

The subject: Marriage and Singleness

Thanks to all the writers who have offered their wisdom, opinions and care to stimulate our discussion this quarter. As you read these thoughts, we hope you are even more encouraged to make healthy relationships. It all comes down to relationships, doesn't it? How we express ourselves sexually is a huge issue for us every day. Right now, we are making choices that will impact the rest of our lives. It makes sense to share whatever wisdom we have. So that's what this issue tries to do. You have God with you every step of the way — and your brothers and sisters in Christ, as well.

Sexuality and Singleness

I am married and I wanted to state that up front and justify it so you won't write me off on this subject. Can a married person talk about sex and singleness? I would say, yes. You see, I was single at one time and I continue to hang out with people who are single and I have worked the past 12 years with college students who tend to be single. In all of this experience two things have always held true: the questions people ask and the mistakes people make. I want to lay out a bit of theory about sex and singleness and then give some practical suggestions.

There are several basic tensions our generation has in dealing with sexuality. We have finally broken with the old idea that sex is bad or a necessary evil for procreation - thank goodness! But we still struggle between wanting to be pure (insert Holy) and wanting to experience freedom.

Most questions about sexuality are really asking where we should be on a continuum between these two theological ideas. On the one hand, the Bible is clear that sexuality was intended for expression in its fullness between two people in a mutually exclusive relationship and that relationship was to last until "death do them part". On the other hand, we recognize that sexuality is part of who we are and needs to find expression. Interestingly enough, as we are waiting longer and longer to be married we are reaching sexual maturity when we are younger. In a culture that uses sex as the primary means of expression and capitalistic exchange, we who follow Jesus are set up for a big hurt.

Just to clarify - freedom in Christ does not mean we are free to have sex outside of marriage. Freedom in a Biblical context is not freedom from rules, it is freedom from breaking the rules. The freedom Christ gives is freedom from being a slave to the world's rules (do whatever feels good) and

freedom to live faithfully (do what will be the best for you). We often read the Ten Commandments as a list of do nots when they are as much a list of blessings. They actually are about God saying, "I will be your God and you will be my people and you won't have to kill or commit adultery. You will be free to express yourself the way I intended for you. You will find fulfillment in the limits of who you were created to be."

Theology aside, there are other good reasons to stay celibate before marriage. It isn't just about principle - God's law is inherently practical.

When students ask me why they shouldn't have sex I just say this, "Because you can get pregnant." And pregnancy outside of marriage can lead to even bigger and more terrible temptations and hurts.

Practical answers to practical questions:

How far is too far? Actually, I think we answer this questions by changing the question. The answer is to ask instead, "What should I do to build this relationship in a healthy direction for both of us?" It is much easier to make out than it is to really talk and to communicate with depth and honesty. Also, we tend to spend too much time alone together when we date. Ask any married couple and they will tell you that most of their life together is worked out in community. The true measure of your success in relationship is how you succeed in loving each other when you are with others. We should go out in groups more and learn how to love in that context.

How do I avoid going too far? Make out less. Don't kiss so much. Don't put yourself into positions where one thing can easily lead to another. Don't lay down together or sleep (meaning just sleep) together before marriage. Avoiding compromising behaviors will go a long way towards effective boundaries. Also, talk about how far is too far. Make clear, mutual agreements as to boundaries and limits. Talk to other couples and single people. Get their feedback on what you should do and not do. Allow the community to help you be faithful.

Masturbation? The Bible's rules on this were based on false assumptions about what was involved in procreation. In biblical times, people thought that semen contained people and that the man implanted women with future generations. Spilling seed on the ground was seen as murder. This idea is based in inappropriate patriarchy and is not as compelling today. That does not mean that masturbation can't be dangerous. The use of pornography and fantasies can begin to affect ones view of sexuality and ones relationships with others. Like any expression of sexuality, masturbation should be carefully considered and discussed with someone you trust. Accountability is as important here as anywhere.

Sexuality is a difficult issue for Christians today as it has always been. What will make the difference for us is in how we work to communicate clearly with one another and support one another. The community of faith, those that love us and want the best for us, are the ones that will make the difference. Only through the community can we become the people we want to be sexually.

David Bestwick-Satterlee

The Best and Hardest Things about Your Relationship Right Now

We asked four couples in different stages of their relationships to share with Dialogue the positives and challenges of their couplehood. The pairs range from engaged to being married several years with children. The questions asked included issues of romance/ intimacy, mundane matters of daily living as well as broader topics and their answers are condensed below.

The Engaged Ones

Pete Johnson (engaged to Sarah Evans) **Positives:** "The best thing about our relationship right now is the future. In fifty years to be able to sit on a front porch swing with our eight kids and sixty-four grandkids and laugh/cry about the life we've had. Also, knowing you found your pal and it's settled that you're going to spend the rest of your life with them. **Challenges:** You really just want to be together. [Also] the responsibility about to be placed on our shoulders. We've both only had to be concerned with our individual affairs and directions in life to this point. It will be a big challenge to focus on what's good for Sarah after all these years of being focused more or less on my own life."

The newlyweds:

Eva Killinger (married to Jason for 4 months) **Positives:** “I think right now our relationship is really good. We just moved out of my parent’s house and we feel more married. I know our communication is really good. We’re still young and learning to grow with each other. It’s pretty romantic. Everyone says when you’re married for a while it’s not the same. It’s nice to sit down and have dinner and light candles and I don’t know if people who are married for a while do that. We can make anything romantic, even sitting down and doing nothing. **Challenges:** He’s more sociable and I’d rather stay home and chill with him. He’s not messy but I’m real picky and neat — those kinds of things. But if something’s bothering me, I’m not afraid to tell him and I think he feels the same way. We talk a lot. We express our feelings about things. I’ve gotten a lot better and he’s probably gotten a little neater.”

Jason Killinger (married to Eva): **Positives:** “Before we were married I’ve always lived between two and three hours away and we’d only see each other on the weekends. It was weird because all of a sudden we were with each other every day and it was a real drastic change. It’s been good; we’ve gotten to know each other better. I know all the little things about her that other people probably don’t know. I can tell when she’s happy or when she’s upset just by nonverbal communication. We’re forming our ways of doing things together, we’re young and open to change together. [Also] I don’t think we’ll lose a lot of the romance because we’re really good friends before anything. Things don’t necessarily have to be romantic and we can just enjoy each other’s company. **Challenges:** I’m trying to learn things she likes to do and I’m learning what annoys her.”

The DINKS (dual income, no kids)

Tracey Kohl (married to Paul for 7 years) **Positives:** I look at our futures together and I see how we’ve grown in 7 years and there’s no stopping how close we could get or how we could grow in love with each other. We had no idea what love was when we got married. Love really isn’t a mushy feeling and feelings come and go. It’s more about commitment and loving regardless of how you feel.” **Challenges:** “I would say the challenges are our completely different personalities, but that’s also the best part too.”

Paul Kohl (married to Tracey) **Positives:** : “So far I have yet to reach a limit where we’ve spent too much time together, reach a saturation level. I never think, “I’m spending too much time with my wife. When I was dating Tracy, I hated leaving. I love not having to go and that we don’t live in separate places.” Also, there’s a difference in how we handle our conflict as God grows in our marriage. We invite God into it and we’ve gone through enough conflict that we know we’re not going to leave each other.” **Challenges:** “What is love? Love is pain. Love is dying on the cross and anything short of that is pretending. God is using my marriage to show me how he wants me to be, to show me that if you’re wife is driving you crazy, He’s showing you how un-Christ-like you are. Whenever I’m just “putting up with her” or only thinking of myself that inevitably leads to conflict. Instead of orbiting around God, I’m no longer in geosyncrinous orbit, so to speak.”

The Parents

Brenda Robinson (married 10 years to Bryan, 2 children): **Positives:** “ We enjoy each other’s company. We have fun. We have a date night on Friday nights, candle light dinners. We’re still best friends, we talk and have fun together. Separately, we’ve grown on our own, and because we’ve grown individually it can only be positive in our marriage. One of the main things we’ve learned, besides putting God first in our lives, is communication with each other, no matter how we think the other one is going to respond. **Challenges:** Having kids really affected us. We had to encourage one another to depend on the Lord for every single thing, like finances and decision-making. That’s even more important when you’ve been together a long time and have kids, because of all they bring to one’s marriage. After 10 years of marriage you work harder and are more intentional about certain things, especially romance. When you’re newlyweds it just seems to come naturally.

Anna James

Go Ahead and Marry

Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am. But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion....

What I mean...is that the time is short. From now on those who have [spouses] should live as if they had none; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away. 1 Corinthians 7:8-9, 29-31

When Paul was offering the spiritual wisdom above to the young church in Corinth, I know he was not imagining Circle of Hope and Philadelphia. Although there was plenty of sex going on in Corinth in his day, what with the Temple of Aphrodite a very popular spot for visiting prostitutes and a general cosmopolitan atmosphere that made the place famous for being “sin city,” there was still a strong sense of community in Corinth that encouraged people to make responsible relationships and get married.

In Paul’s day, people got married younger than today, had children younger and died younger. I think the system worked better all around. When Paul recommended that people remain single for the sake of focusing their energy on the cause of Christ during these last days, he was being radical. It was basically unheard of not to get married — one’s parents often arranged for it well in advance of puberty!

Nowadays, Paul’s exhortation doesn’t seem that radical. “*Don’t get married? Who gets married, anyway?*” Among the Circle of Hope it is not unusual at all to have been ready (sexually, at least) to be married for 10-15 years before the issue even comes up. Paul would probably be writing to us: “Do something radical — go ahead and marry!”

These days someone who is married at 21 years old seems like a freak. Someone who has never been married but has children seems relatively normal in my neighborhood. Someone who is between 30 and 40 and has never married doesn’t seem very unusual to me.

I certainly don’t understand all the reasons society has changed so much since Paul’s time, but I sort of wish the Christians would change it back a little. Here’s a few changes of mind that would contribute to making marriage more common.

1) Don’t forget that partners are not products. A lot of people I know think it is fine to wait for the perfect mate and the perfect moment of that long-sought connection. We’ve watched so many great relationships in the movies and seen so many divorces in reality that we are very picky. But when you go to the store and have to squeeze every tomato on the shelf before you buy one it takes a long time to get to the check out. Go ahead and marry.

2) It’s delusional to think that random sex with uncommitted partners will not damage the soul. We have the pill, reliable condoms and others forms of birth control. We have safe, legal abortions if we get tripped up. So why does the Bible still say “no” to sex outside of marriage? And why get married if casual sex is OK with everyone but God? Because humans make more than a body connection when they have sex. It is soul-reducing to leave yourself spread all over the landscape, a piece here and a piece there connected to all your sex partners. Likewise, it is sex-killing to deaden your soul to what you are doing when you open yourself up to someone who ends up not committing to you. Go ahead and marry.

3) It is a lie that economic security is basic to happiness. So many people are waiting to get married because they want to be settled in their career. I am often amazed at the sense of control people think they have over their lives! They have it all worked out — “After I have my schooling done and I am settled into a good job, then I’ll get married.” But, basically, they often just spend all the passion of their youth coupling with a school or a job. Let’s get our priorities straight. For one thing, God shouldn’t have to compete with economics to be our security. And neither should a spouse and children have the perpetual back seat to what is *really* important to us (that is, ME and what I get from my work!). The love of God, good friends, a spouse and children is a lot better than a job. Go ahead and marry.

4) Remember that God is with us, no matter what happens. We know so much about the social and psychological factors contributing to our relationships we are often overwhelmed by the amount of info we have to sort through on the way to the altar. We honestly believe we have

to do marriage just right, like a chemistry experiment, or explosions will follow. The older we get, the more we know, and the less we want to rub test tubes with untried substances. *"Fools rush in where angels fear to tread,"* the old love song says, *"so open up your heart and let this fool rush in."* These days we're likely to say, "No way, fool!"

I think the "foolish" young are supposed to get married so they get the full benefit of the mutual maturing process God has in mind for marriage. By the time one is 30, some habits of the heart are like granite. At 20, things are a lot more malleable. In the hands of God, I think almost any malleable pair of people can get formed into a good marriage. God is with us. Go ahead and marry.

I guess I sound a little radical, huh? I'm telling 20 year olds to consider marrying the people they are sleeping with! Or maybe I sound like a kill joy. I'm telling 30 year olds to consider growing up to be more connective, contributing and communal. Or maybe I'm sounding like a scold, since you're thinking, "I'd marry someone if I could find someone to marry me!"

I'm sure you are working it out. But as we're doing that, let's reinforce something Christians have always known. It is just like Paul says. For most of us, "It is better to marry."

Rod White

Guess What? Josh Valentine is Here!

My name is Deb Valentine. I am a mom, mother of Joshua Valentine, age 3, and wife of Dave Valentine. We're an interracial family and have been coming to Circle for about 2 years now. I was asked to write about "what I hope my community in Christ will provide for my child." So here it is – my hopes and dreams.

As I write this article I am afraid that very few single people will get very far reading it. After all it's about kids – irrelevant to daily life for most people connected to Circle of Hope right now. That brings me to my first hope. I hope that Josh will be valued. I hope that the members of my community will see him as a person. I hope he will be thought of a member of the community too (at a level that is appropriate for him), not simply as an extension of me and Dave, an add-on or an afterthought. I want him to be valued as a human being with a capacity for knowing and experiencing God and even with a very special purpose and ability to be used by God in the life of Circle of Hope. I hope that my community will care about the fact that he is a biracial child in a church that does not fully represent his African-American heritage. I hope that in caring for him, we will seek with even greater energy to continue to pursue ways to promote racial diversity in our church.

You Need Josh!

Many people connected to Circle of Hope have come to realize that Jesus is present in the lives of the poor, the weak and the needy, that he speaks through them to us about our own weaknesses and dependence, our own poverty. I hope that we will develop a similar understanding of our need to have children in our lives who will teach us about God in ways that our adult friends cannot. We need them to point out areas of character weakness in ourselves that cause us to avoid their dependence, their disruptions and their needs. We need to be around them to be able to access the truth behind some of Jesus' teachings – like when he tells us to come to Him "as a child." We need to see children interacting with their parents to help us to learn about how God loves us as a parent.

Josh Needs You!

I hope also that my community will help me to invite my child to meet Jesus. I hope that this will happen primarily through the willingness of people in the network to open their lives to him and let him see what it looks like to find life and hope and healing through a relationship with God. I hope he will get to be in relationship with adults and other children who are happy, sad, struggling, joyful, angry and a whole lot of other things *with Jesus*. I hope that others will notice

moments when Josh needs Jesus, when he might need to pray or be prayed for, when he could be told a Bible story or truth that could help him with a need in his life. When he is taught Scripture, I hope that there will be constant interaction between the story and the needs and issues in his life and the lives of those around him. I hope that there will soon be some intergenerational cell groups that include children in the process of walking with God in life. I hope that my community will give him space and room to fail, to look stupid and even to “be bad” as he struggles on his own path to wholeness, to personhood and to God. I hope that he will be encouraged to ask a lot of questions and find God in the process of the struggle, not just given answers.

We Need You!

For those of you who don't know this already, Dave and I are not exactly perfect (though neither of us likes to admit it too much). We want to be great parents, but we're going to mess up in lots of ways. I hope that the gaps made in Josh's life made by the weaknesses of his parents will be “filled in” through the strengths of others in our community. I am so deeply grateful for the artists who are here. I hope that they will help my child to experience God in a variety of ways that I can't. I am so grateful for the people around me who are able to “go with the flow” much better than I can who can help him not to be afraid of the unexpected. I am thankful for the social activists who will encourage him to get angry and to be active about injustice. I am so glad that here he will be taught to value women and will get to see them as leaders in all areas of church life. And we already owe a lot of thanks to the people who have helped us be better parents by giving us a break! Babysitters, until you have young children you really can't imagine what this means for us! I also hope that Josh will have more of a chance to see the racial divide that is so prevalent in the Church overcome in our community and that it will strengthen him and give him hope as he faces a culture whose racial wars continue, perhaps even in his own mind and body many times. Finally, I hope that at the times when Dave and I can't understand him or don't “hear” him someone else will. And I hope that people will be willing to let us know when we need to change.

Thus ends my “I have a dream” speech for my son, for other children connected to Circle of Hope and even for myself as I need all of this as much as he does. I sure am glad God is big enough to handle it and that you all are around to share it with me!

Deb Valentine

Place me like a seal over your heart,
like a seal on your arm;
for love is as strong as death,
its jealousy unyielding as the grave.
It burns like blazing fire,
like the very flame of the Lord.
Many waters cannot quench love;
rivers cannot wash it away.
If one were to give
all the wealth of his house for love,
it would be utterly scorned.
Song of Songs 8:6-7