

COURTSHIP IN CRISIS

THE CASE FOR TRADITIONAL DATING



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THE GENERATION THAT KISSED MARRIAGE GOODBYE

A few years ago, if you had told me I'd be writing a book about Traditional Dating, I would've given you a lecture about the benefits of Modern Courtship. My parents weren't fully sold on the idea, but I suspect they were relieved when I chose not to date.

The early courtship books appealed to me. Modern Courtship felt like the safe, biblical alternative to dating. I didn't want to endure a series of heartbreaks that ultimately amounted to "preparation for divorce." I liked the idea of not giving my heart away to a woman I wouldn't marry. I wanted a lifelong happy marriage. Modern Courtship promised to be the best way to get there.

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I didn't go on a single date in high school. When I went to college, that trend continued. I created the website PracticalCourtship.com.

I wouldn't have dreamed of going on a date.

Looking back, I realize I'd held a deep belief that going on a date was a sin. I wouldn't have said it that way at the time, but deep down, I didn't think dating was a godly practice. The idea of going on a date terrified me.

I avoided dating. I hung out with plenty of female friends in groups, and if I really wanted to get to know a girl more, I'd create a group activity in order to spend time with her.

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In my early twenties, a new family came to our speech and debate club. They had a kind, compassionate, beautiful daughter who I'll call Helen. She caught my eye right away, so I volunteered to help Helen and her siblings on their speeches. I racked my brain for school-related excuses to call her.

The first time I called without an excuse, Helen stopped me. "I made an agreement with my parents that in order for a man to give me special attention, he needs to talk to my father first." I told her I understood and hung up the phone.

I knew what a meeting with her dad meant: we would start a supervised relationship for the purpose of marriage—a courtship. After no small amount of prayer and talking with my parents, I worked up the courage to call her dad and arrange a meeting.

I met her dad at a restaurant. After a bit of small talk, he drilled me with questions to determine if I was worthy. He wanted to make sure I was serious about getting to know his daughter better.

At that point, I had never been one-on-one with her and didn't know her well. But what I did know, I liked, so I assured him I was serious.

After our meeting, he told me he'd think about it, and he sent me away with some "homework," which included

bringing him my résumé, a written list of life goals, and some sort of financial statement. Then he would make his determination.

I brought them.

I suffered a few sleepless nights as I waited for my second meeting with Helen's dad. When I arrived, he asked a few more questions and then said the words I'd been waiting for: "Thomas, you have permission to court my daughter. I want to continue meeting with you like this from time to time to check in on how things are going."

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A few days later, I headed off to Ecuador for a study-abroad trip with my university. (Talk about bad timing!) But we stayed in touch via email.

When I came home, I brought Helen fresh Ecuadorian roses. I handed her the bouquet, and as she smiled at me, I knew that enduring her dad's interviews was all worth it. Soon we'd experience all the happiness promised in the courtship books I'd read all those years.

Except for one problem: Helen and I didn't know each other very well. Neither of us had been in a relationship before, and we had no idea what we were doing. We just knew that whatever we did, it had to be "for the purpose of marriage."

For every five or six times I met with Helen, I had another meeting with her dad. Explaining this to my college friends proved challenging. "Let me get this straight," one of them asked during lunch. "You went on two dates with her dad before you went on a date with her?" They just didn't get it.

At first, everything about our relationship was awkward. Being near Helen was awkward. Talking was awkward.

Being identified as boyfriend and girlfriend was awkward. Despite both of us being legal “adults,” neither of us had worked through the “cooties” stage of girl-guy interactions.

We weren’t comfortable around each other, and we didn’t know how to communicate. We felt like two kids struggling

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to figure out and express what we were feeling. Since I’d never been in a relationship before, I didn’t know what I was looking for in a wife.

As you might imagine, we started having issues. I remember wondering, *Are the issues we’re experiencing an indication that we’re a bad fit? Or are they just things we need to work through?* I had no idea how to interpret our challenges.

We were on-again, off-again for a while, until I got word that her parents were planning to move across the country. She was living with her folks at the time and had decided to move with them.

I was devastated. I didn’t want her to leave. I sought counsel from my parents and some of my courtship-minded guy friends. They thought I hadn’t given the relationship enough effort, enough heart, enough commitment. I decided the best way to save the relationship was to give her a reason to stay.

So I started shopping for engagement rings.

I scheduled a meeting with her dad in order to ask for her hand in marriage. I prayed with my parents, then went to meet with her father. My insides trembled as I told him that I loved his daughter, and that I wanted to stick by her through thick and thin.

He stared at me for a moment and then said, “Thomas,

what makes you think you're good enough for my daughter?"

He went through my life piece by piece and pointed out each area where I wasn't good enough, especially in my finances.

I'd launched a tech start-up while in college. As the CEO, people depended on me for their wages. He didn't like that I wasn't working for a steady paycheck with a big company. He pointed out how my company hadn't yet taken off and that we were going through a rough patch.

His criticism didn't stop with my finances. For two hours, he methodically picked through every area of my life and explained how I fell short. Personality traits, family background, theology—very little escaped his criticism.

I sat there, too stunned to speak. None of this had come up in any of our previous meetings. In the end, he said that while he didn't think I was fit to marry his daughter, he would ask her anyway and give her the choice.

I drove to my parents' house, where I found my whole family praying for me, waiting to hear how it went. I had to tell them what Helen's father thought of me. He'd stomped on my hopes and dreams. They tried to comfort me but to no avail. I felt so numb I couldn't even cry.

My proposal to Helen came through her father, the man who'd made it clear he didn't like me. No romantic down-on-my-knees proposal for her. I have no idea what he said to Helen, but it didn't go over well.

She said no. What girl wants to be proposed to by her father?

I felt like a total failure. I worried I had sinned against God by pursuing a relationship that couldn't be from Him, since it hadn't worked out. I'd given my heart to a girl who rejected me. I was damaged goods. Who would want such a terrible person?

What girl wants to be proposed to by her father?

That year was one of the lowest points in my life. Not only did I have to deal with Helen's rejection and her father's stabbing criticisms, but around that same time my dad had a heart attack, my grandfather died, and my business continued to lose money.

During that time, I came to the conclusion that Helen's dad must've been right. I wasn't worthy of courting Helen, much less any other girl.

I decided I would prove to him, myself, and the world that I wasn't a failure. Over the next few years, I dove into work until it consumed all my free time. I took little to no salary. I poured all the profits back into my company to get more growth. We couldn't grow big enough or fast enough for my tastes. I had to prove that man wrong, whatever the cost.

For a while, we hired a new person every month. But no matter how fast the company grew, it never felt big enough to prove I was worthy.

My parents encouraged me to go on dates. At this point, it had been years since the rejection, and they'd grown concerned about me.

A couple of years later, I met a girl through a nonprofit I volunteered for. We hit it off, and I did something I'd never done before: I asked her out to dinner. She didn't come from a courtship culture, so I didn't need to ask her dad first.

It was a pretty normal date. (Except for the fondue. I think most people stopped eating that a long time ago.) I picked her up. We shared pleasant conversation at the restaurant. I paid, and then I drove her home. I don't think I touched her once (even to shake hands or give her a side-hug).

Nevertheless, the next day guilt swirled in my heart. I'd done something I promised I would never do. I went on a date with a girl, alone, at a restaurant. We didn't even have a chaperone!

Though my parents had encouraged me to date after the

Helen breakup, I still felt that dating was evil. Had I sinned against God?

Not Uncommon

One of the aspects of my job is that I travel and speak at conferences around the world. Some of the events are specifically for the homeschool community. This gave me a chance to speak with a lot of courtship-minded folks.

I heard stories similar to mine. It turned out my experience was more common than I had thought. I spoke with one godly and ambitious young man who'd been rejected by over two dozen fathers and was still single. Most young men give up after far fewer rejections.

Some women might question whether these types of courtship-minded men really exist, but they do. I've met them. They're smart, funny, and would make amazing husbands and fathers. Yet they share Modern Courtship horror stories similar to or worse than mine.

Young courtship-minded women are frustrated that "no one is asking." They cry themselves to sleep at night because they feel alone and unwanted. They have no idea how many young men give up on Modern Courtship after suffering rejections by courtship fathers.

But when godly young men give up on Modern Courtship, it creates a gender imbalance in the community. The more people I interviewed, the more I suspected something was wrong nationwide. The imbalance is so strong in some communities that some women get the impression that there are hardly any godly men left.

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These young men and women want to honor God. They also want to get married. Yet there seems to be no clear path from single-and-lonely to married-and-happy.

As I heard these stories, I reconsidered views from people like my grandparents, who had been against Modern Courtship from the beginning. Could their concerns have been valid? How could I have been so wrong?

I spent serious time praying and seeking God. I studied history, searching for answers. Why were God-fearing men being so cruelly rejected? Why were godly women crying themselves to sleep out of loneliness and despair? Why were there so many lonely, sad singles in the Church making comments like, “There aren’t any good

men out there,” or “No girls ever say yes to a date”?

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In many ways, homeschoolers think of themselves as countercultural. But in terms of relationships, we were super-cultural. We forged ahead of culture when it came to group dating. You could almost say those of us in the courtship community were the hipsters of relationships—we abandoned dating before it was cool. Now, even on college campuses, dating of all kinds is on the decline as singles swipe right to hook up with strangers.

The courtship crisis is not hitting only conservative, courtship-minded singles, but it’s also hitting people throughout our society. Each year a smaller percentage of people get married than the year before.¹

This is a crisis many don't realize is happening, but it's one that could have long-term implications for both our personal lives and our entire civilization.

The Marriage Crisis

In the time between when my grandmother sat in that soda shop with her Friday-night date in 1946 and when I asked Helen to consider a relationship in 2008, the yearly wedding rate in the United States dropped from 16.8 weddings to only 7.2 weddings per thousand people.²

Since then, the marriage rate has fallen further still—to only 6.8 weddings per thousand people.³ And some of those weddings are second or third marriages. The wedding rate in America is now at an all-time low and continues to fall. In 1946 a typical church of 300 people would have had five weddings in one year. That same church in 2014 would host only two weddings.

When people think about the “Marriage Crisis,” they usually think about America’s staggering divorce rates. The problem is bigger than that. While the Baby Boomer generation had trouble staying married, many Millennials won’t get married at all.

In 1950, married couples occupied four out of five households. Today, for the first time in history, less than half of U.S. households are occupied by a married couple.⁴ The drop in married households is particularly notable because all the “adults who still live with their parents” count as “living in a household with a married couple.”

Millennials are kissing marriage goodbye like no other generation. Today, just 20 percent of adults aged eighteen

Q&A #1

I'm 25 years old, and I've never been asked out on a date. I want to get married. What should I do?

to twenty-nine are married. That's down from 59 percent in 1960.⁵ So in a youth group of twenty young people, only four of them will be married by the time they turn twenty-nine. The other sixteen students will have to wait into their thirties and beyond.

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The Pew Research center predicts that one out of four Millennials will never get married.⁶ So for five of the singles in that youth group, true love will wait a lifetime only to find nothing but platitudes from well-meaning married couples. We have one generation that won't stay married and another that

won't get married.

The courtship crisis isn't just a crisis of Modern Courtship. It's a crisis of all systems of courtship, both secular and religious.

Young people, parents, and churches are desperate to do something about the courtship crisis. Unfortunately, as we'll soon see, the proposed solutions didn't work, and in some cases they made the crisis even worse.

Civilization Without Marriage

You may be asking, "Why should we care about the marriage crisis? I mean, as long as you find a spouse, who cares what everyone else is doing? Live and let live, right?"

Wrong.

Marriage is the core of a family. According to Aristotle, the family is the foundation for civilization⁷. When a foundation cracks in one place, it creates a ripple of problems throughout the entire structure. Modern social science shows

that when the institution of marriage cracks, a ripple of problems is caused throughout society.

For example, children who grow up *without* married parents do worse in school,⁸ make less money,⁹ pay less in taxes, are more likely to commit crimes¹⁰ and require more government assistance.¹¹ Right now, less than half of all children are growing up in a traditional family.¹²

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But this isn't just about children. Singleness has health consequences for adults.

Unmarried people:

- are less happy¹³
- live shorter lives¹⁴
- have more heart attacks¹⁵
- are less likely to survive cancer¹⁶
- are more likely to get Alzheimer's¹⁷
- experience more depression¹⁸
- experience more stress¹⁹

If a virus causing these symptoms were to spread around the nation, we'd call it an "epidemic" and mobilize society to address the disease. People would be dumping buckets of ice water on their heads to raise awareness. When people talk about the "singleness epidemic," it's not just hyperbole. There are real physical and emotional symptoms.

The human body is only as healthy as the health of its trillions of cells. A sickness in one cell does little harm, but when enough cells get sick, the whole body will die.

A civilization, likewise, is only as healthy as the individuals who make up the society. A rise in singleness makes

more adults and children sick emotionally, physically, and financially. Could anything else be as harmful to our society as the decline in marriage? Western Civilization has collapsed before, with the fall of the Roman Empire. We should beware the hubris that says it can't happen again.

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If we don't restore the institution of marriage, we'll face a future of lonely singles left wondering what happened and who will take care of them in their old age.

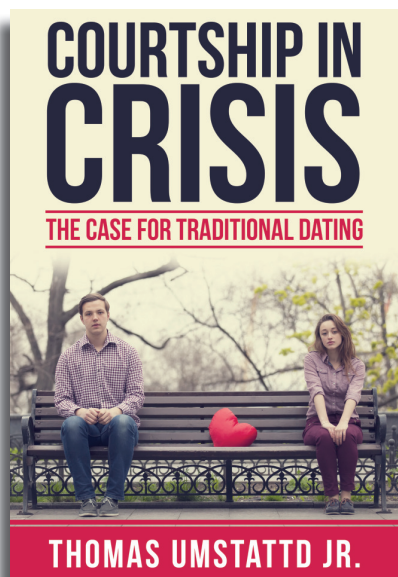
The good news is that this is a problem we can fix. It's not too late for any of us. Yes, it'll take some hard work and a shift in thinking, but solving the courtship crisis is easier than you might think.

The Experiment Failed

In the 1990s, a huge movement swept through America. Millions of young people stopped dating and embraced something new called “courtship” which promised to usher singles into marriage while avoiding the dangers of dating. It sounded wonderful.

The problem? It didn’t work.

The resulting singleness epidemic left a generation with broken hearts and little hope.



There's Another Way

In *Courtship In Crisis*, Thomas Umstattd Jr. explains where the courtship crisis came from, and why it failed. More importantly, he lays out an alternative model that works.

“Courtship in Crisis is a well-reasoned, Spirit-infused breath of fresh air for anyone wanting to re-think their dating habits.”

— Mary DeMuth, author of *The Wall Around Your Heart*



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