

Winter 2002

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Recommended Citation

Russell, Glenn, "Too Wonderful to Understand God's Gift of Romantic Love" (2002). *Faculty Publications*. 962.
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Too Wonderful to Understand

God's Gift of Romantic Love

by Glenn Russell

"Three things are too wonderful for me; four I do not understand . . . the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a snake on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas, and the way of a man with a maiden."

Proverbs 30:19

As her classmates spilled out onto the sidewalks and I gathered up my lecture notes and papers, she lingered after God and Human Life class. She paused at the edge of the classroom, as self-conscious and determined as the last leaf jittering on the branch just outside the window. As the room grew silent, she began to speak. "You were teaching about love, about letting God lead in your love life. You said God brought you and your wife together, but I'm not so sure that works anymore. See, I'm pretty confused. I've been watching "Friends" and reading *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* and I'm not sure what works anymore."

Watching "Friends" and reading *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*—the juxtaposing of humorous immorality and humorless celibacy. Could this be more evidence that there is a love problem in

society today? Jeremy Clark says of the predicament, "The tragedy of our age is that we're at a crossroads, but all the signposts have fallen down."¹ The messages of love emanating from popular culture are too often thinly disguised platitudes of pleasure and lust. And during the last fifty years there has been a seismic shift in the definition of relationships and in role expectations, but this has not helped men be any more romantic. Oh, men know that red roses and a candlelight dinner are likely to win a woman's heart, but a Roper survey of the "romance gap" suggests men are behaving badly, even worse than they did decades ago.² And just when women are getting their MBA's and JD's instead of their Mrs. degrees (as it was quaintly put), along come "the rules girls." Named after the bestseller, *The Rules* by Ellen Fein and Sherrie Schneider, the rules girls follow the book's 35 "time-tested secrets," reverting back to yesteryear's demure deportment and passive coyness in hopes of finding true love. Is it any wonder that men are also confused?

And "love at first byte" hasn't

helped matters much, even when romance is just a PC away. Thousands of hopeful young adults are hitting the space bar on their keyboards instead of the local singles' bar. The language of on-line love is unique; a kiss is just a * and a smile is a :) a wink is ;) and : ' is crying. But the communication isn't always clear. One on-line lover conned more than 100 suitors out of airline tickets and large amounts of money. Nevertheless, sometimes things do work out. I recently talked with an AU graduate who admitted he met his bride on the Internet. (Then he embarrassingly asked me not to use his name in this article.) "People don't understand how we could begin a relationship on a computer, especially in the Nethery Hall lab. But we're both just old-fashioned romantics who found love through the Internet. We even thought about having the computer monitor as the best man at our wedding!"

Christian singles have sensed the cultural confusion and begun looking for spiritual answers. In his best-selling 1997 book, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, Joshua Harris concludes that Christian

couples are seldom very different from their secular contemporaries.³ So he challenges Christian youth to reject the self-centered attitudes and values of contemporary dating and allow the reality of the gospel to affect their relationships. Harris says that because most people pursue love and romance with little intention of commitment, dating is worldly, carnal, selfish and full of problems. The only solution, according to Harris, is for Christians to abandon the pursuit of romance and “kiss dating goodbye,” although Harris implies that courtship (a relationship pursued only for the purpose of finding a marriage partner) is the godly alternative to dating.

The romance discussion is not a new one. French philosopher and critic Denis de Rougemont (1906-1985), in his influential book, *Love in the Western World*, argues that western society’s concept of love was twisted during the later middle ages by the advent of the romance myth.⁴ De Rougemont examines the Celtic myth of Tristan and Iseult, a seminal tale of tragic lovers in the grip of overwhelming passion, transgressing all social and moral boundaries. The myth fostered an idea of secularized romance and an inescapable conflict between marriage and romance. Marriage was clearly associated with dreary social, religious and personal responsibility, in contrast to the excitement of passion which was anarchic, consuming and impossible to satisfy. From countless Arthurian legends to modern sentimental movies and “love songs,” de Rougemont traces the evolution of Western romantic love. Western culture has absorbed the idea that love is not worth having without passion. And since passion in marriage seldom lasts, we are left unfulfilled, longing for an impossible romance.

Charles Williams (1886-1945) saw things much differently. Williams, a

friend of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien, and for a short time a member of the “Inklings,” the prominent Oxford literary group, believed that romantic love could be a prelude to

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understanding divine love. Instead of the myth of Tristan and Iseult, Williams turned to another love story for his inspiration: the narrative of the poet Dante’s unrequited love for Beatrice. Dante was nine when he first met Beatrice, who was a year younger. He saw her on a number of occasions over the next nine years, but it was not until he was eighteen that she spoke to him. Dante would never forget the day! At nine in the morning on a Florence street in May of 1283, Beatrice, wearing a white dress and walking with two other ladies, passed by Dante and greeted him. Dante Alighieri fell in love with Beatrice and remained smitten the rest of his life. And as he pondered the image of Beatrice he was drawn from the spectrum of human love into the sphere of divine love. Romantic love became the doorway into divine devotion.

Romantic love can veil the true person. We may hear someone say, “I don’t know what he sees in her.” This is because we do not see through the vision of love. We see how ordinary

We even thought about having the computer monitor as the best man at our wedding!

she is, how flawed he is, but the lovers see something different. The lover sees how extraordinary, how priceless is the person they adore. Therefore romantic love is a grace, a gift, a rare unveiling of the reality that each human being has priceless value to God. And surely the Song of Solomon reminds us that we don’t have to

choose between a romance without faith and a faith without romance. The Song of Songs is an ode to the joys of romantic, sensual love; the book’s inclusion in the Bible is itself evidence of divine inspiration, for no church committee would have created this document! Yes, the effervescent springs of romantic love

can be traced back to their source in God. And since human love and divine love are intricately connected, the experience of human love can bring people closer to God.

Ultimately, the Christian marriage provides a context of commitment for romance to be resurrected over and over again throughout the journey of life. Perhaps the examples of two real-life Andrews couples will illustrate the positive power of romantic love. I have delighted in hearing Helen Christoffel tell the story of how she and her boyfriend Garth used to keep their romance alive here at EMC back in the 1940s. Leaving their respective dorms, they would signal each other by flashing their room lights. How they hoped this would enhance their chances of being seated at the same table for the dinner hour in the cafeteria! Yes, it was romantic and it led to fifty-two years of joyful, faithful, married love. Garth passed away a few years ago, but Helen is still passionately in love with him. Some romances never die.

Tony Rappette (BSIT ’95) met Dawn Imperial (att. 93-95) while he was ushering at PMC on January 1, 2000. An attraction started and a romance quickly blossomed. At their wedding Dawn said, “While I may have met Tony only a short 11 months ago—without knowing his name—he is who I’ve been praying for, for years.”



Tony's comments were significant as well: "For years I had been praying for someone to love me as I am. On

her wings, but you were not willing!" The spectacle of this unbelievable, unconditional love embarrasses us, for

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January 1, God answered my prayers. I know I am a better man for loving her. I am still thanking God every day for this miracle of a person, and today I thank Him for making her my wife."

In the Bible, God reveals himself as a pursuing Lover.⁵ A Great Romance saturates the scriptures. God chooses Israel for his bride but she is unfaithful. Read and wonder at the passionate pain of God's anger! God is the perfect lover yet Israel—and all humanity—blatantly fornicates with lesser lovers. Listen as the broken-hearted One weeps, "How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under

we are so unlovable. "We turn our backs to Him once more and nail His back to a cross."⁶ But three days later, he rises from the dead and ascends to intercede as our heavenly partner. But the Great Romance is not over, for He is still in love with us. Soon there will be a cosmic wedding day as the Bride, faithful at last, is taken to spend an eternal honeymoon with the One who has pursued so patiently and so passionately. Indeed, this is a romance "too wonderful to understand!"

¹ Jeremy Clark, *I Gave Dating a Chance* (Colorado Springs, CO.: Waterbrook Press, 2000), 7. Clark's

book is a positive yet biblical approach to dating. A different perspective than Harris's *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*.

² Roper Reports, *American Demographics*, Feb. 1997, Issue 2, page 25.

³ Joshua Harris, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* (Sisters, OR.: Multnomah Publishers, 1997). Harris has subsequently gotten married and written *Boy Meets Girl: Say Hello to Marriage*, published in 2000 by Multnomah.

⁴ De Rougemont asserted that a 12th-century heresy known as Catharism was the basis for these medieval romantic myths. Predicated on the concept of a dualism of body and soul, the idea developed that deliverance from the temptation of love would come at death. In this way, sexual desire was transformed into passion and a longing for death.

⁵ For an excellent description of God as a passionate lover see Rodney Clapp's article, "Does the Bible Really Say All that About Romance?" in the February 3, 1984, issue of *Christianity Today*.

⁶ *Ibid.*

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