

There’s more to sexual purity than this, but framing things in this way provides a good deal of clarity regarding appropriate sexual boundaries. By this definition, passionate kissing is clearly a sexual activity, and thus to be reserved for the marriage relationship. I’ve heard a number of creative attempts to work around this logic, but none are very convincing.

The great compromise of contemporary evangelical sexual ethics is that we have justified foreplay as a legitimate part of pre-marital relationships. This doesn’t hold up theologically or scripturally, and it certainly doesn’t work pragmatically. Foreplay is meant to propel us toward consummation. It shouldn’t surprise us that evangelical teens and singles are struggling to maintain sexual purity; we’ve basically said it’s OK to begin having sex, just as long as they don’t finish. And that’s not a recipe for chastity.

**In addition to exacerbating sexual impropriety, you also argue that dating relationships tend to create unhealthy emotional expectations. Can you explain?**

A primary concern of the book is to help pre-engaged couples keep their wits about them. We tell women, “Don’t give your heart away to a man who isn’t sure what he’s going to do with it.” And we tell men, “Don’t try to win the heart of a woman if you don’t know what you’re going to do with it.” We’re not against a man pursuing a woman. But we are against a man doing this irresponsibly. In bygone days, a man would woo a woman toward marriage. Nowadays a man woos a woman to be his girlfriend. Women are giving themselves away—emotionally, romantically, sexually—to men who have made no promises.

Ultimately, the “commitment” of a dating relationship is the commitment to be committed until one or the other doesn’t feel like being committed. When you peel away the veneer, the commitment of a dating relationships is pretty shallow. Yet we treat these relationships as though they were a quasi-marriage, and thus grant them a measure of security that isn’t really there. And of course this goes both ways. Men are often just as much a victim.

**In the book you suggest that pre-marital relationships should only become romantic at engagement. You write, “To romantically woo a woman, or to give your heart away to a man, prior to a marriage commitment is to paint an unclear portrait of Christ and the church. . . . The time to bring on the romance is when you’re ready to bring on the ring!” (87, 106). However, you also argue that the standard of sexual purity for the neighbor relationship, even after engagement, remains the same. So there seems to be some tension here. Explain what this looks like.**

Yes, the trick is to happily anticipate sexual intimacy in a way that it doesn’t lead to immorality. Certainly once a man and woman have agreed upon marriage, it is appropriate that they have a happy sense of longing and desire to experience the relational joy of sexual intimacy with one another. We are not suggesting that an engaged couple repress their sexual and romantic feelings for each other, or pretend that they are not sexually attracted to each other. It is never wrong to anticipate a good gift from God. But it is wrong to anticipate the gift in such a way that it breeds impatience or disobedience. Three times in the Song of Songs unmarried individuals are told not “to arouse or awaken love until it so desires” (2:7, 3:5, 8:4). In the context of these admonitions, sexual love does not desire to be awakened when it has no opportunity for consummation.

Since sexual activity must still be reserved for marriage, it is incumbent that an engaged couple exercise wisdom regarding the extent to which they “fan into flame” sexual desire through physical touch, spending time alone, discussing sexual intimacy, etc. Even within marriage there will be times when sex will not be possible for certain seasons, and such times are not made easier by fixating on sexual intimacy; to the surprise of many singles, continence will be required even in marriage! So I don’t recommend engaged couples, still months from their wedding, spending too much time thinking or talking about sexual intimacy, or even allowing their thoughts to wander in that direction for too long. The sexual tension will build naturally enough—no need to help it along to the point that it become unmanageable.

**You argue that how we live as Christians in our sexual relationships broadcasts a message to the world about the gospel, either rightly or wrongly. What would you say to Christian singles? What does sexual purity before or outside of marriage say about the preciousness and beauty of our union with Christ?**

This really is the theological core of the book, and where we begin in chapter 1. We argue from [Ephesians 5:21-32](https://www.esv.org/Ephesians%205%3A21-32/) that sex is a “type” or image of Christ’s spiritual union with the church. In other words, God created the sexual relationship between the husband and wife to be a picture of Christ’s spiritual union with the church. It didn’t just work out this way; this is how God designed it from the beginning. This then explains Scripture sexual ethics. If the sexual relationships was created by God to picture Christ’s spiritual relationship with the church, then it is incumbent on us to behave sexually in ways that reflect this higher union. Christ and the church don’t divorce, so neither should we.

Christ is faithful to his bride, so likewise husbands should be faithful to their wives. Christ reserves himself exclusively for the church, so too we should reserves ourselves exclusively for our spouse. The point here is that God’s sexual ethics are not arbitrary, but point to the greater and higher reality of the gospel. Christian sexuality is grounded in a fixed norm that anchors our view of sexual ethics, as well as informs our self-understanding as sexual beings. Thus when a single person refrains from sexual activity, this celibacy points toward a higher reality—Christ saved himself for his spouse, and so too the single Christian saves himself or herself for a future spouse. Sexual chastity, then, is a great testimony to the gospel.

And it’s important to point out that sex is only a picture of the real thing, and not the real thing itself. Many Christians are single, but not by choice. This can be a painful situation. But the hope of the gospel is that marriage and sex, as wonderful as they are, are only a picture of the real thing. While one may be denied participation in the shadow relationship, everyone is granted access to the real thing through God’s grace. And it is the real thing that truly brings peace. We often have a hard time believing this, but it’s the truth.

**What would you say to those who have fallen short of the high biblical standards for sexuality, or are struggling with a sense of shame from past mistakes?**  
The great beauty of sex and marriage is that they point beyond themselves to the gospel. And the glory of the gospel is that Christ made himself one with us, taking upon himself all that we are, and giving us all that he is. It is this glorious exchange—typified by human marriage—that speaks of our hope. All of us fall short of God’s ideal. The ravages of sin have left each of us with a disordered sexuality. The good news of the gospel is that, in our union with Christ, God forgives our past and empowers us to live beyond our natural selves. So while our book calls Christian singles to a high calling, we hope it also encourages and deepens their confidence in the grace, power, and mercy of God.