



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Articles:

- 📖 Beyond the “Ring by Spring” Culture  
(*Chastity*, pp. 46-54)
  
- 📖 Relationships with “More than Friends”  
(*Chastity*, pp. 75-83)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to [Christian\\_Reflection@baylor.edu](mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu).

### Christian Reflection

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# Beyond the “Ring by Spring” Culture

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.

### Prayer

Scripture Readings: Song of Solomon 7:10-13 and Psalm 63:1-8

### Meditation†

Our sexual lives are ways of life we live into because our hearts and minds have been captivated by a picture of the so-called good life.

...We are creatures of habits, and such habits are formed in us by the rhythms and rituals we are immersed in, even (indeed, even more so) if we don’t realize it. Our loves and longings and desires – including our sexual longings – are not just biological instincts; they are learned. But the pedagogies of desire that train us rarely look like lectures or sermons. We learn to love on the register of the imagination.

*James K. A. Smith*

### Reflection

So, exactly *why* do we date? Students at Calvin College are usually surprised (and some giggle) when their College Chaplain Mary Hulst answers: we date in order to “draw closer to Jesus and become better for the kingdom of God.”

She means that we should seek for friends and (when led by God) “more than friends” those individuals who imitate Christ in being generous and loving persons of integrity. Relationships with them inevitably will make us better for the kingdom of God immediately around us – that is, among the people we meet, our family members, and other friends. If all goes well, these folks will say: “You are so much better since you started dating that person. It is *awesome*. We want you with that person *forever*.”

One important – and, perhaps, unexpected – implication of adopting this perspective on dating, Hulst notes, is that we will begin to appreciate singleness as a beautiful and important state of being. It is an opportunity “to learn how to attend to God, how to talk to and listen to our Lord. In the process, we can find God really interesting and find ourselves really interesting.” Indeed, she worries her students may become so focused on dating and trying to be liked by others that “they will not learn what they really love...about God [and] what God is inviting them to do with their lives.”

Certainly, Hulst would agree with Stacy George’s concerns about the ring by spring culture that is pushing traditional (18- to 22-year-old) students on Christian campuses – and particularly women – to marry or become engaged before graduation. George warns, “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.” In George’s research,



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students report that the pressure to marry young comes mainly from society (34%) and peers (33%), but also from their families (26%) and churches (24%). And these expectations add up: “the more involved students are in a church community, the more pressure they feel to be engaged or married before they graduate from college.” She further discovered that among the engaged couples, “Only 43% were enrolled in pre-marital counseling and only 20% had purchased marital preparation books or materials.”

Why is this? “Christian communities may be falling short in properly preparing young adults for intimate relationships,” George suggests. “Christian young people may think the only way to overcome temptation is to marry.” But overcoming sexual temptation is a shaky foundation for lifelong commitment to marriage. That is one reason she warns 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 campuses.”

Those who marry young often fail to consider that they may change greatly after their college years. Also, early marriage may distract them from pursuing their callings. They may find it difficult “to pursue post-graduate education, establish themselves in their careers, and become financially stable.”

Finally, “the pressure to marry early often leads to the vocation of singleness being undervalued in Christian communities,” George observes. “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’....”

George, like Hulst, believes that Christian colleges “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.’”

### Study Questions

1. What are the defining features of ring by spring *culture* on Christian college and university campuses? How can it deflect students from chastity?
2. List the pros and cons of becoming engaged or marrying before college graduation. Do you think the ring by spring culture serves college students or the kingdom of God well?
3. How can your congregation best support students who feel pressured to marry within the ring by spring culture?
4. Do you agree with Stacy George that Christian communities tend to undervalue singleness? Why does this occur?
5. Mary Hulst notes that “we all have a list” of attributes for an ideal friend or spouse. Discuss the list she commends from Psalm 15. How does it fit with the idea that we date to “grow closer to Jesus and become better for the kingdom of God?”

### Departing Hymn: “Intense the Love God Molded”

† James K. A. Smith, “Foreward,” in Jonathan Grant, *Divine Sex: A Compelling Vision for Christian Relationships in a Hypersexualized Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2015), 10.

# Beyond the “Ring by Spring” Culture

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To understand the ring by spring culture on Christian college and university campuses.
2. To explore Christian reasons why persons might date and marry.
3. To consider how congregations can provide traditional (18- to 22-year-old) Christian students an alternative to ring by spring culture.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Chastity (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus articles before the group meeting.

## Begin with a Story

“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,” Stacy George recalls. “I was...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.

“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, all the while overlooking their incredible academic accomplishments” (*Chastity*, pp. 46-47).

In this study, we survey George’s research into the pressures and pitfalls of the “ring by spring” culture and explore how congregations can support the students exposed to it at Christian colleges and universities.

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to bless college students and guide their discernment regarding faith and sexuality.

## Scripture Readings

Ask two group members to read Song of Solomon 7:10-13 and Psalm 63:1-8 from a modern translation. Preface the first reading “In Praise of Marital Desire” and the second reading “In Praise of Desire for God.”

## Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

## Reflection

This study pairs two articles—Stacy George’s empirical study of the ring by spring culture on Christian college campuses and Mary Hulst’s winsome Christian speech to traditional (18- to 22-year-old) college students on sex, dating, and marriage during their college years. These authors overlap in their concerns about inattention to vocation, inadequate preparation for Christian marriage, and the devaluation of singleness in congregational life. You might make one of these themes the focus of your discussion.

## Study Questions

1. “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,” writes Stacy George. “It dispenses a social psychological burden that follows students, particularly young women, throughout their undergraduate experience.” George is concerned that it pushes students to marry early with limited discernment of their vocations and inadequate preparation for life-time commitment.

Ring by spring culture can undermine the virtue of chastity in several ways. It may discourage thinking through the role that sex and marriage should play in one’s vocation; rather, it may press students to cede control of these to the (perceived) expectations of their peers. Furthermore, celibate singleness is devalued and committed marriage may be threatened by wrong-headed purposes and inadequate marital preparation.

2. Form two groups to brainstorm the pros and cons of engagement or marriage during traditional college years. The “cons” group will have an easier task since George focuses on the dangers; but members might add that the marriage decisions are more likely to occur away from family and church advisors, be motivated by desires to conform and appear successful among peers, be limited by the available partners at the school, etc. The “pros” group may note that colleges may offer a concentration of available Christian partners, faithful guidance by caring staff and faculty members, and opportunities for safe and meaningful dating.

Recall that George does not recommend “thwarting all engagements on campus or stifling students’ personal goals of finding a spouse.” She wants Christian schools to foster healthy relationships that support the students’ vocations and serve the kingdom of God.

3. Consider the ‘location’ of your congregation. Does it host many undergraduate or graduate students who are attending school away from home, or serve longtime members who stay in touch as they attend nearby schools, or keep up with longtime members who have moved away for their education? The answer may suggest what form of programming is appropriate—a Bible study, special group gatherings over school holidays, one-on-one mentoring, an electronic chat, keeping up through email, providing written materials, helping members find support at their schools, and so on. The goals should include “creating space for...rich theological reflection about sexuality and marriage, exposing young people to nonmarried Christian lifestyles, and providing professional pre-marital programs,” George writes.
4. Despite Paul’s teaching “singleness is a *gift* that many are called to live out, and faithfully embracing it is righteous in the eyes of God,” George notes, “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. Singlehood then becomes invisible, as though it is not an option for adult Christians. This only increases the pressure to find a partner as a way to be seen as ‘successful’ in those communities.”
5. Psalm 15 describes persons of righteous character, who “may abide in [the LORD’s] tent (15:1). Mary Hulst interprets the psalmist’s checklist this way: such persons “love holiness, are open to the Holy Spirit correcting them, and want to move from death to life” (15:2); “speak kindly about their past relationships, even about the people who have hurt them (15:3); are liked and trusted by others, for “they have a clear idea of what is wrong, and keep working to move from wrong to right” and “they keep their promises, even when it costs them” (15:4); and “they are wise with money and ‘stuff,’ and generous with others” (15:5). Consider what members would add to this checklist for a friend or spouse.

## Departing Hymn

“Intense the Love God Molded” is on pp. 55-57 of *Chastity*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.