

When to Break a Promise

Oct. 11, 2011

An important part of integrity is keeping one's word. But are there times when breaking a promise is the *right* thing to do? I think so. And I think God is honored when we do.

We need to make a distinction between giving our word on a legitimate matter—such as wedding vows, signing a legal contract, or even promising to bake six dozen cookies for the PTA bake sale—and making promises that are foolish or sinful in the first place.

I know a number of women struggling to disengage from emotionally dependent relationships with other women. Emotional dependency is putting all your emotional and relational eggs in another's basket, so to speak—needing another's attention, affection and approval as desperately as a baby needs her mama. Making huge promises is part of the manipulative glue that holds these relationships together: "I will always be here for you." "I will always take your calls and return your texts." "I've never loved another like I love you and I always will." "I will never hurt you."

When women come to the point of recognizing these relationships are not God's intention for either of them, they often struggle with their promises as if they were inviolate and carved in stone. Yet the bigger issue—which they need help to see because brokenness keeps us bound up in blindness—is that keeping some promises means sinning against God. In that case, obedience to God is the better choice, even if it means breaking a promise that never should have been made in the first place.

In that case, the right thing to do is repent of making the promise, confess it as sin, and turn in obedient trust to God, depending on Him for help in the painful process.

Recently, a friend who is getting help extricating herself from a sinful relationship told one of her helpers, “But when my friend comes over to help me get out of bed in the morning because I’m depressed, I would be an awful person if she drove all the way over here and I didn’t answer the door and let her in.” The helper wisely responded, “You’re concerned about being an awful person for not answering the door, but you’re in a relationship with a married woman! What about the adultery? Which one is the sin?”

Sometimes, we make promises we shouldn’t make because we didn’t check first with God. Many years ago, our church choir director arranged a day-long seminar with a very wise man. One thing he said stopped me in my tracks: “Why are you here? The need is not the call; the *call* is the call. If God did not call you to this ministry, then you’re not available for what He wants you to be doing.” I realized I had never asked the Lord if He wanted me to sing in the choir, and when I asked, He said no. Embarrassed, I tendered my resignation so that I’d be available for the “something else” that He actually wanted me to do—which, it turns out, was teaching women’s Bible study. Both the women in the study and the other singers in the choir can testify that I am a far better teacher than singer!

Are there promises you should break so you can say “yes” to God instead?

This blog post originally appeared at
blogs.bible.org/tapestry/sue_bohlin/when_to_break_a_promise

It's Not Rubbing the Genie's Magic Lamp

Oct. 25, 2011

Recently I heard a young man share his story of battling his unwanted same-sex attractions. Though Ben's dad loved him very much, he felt like he was everyone else's dad and *then* his dad. He also didn't connect with the masculine that his dad represented. He ended up with longings for deep connection with males. What helped him turn the corner was when he found people with whom he could be completely honest about his shameful desires and feelings, who also helped him develop his relationship with God.

He shared that he slowly realized his heart was looking for three things in other men. First, he longed for someone who was unquestionably a "Capital M-A-N" who made that intangible connection with him that his father didn't make, leaving him with a father-shaped hole in his soul. And he realized that he was also looking for a rescuer, to pull him out of his own wretchedness. And finally, he wanted to be comforted by someone, he said, "who's there when I come back down, when I'm lost, when I'm troubled; I would fantasize about a guy who could just say the right things, do the right things, and comfort me any time I needed it."

Optimally, he told us, it would really great if he could find someone who would be all three of those things at one time, wrapped up in one person. That would be the "Mr. Right" he longed to find and be loved by.

The major "lightbulb moment" of his journey came when he realized that what he longed for was a Father, a Savior, and a Comforter. . . and that perfectly describes who God is—three in one, Father, Son and Spirit. And because he had trusted in

Christ at an early age, that very God was already indwelling him! He realized that the triune God was everything his heart was longing for but he had been too blind to see. God, in giving Himself to His beloved son, was ready to meet Ben's heart's needs and longings, but would not force Himself on him. When Ben opened his heart to receive the Fathering, the Saving, and the Comforting of the God who loved him, everything shifted inside.

God connected some dots for *me* when hours later, our pastor observed that Psalm 37:4 is one of the first Bible verses that people memorize. . . and one of the most misunderstood.

Delight yourself in the LORD, and He will give you the desires of your heart.

Sounds like a magic formula, right? Delight yourself in the Lord, and you get what you want? Just a religious-sounding way of rubbing the genie's magic lamp to get your wishes granted? But that's not what it means.

When we delight ourselves in the Lord, He gives us Himself, and *He* is what our hearts desire. Uncover all the surface, temporary things we think we want, and underneath are the true desires of our heart: to be loved, to be known, to be valued, to be safe, to *matter*.

And as Ben showed us, to be fathered, to be rescued, to be comforted.

Yes, we want all those things—and our marvelous God delights to give them to us as He gives us Himself.

He is so good!

This blog post originally appeared at
blogs.bible.org/tapestry/sue_bohlin/its_not_rubbing_the_genies_magic_lamp

DWTS and the T in GLBT

The big controversy in the current season of Dancing With the Stars is the presence of Chaz Bono, born Chastity, the daughter of pop icons Sonny and Cher. The media has documented Chaz' transition from female to male, bringing "transgender" into people's living rooms and water cooler conversations.



For over a decade, I have loved and walked with people struggling with their gender identity and unwanted same-sex attractions. When I see Chaz, my heart just aches deeply.

How should we wisely, biblically, and compassionately think about those who feel trapped in the body of the opposite sex? [I am not talking about those who were born with chromosomal abnormalities or an endocrine imbalance, which results in hermaphroditism, or—the new term—intersex. These are biological effects of living in a fallen world, and are in a different category from those born with normal, functioning bodies who want to change those bodies.]

People who identify as transgender report feeling different from a young age, which is easy to describe as feeling "born that way," especially when that is the new banner cry of the marginalized, thanks to Lady Gaga's mega-hit of the same name. But it's a big (and, I would respectfully suggest, tragic) step from "I have always felt different from the other boys/girls" to "I am a girl in a boy's body" or "I am a boy in a girl's body."

I would suggest that the core misunderstanding of those in the

GLBT (gay | lesbian | bi-sexual | transgendered) community is the same core misunderstanding of the vast majority of people: a too-narrow understanding of God-designed variations in masculinity and femininity. (Please see my blog post "[The Gender Spectrum](#).") Many of my friends who struggle with same-sex attraction confess that they've often thought how much better life would be if they were the other gender, but transgender-identifying folks take the fantasy to a new level.

The fantasy that "becoming something other than what I am will make me happy" marks transgender. It's wrapped up in a deep-seated envy of the opposite sex, and a hatred of one's own gender. That's why so many believe that surgery to remove the offending body parts will kill what they detest in themselves, their own gender, and transform them into what they admire and believe will give them life.

Fantasy and pretending are part of childhood, but now thanks to advances in technology, an adult can gain access to medical treatments that will feed the fantasy and turn it into reality—or at least the promise of it. Our post-modern culture invents words and redefines language in ways that adds layers of confusion to the issue: instead of the dual simplicity of God creating male and female, we are now told that there is a difference between sex, gender, and sexual identity. No wonder there is so much confusion about this issue!

"I am a man in a woman's body, and I need to bring my outsides into alignment with my insides." (Or the opposite.) This feeling may be strong, but it is not accurate, and it is not trustworthy. We are fallen people living in a fallen world with fallen understanding, and we should not trust our conclusions when they vary so much with what God has said. He declares Himself as our Creator; when God creates a female, which we know by the female body He creates, He is making a statement about His intention for that girl. When God gives us the stewardship over His creation, which includes our bodies, that precludes mutilating them by amputating healthy body

parts because we hate them.

Our culture looks at life through a purely naturalistic, materialistic lens that excludes the spiritual. Our feelings are part of that total focus on the temporal and transitory. When they are particularly strong, they can be all-consuming, and it's easy to say they are true—regardless of what God says in His word. Some people insist that their brains and bodies are mismatched, that transgender is a purely biological issue that, thanks to modern medicine, can be addressed instead of leaving them feeling miserable.

We are broken people, and we try to fix our own brokenness with our own broken methods: enter sex-change clinics. One of the heartbreaking aspects of this issue is what is NOT told to those putting their eggs in the sex-change basket. I had a very long talk one night with a MtF (male to female) post-op transgender woman who blessed me with her heart-wrenching honesty. She was so sure that she would get affirmation and praise as a woman, that the hole in her heart would be filled by what she would see in the mirror. Many surgeries later, from penis amputation to cosmetic surgery to reduce her adam's apple, when she looked in the mirror she saw a man trying unsuccessfully to be what God did not make him to be, and it broke her heart. She said she would give anything to go back to the way God had made her as a him, but now she felt stuck maintaining the charade because that was her identity, both personally and professionally.

This story is one of the reasons psychiatrist Dr. Paul McHugh shut down the sex-change program at Johns Hopkins University Hospital. In his extraordinary article "[Surgical Sex](#)," he wrote, "When I became psychiatrist-in-chief at Johns Hopkins, I realized that by doing sex-change operations the hospital was fundamentally cooperating with a mental illness. We would do better for these patients, I thought, by concentrating on trying to fix their minds and not their genitalia."

I am grateful for the voices of those who have walked deep in the transgender waters and then decided to listen to God (mainly from the helpful website help4families.com): “I remember reading in the Word that our bodies were the temple of the Holy Spirit, and I wondered, ‘What have I done to myself?’ After reading Psalm 139, I began to cry because it spoke of how God had created me and how He had known me from the beginning.”

“I had a hard time having fun, because when I was out with my friends I was jealous of the girls and fun they were having. That started to become a theme in my life, I was jealous of females; their curves, softness, and what I perceived as superiority over men. I hated everything about my masculinity; I had fantasies at times of castrating myself and ending the control of testosterone over my life.”

“I told my wife I was leaving and wanted to divorce and transition to becoming a woman. I went out and bought supplies and women’s clothing that night, and went to hotel room. I won’t go into all the details, but as I sat there in all my ‘feminine glory,’ reading on my computer the stories of other TS folks I remember praying ‘God what am I doing???’ And I remember this still small voice ask, ‘Is this what you really want?’ My response was ‘No, what should I do?’ and what I heard still rings in my head to this day: ‘Run!! Run back to your wife.’ So I did, my wife being the faithful, loving, and godly woman that she is accepted me back, and forgave me. . .

.

“[Later on] I again told my wife that I could no longer live this life and that I needed to leave to pursue my ‘true life’ as a female. I left my wife that night and told her that I wanted to separate. As I left to go back out and check into a

hotel, I was feeling really angry with God. I was yelling on the drive, 'God, this is bigger than You. I can't do this anymore, I am so tired of fighting and I just want to live the way that my mind wants me to live.' I remember God distinctly telling me, 'I am your Father and you are My son. You do not need to do this; you need to get your significance from Me.' I yelled back, 'No God I am done with this crap, this is ridiculous, I am living a lie and I need to be female.' I wrestled and wrestled with this for hours. Finally I was worn down and just asked God, 'What do I need to do?' The answer I got was, 'Get your significance from Me, not from being female. You need to follow Me and love Me more than this.'

"I was worshiping femininity and was ready to sacrifice myself, my wife and my children on that altar. After searching my heart I also realized that I was angry with God, I think mostly for not 'fixing me' the way I wanted. I wanted to pray the prayer and any desire to be female would be gone and I would be some sort of super-man. When God did not fix me this way after years of praying for it, I became bitter."

"If He had intended me to be a woman, He wouldn't have made me male in the first place."

May those who struggle with the lie that they are not okay as they are, find their significance in God who made them the way He wanted them, who delights in them, who loves them with a tender, compassionate love, and says, "Come to Me. Don't try to fix this on your own. Let Me pour truth and grace, love and life into your heart."

This blog post originally appeared at
blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/dwts_and_the_t_in_glb on

Sept. 27, 2011

Interracial Dating

July 21, 2011

Dear Renea,

We are a strong, white, Christian family. Our 22 year old daughter is dating a black boy. He is very nice, kind, well-mannered. However, we just are not in favor of this interracial relationship. We never envisioned one of daughters dating a black boy. We know all the biblical verses pertaining to this. We're just not sure what to say to her. Need some thoughts on this situation. Your thoughts are so welcome. Thanks.

Dear E,

Thank you for writing in with your question.

I'm surprised to hear you mention knowing the scriptures pertaining to interracial relationships because I confess, I am wholly unaware of any verse which addresses the subject. Old Testament passages speak about the importance of Hebrews marrying Hebrews and not pagans who worship false gods and idols, but that has to do with a person's relationship with God rather than his or her nationality. We know this to be the case when we consider heroes of the faith such as Rahab and Ruth, neither of whom were Hebrews, both of whom came to fear (know) the Lord better than many natural Hebrews and were used by God in significant ways, most significantly as women in the lineage of Christ! This is the same vein which runs through the New Testament command not to be unequally yoked in 2 Corinthians 6. Biblical warnings against marrying certain

types of people have everything to do with their relationship with the Holy One (and ours) and nothing to do with nationality, ethnicity or race.

That being said, your feelings and your conflict are real and no doubt a significant part of how you were raised. Based on your letter, it seems you and your husband probably grew up in Bible-believing churches and/or homes which taught against interracial marriages. You certainly grew up in a time in our culture when such relationships were anathema. Your situation reminds me of what the Disciples must have experienced upon seeing Jesus conversing with, not only a *woman* one-on-one, but a *Samaritan* woman. That's not how they grew up! That's not how a good Jewish man was to behave, yet here was their Master, their Teacher, their Messiah breaking all the rules about race-relations (and gender-relations). I'm sure it was a shock. I'm sure it was quite unsettling, perhaps even unacceptable at first. And I appreciate that what I am saying might be just as jarring, just as maddening perhaps, just difficult to accept.

And so it's okay to need time to wrestle with this radical biblical truth that goes against everything you've been taught just as Christ's first followers were constantly having to do. Since Christ's Loving-Truth sets us free, I beg you to wrestle with it, to try to accept it; but even if you cannot, I appeal now to your love for your daughter, a love that has no doubt grown from parent-child love to also include friend-love now that she is an adult. Support your daughter, love your daughter, respect her (decisions) as the adult she is. Don't let your preferences—reasoned as they may be considering the difficulties that can still come as a part of interracial relationships—drive a wedge between you, driving your daughter away from you. Don't give the Enemy a foothold to break down and breakup your family, your love for one another. I implore you with familial affection in Christ our Lord.

Dear E, may our great God give you grace and bless your family

in this scary step of faith we call life.

With love and respect,
Renea

This blog post originally appeared at
reneamac.com/2011/07/21/interracial-dating/

On Gender and Refusing to Disclose It

There was a storm of controversy recently (June 7, 2011) over a Toronto couple's [announcement](#) that they were not disclosing the sex of their now 4-month-old baby. They "believe they are giving their children the freedom to choose who they want to be, unconstrained by social norms about males and females." Not only are they raising their child Storm to be genderless, but they decided not to tell the world—and the world did not like that one bit.

The mother, Kathy Witterick, writes, "When the baby comes out, even the people who love you the most and know you so intimately, the first question they ask is, 'Is it a girl or a boy?' If you really want to get to know someone, you don't ask what's between their legs." But genitals are only one indication of sex; gender-bound brain structures and chromosomes also delineate the fact that we live in a boy/girl world. And the way God set things up—to maintain the boy/girl distinction—you don't have to ask what's between someone's legs because there are plenty of other signs far less intimate.

Ms. Witterick and her husband, David Stocker, hold a loose

ideology about gender, which they are encouraging in Storm's brothers, Jazz (five years old) and Kio (two). Jazz loves traditionally girly things like pink and purple, and chooses to wear his hair long in braids, which regularly invites people to assume he's a girl. His parents give him total freedom in how he presents himself.

"It is true that my oldest son Jazz does not have a traditional notion of what boys should wear, look like or do. It is also true that we believe our children should have the right to choose their clothes and hairstyle. Jazz has a strong sense of being a boy, and he understands that his choices to wear pink and have long hair are not always acceptable to his community. He chooses freely to do them anyway, because he also has been taught to respect difference, love himself and navigate the world in a way that is true to his own voice."

This is a five-year-old boy. How free is he, really, to make choices that he "understands" are "not always acceptable to his community"? How much understanding of the nature of the world does a five-year-old have?

Jazz's mom suppresses her natural instincts in order to parent ideologically:

"In my heart of hearts, I squirm when my son picks a dress from the rack (won't people tease him?), even though I know from experience and research that the argument that children need a binary gender orthodoxy taught to them in order to feel safe is simply incorrect."

I would suggest that teaching "a binary gender orthodoxy" is not incorrect; it is woven into the very nature of how things are because God made it that way: "God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them." (Genesis 1:27) When we depart from a biblical explanation and understanding of reality, and we start making it up as we go along, we invite chaos and confusion.

I think she's right to squirm when her son picks a dress from the rack, and not just because people will tease him. The binary nature of gender is part of God's plan for helping us maintain boundaries between things that need to be kept separate. The Old Testament includes a prohibition against cross-dressing (Deuteronomy 22:5) to support the natural distinction between the sexes. Creating confusion by dressing in the other gender's clothes is not consistent with God's intent to maintain separations between things that should not be confused or blurred. Genesis 1 tells us that He separated the light from the darkness, the waters above from the waters below, the land from the sea. And when he created humans, He created them in two distinctly different types: male and female. Then, in Isaiah 5:20 He said, "Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; Who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness; Who substitute bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!"

I do understand the frustrations of Storm's parents concerning society's too-narrow definitions of boy and girl. (Please see my blog post "[The Gender Spectrum](#).") Jazz is one of those [emotionally sensitive boys](#) who delight in color, texture, fabrics and vibrancy, and his parents apparently fully support the kind of gifted, creative boy he is, which is great. But when parents fully indulge a boy's gravitation to pink, and dresses, and long hair, yet he wants other people to know he's a boy (as Jazz does), there's some needless confusion going on because of a lack of common-sense boundaries.

There's another aspect of this philosophy of parenting that is disturbing: the desire for children to discover "their true gender self," as psychologist Diane Ehrensaft puts it, and to choose what they want to be. Storm's mama wrote,

"[I]n not telling the gender of my precious baby, I am saying to the world, 'Please can you just let Storm discover for him/herself what s(he) wants to be?!. . . We've decided not to share Storm's sex for now—a tribute to

freedom and choice in place of limitation, a stand up to what the world could become in Storm's lifetime (a more progressive place? ...)"

There are lots of legitimate choices that children can make for themselves, and exercising those "choosing muscles" develops self-confidence. But some choices are not legitimate: deciding whether or not to brush their teeth, refusing to eat anything but junk foods, discovering their own religious "truths". . . and choosing their gender, regardless of what their body tells them. From a biblical perspective, God as creator is the one who gets to choose a child's gender, and His choice is revealed in the first moment of birth: "It's a boy!" or "It's a girl!" It is our place as His creations to accept and embrace God's choice for us, not insist on the personal freedom to define ourselves according to our own limited ways of understanding. That is anarchy. That kind of independence from God is the essence of sin.

I am reminded of the deep wisdom of Proverbs 14:12, "There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death." Just because something sounds good to us at the time doesn't mean it will end up well. And this seems especially true of encouraging children to make their own paths without parental limitations.

This blog post originally appeared at
blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/on_gender_and_refusing_to_disclose_it
on June 7, 2011.

Helping Homosexuals Change? Yeah, Right.

ABC News recently did a story on presidential candidate Michele Bachmann's family business, a Christian counseling center run by her husband, Dr. Marcus Bachmann. The focus of the story was a biased, "can you believe this?" exposé of the fact that the counselors help people who don't want to be gay, address their unwanted homosexuality.

They interviewed two people, a man whose mother had taken him to the clinic when he came out as homosexual, and an undercover reporter who brought two recording devices into the sessions with him. Neither man believed their homosexuality was changeable—and when it comes to the counseling office, if your mind is made up that something cannot be changed, guess what? It won't be.

The reporter used the now-familiar phrase "pray away the gay," which is an effective and condescending dismissal of what actually happens when people do successfully shift their sexual orientation. (And I personally know a number of people who have experienced significant and lasting change in their orientation.) Some do successfully engage in reparative therapy, which addresses the emotional deficits in those who find themselves attracted to the same sex using purely psychological methods. But what is more effective is the transforming power of the gospel in the life of a fully devoted follower of Jesus Christ. And, like all discipline of radical discipleship, which means saying "no" to our flesh and "yes" to the flow of Jesus' resurrection power in our lives, it takes hard work over a period of years. There is no easy, 1-2-3 magic prayer to change the way we think and feel. Sanctification is a long process of cooperation with the Spirit of God.

The message our media pumps out today is that sexuality is fluid—except for homosexuality, which is fixed and can't be changed. This means it's okay to give into your secret cravings and come out as gay, in which case folks like Oprah will celebrate you embracing your "authentic self," but it's not okay to say, "God didn't make me gay, and I choose to accept the identity HE gives me instead." It's not okay to say, "I used to be gay and now I'm not."

Which explains why there was an explosion of rage when Dr. Robert Spitzer, eminent professor of psychiatry at Columbia University, released the results of his [landmark 2001 study](#) that showed that change is possible in highly motivated individuals: rare, in his estimation, but possible. (Dr. Spitzer had been the pro-gay lobby's hero since he spearheaded the American Psychiatric Association's removal of homosexuality from the DSM-IV manual, which is the psychiatrists' bible of mental disorders. That decision was the result of caving into political pressure, not the result of any research.)

The idea that people can experience change not only in their behavior but in their hearts is threatening to those committed to the idea of homosexuality as a fixed and unchangeable truth. (I personally believe the reason for their insistence is an understandable defensive reaction to trying to change their orientation on their own unsuccessfully, including attempting to "pray away the gay," which doesn't work. I have written about why that is, [here](#).)

Many of the loud voices insisting that homosexuality is not changeable hold to an unrealistic standard, that only a complete shift from 100% homosexual to 100% heterosexual constitutes change. I suggest that nowhere else do we hold to that standard: would we denounce a former alcoholic who has successfully lived for years in freedom from the destruction of alcohol, as not really changed if he thinks that a cold beer on a hot day still sounds good?

Dr. Spitzer's findings back up the message of the New Testament: that Jesus Christ changes the lives and thus the behavior of people caught in all kinds of sin. Remember this list of changed people in the church of Corinth?

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! The sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, passive homosexual partners, practicing homosexuals, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, the verbally abusive, and swindlers will not inherit the kingdom of God. Some of you once lived this way. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Corinthians 6:9-11)

Change is possible. That is part of the good news of the gospel. And, for the believer in Jesus, change is a normal and expected part of being a follower of Christ.

Even if the world laughs at the notion with a "can you believe this?" contempt. Can homosexuals change? It's not "Yeah, right." It's "Yes! Amen!"

This blog post was originally published at blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/helping_homosexuals_change_yeah_right on July 19, 2011.

Expectations in Dating: Part One

Mar. 20, 2009

Today we're going to talk about boundaries and expectations. Both of which cause us to be selective.

I have to thank Brad Paisley for a song of his which has provided me with this metaphor: dating is a lot like shopping for new clothes. The line from the song goes like this:

*When you go out shopping, you try on brand new clothes.
To see if something fits or not, there's just one way to know.
Why's it any different when someone asks you out?
You might as well just try me on before you turn me down.*

I appreciate this metaphor. I walk into a store – even ones I frequent – and sometimes I don't know how something is going to fit until I try it on. Other times I can tell simply by looking at a piece that it isn't my style or is too big or too small. There are some stores I don't even have to go into because those clothes aren't for me: they might be too trashy or too preppy or whatever. Also, having friends with me whom I trust is helpful. They're honest with me and will encourage me to try things I might not otherwise; items they know will look good on me when I may be unsure – and they're almost always right! I also depend on them to tell me, "No, Renea. That dress doesn't do you right; that color is not for you. Renea, seriously; put that one back." 😊

You see where this is going don't you? Okay, so dating, well, living really, is about risk, but it's calculated risk – more or less. To say that it's important to take risks... in any relationship, dating or otherwise, is not to say we should be uncritical or haphazard. Not being selective about who you'll date is like letting a perfect stranger pick out all your clothes for you; whatever that person brings you, that's what you have to buy, take home, and wear. You wouldn't do that. Why would you be unbiased about who you date?

Okay. So let's talk about dating non-Christians. How many of you think it's probably okay to date unbelievers? You can be honest. Come on. Forget for a minute that you know what the

right answers are supposed to be, or that you think you know what I want you to say. 'Cuz let's be real, if you're unconvinced about what the church has to say about dating unbelievers, chances are we're dropping the ball in some way. And hey, we aren't right about everything; that's impossible; maybe we're wrong about this. So if you think we are, let's talk about it.

Worldview. Whole persons. Intimacy. (Sorry, I did this part extemporaneously.)

The author of our book* puts it this way: "If you aim for nothing, you'll hit it. Is that how you want to aim for your husband – with an open, blank slate? Or do you want to dream of someone who is just right for you, who complements your weaknesses, and who fulfills your hopes and desires" (63)?

And the point she's making is the same one Brad and I were making with the shopping illustration. If we don't have certain standards, goals, ideas and expectations for our lives, including our love-lives, we'll be directionless. We'll zig and zag here and there following any story about sex and romance that's compelling in the moment. And that makes us incredibly vulnerable to believing the lies and distorted views the world has about who we are and how we should live, distorted views about who we are sexually and how we should live our romantic lives.

I'd like to take this thought a bit further, if you'll let me. I'd like to suggest a bigger target. That instead of aiming for a husband who will fulfill the hopes you've pinned upon him, we aim for the Bridegroom of the Church, Jesus, and put our hope in him. As you release your arrow in the direction of the Kingdom, if you happen to snag a husband by the shirt collar, FAN-TASTIC! More to the point, if your arrow becomes intertwined with another going in the same direction, WONDERFUL!

* Gresh, Dannah. *And the Bride Wore White*. Chicago: Moody, 2004.

Stay tuned for [part two](#), and see where we go from here.

This blog post originally appeared at
reneamac.com/2009/03/20/expectations-in-dating-part-one/

Expectations in Dating: Part Two

Mar. 20, 2009

(If you haven't already, see [Part One](#).)

I want to really drive this idea home, so I'd like to read a story from – yep, you guessed it – Lauren Winner's *Real Sex*.*

I recently attended a women's retreat where one of the workshops was about singleness. The speaker, whom I'll call Myrtle, encouraged the single women in the audience to think carefully about what type of guy they're looking for. "You want a Prince Charming," Myrtle said, "and Prince Charmings are attracted to modest women. You might attract certain men by sporting skimpy skirts, but you won't attract the kind of man you really want to be with."

It's encouraging to think that mature Christians are more interested in character than cleavage; yet there is something unsettling about this assurance that chastity will be the erotic mystery that will lead Mr. Right (or Miss Right) to our door. Prince Charming can begin to rival God as the

object of our attentions. Myrtle ended her talk on this note: "What we single women have to do is no more and no less than faithfully pray that our perfect guy is out there. We don't need to hunt him down, we just need to wait for the Lord to deliver him to us. [Is he a pizza?] We don't need to worry about him. Instead we need to focus on ourselves, becoming the pure, modest woman that our Prince Charming will be on the lookout for. We need to devote ourselves to prayer, humility, and grace. We need to continue becoming godly women, so that when the time is right, we will have those godly characteristics that the godly man we dream about will love."

[And that sounds right doesn't it? I mean, that does sound like what we ought to be doing: focusing on prayer, humility, and grace. But this is the point:] I'm not disputing the desirability of the chaste woman or man. It may well be that one of the benefits of practicing chastity is that you attract friends and admirers that admire chastity. But attracting others is not the goal of chastity. Indeed, if Myrtle is focused on catching the eye of the guy who likes chaste women, she may not be inhabiting chastity at all.

Myrtle seems to be working toward becoming, principally, the kind of woman Prince Charming wants, which incidentally may be the kind of woman God wants. Her priorities, I would suggest, need to flip-flop. We are to become the persons of God, and this may bear the incidental fruit of attracting a great partner. The point of chastity is not that you turn your attention away from other people to make you more attractive to them, but that you turn your attention away from sexual and romantic entanglements with other people, and orient yourself toward God. (129-131, bracketed parentheticals mine)

What does it mean to orient our lives toward God?

Right. It means we align ourselves with God's ways. Why would we do that?

[Silence.]

It's a tough question, I know, but an important one. Why does it matter? Why should we bother? Let me help you put words to what I suspect some of you know in that deep, unspeakable way. God's way is the way it's supposed to be. We talked last week about the physical reality of sex being evidence that God's creational intention for sex is good and right and true; how sexually transmitted diseases evidence the fact that when we misdirect our sex-lives, something isn't right. Look around you. Look around you and you'll see things aren't the way they're supposed to be. There's so much hurting in the world. There's so much hurting sexually; things are no longer true – or straight – they're bent. Jesus came and he began the process of righting all the wrong and healing all the hurt. Those of us who believe are called to continue the work Christ began until he returns, when everything will be made right at long last! We do this by orienting our lives toward God.

Here's where I get back to why it's important to have standards concerning who you will and will not date. Because purity, sexual purity, is bigger than sets of dos and don'ts, rights and wrongs, standards and judgments; it's about shaping our lives to the themes of the Gospel, themes such as love, mercy, justice, healing, forgiveness; themes such as defending the oppressed and supporting the weak; themes that express God's way. Learning how to do this is a life-long process. Jesus promises in Matthew 6 that if we will orient our lives toward God's Kingdom, everything else will work out. In light of this promise, let me challenge you to commit the rest of your lives invested in communities dedicated to learning what it means to pray and live out, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Marry the man who has oriented his life toward God and journey toward the Kingdom together... for as long as you both shall live.

* Winner, Lauren. *Real Sex: The Naked Truth about Chastity*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005.

This blog post originally appeared at <http://reneamac.com/2009/03/20/expectations-in-dating-part-two>
/

The Gender Spectrum

When I use the term “gender spectrum,” you might think in terms of masculinity on one end and femininity on the other. We hear men being prompted to “get in touch with your feminine side.” (For some reason, women never seem to be exhorted to “get in touch with your masculine side.” Huh.)



But I don't think that's the way it works.

In Genesis 1, we are told that “God created them male and female” (Genesis 1:27). I think, rather, that there is one spectrum of masculinity and another spectrum of femininity. I also think that God is the one who chooses where on the spectrum babies are born, according to His design and for His pleasure and glory.

The Femininity Spectrum

I suggest that little girls come into the world at some point on a femininity spectrum. On one end is the girly-girl who comes out of the womb asking for the little flower headband to wear in the hospital nursery, and she keeps on running toward

all things frilly and girly. She loves pink, loves to wear dresses and twirl around to “be pretty,” wants to wear nail polish and makeup just like Mommy (or like the other ladies she sees on TV).



Femininity Spectrum



Girly-girl.....Tomboy



On the other end of the spectrum is the tomboy jockette, who can't stand wearing dresses, wants to climb trees and play tackle football with the boys. These girls are often gifted athletically and many are natural leaders. When these little girls' type of femininity is supported and encouraged, they are comfortable in their skin just the way God made them. Wise parents also make sure they wear dresses and “act like a lady” when it's time to do that—with the promise that when they get home, they can put their jeans or sweats back on and be comfortable.

Sometimes, though, girly-girl types can morph into “mean girls” and inform the jockettes that they're not good enough as girls, and they can receive the message that it's not okay to be the kind of girl they are, the kind of girl God chose for them to be because He has a good plan for them. They can grow up not feeling secure in their femininity.

The Masculinity Spectrum

On one end is the rough-and-tumble boy—athletic, noisy, enjoys getting dirty. He bonds to other boys shoulder-to-shoulder, engaging in common activities or tasks, and tends to find face-to-face interaction intimidating.



Masculinity
Spectrum



Rough-and-tumble. Sensitive/creative



On the other end of the spectrum from the *athletic* boy is the *aesthetic* boy: emotionally sensitive, gifted in art, music, theater, dance, or some other kind of art. He usually avoids athletics, getting dirty, and anything having to do with balls coming at him. He bonds eyeball-to-eyeball, connecting to others' hearts through their eyes the way most girls do, but they are not girls. And then, of course, there is everything in between.

In our culture, we tend to define masculinity in terms of the rough-and-tumble type ONLY, but I don't think God agrees, since He delights to create so many sensitive boys and those who are a balance between the two. In fact, even as toddlers, they can reveal themselves by responding to another child's upset by dropping what they're doing and going over to pat them, soothe them, and attempt to comfort them: "You okay?"

It's okay." This sensitivity is a beautiful thing to behold, but it can get a little boy in trouble. Since we define masculinity so narrowly, it is easy to marginalize and shame the masculinity of the sensitive boy. Especially if his daddy is a rough-and-tumble sort of man who is flummoxed by a little boy who would rather Daddy read to him than throw a football.

If the sensitive boy is affirmed in his type of masculinity, he can grow up to be a phenomenal husband, father, pastor, counselor, artist, musician, dancer—the list goes on. When tomboy girls are loved and accepted by their parents just the way they are, they can grow up to be great moms and teachers and scout leaders, especially of boys. If, however, they are ostracized for the way they are designed, they can burn with the indignity of being "other than."

It's these sensitive, gifted boys that are most at risk for embracing a gay identity, especially when others wound them by slapping false labels on them, even from a young age: gay, queer, homo, fag. Tomboy girls, especially the ones gifted athletically, are quickly tagged with ugly false labels as well: lez, queer, gay. They can easily think, "What do others know that I don't know? If they say it, it must be true."

But it's *not* true. They're not gay, they're gifted. If only they could be helped to see themselves that way!

Our goal as adults should be to help all children grow into gender-secure, emotionally healthy kids who are glad God made them a boy or a girl, and are comfortable in their own skins just the way God made them. I think it starts with affirming the different kinds of masculinity and femininity. It's ALL good!

This blog post originally appeared at
blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/the_gender_spectrum
on January 4, 2011.

To Live Is Christ: On Singleness and Waiting

Apr. 9, 2010

We live in the tension between contentment and craving. Whether you are married or single or widowed or divorced; dating, not dating, wanting to date, not wanting to date—for now, forever. If you are wondering about your sexuality or your sex-appeal, your marriage, the strength of your love or your hope. . . And if you can empathize with the faith-struggle of doubt and dashed or delayed dreams (because without empathy we are nothing but the annoying, repetitive clanging of construction in the city streets) . . . Angela Severson has bravely opened a vein to unleash the power that only life-blood has for the healing and cleansing of [telling the truth](#).

This poem is so very well done. I've never seen anything like it. It's holistic and honest and inspiring and right on the money. The single life and the married life illustrate and teach us about life with Christ and the character of God. The story of "This Life" is one that all too often gets marginalized and left untold, or told unwell—But, we're doing better. When both stories are told (and listened to), all lives (and theologies) are enriched.

This Life

We wait, we long for, we pine after, ... we desire, we yearn.
We wait.

I wait
I am thirteen

Puberty explodes like a rash, an epidemic.

My girlfriends hold hands with boys we only months ago snickered at, turned up our noses at, as though their very essence was a disease. Now the disease appears to be, that my girlfriends can't stop gawking over these same specimen. I decide to play along and choose my crushes. I crush my way through high school, waiting to be asked out. Waiting by locker stalls during break, waiting for a nudge in the hall, a simple "hey," a nod. I wait, standing pressed against the wall, through all the slow songs on Friday nights in the darkened gymnasiums. I wait for an invitation to senior prom. I wait.

Through this waiting, I feel like it is not working, meaning me.

Something is not working with me...my friends acquire boyfriends, hold hands, kiss, and I acquire journals, stashed by my bedside, full of wonderings and waiting.

{Wait: as defined by Webster's: To be ready and available}

It is July.

I'm twenty-two.

My days of being a serial "crushest" are about to end.

I am standing in a parking lot surrounded by pigeons pecking at croissant crumbs. The aroma of Newman's fish-n-chips deep fat fryers heating up engulfs me. In the slant of the morning sun my current crush tells me, that he has a crush on me.

.....finally! He likes me and I like him. So, this is what it's like to be loved, this is what I've been waiting for... this messy, dizzy, complicated, delicious, heart pounding love. We dance the dating dance for months and then on a quiet unexpected spring day he wants me to be his...asks me to be his, opens the door to the promise of forever and stamps soul-mate on my heart.

{Wait: as defined by Webster's: To stay in a place of expectation of}

I am twenty-six.

I am engaged to the same fellow.

I am still waiting.

I've waited through friends getting married, through showers and bridesmaids dresses, through banquets and bouquet tossing, through Martha Stewart Wedding Magazines and honeymoon trip photos. It is now my turn. I am next in line to run from the church doors dodging birdseed and blessings. However, love is delicate, as fragile as the blossoms of spring, opening in trust to the slanting sun and quick to close in the cool of the evening, so too was this promise, one that could not take hold, a love aborted, out of fear and wisdom, full of pain, and awe. Stunned with grief, the love in my heart shrinks, evaporates, dies and God becomes small, cruel and unkind.

Hope aborted.

For what do I wait?

Am I waiting for what I want, or what I need?

For that which I desire, or believe that I deserve?

Am I longing for wisdom? ...opening myself to the God, who loves me into this deep-down empty sorrow...

{Romans Eight}

"In the same way the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will."

I am 30 or 32 or somewhere in between.

I have dates that last 10 minutes or 2 years. I avoid answering calls from some and linger hours by the phone waiting for others. In and out of love, infatuation, intrigue...sometimes going through the motions, other times knowing he is.

....I'm into men, I'm tired of men. One day I'm free as a bird

and content in my singleness, the next I am desperately pining away for every male that crosses my path, searching his finger for a wedding ring. I seize the day, travel over seas, take classes, switch careers, indulging in the delights and rewards of being single and still I wait. I watch my married friends build homes, families and history.

It is summer wedding season again. My cousin is getting married. I congratulate myself that I am actually excited about being there, really o.k with my place in life, o.k. that I don't have a date for this wedding, feeling genuinely happy for the two tying the knot. At the reception, between sipping white wine and sampling stuffed mushrooms, she approaches me...that token distant relative, you know the one...she has known me since birth, and kept up on me through my parents Christmas cards...and she asks "So are you going to be next?" I politely answer that I am not currently dating anyone...and she replies, "Well, what is a pretty girl like you still doing single?" Deep in my heart I have to trust that she means well, but the thoughts in my head and the words about to fly off my tongue feel like dragon fire. I want set blaze to her lovely over-sprayed doo. I smile and shrug, and pop another mushroom in my mouth to choke down my anger and my shame. "Yeah, what is wrong with me?" A moment ago I was confident in my singleness and now I feel other. I feel like a freak of nature, an alien, a misfit. I feel shaken.

{Hebrews 11/12}

"All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised, they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth.....They are longing for a better country- a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.....Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God

acceptably with reverence and awe, for our “God is a consuming fire.”

I am thirty-six.

I am single.

Singleness seems to be the new “have it all” lifestyle.

I decide to take a break in my day, a little escape from work.

I brew my cup of tea, add a dash of cream and sit back on the sofa with a magazine for some creative inspiration. I flip open into the middle and look down on the page. It is an advice column. The first question I glance at reads {Capital Q, semicolon} “Help, Please! What should I say to people who ask “why are you single?” It’s so rude, I can never think of a response. (yeah, I agree and can’t wait to hear the answer) {Capital A, semicolon} Shake your head, frown and say, “I loathe giving up all the fabulous sex” The answer hits me in the gut. I feel sad, disgusted, disappointed and angry. I’m appalled at the culture in which I live and yet not surprised. What do you expect, Angela...this world is not going to encourage you in your singleness, at least in a moral sense. I’ve read that singleness is on the rise...more people are single now than ever before. I want to think, great, I’m not so different, not so alone, but there is a huge chasm that defines this single lifestyle. The chasm is sexuality. It is one thing to be single and living with someone, single and sleeping with someone, single and sleeping with anyone and a very different state to be single and abstinent.

Abstinent not because it feels good or is pious, but because it honors God. Choosing abstinence out of obedience and respect for the vulnerability of the human body and spirit. I am ashamed to admit that I often hide the truth that I am nearly forty and a virgin. In this culture being a virgin makes me feel small, prude, asexual. Some nights I lay in bed at night aching to be held, longing for sexual intimacy. Gravity pulls my bones toward the earth, my body fills

hollow....I lay one hand on my belly and the other over my breast, not with the intention of arousal, but to be held. It would be easy to deny my sexuality and I have. But tonight I want to acknowledge that my body was designed for sexual intimacy, and although that yearning is not being fulfilled, I am still a sensual creation.

{Psalms 139}

"You hem me in – behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me."

{Martin Luther}

"This life, therefore, is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness;

not health, but healing;

not being, but becoming;

not rest, but exercise.

We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it.

The process is not yet finished, but it is going on.

This is not the end, but it is the road.

All does not yet gleam in glory, but all is being purified."

I am thirty-eight.

There are days when I feel content knowing that I am growing in wisdom, I am awaiting the Kingdom. That my singleness is just part of my journey here, it is the color of my life. Our stories all get colored in, mine just happens to be green at the moment.

Perhaps I'll meet someone and get married and then I'll get to add some purple and red, but today it's green. I feel blessed with my greenness, alive and grateful. I love my career. I have rich, beautiful friends, and family.... my daily needs are always met, and still there is this tension. I'm driving home from Eugene, marveling over the spring grass, the baby lambs, the sinking sun...the beauty is intoxicating and warm tears roll down my cheeks. I've just come from holding my new godson. His sweet newborn smell,

his fragile breath, his parents (my beloved friends) and his sisters (my other two god children) all nestled in unison. This is a family. In this moment I am so grateful to be a part of it, but now I must travel north on I-5 towards home, alone. These tears are full of sorrow and joy, so bittersweet. In my heart I hold the hope that I may one day receive the blessing of a family like this earth but I know that this earth in all it's beauty, is broken, so that for which I was made, I may not receive. There are bigger promises, larger hopes...to that I must cling.

{Hebrews 11}

"none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect."

{Wait: as defined by Webster's: To look forward expectantly, to hold back expectantly.

To remain neglected or to remain in readiness.}

Today, as I write this, it is hard to wait.

I squirm. I writhe.

My skin crawls. The discomfort is visceral. Anything would feel better than here. The loneliness penetrates and all I see around me is what I don't have. I hike through Forest Park and I see love and families. I see holding hands and holding hearts. I see couples with babies and couples with dogs and couples melting into one another, sharing food, laughter, words and breath. I cry out "God, spare me from this loneliness, this waiting. I want my feelings to change. I feel guilty for not being satisfied with what I have in this moment. My head knows the gospel's truth.

The God of the Universe cares for me, loves me to the core, is for me,...and he has promised me life.

Not this life, but the everlasting kind.

The one without pain and suffering, hungering and squirming. A promise that is more than I can conceive, contain, or deserve. His grace covers the reality that my heart, at this

moment, does not feel any better with this knowledge. I feel small and fragile, achy, and tired. Right now I am marred then I shall be perfect, right now I am broken, then I shall be fixed. I cry out for redemption.

{Deuteronomy 31}

“Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”

What is it that I wait for? For what do I long? Is it Connection? Wholeness? Safety? Love?

I wait with myself, with my family, my friends,

I wait with my neighbor, the clerk at the grocery store, the lady next to me on the bus.

I wait with those across the country, across the sea, across the world, in places I know nothing of, filled with people waiting...

They wait for things that I have. They wait for warm food in their bellies and water on their lips, they wait to see their sick child healed, or the miracle of their bodies restored, they wait for a soft place to lay down at night, and the demon voices in their heads be stilled. They wait for the terror to stop and the monsters slain. We all wait.

We wait for hope, for freedom, for comfort

We wait for love.

Deep, deep love that will never fail. A love that will fill us.

We wait for Christ.

{Romans 8}

“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angel nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Angela Severson

<http://www.imagodeiwomen.com/2010/03/this-life.html>

This blog post originally appeared at
<http://reneamac.com/2010/04/09/to-live-is-christ/>