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COVER STORY

Can the Church Save Marriage?

Matrimony rates are in decline, even among conservative Christians. Here's what that means for the future.

MARK REGNERUS / POSTED JUNE 22, 2020

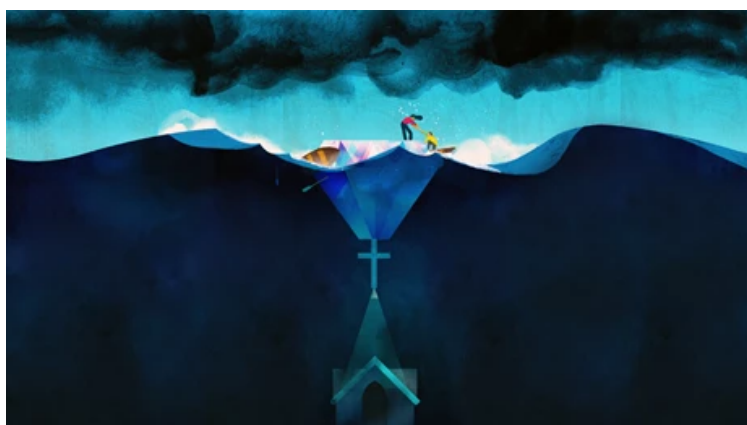


Image: Illustration by Keith Negley

For Rachel, the educational phase of her life was about freedom and independence, not commitments. She met plenty of men in her 20s, but none of them was ready for a serious relationship. She doesn't entirely blame them. "Men have gotten rightfully confused about what the heck women want," she said, "and aren't really sure how to date women."

After moving to Austin, Rachel met her husband on the dating site OkCupid "because I'm cheap," she said, laughing, "and it was free." Her marriage preceded her conversion, yet the two events felt like a package deal. Before becoming a Christian, sex was less meaningful, cohabitation was defensible, and marriage was a pie of paper issued by the state. No longer. After coming to faith and joining a Southern Baptist church, she now believes that marriage is a covenant before God and a sacred relationship.

Even more than marriage, the arrival of children matured the love between Rachel and her husband. Starting a family felt natural and intuitive. But she's convinced that her husband and many men like him view work, marriage, and family as something more practical and functional. "I think men are meant to be the providers," Rachel said. "You know that's kind of what they're designed for."

Although Rachel landed on her feet, the fact is that fewer and fewer men like her husband are opting into

matrimony and family. According to a Census Bureau survey taken in 2018, only 35 percent of 25- to 34-year-old men were married, a precipitous and rapid plunge from 50 percent in 2005.

These numbers point toward a clear and frightening trajectory: Marriage is getting rarer. Fast.

Getting married is something humans have done for millennia out of economic practicality, if not out of love. Some challenges in tying the knot are old and mathematical—for example, more women are interested in matrimony than men. Others are recent and ideological, including the new norm of short-term relationships and the penchant for “keeping your options open.”

Another new barrier is the pandemic. Months into our collective experience with COVID-19, many weddings are being delayed, and a lot of burgeoning relationships are being put on ice.

However, long before social distancing took its toll on marriage, I became curious about how the marital impulse was faring, especially inside the church. As a sociologist, I wanted to know: What forces push Christians away from matrimony? What scenarios encourage marriage? Are American Christians unique in their experience of these forces? And finally, are Christians elsewhere better at resisting the cultural voice that counsel them to be self-absorbed and skeptical about marriage?

Unfortunately, the kind of marriage I had in mind is no longer hip in the scholarly sphere. The late ethicist Don Browning said that for many academics, marriage is now considered “the ‘M’ word, almost in the same category as other dirty words.” Add Christianity to the mix, and you get the holy grail of unfashionable pairings among my peers.

Nevertheless, I persisted. Over the course of a year, my global research team and I spoke with nearly 200 churchgoing, young adult Christians across seven countries: Mexico, Spain, Poland, Russia, Lebanon, Nigeria and the United States. (Subjects quoted in this story are identified by pseudonyms to protect their identities.) Some of the interviewees, like Rachel, were recently married or engaged, but the majority of them were unmarried. Their average age was 27.

The takeaway from my research was more than clear. Skepticism about marriage is spreading well beyond the West. It was detectable from Mexico City to Moscow, Beirut to Lagos. As I studied the data and put the puzzle pieces together, it became obvious that among the globe’s young adult Christians, something is amiss with marriage. In an era of new options, more choices, greater temptations, higher expectations, consistent anxiety, and endemic uncertainty, nothing about the process of marrying can be taken for granted. Although I sound like a risk-sounding alarmist, I can’t stress this point enough: The institution of marriage is under severe strain.

Ander, a 25-year-old engaged physician-in-training in Spain, is marrying soon. One might think that he, of all men, a doctor marrying another doctor after six years of dating her, would exhibit confidence. Not quite. I asked him what he’s afraid of.

“Not to be free,” he said. “Tied to someone. Compromised. Things you don’t know that you don’t know. Maybe we’re okay now, but not later.” After asking him how, exactly, that might happen, he said, “Differences arise

a couple. The other person is different than you thought they were.” I asked if dating for six years wasn’t long enough to get to know someone. He replied, “I feel like I don’t know her that well.”

Ander said he has only modest Christian resources to help him deal with his concerns, even though his faith is strong and he’s entrenched in a supportive community of believers. He’s hardly alone in expressing uncertainty and its accompanying anxieties, to say nothing of the standard premarital jitters. But he recognizes that these misgivings have taken on a life of their own. “This fear is now pathological and is stopping us in some way from doing a good thing,” he said.

Ander is only one of many Christian men who are part of the downward turn in marriage trends. According to data from the World Values Survey, regular church attenders in the seven countries I studied do indeed have a better shot at being married—at almost every age. But the predictions varied across countries.

For example, 76 percent of Polish women who attend church weekly are expected to be married by age 30, and 88 percent by age 35. That’s about 10 percentage points above women of the same age in the United States and Spain.

The marriage gap between churchgoers and everyone else, however, is especially striking. In the United States, 72 percent of men who attend church weekly are expected to be married at age 35, while the same is predicted for only 50 percent of American men who don’t regularly attend.

How do American evangelicals fare? In a nationally representative survey collected in 2014 for the Austin Institute (where I’m a research fellow), 56 percent of self-identified evangelicals between ages 20 and 39 told us they were currently married. That number is well above the 42 percent reported by the rest of the same-population. A repeated inquiry four years later yielded an obvious dip. In late 2018, 51 percent of evangelicals ages 20 to 39 were married, compared to 40 percent of that total population. The number is still higher, but it’s falling faster.

Meanwhile, the portion of evangelicals who said they were cohabiting rose from 3.9 percent to 6.7 percent over the same span of time. Support for cohabitation sprouted from 16 percent of this population in 2014 to 27 percent by late 2018. Very few of the surveyed evangelicals believe that marriage is “outdated,” but a growing minority of them now perceive an alternative pathway to get there.

Official church records also note obvious decline over time. A look at the Statistical Yearbook of the Church of the Holy Eucharist, a Catholic publication, reveals that Catholic marriages in the United States have plunged 59 percent since 1960 when there were 9 weddings for every 10 funerals. By 2017, that ratio had dipped to 3.7 for every 10. Unless you’re pastoring a hipster evangelical church whose median age is under 40, you may be doing more burying than marrying.

Why? One understated factor is the endemic uncertainty exhibited by Ander and others like him.

In theory, committing should diminish such doubt—especially if it concerns finances. After all, two together

can accomplish more than one (Ecc. 4:9–12). But most men and women don't perceive marriage this way anymore. In no country did I hear a consistent description of marriage as a means to combat or mitigate material, social, or psychological uncertainty.

In fact, I heard quite the opposite from many of my interview subjects, including Victor, a 29-year-old Orthodox Christian in Moscow. The very concept that he's attracted to—having a wife and children—create questions in his mind. What would he do if his wife became unstable or difficult? What if he struggled to support his family? And what about the challenge of living in a tiny apartment? "It's very problematic," he told me, "to create a family in the conditions of a modern metropolis."

The story of how this pandemic of uncertainty came to be is no straightforward tale about sexual revolution, gig economies, or substandard men. Instead, what people expect from marriage has changed profoundly, even though what marriage offers has not.

Marriage, even in the minds of most Christians, is now perceived as a capstone that marks a successful young adult life, not the foundational hallmark of entry into adulthood. The nomenclature attests to this. A capstone is the finishing touch of a structure. It's a moment in time. A foundation, however, is what a building rests upon. It is necessarily hard-wearing. In the foundational vision, being newly married and poor was commonly expected, and difficult, but often temporary. In the capstone standard, being poor is a sign that you're just not marriage material yet.

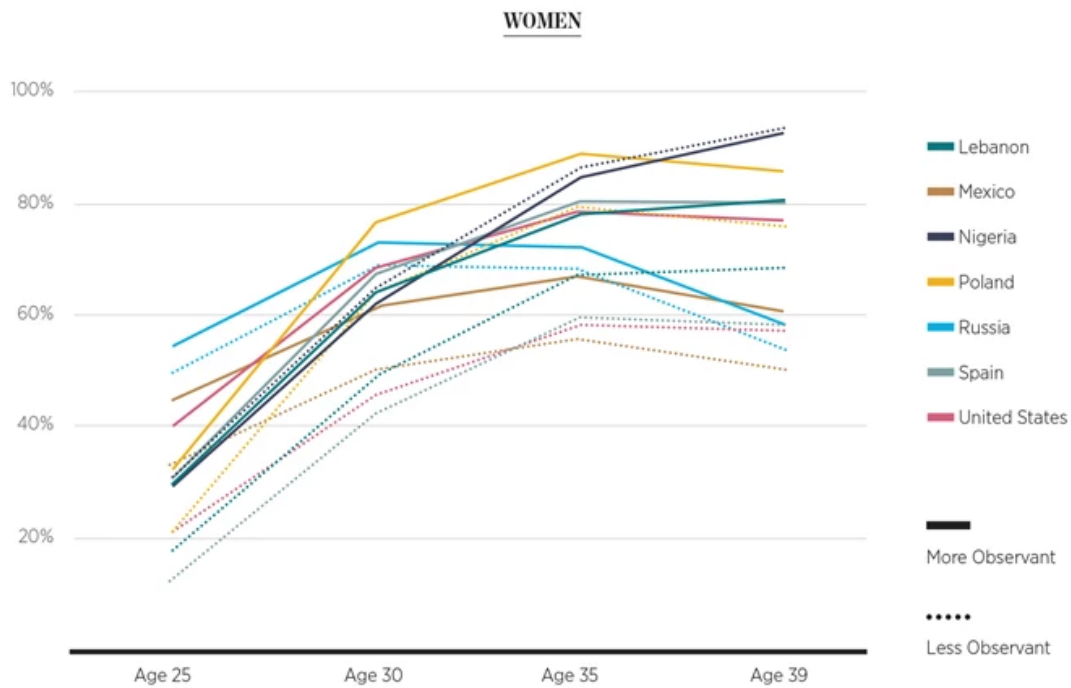
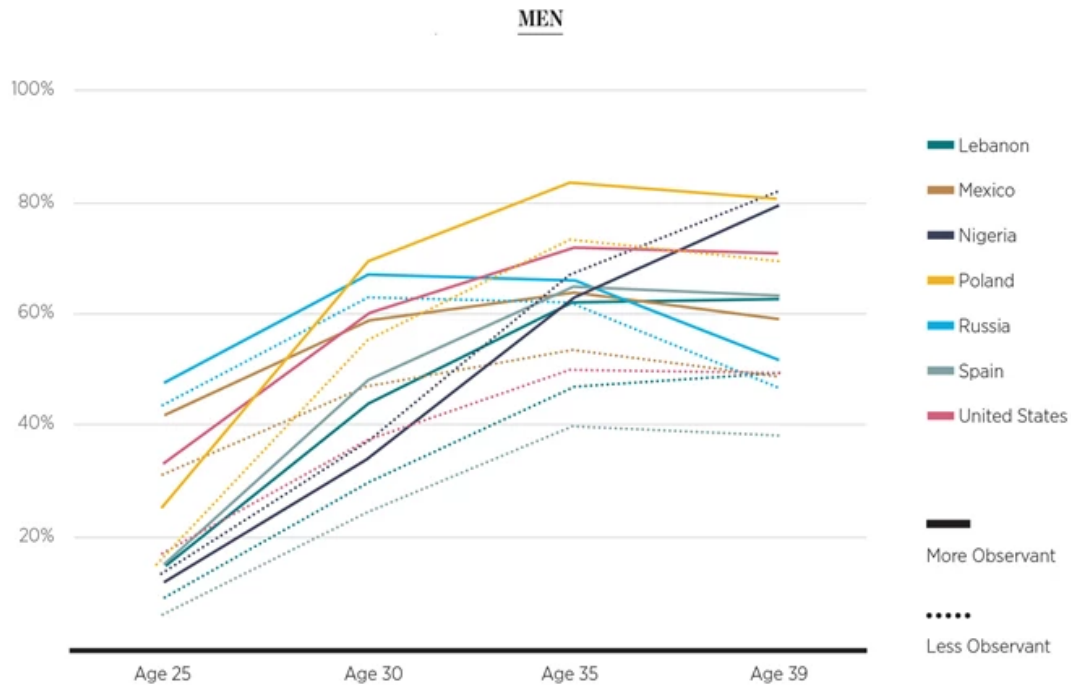
As Russell Moore laments in *The Storm-Tossed Family*, marriage is increasingly a "vehicle of self-actualization" rather than a setting for self-sacrifice.

Chloe, a 27-year-old interview subject from Michigan, explains this mentality. "You have your 20s to focus on you," she said, "and then [after that] you try to help others." This approach, common among her peers, is poor preparation for marriage. Self-sacrifice is learned behavior, not a gift for your 30th birthday.

Marital mission creep is not exclusive to the prosperous West, either. Ndidi, a 28-year-old unmarried Pentecostal from Lagos, was clear about the conditions under which she would marry. "When I have everything I want," she said. "When I am able to achieve everything I want to achieve for myself. Then I will get married."

Another 24-year-old unmarried woman from Lagos concurred. "Oh, please!" she said, laughing. "I can't marry and suffer."

LIKELIHOOD OF BEING MARRIED BY COUNTRY, AGE, AND LEVEL OF RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE



WORLD VALUES SURVEY

Most of the young Christians we interviewed articulated high expectations for matrimony and a low tolerance for sacrifice. They frankly didn't like to give of themselves too much. They might have balked at talk of soulmates, but they secretly pined for one.

By contrast, couples who managed to thwart such elevated standards could see the future more clearly.

One Polish family in my study serves as an example. Pawel, 24, and Marta, 29, are a recently married couple living in Krakow. Marta is a full-time mother to their one-year-old daughter, while Pawel is in the middle of graduate studies in philosophy at a nearby university.

The Krakow couple went against the current in a number of ways. By having a modest wedding, the two saved money, but in doing so, they frayed social ties. Marta is from a small town where weddings are a very big deal. "It was a bit of a scandal," Pawel confessed, "because we didn't have a big reception." But she and Pawel were convinced that there's far more to the good of marriage than satisfying friends and neighbors.

When I asked them whether they thought marriage had changed, Marta was blunt. "Yes. It's now about comfort in marriage, looking for comfort, [more] than it was 20 to 30 years ago," she said. "When I think about my family and parents, they didn't have [much] money or [own] a home."

She and Pawel have followed in that same tradition and taken a foundation view of marriage rather than a capstone one. Their life together, while hardly simple, reflects a confidence in their Maker that eludes many of their peers.

In my research, I saw very few couples esteeming this more functional, foundational, natural-next-steps approach to matrimony. Here's what that tells me: Marriage is moving away from its populist roots and is no longer a practice that most of the world's adults participate in and benefit from. Instead, it's fast becoming an elite, voluntary, and consumption-oriented arrangement that takes place later in life. The advantaged now consolidate their wealth and income by marrying, while the disadvantaged are left without even the help of each other. But how many of us see clearly that marriage is about social justice? Not very many.

Marrying later, of course, need not be a problem and can be a strength. The bad news is that later marriage predicts less marrying. Fewer people—Christians included—will marry in the future.

In this space of declining or delayed matrimony, a lot of women, especially, are left waiting. In fact, "I'm tired of waiting" might be the most common lament that I hear in this domain. In most congregations, there are simply more women than men interested in marriage. Sociologists are often eager to use economics as an explanation for this trend. But unfortunately, it's not merely a numbers game. Those who have more options—men—by definition have more power than those who have fewer, and that power translates into the ability to demand whatever you want, including sex.

For many Christian women, this dynamic puts them in a familiar double bind: *Do I prematurely sleep with a man who shows considerable promise, or do I say no and risk the probability that he may leave me for someone*

who will?

Farah, a 25-year-old Lebanese woman who works part time for the United Nations, has not had to make this decision. Her waiting, however, is not without its challenges.

Farah lives with her parents, as do most unmarried adult children in Lebanon. Her father, a married priest, cares a great deal about matrimony and has counseled many couples in the apartment they share together. (It's a small place, so she overhears the conversations.) She feels prepared to be married, but there are no suitors on the horizon. She's not too concerned, though. Lots of devout Lebanese women wait. When they do marry, they seem to work more, not less, since the cost of living in Beirut outpaces salaries. Spare time is swamped with domestic responsibilities.

"When both spouses are working, they come home tired," said Farah. "Even before they have kids, the couple doesn't have the time to sit together, so they delay their discussion time. They delay things to Saturday, usually, so Saturdays or weekends become overloaded, which becomes very tiring."

Farah came to a clear conclusion. "This challenging condition is creating a new image of marriage," she said.

This dynamic is hardly limited to Lebanon. Increasingly, spouses are expected to sacrifice across a host of domains by supporting each other's careers, co-parenting with equality, listening with understanding, and becoming best friends. Some of these conditions are externally imposed, as with economic strain, but many others are internally generated and elective. In this context, the quest for an ideal mate may yield what sociologist Eli Finkel has dubbed the "suffocation model" of marriage. Tim Keller, author of *The Meaning of Marriage*, is also skeptical of this turn. "Simply put," he writes, "people are asking far too much in the marriage partner."

As we wring our hands over the flight from marriage, one insight that hasn't received attention is that fewer and fewer people are interested in participating in what marriage actually is. While most people marry with affection—as they should—marriage, when you observe it across time and place, still concerns the mutual provision and transfer of resources within a formalized sexual union. That may sound unsexy and old-fashioned, but it's not untrue. Matrimony has long depended on an exchange based on inequalities between the spouses: He needs what she has, and vice versa.

Many balk at this notion. "If the basis of marriage is specialization and exchange," wrote the late UCLA demographer Valerie Oppenheimer, "then marriage seems an increasingly anachronistic social form."

She's right—and declining marriage rates appear to reinforce her point. But marriage is what it is. Demand much from it, and you will be disappointed. All of our social, cultural, and legal efforts have not fundamentally altered the nature of the union. Marriage isn't changing. It's receding. In an era of increasing options, technology, gender equality, "cheap" sex, and secularization, fewer people—including fewer practicing Christians—actually want what marriage is. That's the bottom line.

As a researcher, studying the demise of marriage has been like watching an invasive fungus slowly destroy :

stately old oak tree. Despite all this bad news, though, there is reason for hope. The oak will not perish. In fact, marriage will increasingly become “a Christian thing,” which means the church will bear increasing responsibility for an institution with an uncertain future.

As my research assistants and I talked with interview subjects around the globe, we heard many of them describe marriage in sacramental terms. Some—like Rachel—spoke of a covenant. Others described marriage as a domestic church, a procreative union, or a unity blessed by God.

Augustine would be pleased by these answers. In his book *On the Good of Marriage*, he affirms matrimony as the first natural bond of human society. Many of our interviewees defined marriage with reference to some version of Augustine’s “three goods”—fidelity, children, and a sacred bond.

While these three goods are not uniquely Christian, whenever or wherever these practices are disregarded or undermined, marriage recedes. And since Christians on average tend to be more committed to these goods than their secular peers, it’s no surprise that marriage will slowly become more of “a Christian thing,” even while Christianity continues to wrestle with its own marital recession. The World Values Survey numbers from several Western nations make this picture fairly clear [see chart above]. Even a modest gap in marriage patterns between the more and less devout will amount to a far more significant difference over several decades. For the foreseeable future, then, matrimony will increasingly come to be associated with the world’s most religious citizens—Muslims, orthodox Jews, and conservative Christians.

These survey numbers contain both upsides and downsides. The bad news: Although conservative Christians on the whole are notably more apt to be married, that means they have further to fall when signs of decline appear, as they have. The good news: Christians of all stripes still express significant social support for marriage and a strong desire to problem-solve.

In this hard-but-hopeful space that we currently inhabit, the raw materials for reviving marriage are there for the taking. “It’s too late to repair everything,” a friend and colleague of mine wisely reminds me. “But it’s not too late to repair something.”

Since the secularization of the West feeds on and sustains the flight from marriage, the life of faith is key. But if the church becomes marriage’s primary defender in the West, how exactly do we protect and encourage it for those inside and outside our sanctuaries?

First, we have to study and foster the social conditions that help enable marriage. That includes the role of parachurch organizations.

While I occasionally heard about pastoral efforts to encourage more marriages in congregations, I heard no consistent sources of success. Faith-based groups, however, were a different story. Our interviewees (especially in the US) reported widespread use of dating sites, with a preference for Christian ones, but human rather than algorithmic matchmakers were far more appreciated. (Real matchmakers “know” more people. In terms of satisfaction with an efficient process by which interviewees met, fell in love, and married, vibrant subcommunities fared best. Congregations are often too big. Small groups feel too small and their dynamic

too fragile. Midsize organizations, to borrow from Goldilocks, are just right. They attract young adults because of their distinctively Christian and sometimes countercultural nature. As the age of marriage rises these midsized, post-college groups become more important for marital fortunes.

Pawe and Marta, the married couple from Krakow, said two Catholic societies aided their marriage both before and after the wedding. One was a youth organization at the nearby Dominican order where they met and the other was the Neocatechumenal Way, a movement of church-based communities of up to 50 people that was mentioned by interviewees in Poland, Lebanon, and Spain. Stateside, we heard about college organizations like InterVarsity and the Baptist Student Ministry.

In other words, meeting a mate seemed more likely to occur—or be on its way soon—when our interviewee focused on holiness before loneliness. That may sound simple and unoriginal, but remember C. S. Lewis's remark: "Aim at heaven, and you'll get earth 'thrown in.'" Of course, not everyone who aims high finds marriage waiting in the wings. (Sex-ratio disparities remain a persistent challenge.) Nonetheless, orienting yourself first toward faith and discipleship seems to offer more fruitful ground for marriage to take root.

The seeds of matrimony sprout, too, through personal modeling and storytelling. As one Russian interviewee remarked, bad examples serve as "a sort of vaccine against marriage." By contrast, good examples inspire the next generation.

This tool has limits, of course. We can't re-brand or repackage marriage with the right narrative and expect to find our efforts successful. Getting married and starting a family are traditional moves, no matter how you frame them. But reinforcing that tradition through public practice is within reach for many of us.

Tomas, a 34-year-old school counselor from Guadalajara who is getting married in two months, brought the message home. "How parents live their marriage will make a strong impression," he said. "And I imagine that if the relationship is sweet, if there is really love, I think that generates enthusiasm in a young person to say 'I want something like my parents have.'"

Finally, we have to avoid the pitfall of idolizing or over-idealizing marriage. If we borrow Lewis's "aim at heaven" concept and bend it toward marriage, it reminds us of the foundational nature of matrimony and warns us against the out-of-this-world material and psychological expectations about marriage that have gone stratospheric today. Marriage is an earthly arrangement, one that our Lord noted will not be found in the post-resurrection kingdom of God (Matt. 22:30). It's a tool for material flourishing and a vehicle for spiritual progress that provides daily (if not hourly) opportunities to exhibit sacrificial, incarnational love.

By now, the West is living off the fumes of countless sacrifices that husbands and wives, mothers and fathers have been making for many decades. We know that those committed marriages are key to a healthy society. But we've lost sight of the fact that marriage is in many ways a corporeal (and spiritual) act of mercy not just to our own spouse and children but to the world beyond our household. The West's successes have been built upon this family social structure, and dismantling it will leave us far more vulnerable and psychologically unmoored than we realize.

From my vantage point, then, it's past time for the church to re-demonstrate to the world what marriage is. We have on our side a timeless and transcendent motivation for matrimony. The task is not a glamorous one. But it just might work.

*Mark Regnerus is a professor of sociology at the University of Texas at Austin and co-founder of the Austin Institute for the Study of Family and Culture. His new book, *The Future of Christian Marriage* (Oxford University Press), releases on September 1.*

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