

Rethinking Dating, Rethinking Marriage

By Tim Gallant

Note: I claim originality for nothing I write below. These are simply matters I have had opportunity to reflect upon and discuss, and to learn from others who have thought and written well on the subject.

Let's not kid ourselves. Statistics say (and observation verifies) that the sexual activity between unmarried partners is rampant, not only in the world but also in the church. In fact, surveys for years have revealed that fornication rates are barely different between professing believers, even evangelicals, and that of the general population.

But although evangelicals are presumably agreed that this is sin, and that sin is bad, by and large we seem very reluctant to deal with the root of the problem. We tell our young people not to have sex before marriage, and even get them to sign "covenants" to stay pure. But we studiously avoid taking real action which would attack the genuine root of the problem.

"Ah, but the root of the problem is our sex-crazed culture. It's something we can't escape. Billboards, magazines - almost everything we see sexualizes all of reality."

But that is to lay the blame outside of what we can control. And it's all wrong. Yes, the sexualization of our culture is a *problem*, and we Christians have bought into it well more than we are aware.

But the outside culture is not the reason why we're a bunch of fornicators. Christians have been surrounded by degenerate cultures on many occasions, and the Church has not always looked this much like the world.

The big reason we're a bunch of fornicators is that we refuse to learn from the mess we've made and change our pattern of behaviour.

Rethinking Dating

Paul says, "Make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts" (Rom 13.14). That is, don't equip yourself to sin; don't throw yourself in harm's way (in the moral sense).

Last I checked, none of us is Jesus. We all sin, and we all have particular temptations that are particularly powerful for each of us. And that means that we need to take that into account rather than pretend we're invulnerable. Just as Jesus said a king

shouldn't enter a battle he probably cannot win, we surely should not enter situations where our moral flaws are most exposed to temptation.

Far the opposite: Jesus said that if your eye causes you to stumble, you should pluck it out. It is better to enter life with one eye than to be thrown into hell with two (Matthew 18.9). If you're clumsy, you don't leave a rock in your path and trip over it every time you go by. You move the rock.

The truth is that Christian dating practices usually differ very little from worldly dating practices. A guy and girl like each other, get romantic, start holding hands, and start kissing and spending time together - *alone*.

In most cases, the sin of fornication does not begin at the moment when two wills finally collapse and the clothes come off. It starts with the folly that precedes - a folly that pretends these two people are above the temptations that affect nearly everyone else. It is the sin and folly of failing to count the cost. "Can I go in that room with that girl and kiss her and not get sexually aroused?"

Instead of entering a position of vulnerability, and then acting surprised by our weakness, we ought to be avoiding that kind of vulnerability to begin with. Jesus taught us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation," and no prayer is less sincere than that of the one who prays it, and then strolls into that temptation willingly.

Nor is this simply a case of dealing with tragic human weakness.

It is also a matter of knowing what sorts of actions and settings belong together. We need to accept the fact that a man and a woman holding one another and kissing aren't merely courting. They're engaging in foreplay. They're starting something which leads, not simply due to sin, but very *naturally*, to sexual intimacy. Frankly, any man *not* tempted in that situation probably has the gift of celibacy and wouldn't make a good candidate for a husband.

All of which means that this sort of activity simply shouldn't be undertaken by anyone other than married couples. The period of courtship must be reevaluated. It is a time of determining whether this person is suitable for me as a lifelong partner, and vice versa. Such a period of determination is not an admittance to the rights and pleasures of marriage. It is a time of evaluation, and if the answer to that implicit question is "no," both guy and gal should be able to go on their ways toward the destination of future marriage partners who will receive spouses who have been kept pure for them.

In short, two people courting do not have a right to one another's kisses. They do not rightly possess one another; courtship is a time for evaluation of whether two people are properly suited to one another for marriage; it is not a time to dip into the privileges of marriage, which may never in fact belong to them. In short, those kisses belong to their future spouses.

Rethinking Marriage

But it's not only dating we need to rethink. We need to rethink marriage.

Now, this may come as a surprise to many of us. After all, we're busy defending biblical marriage, right? We're fighting to maintain the definition of marriage as between one man and one woman, after all.

Well, so far, so good. But that's pretty basic, and it doesn't seem to be affecting our fornication rates or our divorce rates all that much.

We're not talking about divorce at the moment. With regard to the matter of fornication, however, the way we think about and prepare for marriage comes into play more than we may think.

In his insightful and incisive article, "The Case for Early Marriage,"¹ Mark Regnerus argues that on the ground, we don't take fornication as seriously as we sometimes pretend to. We follow the lead of the world and put off marriage until later and later in life - not merely as an incidental thing, but by design.

But as Regnerus points out, this wholesale affirmation of cultural trends means, not only that our dating practices themselves echo those of the world. It also means that most Christian young adults, at the age when they likely have least control of their hormones, have no legitimate outlet for their sexuality. It's a recipe made in hell, or Hollywood, if there's a difference.

Many parents and all sorts of counsellors push for late marriage, for a variety of reasons, but mostly boiling down to either financial considerations ("get yourself set first") or self-fulfillment ("get to know yourself first" or "do what you have to do first"). All of which means, it's okay to date, but don't get married.

But what of these considerations? Yes, a husband needs to feed his family. But dire complaints about the economy to the contrary, that isn't really what is in view when financial considerations are cited. Very few people in Canada are starving, and almost none of those few are likely to be starving because they married young. The harsh truth is that we value money more than family, and more than we value sexual purity. Perhaps not in theory, but when the rubber meets the road, putting financial considerations ahead of marriage is a fundamentally problematic ordering of priorities.

If possible, the other predominant type of rationale is even worse. Taking the formative adult years as an opportunity for "getting to know yourself" and "doing the things you want to do" are, by the nature of the case, individualistic, narcissistic, and selfish. It says that the most important thing about us is what we are in abstraction from others; and it encourages creating a pattern of doing what *I* please

¹ http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/article_print.html?id=84286

that will have to be unlearned if I am ever to be a good spouse (not to mention a good servant in Christ's Church).

It is a simple fact that there are no records of either extended courtships or lengthy engagements in Scripture. Courtship is for mutual evaluation of partners; engagement is an opportunity for two people who have bound themselves by promise (yet another thing treated far too lightly) to make the final preparations for the actual marriage. Neither one of these requires years.

We may think the cases of Isaac and Jacob to be extreme - Isaac and Rebekah's courtship pretty much started in their absence, and they married as soon as they met, while Jacob became engaged to Rachel after knowing her a month (Genesis 29.14ff).

Yes, that seems extreme. And yet, all the biblical records we have of courtship and marriage seem to involve very short time frames. Young men and young ladies don't go off alone exploring each other's psyches and thus they usually don't end up exploring each other's bodies.

But we wonder. All of this sounds like a recipe for disaster, with the likelihood of even more troubled marriages, and ultimately, divorces. Marry hastily, and divorce hastily.

It is to be granted that there are particular reasons why all of this worked in the cases of marriages like those of Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and Rachel, as well as others. One reason is simply that *they knew where to look*. Isaac and Jacob married young women who belonged to their own people and faith, and they knew that there would be shared conviction.

Another reason is that while the courtships were short, haste was not the issue. Because they were prepared to be married. Prepared by being shaped by the promises and Word of God.

Then too, divorce just was not an option. It wasn't treated as viable or even reasonable in all but the most extreme (and rare) cases.

In the mess of craziness that plagues much of the Church of the West, knowing where to look - and pointedly, being the kind of people who ought to be looked *for* - is not necessarily quite as easy of a task for us.

Perhaps that should tell us that we're not building the kind of church communities we ought to be building... But in any case, while most of us realistically cannot have courtships and engagements as brief as that of Isaac and Rebekah, we must denormalize the pattern of delay, delay, delay, that has become the norm in our day. There is usually no genuinely good reason for it, and almost always decisive reasons against it.

Courtship does not require years of evaluation. As Regnerus so aptly says, “successful marriages are less about the right personalities than about the right practices, like persistent communication and conflict resolution, along with the ability to handle the cyclical nature of so much about marriage, and a bedrock commitment to its sacred unity.”

There are no two persons on the face of the earth who will have perfect chemistry every hour of every day; whose personalities will never grate on one another; whose best characteristics will not seem like flaws on occasion; whose “attractive edginess” will never be felt as negative unpredictability once in a while; whose steadfast reliability will not at some point be taken for banality. But if a man and a woman practice the gospel, by forgiving as God has forgiven us in Christ, by being forbearing even as God suffers long with us, by being patient and kind... these are the important things for a successful (read: *faithful*) marriage - not whether you chose correctly when you guessed at door number two because you studied its hinges and paint details long enough.

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