PURSUING A RELATIONSHIP THAT GLORIFIES GOD

CHRIST CENTERED DATING

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DAVID C COOK™
transforming lives together

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1

CHAOS TO ORDER

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"When in Rome," I muttered to myself as I gleefully took another cupcake from the dessert tray.

I heard a little chuckle from behind me. The line was from a comedy that was popular at the time, and I was purposely using it out of context, in a way that didn't really make sense, to amuse myself. So I had to wonder who had felt compelled to laugh at my nonsense.

It turned out to be my future wife, Bethany, and this was the start to our first significant social interaction. We had both been serving on a mission trip in Liberia with the Mercy Ships organization, which uses hospital ships to offer medical assistance to those in need. We had been introduced in passing, but our ship had over four hundred crew members, and we had not yet had a chance to get to know each other.

We were at the birthday party of a mutual friend when I snatched the extra cupcake.

"Oh, sorry," I said as I turned with an embarrassed smile. "I didn't think anyone could hear me. It was a joke from a movie."

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"I know," she said, smiling back. "It's just funny that you made a joke out loud to yourself. Who does that?" She started laughing again. I wasn't sure if she was laughing with me or at me. Either way, I didn't care. I was hooked.

As we talked, we discovered we both had the same favorite Christian author and other common interests as well. Before long, the people around us seemed to disappear. All I cared about was knowing everything about Bethany, and for some reason, she felt the same way about me. Then …

She gasped with a slight tinge of disgust. "Oh, you're nineteen!" She quickly regained her composure and said, "That's cool. I'm twenty-four."

Nothing more was said about our age difference, and we both retreated to the relative safety of the "friend zone." We became great friends in the remaining five months of the mission trip, probably because we didn't feel pressure to be anything more. Fresh out of high school and talking to a pretty registered nurse, I considered romance a pipe dream.

After the mission trip was over, we stayed in touch—emailing each other almost daily, talking on the phone every few weeks, and trying to find excuses to see each other while acting like it was "just a friend thing." It was becoming something more, however, and when I turned twenty—and lost that annoying "teen" at the end of my age—I decided to shoot my shot.

"So …," I said over the phone one night. I had rehearsed this moment a lot, but I felt myself freezing up. *Just do it, Mark. Don't be a wimp. It's time.*

"I, uh … well, I think it's pretty obvious you and me have gotten really close lately. I feel like it's time for me to get in or out with you,

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because I don't want to play games with your heart or our friendship to be too intimate."

Bethany later said she thought I would tell her we should take a step back because I had started college and we were in different seasons of life. That's not where I was going.

"I've been praying a lot about it. I mean, so I want you to have time to think and pray about it too—but I want to know if you would be my girlfriend. I really like you and want to commit more to you than friendship can offer. What do you think?"

"Yes," she said quickly.

"Oh, wow! I mean—don't you want to pray about it first?"

"I already have," she said. "I knew I would date you if you asked me, but I thought you wouldn't because of our age difference."

"Yeah, I wasn't sure how you felt about that. There may be challenges, but now that I'm twenty, I thought maybe I had a small chance with you."

She laughed and agreed that telling her friends she was dating a nine*teen*-year-old was a bit much.

We dated long distance for a year before she moved from North Carolina to Cleveland, Ohio, where I was finishing up college. Four months later, we were engaged, and four months after that, we were married.

The Center of Your Story

That's a quick snapshot of our story. We've been married since 2008 and created countless more memories together. Some are fun to think about; some are painful. There have been lots of failures and wins, arguments and bliss, hurtful words and loving words, forgiveness,

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maturing, growing intimacy, laughter with our two kids, parental stresses, ministry, and God's amazing grace. And I'm sure many more highs and lows are to come.

Of all the people who have ever lived, no one has a relationship story exactly like mine. Not that mine is special. Quite the opposite! And if you asked everyone who has ever been married to share their story, each story would have unique details that differ from everyone else's. So if God blesses you with a marriage one day, your journey will be beautifully unique as well.

Perhaps that's why the Bible doesn't give a lot of detail about the pre-marriage process. If God wanted us all to have the same experiences in our relationships leading up to marriage, he might have outlined a much more rigid system in the Bible. But he didn't.

So how will we figure out what God wants us to do in our pursuit of marriage, if the Bible has little to say about dating? Don't get me wrong. I like sharing stories from my life, and I will, but our stories are not authoritative truth. If we base principles on personal experiences, we may lead others astray when their personal experiences differ from ours. Even if I could write an enjoyable book based entirely on Bethany's and my experience, it would not be as helpful as one containing eternal truths that are relevant for everyone all the time.

There are countless questions and issues that are not specifically addressed in the Bible. The Bible is not an encyclopedia in which we can look up every random topic—even the important ones—and find the information we're seeking. God has not provided a heavenly

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search engine that spits back divine answers to every question we ask. However, we can find everything we need to know to accomplish God's will in Scripture.

God did not provide a formula for dating; instead, he gave us eternal truth that can shape every part of our lives—including our pursuit of marriage.

There is one major theme in Scripture that seems to arc over every other theme, unifying everything: the glory of God. Everything, including the seasons you go through in your journey toward marriage, is meant to bring glory to God.

God's glory links your story and mine. Some people are called to a life of singleness and others to a life of marriage. Those called to marriage each meet their spouse in a different way. And each has unique joys and pains throughout their relationship experience. But after studying the Bible, I am absolutely convinced that everything, for all of us, swirls around the glory of God.

God did not provide a formula for dating; instead, he gave us eternal truth that can shape every part of our lives—including our pursuit of marriage.

So, before we can talk about how to glorify God through your pursuit of marriage, we first need to unpack what it means to glorify God.

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Glorifying God

Moses stood before the manifest presence of God. He had God's full attention. As he stood on the mountaintop before his Creator, he could have requested anything. What did he ask?

> Moses said, "Please show me your glory." And [God] said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The LORD.'" (Ex. 33:18–19)

"The glory of God" is such a common phrase in Christian vocabulary that we can miss its significance. We must fight to keep this important phrase from getting sucked into our vocabulary bank of meaningless religious platitudes. If we lose the meaning of "God's glory," meaninglessness will trickle down to every area of our lives.

Removing God's glory from the center of your being is like removing an engine from a car. It's like removing your heart from your chest. It's like removing love from a marriage. You lose the whole point of your Christian faith. As 1 Corinthians 10:31 commands, "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."

Moses understood this, which is why his request was so pleasing to God. God granted Moses' request to see his glory, saying, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The LORD.'" Therefore, we can conclude:

God's glory is when God's goodness and character are made known to the watching world.

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The phrase "made known" means God is revealing himself in a visible or knowable way. Bible names, in the Old Testament especially, are more than identifying labels. They carry information about a person's character and essence. When God said he would proclaim his name before Moses, he meant that he was going to make his character and essence known to him.

By examining a handful of other biblical examples, we can confirm that this is what is most often meant by the phrase "God's glory" in Scripture.

When Isaiah saw the Lord sitting on his throne, he heard the seraphim singing, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!" (Isa. 6:3). We might have expected the second line of this song to say "the whole earth is full of his holiness!" But when the holiness of God fills the earth in a visible or knowable way, it is referred to as "his glory."

When God visibly displayed his power (as in the cloud filling the temple) or performed a miracle (like providing manna from heaven), it was often said that the glory of the Lord appeared (Ex. 40:34; 2 Chron. 5:14; Ex. 16:7–10). The character and power of God were on display.

When God made the earth and everything in it, he did so to display aspects of himself. Everything created by God reflects something about him, as Psalm 19:1–4 states:

> The heavens declare the glory of God,
> and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.
> Day to day pours out speech,
> and night to night reveals knowledge.

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> There is no speech, nor are there words,
> whose voice is not heard.
> Their voice goes out through all the earth,
> and their words to the end of the world.

Creation speaks a language every human can understand, regardless of nationality or geographical location. When you see the sky, it "pours out speech" about God. Thus, "the heavens declare the glory of God."

When God is made known through creation, it's called *glory*. For this reason, no one who denies God has an excuse. He made himself known in the world where we live. Romans 1:20–25 explains:

> For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.
>
> Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged

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> the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

God's "invisible attributes" can be "clearly perceived" by observing his creation. When people rejected these truths, they "exchanged the glory of the immortal God" as well as "the truth about God for a lie." The two phrases mean essentially the same thing. When God made his "invisible attributes" visible and the "truth about God" knowable, he revealed his "glory." Thus, when people rejected the visible truth about God in creation, they rejected God's glory.

Theologians refer to nature as God's "general revelation," while they refer to Scripture as God's "special revelation." God reveals himself in a general way to all people through creation, and in a special and specific way through the illumination of Scripture by the Holy Spirit. But when people deny the truths about God in the Bible, like they deny the truths about God in creation, they (again) miss God's glory: "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23).

Sin occurs when we disobey God's commands. But what if God said adultery was good; would adultery be good? If God said murder was fine, would murder be fine? If God said lying was okay, would lying be okay?

When you understand God's laws, questions like these are nonsense. God's laws are not a list of random rules he picked out of thin air. Rather, they reflect his nature. God commanded faithfulness in marriage, because God is faithful. God said murder is a sin, because

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God is just. God commands truthfulness, because God is true. The laws of God make known God's invisible nature.

So asking if adultery, murder, or lying would be good if God said so is like asking, "Would God be different if he was different?" God's laws reflect who God is. The only way God could have given different laws would be if God were different than he is. God gave us the laws we have because they reflect his unchanging nature. His word and moral laws will never change, because they reflect him, and he never changes (Ps. 119:89; 1 Pet. 1:25; Heb. 13:8).

This is why, when we look at the law, it is like looking at a mirror that shows us our flaws (James 1:23–24; Rom. 3:20). We were made in God's image (Gen. 1:27), but when we look at the perfect image of God reflected in the law, we see that, because of sin, our reflection of God's image is no longer fully accurate. The law shows us that our image-bearing is flawed, because we no longer match the picture of God's character revealed in his laws. Only Jesus can reflect God's character perfectly, which is why only Jesus could fulfill the law perfectly (Matt. 5:17).

In Romans 3:23, we might expect something like "for all have sinned and fall short of obeying God's commands." But instead, it says sin causes us to "fall short of the glory of God." The word *sin* literally means "to miss the mark." When we sin, we are missing the mark of accurately reflecting his image. When we reveal God accurately, we reflect his glory. When we conceal God, it's called sin (we "fall short of his glory"). When God's truth about himself is made known through his laws, the Bible calls this "the glory of God."

This same truth can be seen in God's creation of humans. Genesis 1:27 says, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of

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God he created him; male and female he created them." Similarly, Isaiah 43:6–7 says, "Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made." God created us for his glory, thus God created us in his image. When we reflect his invisible qualities in a visible way, it's called glory. Through the gospel, God is bringing himself glory by restoring his image in us through Christ (Col. 1:27). As 2 Corinthians 3:16–18 says:

> But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

As we are being transformed into God's true image, we reveal his glory by increasing degrees, because God's glory is manifest when his image is revealed.

This truth about God's glory can be seen most clearly in the person and work of Jesus Christ. If I were to ask, "What person has glorified God the most in all of human history?" Certainly, the answer is Jesus Christ. But why?

Jesus glorifies God the most because he reveals God the most. Jesus is the God-Man, which means he is God and thus has given us a perfectly accurate and visible representation of God. As Colossians 1:15 says, "He is the image of the invisible God." John 1:14, 18 says:

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> The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.…
>
> No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known. (NIV)

John said we have "seen his glory" and that Jesus made the Father known to us. Jesus glorified God perfectly and to the maximum, because he made God visible and knowable to us. Hebrews 1:3 says Jesus "is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature." Jesus revealed God to us, and this is seen most clearly in the gospel. Notice the powerful connection between God's glory and the gospel of Jesus Christ:

> In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Cor. 4:4–6)

The phrase "seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" can be confusing to follow. I've found

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it helpful to start backward to understand what this is saying. Beginning with "God," we see that Jesus is the image of God and thus reveals the most about God. Then we learn that the gospel reveals the most about Jesus. The gospel gives us light to see who Jesus is, and Jesus in turn reveals who God is. If God's glory is God revealed, the apex expression of God's glory is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ and his gospel reveal more about God than anything else ever could. Therefore, when you read 2 Corinthians 4:6, you find the phrase "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." Jesus Christ and his gospel glorify God most because they reveal God the most. Everything you need to know about his glory, everything God wants you to know about his glory, can be seen in Jesus.

We started with the question "What does it mean to glorify God?" If God's glory is God's goodness and character revealed in a visible or knowable way, and if Jesus Christ reveals God's goodness and character the most, the answer to our question is:

To glorify God, you must make Jesus known.

If you want to glorify God in dating, Christ must be at the center of your dating—hence the title of this book, *Christ-Centered Dating: Pursuing a Relationship That Glorifies God*.

Glorifying God in Pursuit of Marriage

Now, applying what we've learned about glorifying God to our questions about the pursuit of marriage, we can say:

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If we want to glorify God through our pursuit of marriage, our goal is to reflect Jesus at all times.

Our goal throughout the Christian dating process is the same as our overall goal as Christians—to live like Jesus. Of course, Jesus was a single man who lived in ancient Israel, so your experience will be much different than his. But as Christians, we can invite the Holy Spirit to fill us so that our character, actions, and attitude resemble Jesus' character, actions, and attitude. As Philippians 2:5 commands, "In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus" (NIV).

In applying these truths specifically to romantic relationships, we are led to Ephesians 5:21–33, where Paul described the imagery God intended a Christian marriage to express.

A Christian husband and wife are called to reflect Christ and his bride, the church. Ephesians 5:31–32 says, "'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church."

That last phrase—"it refers to Christ and the church"—leads us to the heart of what I hope to express in this book.

If you want to glorify God in dating, Christ must be at the center of your dating.

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Keep in mind that the verse says marriage refers to Christ and the church, not vice versa. Sometimes Christian singles have fallen victim to a subtle bait and switch, in which they have been led to believe that "glorifying God" is sort of a prerequisite for finding a Christian spouse. "Give God glory, and God will give you a marriage," so the logic has gone.

What I hope to show you is that the opposite is true. If God has called you to pursue marriage, he has done so that you might, in turn, glorify him (i.e., make his goodness known) through your marriage relationship. Glorifying God is not the admission price to a loving marriage; it is the result of loving your spouse well in marriage!

It's essential to get the order right. Christ and the church do not point to marriage; marriage points to Christ and the church (Eph. 5:32). God is not there to serve marriage; marriage is there to serve God. Glorifying God doesn't lead to the goal of marriage; your future marriage helps achieve the goal of glorifying God. When Christian singles are taught the wrong order, as so often happens, chaos ensues.

But when you get the order right—when you stop trying to use your service and love for God as leverage to get a healthy relationship—you unlock the secret to a godly relationship. Healthy relationships are by-products of God-centered lives, not the other way around.

If you worship God rather than your personal happiness, you will accomplish both. If you worship your personal happiness rather than God, you will accomplish neither. The same is true when it comes to

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relationships. If you seek to glorify God so he will give you a relationship, you will not truly glorify God, and your relationships will not function properly. But if you seek to use your relationships to bring glory to God, he will be glorified, and your relationships will function much better.

When you order God's glory properly in your heart, the rest of your life will come into order as well. Things work best when we use them as they were designed. And if relationships were made to glorify God, that means your relationships will be at their healthiest when they are being used in this way. This same principle applies to your pursuit of marriage as well.

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