**Introduction to my document on Male-Female Interaction**

I went out on a limb to produce the following document on male-female interaction approximately three years ago and I have been very pleased with the affirmation it has received from individuals I respect near and far from All Souls, by the experience of women who have followed the spirit of my philosophy against their better nature and most comfortingly by the consistency people have noticed between my philosophy and the books ‘*The Road Less Travelled*’ and ‘*What is so amazing about Grace?*’ that are reviewed elsewhere, which I had not read at the time of writing on this topic. I commend it to you as sincere heart-felt analysis and considered advice.

No one has challenged anything I have written, but people have said that it betrays my viewpoint and a complimentary document should be written from the female point of view. Of course I accept that up to a point, but I assure you that the majority of my input has come from women and I aim to have the interests of women and the overall kingdom of God central in my heart. Those who dismiss what I have written as irrelevant ramblings without being willing to respectfully criticise any particular part of them, I consider to lack validity. Issues related to singleness are very significant in modern society and particularly for Christians submitting to Christ’s exhortation to love as He did and so to love all whom they meet including those of the ‘opposite’ sex with determination and without condition or discrimination. Fear or disinterest in extending appropriate love to others and rather a preference to self-protect and manage is at the root of much of our insecurity, improper perspective and inability to fully grow in love for Him. **The Christian walk does not involve seeing the ‘opposite’ sex as either a potential conquest or a potential nuisance to be ignored; we were created to live side by side as brother and sister, as a picture of Christ, not at all as ‘opposites’ but as complementary helpers. As written in Genesis 2 before the fall, woman came out of the side (rib) of man, not the head, the foot or the penis and this provides a picture of heaven, man and woman living side by side, which is part of what we earnestly pray for in the Lord’s Prayer: ‘*As it is in heaven….Thy will be done*’.** Yet few follow the Lord’s command to love others sacrificially, unconditionally and persistently, through struggle and suffering and so it is small wonder that many are in a mess in this area of their lives, whether they realise it or not. A husband or wife should be a priority and there should be regular sexual union, but otherwise there should be no difference in the desire to love and submit in other relationships including those with the opposite sex. The ambition should always be to reach and maintain an appropriate intimacy of steadily deepening love, submission, concern and accountability out of reverence for Him and the enhancement of His Kingdom. (Seeking or knowing only one member of the opposite sex other than biological family often leads to a distorted view of God and pastoral concerns.)

Although some parts of the following writing on this subject are a little grating now, I would hardly change the content. It is all real, from the heart, prayed through, the result of much struggle and, I feel sure, the influence of the Spirit. I commend it to you and hope you can see consistency within it. I particularly recommend the first pages up to the end of Section A: The Biblical Platform. I have left the Appendices as they were in the original document, rather than re-locate them. (*My apologies to anyone named Pippa for any completely false implication that they may have had any part in the entirely fictional conversation recorded in Appendix D.*)

It amazes me that I found myself able to write on this topic at such length and with considerable confidence. **Above all, I hope it encourages others to share their feelings on this subject, knowing they are not alone in whatever situation they may be in.** I believe in the necessity of giving people quality time and that God will eventually bless those who follow His command to love one another in male-female interaction as in any other aspect of friendship or relationship. Please see on the next page examples of when my philosophy has been adhered to with positive results. I have not heard of suffering arising from being graceful and behaving respectfully that could have been avoided if someone had taken control of the situation. But there are many instances of prolonged difficulty which could easily have been avoided if in the first place respect had been given and reconciliation after any misunderstanding was assumed and assured. I trust that I can rightfully encourage anyone to follow the spirit of my philosophy – that of unconditionally aiming to be friends with everyone whom one meets, including those of the ‘complementary’ sex, allowing for time and other practical constraints, and putting off any decisions regarding the nature and extent of such a relationship as long as reasonably possible. Anyone can know that if they apply this policy and suffer then I personally will be deeply hurt and jump to empathise with them and offer practical help in any way I can, but I believe God will honour in the long run, those who trust Him and His promises under pressure and through emotional uncertainty. For what are promises if they are not to be held on to when there appears most to lose. I welcome any response or feedback; please take what you will from what follows and, in keeping with the spirit intended, **hold me accountable.**

Nigel Bird March 2003

**Prologue: Christian lady-friends who have followed my advice against their better nature**

1. A Christian lady was walking alone through the streets of a town in Southern Italy, because her companion had needed to delay her flight out there in order to have a tooth operation, when she realised that a man was following her (not so uncommon in such a place where men habitually stare at women in public). Remembering my advice, she stops to meet the man and walks on with him in conversation, and when she comments on a square having a Saint’s name, he reveals that he is an evangelical Christian and invites her to his church on Sunday! They soon part, but she goes along to his church on that Sunday and hears a very good sermon, but he is shy and, except briefly and nervously, he avoids her. The next Sunday she returns with her female friend to hear another good sermon, and this time he is friendlier and they chat in a group, going out for a coffee afterwards.
2. A Christian lady who is living in a tower block puts up a Christian message in her window at Christmas and a man, who can see her window from his flat around the corner, knocks on her door saying he is a Christian and invites her on an Oak Hall holiday. She is worried that he will return regularly to hassle her, but she remembers my advice and talks normally, and they leave on good terms and he does not call again. Similarly a man, living right next door to this lady, with a punk hairstyle and dress sense, meets her in the lift and asks if he could call in to her flat for a coffee and she says yes. He arrives after a delay to wash and change his clothes and she is even more worried, but she chats to him and drops into the conversation that she is a Christian and it becomes clear that he respects her, and he does not knock on her door again. (Sometime later this lady married a vicar, but obviously I do not know if the above played any part in the path to this happy occurrence.)
3. A Christian lady is worried that a non-Christian man she is witnessing to is more interested in her than the Christian message and is wondering whether she should back off. I assure her that is just where he is at and there is no need to address issues before they have arisen so missing opportunities for providing Christian input and example. She continues to be his friend, there is no problem, and he continues to attend church.
4. A Christian lady of some maturity telephones me in a bit of a state saying that a man, of seemingly unattractive nature, had telephoned her out of the blue, and asked to meet up. She had said no, but then had second thoughts, telephoned him back, and said she was prepared to meet him if I was present also, and so would I agree to do this? I went through my usual statements about treating a man respectfully when they have made themselves vulnerable for best results, but said she was at least going in the right direction, and I would be available if necessary. She was a bit upset that I was not listening to her broken-ness and her feelings in these situations, but she telephoned him again, and they met up for a peaceful and rewarding couple of hour’s conversation without any sign of a problem, and they have done so again since, on more than one occasion.
5. Remember the hard and fast rule that **behaving gracefully in all situations is for the best**, particularly at times of real, or perceived, threat or danger, and this applies to men also! Graceful behaviour warrants and inspires respect giving the best chance of a good outcome. Although suffering is not always avoided, a graceful and respectful attitude also gives the best chance of overcoming any suffering experienced, and is the best platform for dealing with any resulting emotional baggage. I have witnessed this at first hand. For example women have pigeonholed me as not worth knowing, or a (good) friend, or a ‘*knight in shining armour*’ and then have been outraged that without any discussion and without it being directly conveyed, I have not unconditionally accepted such a message/understanding, or been the person that I was supposed to be. For me a proper ‘*friendship*’ without ‘*relationship*’, is the requisite platform for a ‘*relationship*’ to begin and to be sustained, since initial ideas and pre-conceptions of a ‘*relationship*’ vary a great deal, and do so much to colour proper discernment of the intended nature and extent of the ‘*relationship*’. I am deeply hurt when women, particularly those who know me well, seek to manage, control, and super-impose their will upon me, especially since providing love and demonstration is the capable and desirable way to achieve this. But having dealt with emotional baggage in this area, I am able to react gracefully when this occurs, and usually the ‘*friendship*’ is eventually restored. In my understanding, one should always be willing to risk a ‘*friendship*’, such as by inviting further intimacy, and then be able to assume that after any pain arising, the ‘*relationship*’ would be restored to ‘*friendship*’, or, at the very least, to civil engagement consistent with a commitment to communion. **Grace and time should be all that is required for a meaningful ‘*friendship*’ or ‘*relationship*’.** The most numerous examples I have are of modest success such as occasions when a lady is reluctant to go to watch Arsenal F.C. and also wary of meeting up with me one-to-one. But after the process of changing her mind is accomplished, she usually much enjoys the experience itself and not infrequently discovers significant ongoing benefit in being able to mention to others that she has been to watch a match at Highbury.

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19 June 2000

Dear friend,

I wrote a critique of church last year, which was well-received by my peers and (the All Souls Curate) Richard <*surname*> encouraged me to keep writing in, so **I have compiled my thoughts on male-female interaction, a very difficult subject with many opinions I am sure you will agree**. I hope you will find it interesting and not be too harsh on me in making myself vulnerable on this issue. I feel that people can come to their own conclusions without really sharing them and could benefit from hearing a prayerfully thought-through point of view. I am certainly not attacking anyone or disparaging anyone’s behaviour, but I believe that people should welcome constructive ideas. I might upset some people, but I definitely do not mean to be accusing, rather potentially refining. I love you, even if I might disagree with some of your methods and thinking in this area, and I ask you to reciprocate that love, with rebuke as appropriate.

**People feel alone and un-assisted in this area**, but we are together in Christ and should support each other not compete with each other. Relationships with the ‘opposite’ sex are very difficult and everyone has my sympathy, but everyone including me has room for improvement and wider understanding. Where people fall down it is almost always not their fault, but due to the circumstances they find themselves in and what they have been led to believe often by those with narrow experience. I hope and pray that we all increase our wisdom and understanding of male-female interaction.

The document is on the long side, but three or four hours of **quality time might be a good investment considering what has gone in to producing it** and the lack of alternative analysis and vision on this subject. I suggest that the reader picks out some topics of interest to digest and leaves the rest for perhaps another time. At the end in Appendix D is a totally fictional sketch on my love life (1995), which my friends have found very amusing. I would recommend reading the topics chosen in the order given with that sketch as a carrot at the end, but alternatively it could be read first to (hopefully) assist the mood in approaching the rest of the document.

God Bless You,

Nigel Bird

**Note:** *Since I wrote this document in June 2000 I have made a few additions and amendments in the context of later experience and insight, but it remains content-wise very largely (>95%) as it was and almost entirely consistent in meaning.*

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Understanding of ‘platonic’ love: ***Philia*** and ***Philadelphia***

Several Greek words translate into *love* in English and amongst those defining non-erotic love are *Philia* (friendship love of any kind) and *Philadelphia* (brotherly-sisterly love between two people of the same sex or not), which evidently have the same linguistic root and so are similar in nature. The Bible (even with the cultural constraints of its time) has many examples of non-married intimacy, same-sex and across-sex. The inclination should therefore be to choose your friends (or rather have God choose them for you) and then treat them as family akin to the way Jesus disciples were chosen and treated. God’s love, expressed in dying for us, was surely designed for us to be friends and not for us to have excuses to be apart; He did not design two distinct sexes and the sexual function to promote fear, distance and barrier in non-married relationships. Only in the modern world is non-erotic intimacy in all its varied forms so marginalised and misunderstood when it should rather be natural, healthy and normal.

This document is about male-female interaction at church and does not essentially deal with love, sex or relationships except where they impact such interaction. It identifies three main problems:

1. **High expectations**; e.g. believing God has someone out there for you, a Mr. Perfect or Miss Right whom you will smoothly get to know, marry, and live with happily ever after.
2. **Over-reliance on initial chemistry as a guide to selection of marriage partner**; chemistry is not necessarily or even at all an indicator of where a relationship is going and compatibility over a lifetime; a wiser alternative may be to try to become friends first over a period of time and expect chemistry to develop later if appropriate.
3. **Baggage of all kinds**; bad experiences in the past affecting how we treat people; church influence leading us to believe we can relate to each other intellectually, should not share struggles and weaknesses and should be scared of gossip; society saying that we can have it all leading to being independent and busy rather than living gracefully and depending on Him.

The three strands that run through the document as suggested areas of improvement are:

1. **Love (people)**; Expand your comfort zone as you try to become a shining light in the world in your ability to love sacrificially all types of people regardless of spiritual maturity, intelligence, class, sex, education, age, culture etc. Be prepared to over-come bad experiences and gain experience of what the opposite sex are like by having a range of friends.
2. **Listen (to people)**; Engage with people and consider what they are saying even if they have a different point of view. Do not attach too much weight to the preacher and too little to the church member who may have more experience of some issues. Do not pigeonhole people and prematurely evaluate their worth and usefulness to you.
3. **Live (life fully)**; Take opportunities and reasonable risks in broadening your life, not becoming too caught up with solely Christian activities and friendships while waiting for a ‘second saviour’ to come along.

The general statistic goes that there is a 70% turnover at All Souls every 3 years, but this hides the fact that some people stay a long time and many come and go during a 3-year period so not registering on this statistic. Well over 90% of those who arrive at the church do not stay for 3 years; the fall-out rate is high and it is arguable what proportion of people go on to better things in other churches and what proportion leave disillusioned or even antagonistic. Most of those attending the evening service are single as are some in the morning services. Despite the large numbers of Christian men compared to churches up and down the country there are perhaps on average three or four ‘All Souls’ marriages a year, though some marry someone from another church. So in rough bald park figures in every 10 years 25,000 singles attend All Souls at least fairly regularly for a period of time and yet there are only around 30 or 40 marriages.

John Stott states:

**‘I am certainly convinced that marriage is God’s general will and that singleness is the exception.’**

There seem to be obstructions to God’s general will in large evangelical churches and it is this that has motivated me to write this document. It is entirely my personal opinion and not an attempt to be universal; in particular those more than averagely attractive may well have different opinions, but it may well interest them nonetheless. I am not attacking anyone when I point out imperfect behaviour just as one may attempt to rebuke the sin while loving the sinner. In fact I claim that I know what it means to love you, that I do love you and that I have no mental reservation in the suffering I am prepared to endure in loving you. **Hold me accountable!**

I have experienced periods of being shunned, of over-excitement of the chase and am now of attempting to increase the quality of my male-female interaction. I feel content being single and I am just aiming to let other’s benefit from my wide experience, but I am certainly far from perfect myself and have made and continue to make mistakes that I hope to learn from, but I believe that I have a battle-hardened philosophy that works well. I strongly believe in the brother-sister relationship as not being without difficulty, but offering real potential for maturity. I do not feel particularly biased or that I have an axe to grind, but obviously I speak from my (male) point of view. **My greatest wishes for single Christians would be that they aim to relish uncertainty (e.g. not ruling anyone in or out), are spontaneous, share their feelings and prioritise making decisions jointly.** I genuinely wish everyone well and pray that God will give much wisdom to all regarding male-female interaction.