



**I AM  
A  
TOOL**

*to help with your dating life*

SHELBY ABBOTT

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**FORWARD**

*IT WAS EARLY 2003. There I was sitting in ISAT 230<sup>1</sup>, a classroom on the campus of James Madison University, listening to a short man talk about dating. He was funny, so I was enjoying myself quite a bit, until he said something that hit me square between the eyes.*

Spend less energy on finding the right person and more energy on becoming the right person.

*Boom. Wow, I thought. I don't do that. You see, I was your typical girl-crazed college dude. My obsession with humanity's other half wasn't abnormal, I don't think, but it was real. Outwardly I tried to play it cool, of course, but inwardly I was deeply concerned with how I was perceived. I wanted the ladies to notice me, to like me, to admire me, to journal about me.*

*If you haven't guessed, the short man in the story is Shelby Abbott, and I needed to hear what he said that night at Cru. It was a significant*

moment for me. I'm a married man with kids but am still thinking about it over a decade later.

Perhaps you know Shelby from conferences like RADIATE and Big Break as the dude up front who makes you laugh. But in his new book, I'm a Tool (To Help with Your Dating Life), the emcee steps off the stage and becomes your friend, offering to help you navigate the tricky waters of lust, longing, and love during the college years.

There's no lack of confusion today about what it means to be men and women. This deep confusion isn't just out there in the culture; it pervades our churches and campus ministries, too. Even if you're not confused, chances are you're unsure—if not downright scared—about the answers to certain questions. What if I'm single and lonely forever? What if no one I like ever likes me back? What if I'm attracted to people of the same sex? How far is too far? Can I do \_\_\_\_\_ with him, or her? If God wants me to be happy, then why am I so sad? Is singleness a second-rate existence? Do I have to date with the intent to marry? What should I be looking for in a potential spouse anyway?

In chapter after chapter, Shelby takes the questions and fears you can't stop thinking about and holds them up to the bright truth of God's Word. He rightly contends that the ultimate purpose of your singleness, your dating, your marriage—your entire life, in fact—is to honor your Maker and reflect his gospel. If you aren't satisfied in him when you're single, you won't be satisfied in him when you're married. Now is the time to cultivate a lifestyle in which King Jesus is at the center of your solar

system, the gravitational pull holding everything else in orbit.

Os Guinness has said that the Lord is most against his own gifts when they are put in his place. Think about that. Romantic attraction and dating relationships are good gifts from a good God, but they can easily morph into idols when they're pursued and treasured above him. You will never love another person the right way until you love Jesus more. And that means you haven't found the right person until you've found one who can look at you and say, with honest gladness, You're number two.

I'm a Tool is my friend Shelby at his best. It's witty, winsome, and packed with practical insight from a Christian perspective. Whether your questions or struggles have to do with sex, singleness, DTRs, breakups, or what social media has to do with any of it, Shelby will meet you where you're at and help you move forward in a direction that honors Jesus.

Read this book, but don't do it alone. Invite a friend to go through it with you. Tell an older person in the faith how it's helping and challenging you. And if you're dating, open it up, laugh, learn, and, if necessary, repent.

Friend, do not settle for anything less than a life centered on King Jesus. And when it comes to the complicated arena of dating, let I'm a Tool help show you how.

—Matt Smethurst, Editor at The Gospel Coalition

<sup>1</sup>Yes, you should go this year. No, Cru didn't pay me to say so.





**INTRO-  
DUCTION**

A hot shower on a cold morning. The latest Hollywood blockbuster movie. Barbecue chicken pizza. Crown molding. Licking your fingers after fifteen minutes of ripping through a bag of Tostito's Hint of Lime tortilla chips. Vin Diesel's voice. The smell of a wood fire in the crisp autumn air. Footsie pajamas for adults.

It can truly be said that all of these things are great things... wonderful things, in fact. Things that can make the corners of your mouth bend upward into a silent, tight smile and fill your heart with sincere happiness. But if you really think about it, these certain some- things that make your life full and glad, none of these can compare to the thrill people experience when they discuss that *one* topic. You know what I'm talking about. Entire magazines, books, television shows, movies, and occupations are devoted to it, and hours of con- versation are committed to it on a daily basis. Emotions run high and low because of it, and everyone on the planet has been affected by it in some form or fashion.

If you're honest (and your relationship status happens to be "single"), the subject probably crosses your mind every day...maybe even every hour. In fact, this *one* topic can be the sole filter by which all of your thoughts are siphoned and processed. Obviously, I'm talking about relationships: romance, dating, and the like.

\* \* \*

Every now and then I noodle on little informal social statistical equations in my mind, and I take inventory of what's on the front burner of my life's stove top range, so to speak. I'll be intentional about listening to what the world discusses via advertising, social media, television, radio, casual conversation, and things like that. I want to know what's trending in people's lives.

Sometimes, I'll even make digital tick marks on my smart phone to keep track of things, like how many times food is mentioned in a half hour syndicated sitcom on basic cable TV, or how many times the worship leader at church says "Lord God" when he prays at the end of a three-song set before the pastor gets up to deliver the sermon. Stuff like that.

But the most fun this little game of mine produces is when I start to count the number of times something relationship oriented pops up on the social radar. It's incredible. And because of its frequency, it's nearly impossible to record the number of times people talk about the complexities of dealing with the opposite sex. So much of our world revolves around this subject, and in the ever-changing landscape of what's currently "in," relationships will never, ever go out of fashion.

So I guess the real question is, "What are we to do about it?"

People will always be interested in relationships, and the last time

I checked (which was yesterday, I think), followers of Jesus Christ are people too. Christians tend to be just as obsessed with the opposite gender as anyone else, but the main difference in how we approach this important life subject lies in the specific way we define ourselves. We are Christians, and with that single distinction, the entire topic of relationship is flipped on its head. The standard rules don't apply. Status quo for the way everyone else approaches relationships cannot and should not be the norm for us.

The pages of Scripture call us to something greater and healthier in our relationships with the opposite sex. It calls us to something thrilling and more challenging that involves service, self-sacrifice, communication, and patience.

Sure, anyone can have a relationship, but that doesn't mean that everyone should...especially if the relationship isn't pleasing to God. I've literally seen a 9-year-old boy talk about having lunch with his "girlfriend" at school and how awesome it is because he usually takes and eats her cookies at the end of the lunch period. Unfortunately, such attitudes exist in many places throughout the world – the desire to seek and to take whatever possible for one's own personal benefit in a relationship.

However, as followers of Jesus, we are called to do life differently. It's in our spiritual DNA to be unsettled with the way our culture says that romance should happen. The old has gone and the new has come (2 Cor. 5:17). Therefore, for Christians, it's not "business as usual" when it comes to relationships and dating.

This book is a call for both men and women who love Jesus to drop-kick "business as usual" out the back door. Yes, we will often have relationships on the brain just as much as others, but how we

choose to live out those relationships will speak to what and (more importantly) Who we stand for.

### SHALL WE DANCE?

But before we dive in here, let me begin by confessing that I will not be writing this book from a position of wisdom gained through great previous successes. What you hold in your hand is by no means a collection of anecdotes on how I got it right, time and time again. I will not be telling you how you should emulate each and every dating practice I lived out over my single years, because the truth is that when I was in the thick of it all, I got it wrong most of the time. My mistakes were plentiful, embarrassing, and sometimes more public than I wanted them to be. However, as a direct result of me getting it wrong, I believe that you could possibly get it right. In other words, you have an opportunity to learn from my mistakes, and that kind of information can be quite valuable if it's put to good use...kind of like a tool.

Tools are instruments that, when used appropriately, can create something quite beautiful. They help us get things done with excellence, and they prevent us from getting hurt in the process. They also help us to avoid wasting time, wasting energy, and wasting our patience. Tools can be glorious things if we choose to utilize them, so consider this book a tool. Yes, you can also think of me as a tool (implication intended), but let's get past all of that and focus on the greater picture of where this tool can lead you.

My goal here is to help guide you through the precarious topic of dating en route God-glorifying relationships with the opposite sex. Sound like an adventure? Well it is, but let me tell you that even though you might think there is some "magic bullet" solution to your

specific relationship (or non-relationship) issue, I'm sad to say there isn't. Dealing well with the opposite sex isn't a science. You cannot plug-in and play the same formula for everyone's story and expect it all to work out the exact way you imagine. It isn't static, predictable, easy, or analytical. It's not a science; dating is an art—a dance.

Now, even if the dance metaphor doesn't resonate with you, just go with me on this. You can learn the steps of a dance from watching a video, or you can read up on the appropriate steps, but when it comes time to hit the dance floor, you simply have to feel the music and dance with your partner. You might be scared, you might be off-beat, you might step on the other person's toes, you might trip and stumble in the middle of the dance floor, but in the end, the dance itself is always exhilarating. Conversely, science is safe and practical and precise and people don't usually trip over their feet in the lab, but dance can only be experienced in the raw environment of the real world.

I can try to help you by providing the scientific do's and don'ts of dating and relationships (and I *will* try), but in the end, you're just going to have to feel the music and dance. Study the tools and prepare yourself as a mature, responsible, thoughtful, and caring person, but know that the whole thing can get messy and awkward when the music starts. Lord knows I've stepped on toes and feet and flattened arches in the process of trying to dance well in the world of dating, and my guess is that you will too. But that's okay. Just roll with it.

Oh...you hear that? I think they just started playing your song...





**CHAPTER  
ONE**

# WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT DATING

## *WHY DATING IN THE FIRST PLACE?*

It's probably important that we first address the looming question of *why dating and not some other option?* Is dating really the right way to go about pursuing a relationship with the opposite sex? What about courtship? What about just casual hangouts without such an official label as "dating?"

The thing is, when it comes to relationships with the opposite sex in the context of our faith, certain issues aren't always a matter of right or wrong. Sometimes, they are a matter of what is wise or unwise based upon the situation. And, what might be right for one

couple may not necessarily be what you feel called to or comfortable with in your own relationships.

I've overheard many sincere advice-givers label specific dating practices as "sinful" or "unbiblical," hoping to shepherd an ignorant advice-seeker toward a more godly relationship. And while the advice-giver's heart is probably in the right place, calling something in the realm of dating "biblical" or "unbiblical" is like saying, "heating your home with electricity is more biblical than heating it with propane gas."

The Bible doesn't say anything in particular about how one should heat his or her home. However, if I were to come over to your place and notice you warm your house by setting little baby chinchillas on fire, I'd have a problem with that. In other words, biblical principles and biblical thinking can be applied to practices that Scripture is silent on. As we get into dating, I'm going to be advocating principles consistent with biblical values, such as valuing and honoring others, being truthful, and communicating openly. Scripture is quite clear on all of these things. We simply need to apply them to the context of dating.

So, even though the Bible has a whole lot of nothin' to say about the American cultural practice of dating—because it didn't exist in biblical times—we can certainly say that dating is not wrong if it's done right. If dating is done well in a biblically influenced, God-honoring way, then it's just the opposite of wrong; it's actually quite appropriate, godly, and fun!

There is, however, plenty of room for sin to creep in and start to transform godly intentions into something that does not honor the Lord, and we'll address this in the coming chapters, but for now, my guess is that dating is currently the most common form of familiarizing oneself with the opposite sex. That is the well-journeyed road I

chose to travel when I was single, and it's what I know from my many years of working with college students in full-time missionary work, so I'm going to concentrate on what is likely the most common practice in our culture. People are dating, so let's talk about dating.

But what is *dating* exactly?

### **DATING DEFINED... SORT OF**

The word *dating* might mean totally different things to different people, based on past experiences, books read, information gathered, or lessons learned. Therefore, it is important that I give clear definition to what I'm referring to when I use the term *dating*.

So, what *are* we talking about? Well, I once heard by someone that dating can be conceptualized in terms of the breakdown of the letters within the actual word "date." D.A.T.E. A date should be a Divine Appointment To Encourage. Basically, it's a God-given opportunity to spend time with someone you like, and encourage him or her in the process.

To be honest, when this certain someone told me that a date was a divine appointment to encourage, my first thought was that this guy did not have many appointments to encourage, either regularly or divinely. The pithy cuteness of his definition made me want to roll my eyes and say, "Thanks, but I'll be handling the whole dating-a-lady-thing on my own."

But as time went by, I understood more what he was getting at. To him, a date is an opportunity to show a Christian woman that she is worth spending time, energy, and money on. It is a chance to build-up a sister in Christ, and communicate to her that she is valuable. He enjoys the window of opportunity to encourage a woman, because

to him, it is a casual way for a Christian guy to uplift a Christian girl. In his case, however, things didn't ever seem to move past that casual date phase into something deeper. So, while I agree with the concept of the D.A.T.E. paradigm, for me it seems to lean a little toward care-free or indifferent.

Yes, of course it's important to encourage the other person while on a date and communicate care via time, energy, forethought, and money on something like dinner. I absolutely agree. But the non-committal attitude can actually cause more harm than good without healthy communication before, during, and after the date about each person's intentions. This constant defining and redefining can be exhausting and awkward. Plus, this guy friend of mine began to acquire a reputation as a player with the ladies, so his strategy toward dating, no matter how sincere he was with his intentions, ended up coming back around to bite him in the rear-end after all was said and done.

Yes, I agree that dating can and should be a series of divine appointments to encourage someone, but I'd like to add a bit more to the definition and say that dating should not just be about the dates. When you are dating someone, there should be a standard for clear communication about what's actually going on between the two of you. Are you dating exclusively? Are you ready to attach the label of "boyfriend or girlfriend?" Is this moving toward something more serious? These kinds of questions shouldn't constantly be looming in the minds and hearts of the two people who are dating one another, and the remedy for chronic questioning is communication. Both of the people going out on this series of dates should understand with clarity the intentions of the other and the direction in which the

relationship is headed.

So, to wrap it up in one sentence, here's my definition of dating: A series of divine appointments to encourage the other person with the assumption that the God-honoring relationship is clearly defined via healthy and appropriate communication.

### *JUST HANGING OUT*

That, in a sentence or two, is what I mean by dating—what I think Christian dating looks like. And maybe just as important to clarify, here's what I think it should *not* look like. As Christians, we allow culture to define who we are and how we behave in our everyday lives way too often. This is especially true when it comes to the practice of relating to the opposite sex. What is widely accepted as standard or "normal" in the dating world at large, sadly becomes the standard for Christians as well.

According to a recent *New York Times* article<sup>1</sup>, many young singles are now in the practice of living inside a "dating culture [that] has evolved into a cycle of text messages." Because we live and breathe and hide behind our phones, the non-committal "whatever" attitude in culture has downgraded this opportunity for encouragement into something referred to as, "one step below dating and one step above high-fiving."

The article goes on to say, "Dinner at a romantic new bistro? Forget it. Women in their 20s these days are lucky to get a last-minute text to tag along. Raised in the age of so-called 'hookup culture,' [young people] — who are reaching an age where they are starting to think about settling down — are subverting the rules of courtship. Instead of dinner-and-a-movie, which seems as obsolete as a

rotary phone, they rendezvous over phone texts, Facebook posts, instant messages and other 'non-dates' that are leaving a generation confused about how to land a boyfriend or girlfriend.”

This is from the *New York Times*, but as I stand back and observe what's going on inside the Christian culture, I'm quickly realizing that we're simply playing copy-cat. For Christians, the new idea behind dating is just “hanging out”: a safe, comfortable, and to be honest, lazy way to approach the dating scene. It reinforces an already existing improper urge to extend adolescence beyond what it should be.

*Whatever. We're not dating. She's not my girlfriend or anything... we're just hanging out. Why should I have to label it?*

*Boyfriend? No, he's not my boyfriend. He's just a guy I hang out with all the time...he's like a really good friend that happens to be a guy, but we're not a couple or anything.*

These are childish, vague words and phrases spoken by immature people who would rather give more commitment to a video game or cell phone than a sister or brother in Christ who deserves to be treated with enough respect to be communicated with appropriately.

Simply put, “hanging out” is not dating, even if two people are hanging out every night of every week. Dating should not be casual or ambiguous or “whatever.” It should be intentional, communicative, and approached with initiative. If someone asks you what is going on with the guy or girl you've been hanging out with on a regular basis, you should be able to give clear definition and never once have to shrug your shoulders. The world is telling you to hide behind a text message because it's easier that way, and you won't have to put your heart out there and get hurt. That's just a silly way to protect yourself from being rejected, and it's not really showing honor to God. Oh,

and there's something else that I would not define as dating...

### **THE BUFFET APPROACH**

People are pretty split on the idea of the all-you-can-eat buffet: some love it, some gag at the thought. But as a general demographic, I think it's safe to say that most American college males love the concept.

“Pay one low price and get to eat all you want? How on earth could this be considered anything but amazing?” says the dude. However, there are many people in society who would rather eat at a gas station on their birthday than pay good money to eat from what I sometimes call a “trough of poorly prepared, poorly warmed, bland tasting slop for the masses.”

No matter your view on the American buffet, if you choose to eat at one, the ritual is always the same: grab a dish, roam around a room full of food choices, select what you'd like from behind the glass sneeze guard, spoon it onto your plate, sit down at your table, eat as much of it as you want, and then go back and get more. Repeat as many times as your stomach can handle, and finish with a bowl of banana pudding or a chocolate/vanilla twisty cone from the self-serve ice cream machine.

Well, whether you love or hate standing at a public feeding trough and shoveling “nutrition” onto your platter, the idea of a “buffet” should remain solely in the culinary world, never creeping into the world of dating. And here's what I mean...

There are people who treat dating as if they are roaming around an environment, selecting someone, consuming what they want from that person, throwing the relationship away, and quickly moving on to the next person. Or, they take a little bit of something from

one person at the same time they are trying out another, without any real sense of maturity, relational health, communication, or commitment. They treat the opposite sex as something they casually select for their own personal satisfaction, and if they don't like the taste, they quickly discard it in order to move on to someone else. With this kind of carelessness, people can get very, very hurt.

The "buffet approach" is not acceptable when it comes to dating. Those who characterize dating in a way that treats others like a side dish to be sampled and discarded are not at all on the same page as me or what I mean by the term *dating*. The world may accept relationship hopping and sampling multiple partners at once. I do not.

Dating with the buffet approach is the epitome of self-serving and is therefore not at all a part of my definition.

### **WHAT ARE YOU SAYING?**

So, let's step back and again go over what I'm saying and what I'm not saying when I talk about dating. I mentioned earlier that dating is a series of divine appointments to encourage, under the assumption that the God-honoring relationship is clearly defined through healthy and appropriate communication. That's what I believe dating should be.

Since dating can be such an ambiguous notion, I feel like it is of great importance that we are all thinking through the same grid before we began to tackle the more intricate details of a relationship.

And now that we've built the foundation, let's get into the nitty-gritty.