

Beyond the “Ring by Spring” Culture

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The “ring by spring” culture at Christian colleges and universities can pressure students to become engaged or to marry before they graduate. This may muddle their perceptions of marriage and vocation, and deflect them from receiving more formative preparation for marriage.

Christian colleges and universities are unique academic institutions. They not only provide rigorous academic courses, competitive athletic programs, and opportunities for student participation in a number of clubs and organizations on campuses, they simultaneously serve as religious communities committed to advancing the gospel through faith integration in the classroom and Christ-centered policies in the student life division. For this reason, they often appear to be institutions of higher education that serve much like Christian congregations by providing opportunities for educational, physical, emotional, and spiritual growth.

My exposure to Christian higher education began my freshman year as an undergraduate at a small, Christian liberal arts university in the northwestern United States. I was somewhat familiar with Christian college culture, having been well-prepared by my youth group at my home church, but I was nonetheless overwhelmed by the enormous pressure I felt to fit in the day I arrived on campus. Hearing the chattering of other young women on my floor about who they pegged as their future husband at the nearby all-male dorm, I was immediately aware that my success in college would be measured not only by achieving a college degree, but also by whether I had an engagement ring on my finger by the time I graduated. It was common knowledge among my friends and classmates that getting a “ring by spring” of one’s senior year was part of the hidden curriculum of the institution.

Though I failed to get my ring by spring, I succeeded academically and eventually returned to Christian higher education a decade later as a professor. In the first weeks of teaching, I was stunned to hear that the ring by spring culture still pervaded student life. Within the first two weeks of the fall semester I had three students, all single women, approach me with concerns about leaving college before finding a husband. They were already dreading graduation, rather than anticipating what lies ahead for them in the future. They were focusing only on their ‘failure’ at not being engaged at twenty-two, while overlooking their incredible academic accomplishments. After consoling and reassuring these students that God had better options for them at this time, I developed a research plan to more fully understand this not-so-hidden culture on Christian college and university campuses.

EXAMINING “RING BY SPRING”

My research examines the dynamics that lead students to feel compelled to become engaged before they graduate from college. My purpose is not to question the legitimacy of young engagements or marriages; nor do I presuppose that young marriages are an inherently positive or an inherently negative practice. Rather, I seek to understand the dynamics that lead these students to marry young, the peer pressure that may accompany their dating experience (or lack thereof) on campus, and the institutional infrastructure that may foster this culture. In doing so, perhaps I will gather information on how to address ring by spring with delicacy, and thereby provide Christian communities serving young adults with the necessary tools and procedures to promote healthy relationships.

Information from this study comes from a private Christian school located in a suburban setting in the United States, with a student population of approximately 2,500 undergraduates. In the fall of 2014, I asked students to complete an online survey, which would anonymously track their responses to questions about the ring by spring culture. The survey included fifty-five questions. Some of these questions asked students for basic demographic information such as their gender, age, major, and religious affiliation. Other questions sought information about their parents’ marital status, their own perceptions of marriage, and their views on the ring by spring culture more generally. In a series of open-ended questions, I asked students to discuss their perceptions of dating culture on campus and their level of sexual activity. The study concluded by seeking information on how, or in what ways, faculty and staff can help facilitate more productive conversations on campus around the topics of dating, sex, and marriage.

DEFINING “RING BY SPRING”

The tagline “ring by spring” signifies the tongue-in-cheek ambition of many traditional (eighteen- to twenty-two-year-old) Christian college and university students to be engaged by spring semester of their senior year. While students and faculty may joke about the marriage-obsessed ring by

spring culture, it dispenses a social psychological burden that follows students, particularly women, throughout their undergraduate experience.

Instead of encouraging men and women of faith to live out their individual vocations which may or may not include marriage, ring by spring culture pressures students to fulfill this sacrament as a cultural requisite for Christian college success. This is how Christian college students themselves, define “ring by spring”:

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“The silly notion that, in Christian universities, the goal of couples (particularly women) is to attain a ring by spring. This puts pressure on people in relationships to commit to one another prematurely and also those not involved in relationships to couple up and rush into a committed relationship.”

“When a girl is supposed to get engaged by the spring of her senior year”

“A social pressure to be proposed to before you are done with school”

“Put a ring on her finger before spring”

“The desperate act of finding a husband before stepping out into the scary real world. I hear it most particularly described as a female goal. I also see it as the idea that finding a husband after school is highly improbable and extremely difficult, which in my opinion is ridiculous.”

“The goal of a woman to find a husband by the spring of her final year of college. In my experience, men are not pressured in the same way women are when it comes to this phrase.”

“The phenomenon (typically experienced at Christian universities and by heterosexual couples) where dating couples in their last year of college get engaged sometime during their final spring semester.”

“Gurrl, you betta find yourself a man by the time you graduate!”

These are just a few — roughly 5% — of the responses received from the survey questions related directly to the ring by spring phenomenon. Not surprisingly, the students report that they feel an incredible amount of pressure. In fact, 60 of the 139 responses to the question, “What is ring by spring?” use the word “pressure” to describe the sentiment behind the ring by spring

culture. When asked directly if students feel pressured to be married, at least 67% of students say they feel at least a little bit of pressure.

Where does this pressure come from? Of the social groups encouraging students to marry, their peer groups (33%), family (26%), churches (24%), and society in general (34%) are among those mentioned most frequently by respondents. Professors and student life staff on campuses, on the other hand, are among the groups least mentioned by them (only 3% of respondents, or 5 students). Yet, the culture continues to permeate Christian college and university campuses because of students' interactions with one another: 84% of student respondents report that they hear conversations about ring by spring at least occasionally, and 24% say the topic comes up often.

Women feel more pressure to be married than men (see figure 1). It is noteworthy that over 80% of the respondents in this study identify as female. This disproportionate gender response may indicate that women were more interested in communicating their perceptions of ring by spring than men.¹ Pressure to marry is generally higher for women than men due to traditional social expectations of domesticity; additional Christian pressures to refrain from premarital sexual activity (discussed below) may generate a heightened sense of anxiety for women to be in a committed relationship.

Do you feel pressured to be married?

	Definitely	A Little Bit	Not Really	Not at All	Already Married	Total
Male	0	6 (22%)	12 (44%)	9 (33%)	0	27
Female	16 (14%)	54 (48%)	20 (18%)	19 (17%)	3 (3%)	112
All	12%	43%	23%	20%	2%	139

Figure 1: Cross Tabulation of Gender and Pressure to Marry

The Christian university where I conducted the study does not keep accurate statistics on how many students become engaged during their undergraduate years. However, the students' perceptions of how many students actually become engaged are vastly exaggerated. I asked students whether they anticipated becoming engaged or being married before they graduated. Only 6.3% of students say that they are either engaged or plan to become engaged before graduation. Given the pressure felt by most students in the survey, there is an evident disconnect between this reality and the students' expectations.

From where do these expectations emerge? My findings suggest that there is a correlation between students who go to church frequently and amount of pressure they feel to marry. That is, the more involved students are in a church community, the more pressure they feel to be engaged or married before they graduate from college.

Many students at Christian colleges and universities have been brought up in religious households and participated in Christian youth groups throughout adolescence. Clearly, there are a variety of perspectives on marriage within these Christian communities, but traditional Christian theologies communicate that marriage is a portrait or metaphor of God's relationship with the Church. The Apostle Paul writes, "For this reason a

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man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church" (Ephesians 5:31-32, NIV).² Thus, young unmarried Christians are taught to believe that just as God is fully committed to God's people, they should keep their intimate relationships sacred within marital struc-

tures that allow a couple to demonstrate complete and full commitment to one another. In this sense, it is the norm for Christian communities to promote sexual abstinence until marriage. As a result, single Christian students are expected to remain sexually "pure," which increases the pressure and anticipation to marry.

CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES AND MARRIAGE PREPARATION

Contemporary Christian communities may be falling short in properly preparing young adults for intimate relationships. In *Premarital Sex in America*, Mark Regnerus and Jeremy Uecker explain:

Churchgoing and religiosity often provide social support and social control for those who remain virgins into adulthood. On the other hand, however, since organized religion is a key source of American's social interaction and a central place to meet people, it actually increases sexual opportunity. So virginity in the pews becomes quite rare, given enough time.³

Given the social pressures outside the church for them to become sexually active, Christian young people may think the only way to overcome temptation is to marry. They may see marriage as the only way to be sexually active and free from religious guilt. This is an honorable notion, no doubt, but young adults require more tools to overcome sexual temptation than to simply "put a ring on it." Young Christians admit to pushing the boundaries when it comes to sex.⁴

When marriage becomes the only solution to overcome temptation, then having sex becomes a primary reason a couple decides to marry. The danger in this, as most people recognize, is that marriage is the union between two people with different backgrounds, expectations, and family structures, which make for inevitable conflict after the honeymoon.

Given that an alarming number of evangelical Christian marriages will end in divorce,⁵ it seems reasonable that the ring by spring culture, with its attendant pressure to marry young with little to no marital preparation, may be an unhealthy practice on Christian college and university campuses. While divorce is generally considered the primary indicator of a failed marriage, there may be other consequences to marrying young that young adults do not consider before tying the knot. For instance, persons’ identities continue to develop through the mid-twenties, and some people change drastically between their college years and early adulthood.

Delaying marriage can have significant benefits for college-aged men and women. Information from the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia, and the RELATE Institute reveals that later marriage allows both men and women to pursue post-graduate education, establish themselves in their careers, and become financial stable. The economic benefits of waiting to get married more greatly impacts women. According to the study, women may make as much as \$18,000 more per year if they wait until their thirties to marry.⁶

Finally, the pressure to marry early often leads to the vocation of singleness being undervalued in Christian communities. The Apostle Paul writes, “I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has a particular gift from God; one having one kind and another a different kind. To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am” (1 Corinthians 7:7-8), and then he goes on to extol some benefits of remaining single (7:25-35). He teaches that singleness is a *gift* that many are called to live out, and faithfully embracing it is righteous in the eyes of God. Yet rarely is singleness celebrated or encouraged in this way in Christian circles. Too often, being single is seen as deviant or abnormal. Healthy family-based gatherings and couples’ retreats are pervasive in Christian communities, but many single-focused groups are perceived as glorified “meet-markets,” places for nonmarried individuals to mingle with potential marriage partners. Singleness then becomes invisible, as though it is not an option for adult Christians. This only increases the pressure to find a partner as way to be seen as “successful” in those communities.

ADDRESSING RING BY SPRING

Marriage is also honorable in the eyes of God. Yet the pressure to marry young seems to be distracting some students from pursuing their callings. Undergraduate students’ engagements and marriages are very personal

matters, but I think many students (like the ones who approached me) would appreciate some faithful guidance. Their decision to attend a Christian college or university typically involves some embrace of the “mind and heart” education – both inside and outside of the classroom – that such schools provide.

Christian campuses should review to what extent the ring by spring culture is perpetuated by their institutional structures. They have a responsibility to guide students to pursue healthy relationships. This does not imply thwarting all engagements on campus or stifling students’ personal goals of finding a spouse. Rather, faculty and staff should use their disciplinary knowledge, theological convictions, professional training, and personal relationships to better educate students on the implications of their marital engagement for life “beyond the ring.”

A plethora of resources for marital preparation are available from both Christian and non-Christian perspectives, ranging from pre-marital counseling with pastors and marriage and family therapists, to books and quizzes to review with your mate, to online programs and articles to walk you through the engagement process. Even so, how many Christian college students seek out these materials? In a second wave of research in which only engaged or married students were polled, I asked students to describe their preparation for marriage. Only 43% were enrolled in pre-marital counseling and only 20% had purchased marital preparation books or materials. It is clear that more guidance is required to better equip students for a lifetime commitment to another person.

I asked students with whom, or in what context, they would like to discuss marriage and sex. They prefer to have intimate discussions privately with family members or church leaders rather than large-group, impersonal discussions about these issues, and are even less interested in private conversations with faculty and staff (see figure 2).

*Outside of romantic relationships,
where should there be more discussions about marriage and sex?*

	Marriage	Sex
Privately with Friends	55%	59%
Privately with Parents	51%	49%
Privately with Religious Leader	35%	36%
University-wide Forum	27%	38%
Residence Life Meetings	24%	42%
Privately with Faculty	10%	11%
Privately with Staff	8%	10%
No One	5%	3%

Figure 2: Preferences for Discussions about Marriage and Sex

There may be occasional faculty members who speak to students about marriage. However, students report that the majority of their conversations about marriage are with persons unaffiliated with the university (specifically, family and church members). Indeed, 90% of the respondents in my study indicate that their conversations around engagement and marriage are among peers or with their families, rather than among faculty, staff, or administrators on campus.

Christian colleges and universities have resources to support students who find themselves at a relationship crossroads: a faculty population of highly educated, successful Christian adults who deeply care about the students in their classes; a student life center that connects with our students on a personal level every day; a student health center with trained counselors and health educators to encourage healthy lifestyles and promote self-care; and an eager and curious student population directly affected by the ring by spring culture.

CONCLUSION

Many Christian college and university students feel pressure to become engaged or marry before they complete their senior year. Christian schools typically claim little responsibility for perpetuating the ring by spring culture, but once they recognize that it exists, its potential harm requires their attention. Offering traditional undergraduates the appropriate resources to plan their engagement and marriage decisions – such as workshops, seminars, pre-marital counseling sessions, or references to external sources – would benefit them during their college years and give their future marriages a better chance to succeed.

How Christian colleges and universities nurture young adults’ convictions regarding Christian dating is an essential discussion for all Christian communities. Mentoring resources must include supporting students as they discern whether to marry young, a choice that is arguably one of the most formative decisions of their lives. Specifically, they must handle the ring by spring culture with care, especially as it pressures some students to become engaged and to enter into marriage at a much earlier age than in the wider culture.⁸

Jonathan Grant argues that Christian thinking about marriage should be countercultural:

We must reframe marriage as an essential part of the community of the church. It is not simply enough to wave the happy couple off into the sunset; the goal of Christian marriage is not to see two lone rangers become one long ranger – it is that they become part of the wider faith community. By investing time in those entering into marriage, we can better help them to understand the nature of their commitment to reach the maturity required to sustain the covenant.⁹

A Christian toolkit to help undergraduates battle sexual temptation would include creating space for this sort of rich theological reflection about sexuality and marriage, exposing young people to nonmarried Christian lifestyles, and providing professional pre-marital programs. Such resources may prevent some students from marrying before they are properly prepared and may better prepare those who do marry for successful Christian marriages.

NOTES

1 The female population at the college is approximately sixty percent of the student population.

2 Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

3 Mark Regnerus and Jeremy Uecker, *Premarital Sex in America: How Young Americans Meet, Mate, and Think about Marrying* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 21.

4 *Ibid.*, 228.

5 Jonathan Grant notes that “although rates of divorce among American evangelicals have been consistently lower than the national average on most measures, evangelicals still track with the general cultural trend. The proportion of divorced or separated evangelicals almost doubled from the 1970s to the 2000s, from 25 percent to 46 percent—which is below the national average but hardly a victory for the distinctive witness of the church” [*Divine Sex: A Compelling Vision for Christian Relationships in a Hypersexualized Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2015), 39.] For a review of the statistics, see Ed Stetzer, “Marriage, Divorce, and the Church: What Do the Stats Say, and Can Marriage Be Happy?” *The Exchange* (February 14, 2014), www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2014/february/marriage-divorce-and-body-of-christ-what-do-stats-say-and-c.html (accessed August 25, 2016).

6 Kay Hymowitz, Jason S. Carroll, W. Bradford Wilcox, and Kelleen Kaye, “Knot Yet: The Benefits and Costs of Delayed Marriage in America” (2013), <http://twentysomethingmarriage.org/> (accessed August 25, 2016).

8 In the United States today, the estimated median age for marriage is 27 for women and 29 for men. See “Families and Living Arrangements,” *United States Census Bureau*, www.census.gov/hhes/families/data/marital.html (accessed August 25, 2016).

9 Jonathan Grant, *Divine Sex*, 234.



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