

Building a House

Study Guide

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Introduction

This study guide has been written to help you read and consider the content of the book *Building a House*. *Building a House* outlines our suggested approach to Christian courtship. The approach is simple. A sound relationship must progress gradually from friendship to courtship and become bonded and yoked in a uniquely Christian way.

The study guide draws attention to five points, or phases, of growth in a courtship relationship outlined in *Building a House*. These phases are expressed as 'questions', which describe the approach or aim of each phase of courtship. A phase begins with a 'question', and ends with an answer. Each question must be answered by both the man and the woman. Of course, the questions are really only signalling a large body of personal and relational content for each individual to grow through. The 'answers' to these questions are the foundations that will become established in the relationship. Each of these phases will vary in length from couple to couple. In fact, the phases will overlap one another, even though there are elements that are exclusive and specific to each phase.

For each courtship phase, the study guide commends a section of reading in *Building a House*, and provides a set of summary points and questions to help readers to understand the courtship process, even if they are not currently in such a relationship. For those who are in a courting relationship, the answers to the questions should be used as a measure of the maturity of the relationship and to indicate areas where further growth and understanding should be sought. All readers, and particularly courting couples, should seek further understanding in fellowship. Couples should look beyond themselves in developing answers to these questions, and avoid turning 'inwardly' as a couple or approaching the material as an

'assignment' or checklist. Rather, the answers will be found and established in the relational contexts that are appropriate for each phase of the courtship.

1. The Friendship Question

Please read:

Building a House, pp 23-32, '1. The friendship question'.

The simple question to be answered during the friendship phase is: 'What does genuine friendship mean, and do we have a friendship that could last a lifetime?'

Summary of the Phase:

- Christian friendship is the foundation and beginning point of all relationships. Therefore, understanding true Christian friendship is the first phase of a courting relationship.
- Christian friendship is learnt while we are brothers and sisters together, as the brethren of Christ. Jesus said to His disciples, 'You are My friends if you do what I command you.' Joh 15:14. We are friends together because we are *firstly* doing the Lord's will, serving alongside one another as brothers and sisters.
- Friendship is defined as laying down life for another. 'Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.' Joh 15:13. And, 'A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity'. Pro 17:17.
- The 'test' of the friendship question is whether a couple can relate as brother and sister at all times. Even as their friendship as a couple grows and blossoms, does each individual continue to follow and serve Christ as His disciple, and to lay down their life for the brethren?
- Friends have resolved basic issues of Christian culture and relationship. Their community is the body of Christ.
- We note that worldly friendship is not the same as Christian friendship. In fact, the friendship *of* the world is enmity with God. Jas 4:4. This is evident where people relate with certain ones, for what they can get out of their connection.

This is taking advantage of your brother or sister, and isn't friendship at all. We need to be very wary of this way of relating. If young people begin to 'mark out' or to 'compete' for a partner, it shows there is a violation of friendship. These ones are endeavouring to conquer the other, for *advantage*. This is worldly friendship.

- Friends should see the capacity of 'reconciliation' active in their relationship. And, they should both belong to the 'grace-reconciling community'.
- Reconciliation is not just 'conflict recovery'. Reconciliation involves a person being reconciled to God, and to the community. That is, each person is to be 'connected' with their name (in understanding who they are before the Lord) as well as to their works. From this position, they are then able to be reconciled to others.
- Reconciliation is active in the body of Christ, which is a 'grace-reconciling community'. Thus, the proof of reconciliation is participation in the body, where there is grace coming to see each member reconciled. This capacity for reconciliation proves a relationship as a true, lasting Christian reality. In a courtship, witnessing the capacity of reconciliation in action proves that the relationship is a true brother-sister relationship.

Timeline of Friendship

In the average situation, friendship grows over many years. However, the more deliberate friendships which do lead further usually span two to six months before any hint of the second question arises.

Answering the Friendship Question

Specific questions that assist in 'answering' this phase are given below. Consider your answer to these questions individually, and then discuss your responses together and with those to whom you relate.

- (1) Is each of us established as a disciple of Christ? Am I free to release the other to serve the Lord as his or her Master?
- (2) Have we put aside romantic interests and pressures to genuinely meet as brother-sister friends?
- (3) Have I seen in the other person their commitment and capacity of laying down life, and for making offering?
- (4) Have we seen grace-reconciliation active in our friendship? That is, am I able to be 'me' to the Lord, and to the other person? Do I relate with an understanding and appreciation of who I am; and am I free to meet the other in the truth of who they are?
- (5) Have you read and discussed together the section on 'Friendship difficulties' (p 30)? Which of these issues have you negotiated? What other dynamics did it uncover?
- (6) If we have understood godly friendship and begun to realise an interest in each other, where is our relationship now going? Do we have the conviction to proceed forward or do we remain as we are, as good Christian friends?

The *romance question* (next section) now becomes an indicator of whether or not this relationship can move forward.

2. The Romance Question

Please read

Building a House, pp 33-58, '2. The romance question'.

The principal romance question is: 'Do we understand romance and what constitutes 'love' with respect to marriage?'

Summary of the phase

- The romantic love of Christian courtship is not the same as the worldly passion pursued by those ruled by their own appetite. It is important for individuals and couples to understand this basic difference.
- The basis for the romance in the world (i.e. those 'who do not know God') is *lustful passion*. 1Th 4:3-8. Lust is a generic term for *all selfish desire*. This romance, or love, is fundamentally motivated by how the other person of interest makes 'me' feel.
- Love described as sanctification and honour is the alternative to self-centred passion and lust. It is intended that a couple should marry because they *seek, discover and commit to this unique form of the love of God*.
- In contrast to senseless and helpless 'falling in love', couples must know what is drawing them together. God does not arrange our decisions, even though He is shepherding our lives. True romantic love is accountably and responsibly *sought and chosen, so as to be freely offered and freely received*.
- A man and a woman committed to sanctification and honour seek a single 'image' in which two may be joined as one. In this regard they are seeking the mystery of identity and community (i.e. knowing one's self and knowing and being known by another). Romance involves elation upon discovering the mystery of the other. (see pp 46-48)

- Choice is related to the mystery of our responsible interaction with God concerning His will for our lives. The mystery is this: the will of God has already been determined, but our participation in His will affects whether or not it is realised in our lives.
- Concerning marriage, we simply 'choose' a relationship as part of our responsible commitment to God's mandate for life. Romance becomes defined by the choosing of the other and this relationship.
- Courtship is not the time to stir and re-stir sexual love that overwhelms, confuses and troubles the development of the relationship.
- Courting couples should be able to identify, discuss, agree upon and avoid all forms of expression which are sexual in nature. Equally there are levels and actions of friendship and affection that are consistent with the committed nature of an emerging courtship relationship.

Timeline of the Romance Question

Once this second question does arise, this phase of consideration may be reasonably short – anywhere from 2 weeks to 2 months.

Answering the Romance Question

Consider the romance question and those questions given below individually before discussing your responses as a couple. Also seek broader fellowship, particularly around those points where you would like to see further understanding and growth come.

- 1) Explain your understanding of the difference between true romance and the romance that is pursued in the world. What has been your view or belief about romantic love in the past? How is your cultural approach being reformed to the way of sanctification and honour?
- 2) Why is the notion of 'falling in love' a self-centred desire of the passion of lust? How do we actively and responsibly seek true romance that is of God?

- 3) Discuss together what you understand as the mystery of the will of God concerning marriage. What are the implications for the way you are approaching courtship and preparation for marriage?
- 4) Consider those forms of physical affection that are sexual in nature, and those that are consistent with a committed Christian courtship relationship. How will you negotiate the 'line' between these approaches to physical affection? What does it mean to defraud your brother in relation to these matters? How will you maintain your sanctification and honour? (see pp 54-56)

3. The Courtship Question

Please read:

Building a House, pp 58-74, '3. The courtship question'.

The primary question for this phase is: 'As we undertake and test our courtship, do we have a viable 'proposition' for marriage? Is he/she the one for me, for life?'

Summary of the Phase

- Courtship is defined as embarking upon an exclusive relationship with a view to *testing* it toward marriage.
- A couple does not enter courtship lightly. They court because they sincerely believe they have something which must now be tested. The key word for the courtship phase is 'testing'.
- A couple passes into this phase when there is a clear (mutual) decision and commitment to court. A couple proceeds to test the 'courtship question' only if each person has freely chosen the relationship, and if each is prepared in age and maturity to follow through to marriage within 18 months to a little over two years.
- During courtship, the desire of each individual is to meet and to know the other person, and to be known by them. They begin to test the nature of the relationship and the question, 'Can I marry this particular person?'
- Since courtship is an exclusive relationship, the relationship must honour the lines of *accountability and headship*. The man must take a lead in indicating his faith initiative. He must be 'up front' in his communication to all concerned. Before courtship can commence, he must seek permission from the woman's father (her 'head'). He indicates his desire to meet her, to be known by her, and to test their relationship toward marriage. The couple also notify their

parents and the elders who have watched over them as individuals.

- The input of parents, elders, etc during courtship is not with regard to the choice or suitability of the match, since this is the choice of the individuals. Rather, the two individuals seek pastoral and parental support during this phase, to encourage them toward proper processing, testing, growth and meeting. (It is not yet time for pastoral counsel as a couple, since their future together is still fundamentally undecided.)
- The couple also understand the appropriate place of physical affection in the relationship (p 54). Prior to courtship, there is no place for physical affection. Physical affection implies exclusive relationship, and 'taking another's hand' signifies their commitment to accountable testing of their relationship before the Lord toward marriage.
- The aspects of 'testing' that take place during courtship are to do with testing and confirming the foundations for a viable companionship. These include: identity foundations and maturity; common Christian commitment and goals; relational capacity and integrity; capacity for givenness, respect and appreciation; and understandings of affection, friendship, *eros*, *agape*, and true romance (i.e. the worth-ship and appreciation of the 'other'). (see pp 60-62)
- Other content that the couple processes includes: romance vs reality, male/female perspectives, cultural differences, and personality differences (refer to: 'Developmental issues', pp 63-65).
- The courtship question will begin to become 'answered' in the later stages of this phase, with the couple feeling confirmed in their choosing of one another. Their 'answer' should now be formalized with the completion of the courtship assignment in *Building a House*. The assignment provides the basis for pastoral input to commence as a

couple, to begin to process and form their bond towards marriage (as discussed in the next section).

Timeline of Courtship

The courtship question can take from six to nine months.

Answering the Courtship Question

Answering the courtship question in this recommended program involves completing the courtship assignment in *Building a House* (Section Five – Courtship Assignments, p 171). A courting couple can make a written response to these questions as individuals, as a couple, and then in discussion with a carer, which summarise their courtship growth to date and leads them into the bonding content and process. A description of the assignments to be conducted during the courtship phase is provided in the back of this study guide.

4. The Bonding Question

Please read:

Building a House, pp 74-100, '4. The bonding question'.

The principal question for this stage of the courtship is: 'Having privately decided to marry, can we now establish a *bond* that is uniquely Christian, i.e. in the power and wisdom of the cross?'

Summary of the Phase

- Compared with courtship ('testing'), bonding involves more structured processing and growth of their unique bond as a comparable head and helper ('forming'). This is also the phase in which courtship counsel is most helpful to support the couple process their bond.
- The aim of the bonding phase is the development of a couple's relationship from one that is 'parallel', to a relationship which is united in the image of God, through the cross of Christ. The process of bonding allows God to join the couple in 'one spirit'. (see pp 78-80)
- The couple are seeking to be made comparable through the operation of the cross rather than merely compatible in terms of personal similarities. (see pp 82-84)
- During bonding, the couple's focus shifts from *testing* the relationship to *forming* a single yoke and culture for the future. If a couple does not bond properly, fundamental gaps in identity development and relational capacity, as well as unprocessed expectations of life, will impact on the their capacity to be properly joined.
- Signs that a couple are making a transition from courtship to bonding include the shared belief that marriage is likely to take place, *recognition that the current relational culture will need to change, and the couple's choice to apply themselves to*

being established in a unique mode of Christian relationship.
(see pp 74-75)

- There are three stages to the bonding process – early, middle and late bonding. The points of development in each stage are essential to reforming the courtship relationship into the distinctive Christian culture of the cross.

Early bonding

- Early bonding is marked by the action of the woman to ‘stand up’ and express herself in relation to the man. We call this the exertion of feminine *eros* (see pp 89-91). This is demonstrated by a strong desire to facilitate the future relationship and the exertion of full, accountable identity expression toward the man.
- The woman’s firm ownership of the future frees her to express much more of who she is, both personally and in relation to her family. Accordingly, the man should give priority to meeting in the house and cultural setting of the woman.

Middle bonding

- In the middle phase of bonding the couple must begin to understand what it means to function as Christian ‘helper’ and ‘head’ rather than just two romantic idealists. This will bring the subject of conflict recovery and reconciliation into view. Through the highs and lows of their relational interactions, the two must negotiate, define, refine, test and establish their approach to relational recovery for the future.
- In this phase the man is now free to call the woman to experience his own family culture and she will feel free to do so as an appropriate measure of her commitment to those who will soon become parents-in-law to her.

Late bonding

- Mature choice and the resolution of a genuine Christian culture are the hallmarks of late bonding. Together the two should blossom and relax with the culture and future that they have chosen. The couple are secure in understanding

both family directions, for they are defining, and comfortably expressing, their own prospective culture.

- A couple may encounter challenges during the bonding period. In many cases these obstacles are only exposed through this testing time and need to be resolved if a single culture is to be successfully established. Some of these challenges are outlined in *Building a House*, pp 97-100.

Timeline of Bonding

This 'bonding' phase usually requires between four to six months of structured process.

Answering the Bonding Question

Specific questions that assist in 'answering' this phase are given below. Consider your answer to these questions individually, and then discuss your responses together and with those to whom you relate.

- 1) What does it mean to participate in relationship as one born of God, accessing His life for another? How is this way of participation evident in your relationship?
- 2) Discuss what it means to be redefined toward another and for another. Why do we need to be redefined? How does this occur individually and in relation to each other? (see pp 78-81)
- 3) What is the difference between comparability and compatibility? Explain why it is so important that Christian partners are made comparable in marriage. (see pp 82-84; the booklet *Finding Comparability* is also a helpful reference)
- 4) What are the practical implications of trusting and respecting a man as head and a woman as helper? What can inhibit this trust and respect and what might the implications be for the future relationship?
- 5) Identify the possible corrupt expectations of marriage relationships. How can these be dealt with? What effect might these expectations have in a future marriage

relationship? (consider for example, romantic expectation, lifestyle, identity abdication etc.).

- 6) Contrast the cultural foundations of a Christian bond with the vain traditions of fallen relationships.

5. The marriage question (proposal and engagement)

Please read:

Building a House, pp 100-116, '5. The marriage question – proposal and engagement'.

The question to be answered during the engagement phase is: 'In finally choosing marriage, do we believe that God will make provision for us to build a house as His specific will?'

Summary of the Phase:

- The answer to the marriage question seals the relationship as the *specific will* of God. Through the process of offering, the man seeks God for the provision and capacity for a 'house'. Understanding authority, headship, love, respect, obedience, culture, naming, and resurrection life now become essential in the establishment of the foundation upon which this house will be built.
- Before announcing their engagement, a couple is advised to take time in prayer and fasting to find an explicit assurance that this marriage is 'the will of God'. Each partner needs to meet the Lord and resolve absolutely, that he/she has a faith for this relationship to be the specific will of God.
- The two go before the Lord, in the manner of Abraham's Moriah offering, and place the relationship before the Lord for Him to receive it, and at the same time, assure them of His miracle provision of an all-sufficient 'Lamb' for the house. A house will not be built on the rock unless it is based on complete commitment to the lordship of Christ. (see pp 100-102)
- It is firstly the man's initiative to meet Christ as His Head and as future provision for the house. Then, the woman must finally choose this man and the house he is now proposing.

This is where the full maturity of 'he will live because of me' is revealed. Each must finally choose the other.

- The house must be established in the love of God, which will be demonstrated within the framework of authority and relational obedience.

Timeline of the marriage question

This phase of process should be anticipated to take somewhere between one and four weeks and is considered as the finalisation of the Bonding Question phase, with the real and final proposal and acceptance of marriage signalling the inauguration of the couple's engagement. Once the man's proposal has been accepted, engagement should be as short as convenient to avoid prolonging the artificial nature of engagement. The primary purpose of engagement is to set an appropriate context for making wedding plans.

Answering the Marriage Question

Specific questions that assist in 'answering' this phase are given below. Consider your answer to these questions individually, and then discuss your responses together and with those to whom you relate.

- (1) Consider the provision of God for a house. What is a man seeking when he goes before the Lord in prayer and fasting? What is the woman's participation in this phase of the courtship?
- (2) How is a house built of the rock? What are the implications of a commitment to the lordship of Christ for the couple, individually, and in relation to each other? (see pp 105-107)
- (3) Consider and discuss together how love is demonstrated within the framework of authority and relational obedience. (see pp 107-110)
- (4) Do you understand *agape*? How is this love expressed toward us by God?
- (5) What will be the final crises of submission for the courting couple? What is each person submitting to?

Courtship Assignments

Beginnings | 1st assignment – Journal

Our first suggestion is that each couple should keep a journal of their relational development firstly as individuals and then as a couple, from the beginning of the ‘courtship question’. This will give the couple and the counsellors something concrete upon which to base their discussion. This journal can simply record the key points of decision and development.

Early-courtship | 2nd Assignment – *To Meet!*

In our experience, it is normally 5 or 6 months before any input is needed toward the courtship. The couple must simply meet one another and continue to build their Christian friendship since, in this early stage, their relationship is still only forming. In the courtship phase, the priority with regard to process is between the two individuals. It is only in the late courtship and in the bonding phases, that the celebrant and counsellors are substantially involved.

Mid-courtship | Courtship Question Assignment (pp 175-186)

By the time the courtship is settled and steady, it is time for the points listed under the ‘courtship question’ to become the basis of discussion (Christian foundations, sanctification and honour, romance etc). We propose that between mid-courtship and the ‘finalising of the courtship question’ (somewhere between 6 and 9 months from the commencement of courtship), the couple begin to prepare a summary of these key process points. Of course, they might write up any other observations and issues in order to make these known to their counsellors. On each of the points of content listed, they should comment on how they first saw and understood that particular point, and also how they confronted the issue and negotiated it to a mature understanding. Naturally, a couple have a general ‘feel’ for the content listed, and may see writing it down for

discussion as an unnecessary exercise. However, it is good to be pressed to genuine, cognitive assessment of the points.

Late courtship, toward bonding

As the couple shifts from courtship-testing toward 'finalising the courtship question', the written assignments on the eight points (shown pp 67-69) should be concluded and presented to the counsellors for discussion and fellowship.

Bonding Question

The bonding tasks, in terms of elements for discussion and written summary, are referred to in section one (p 94). Note also that in section three of *Building a House*, we have illustrated some of the problematic cultural biases that result from the failure to address significant issues of relationship. These profiles are an illustration of how problems and failures continue into marriage unless checked and processed during the bonding phase.

Marriage Question

Content to achieve and reflect on: love, obedience and authority, final covenant written by the man and 'proposed' to the woman, as the final statement of his ground for marriage as given from Christ Himself.