

TO MARRY OR TO BURN

I HAVE A FEELING

Dear Professor Theophilus:

I need a little advice. I am 18 years old and a sophomore in college. I am also engaged to be married. My fiancé and I have agreed to get married one semester before I finish my bachelor's degree (in one year and eight months) but I have a feeling we won't be able to wait that long. I know the Bible says "It is better to marry than to burn" but we know that we are still not ready for marriage. We feel that by the time our wedding date comes around, we will be ready spiritually, emotionally, physically and financially. We both know it is not God's time yet, but we are very anxious to be together. We've already been together for one year 11 months, and we've been engaged for 10 months. We've prayed and we've fasted and we've asked for advice but every day that goes by seems to be more and more difficult to get through. I start to ask myself whether God really wants us to wait that long or if He rather us marry sooner so that we will not fall into temptation. How will we be sure when it is "God's time"? Do you think you may have some advice for our situation?

Reply:

Thanks for writing. Now brace yourself, because I have three questions for you.

The first: If you're sure you aren't mature enough to marry, then what makes you think you're mature enough to get engaged? Turning it around: If you're sure that you are mature enough to get engaged, then what makes you think you're not mature enough for marriage too?

The second: The usual reason people have difficulty avoiding sexual intercourse is that they've already crossed too many other lines. If you want to avoid having sex, you have to re-cross those lines in the other direction – you have to go back. This means a real change in behavior: Avoid everything that is arousing. Yes, that includes drawn-out kissing sessions; as I told another reader, you have to stop thinking of sexual arousal as recreation.

The third: Being alone together is one of the most arousing things there is, so spend as little time as possible by yourselves (read that as zero). Instead, spend your

couple-time with other people around; for example, restaurant yes, apartment no. If you back off from aloneness now, then it will be wonderful to be alone on your wedding night – but don't imagine that you can have bedroom privacy without the rest of the bedroom experience. Capiche?

I think you'll be interested in my reply to the next set of letters, too.

Grace and peace,
PROFESSOR THEOPHILUS

RACING TO THE ALTAR

In several columns I've responded to reader mail about the question of when to marry, but the real outpouring of mail began after something I said in "Takings Things Seriously." After mentioning that my wife and I had married young, I added, "We're convinced that the trend toward later and later marriages is bad for men and women, bad for the society and bad for the Church."

Responses have come in two waves. The first was from readers who saw the column when it was originally posted. Eventually they forgot about it, but a second wave developed as new readers began coming across it in the archives. I've promised to reply, but for lack of time I've put off doing so for months. Now I'll keep my promise.

Some readers, like these two, merely asked me to explain.

I noticed your statement that you and your wife both believe the trend toward later marriage is harmful. I was just wondering why. Thanks!

I want to hear more about this. Why do you feel that way? What are your thoughts?

Others, like these two, demanded specifics of what I meant:

Why are you convinced that the trend toward later and later marriages is bad for men, women, society and the Church? I am especially curious about why it is bad for the Church.

I agree with you, but only qualitatively and without good reason. How exactly is marrying later and later bad for all those different parties?

I gave some readers pause for thought:

Your article has inspired much thought in my mind. My girlfriend and I are both undergrads. We very much love one another, and we understand the commitment involved with loving one another and in being married under the lordship of Christ. We're not yet ready for marriage, but by the definition of readiness that you give we may very well be ready before we both leave college. I have always been of the opinion that getting married while being in college would be harmful to both the marriage and one's academic career. But the more I see married Christian couples in college, and the more I come to understand God's design for marriage, the more I come to question my belief. Any light you could shine on my question would be helpful.

But others thought I was on shaky ground. One said,

It's my opinion that you shouldn't worry about whether to marry young or old, but rather trust God to work that out (if it's to be) for each person in His perfect timing – whatever that may be.

Sure, but doesn't God expect us to cooperate with His perfect timing by using our minds? Another critic said,

Before criticizing the trend to postpone marriage, you should consider the probability of divorce for couples who marry early. Some couples are ready to marry early – but it seems that a whole lot think they are, but are not.

True, but I didn't say oppose late marriage – I said I was disturbed by the *trend* toward later marriage. More about that below. Yet another reader complained,

I can't think of anywhere I see that comment made in the Bible, so I was wondering what you have to back that up Biblically.

That error just keeps on coming back; "You can't say it if it isn't in the Bible." Come on folks, God commands not just "Scripture memory" but wisdom – He expects us not just to know the Bible but to try to think biblically. "Come, let us reason together," He says to Israel in Isaiah 1:18. What I offered was a considered

judgment: Possibly mistaken, but based on [over 40] years' experience of marriage and illuminated by the Christian understanding of the institution's purposes.

Needless to say, some distinguished Christians take a view quite different than mine, and give better reasons than those above. Consider carefully the advice of [the late] John R.W. Stott, as quoted in Albert Y. Hsu's book *Singles at the Crossroads*:

HSU: *Do you have a final word of advice for single people?*

STOTT: *Yes! First, don't be in too great a hurry to get married. We human beings do not reach maturity until we are about 25. To marry before this runs the risk of finding yourself at 25 married to somebody who was a very different person at the age of 20. So be patient. Pray daily that God will guide you to your life partner or show you if he wants you to remain single.*

Well, what did I mean? Perhaps the best way to elaborate my complaint about the trend toward later marriages is through a bit of Q & A.

Is it your view, contra Stott, that people should be in a hurry to get married? Not at all. Some people should marry when young; others should marry when older; still others, who have the gift of celibacy, should not marry at all. What I criticized was the trend toward later and later marriages. The problem isn't that people are marrying late — the problem is that too many people are marrying later than they should. Those who should marry when young are marrying when old, and those who should marry when old are marrying older still. Some who should marry never do at all.

Doesn't the trend toward later marriages merely reflect the fact that people are becoming more realistic about marriage? In my view, no. I haven't noticed that people are becoming more realistic about marriage — it seems to me that they are becoming less realistic about it. To be sure people are becoming more cynical and fatalistic about marriage, and cynicism and fatalism are often confused with realism. Many of my students dread marriage because they have come from broken homes and think divorce is nearly inevitable. But this is a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you consider divorce an acceptable remedy for your problems, then you won't work out your problems; you'll get divorced. And then you'll have new problems. Your problems aren't the problem; your attitude is the problem.

Couldn't it be that people are just delaying marriage until they are mature enough for it? It could be, but it isn't. People should wait until they're mature enough to get

married, but the trend toward later marriage has more to do with other things which we call waiting until we're mature enough to get married: the lust to make money, the fear of responsibility, the desire to not grow up — last but not least, the separation of sex from procreation, with all of the anti-marriage and anti-child attitudes that go with it. Not only does the trend toward later and later marriages reflect these bad things, it reinforces them. That's why I call it bad for men and women, bad for society and bad for the Church.

Then when do you think people are mature enough to get married? At 25, as John Stott suggests? Stott is a wise Christian and deserves more than a casual dismissal, so let's slow down, drop the Q & A, and consider all the angles.

One important point is that the age at which people are mature enough to take on the responsibilities of marriage is not, as Stott suggests, a constant of human nature. In our day people not only take longer to get married but take longer to become responsible; that's one of the things that worries me. Many of my own generation still haven't grown up. If people aren't yet mature enough for marriage until 25, then my first question is "Why aren't they?" We should also pause to consider how people become mature. It simply is not the case that first men and women become mature, then they take on responsibilities. Rather, only after they begin taking on responsibilities do they become mature. Responsibility itself is transformative.

I suspect that Stott may also have underestimated the enormous — and unnatural — strain which is brought about by the discrepancy between the age at which human beings reach biological or procreative maturity, and the age at which they reach what he considers a sufficient emotional maturity for marriage. For those who do not have the gift of celibacy, as he does, this strain is an enormous temptation to sexual impurity, and the aftereffects of sexual impurity undermine even those marriages which do eventually take place. Yet the strain is largely avoidable; younger people than in our society have been building successful marriages for thousands of years. True, the ridiculous length of time during which we keep people idle in order to educate them makes youthful marriages more difficult to manage economically today than in former ages. That problem is nothing to take lightly, but there are ways of dealing with it. Besides, we should adapt the educational system to human nature, rather than expecting human nature to adapt to the educational system. (While we're at it we might look into why the age of puberty keeps dropping, but that is another story.)

Finally, I disagree with Stott's apparent assumption that people shouldn't marry until they can be sure they won't experience any more great changes. ("To marry before

this runs the risk of finding yourself at 25 married to somebody who was a very different person at the age of 20.") He is a far better man than I, but in this matter too I think his perspective may be limited by his lack of direct experience with marriage. My reasons for thinking so are threefold. In the first place, marriage itself is normally one of the greatest causes of change. It shatters and reassembles two people into a single organism with two personalities. If you marry at 20, then you ought to be very different persons at 25 – both of you! But the older people become, the harder it is for them to yield to this transformation; the more nearly they have finished their changes, the harder it is for them to change.

In the second place, closely bonded married couples tend to change together, precisely because of their union. My wife and I abandoned Christ together, to our sorrow, and returned to Him together, to our joy; although we did not change identically, our influence on each other in both stages was profound. Changing together toward good – not in unison, but in counterpoint, like a Bach sonata – is part of the challenge, and, if I may say it, the romance, of marriage.

In the third place, significant change is not finished at 25, but continues throughout life. The periods of greatest personal change for me and my wife have included the first few years after marriage at 19 and the first few years after childbirth at 21 – but also the first few years after conversion in our early 30's. Some Western cultures didn't regard young people as mature until the age of 35 or so. In some ways they were right to think that way; the capacity to bear certain responsibilities develops quite late. But it isn't necessary to be mature enough to lead one's country just to get married and have kids. After all, it isn't like exploring Mars, breathing with gills or flapping our arms to fly. We were made for it; it belongs to the human design.

A deluge of letters will now follow – but I will try to write about other things.

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