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Looking Back at 'The Mystery of Marriage'—Part Two

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Nevertheless, the delayed reaction among some who did not attend the conference has been to the contrary. Weeks after I addressed the conference, much of the message was broadcast on FamilyLife Today, a national radio broadcast hosted by Dennis Rainey and Bob Lepine. FamilyLife Today is an outstanding program, and I was very pleased that my message had been broadcast. It seems that others were less than enthusiastic.

In recent days, a major critique of the message has been offered by Camerin Courtney and posted at ChristianityToday.com. In her article, entitled "Is Singleness a Sin?," Ms. Courtney decided to respectfully let me have it. She suggested that I had offered "gross overgeneralizations" about single people, and she argued that most Christian singles "aren't delaying marriage due to selfish motives." Ms. Courtney went on to say that most singles she knows "earnestly desire to be married, are surprised and/or frustrated that they aren't yet, and are prayerfully trying to figure out how to get from here to there."

Most specifically, Ms. Courtney was offended by my suggestion that, except for those given the gift of celibacy, marriage is the God-given context for the achievement of maturity in adulthood. Many others have responded to that argument as well.

In recent days, I have received a flood of e-mail messages and other contacts, mostly driven by Ms. Courtney's article. Most have been very clear about their outrage, but also very thoughtful in suggesting exactly where they felt I had gone wrong. Interestingly, every single response to Ms. Courtney's article I have yet received has been written by a woman.

In reflecting on these messages and the points these very articulate and thoughtful women have raised, I am led to wonder if parts of the total message may have been edited or missing from the version they read or heard. But even if all the arguments were present, I wonder if some of them may have been missed or minimized.

In any event, the ensuing controversy affords all of us a good opportunity to look again at the biblical teachings concerning marriage and commit ourselves to accountability before God for the totality of our lives. Some of my respondents clearly missed the point concerning celibacy. But others still want to argue that intentional singleness—apparently without respect to celibacy—can be an acceptable lifestyle option for believers. I stand unmoved, even more convinced that the argument I made at the New Attitude Conference is precisely correct. Singleness is not a sin, but deliberate singleness on the part of those who know they have not been given the gift of celibacy is, at best, a neglect of a Christian responsibility. The problem may be simple sloth, personal immaturity, a fear of commitment, or an unbalanced priority given to work and profession. On the part of men, it may also take the shape of a refusal to grow up and take the lead in courtship. There are countless Christian women who are prayerfully waiting for Christian men to grow up and take the lead. What are these guys waiting for?

The delay of marriage has caused any number of ills in the larger society, and in the church. Honesty compels us to admit that this is indeed tied to levels of sexual promiscuity and frustration, even as it means that many persons are now marrying well into their adult years, missing the opportunity of growing together as a young couple, and putting parenthood potentially at risk.

Almost all of the women who have written me in response to this article have indicated their grief and frustration that they are not yet married. Not one has indicated in her message that she has intended from the beginning to be single and to remain single. To the contrary, each writer has affirmed her own commitment to marriage and to be married, and each has spoken of her personal frustration that her hopes have not been yet fulfilled.

Given this commitment and hope as articulated by these thoughtful young women, it should be clear that when I spoke of a pattern of sin in the delay of marriage, I was certainly not attributing that sin to them. To the contrary, as one who believes wholeheartedly in the biblical pattern of complementarity and in the male responsibility to lead, I charge young men with far greater responsibility for this failure. The extension of a “boy culture” into the twenties and thirties, along with a sense of uncertainty about the true nature of male leadership has led many young men to focus on career, friends, sports, and any number of other satisfactions when they should be preparing themselves for marriage and taking responsibility to grow up, be the man, and show God’s glory as husband and father.

I am not calling for high school students to marry, and I am certainly not suggesting that believers of any age should marry thoughtlessly, carelessly, and without sound spiritual judgment. But I am most emphatically arguing that this delay of marriage now presents the church with a critical test: We will either recover a full and comprehensive biblical vision of marriage in all of its glory, or we will soon find believers so accommodated to the culture around us that all we seek in our marriages is to do marginally better than what we see in the world.

Sensitivity demands that we understand the grief, frustration, and concern of Christian young adults struggling with this issue. They are the inheritors of a culture that has minimized marriage and has sent mixed messages concerning sex, gender, marriage, and all the rest. The full biblical vision of marriage was not, in the main, held before them from their earliest years at home, and was not encouraged and enriched as they grew through adolescence into adulthood. Many of them—especially many young women—feel victimized by this pattern, and they are frustrated by the reality.

Now is the time for the church to take this conversation to the next level. This generation of Christian young adults has the opportunity to seize the moment, reverse cultural trends, and show their elders the glory of marriage as God intended it from the beginning.

I stand by my argument—renewed in this conviction even by the controversy that has followed. At the same time, I’m going to be a good bit more careful to make clear that young men must accept most of the blame for this situation. I will also remind these young men that, armed with a biblical mandate and fueled by Christian passion, they can also be the vanguard for recovery. So, thanks to Camerin Courtney for her article, and to all those who have followed with responses. Let’s keep this conversation going, and encourage each other to pursue God’s glory in every dimension of our lives—and to settle for nothing less.

