

DELAYING MARRIAGE

The Trends and the Consequences

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We learn from “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” that “marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God and that the family is central to the Creator’s plan for the eternal destiny of His children.”¹ Unfortunately, the priority of marriage is declining in society as more people view it as simply a couple relationship or a personal life choice rather than a divine institution created by God for our eternal progression and happiness.

Over the past few decades, the age of marriage has been rising in every region of the world for both women and men.² In many developed nations we’re approaching the point where more than half of marriages will occur after age 30. In social science circles, this pattern of delaying marriage is typically viewed as progress and talked about positively. However, it is resulting in some troubling trends

in coupling patterns and family stability, challenging the assumption that delayed marriage is always a positive thing. Perhaps most importantly, the increase in age of marriage across the world has been associated with a rising number of children being born outside of the bonds of

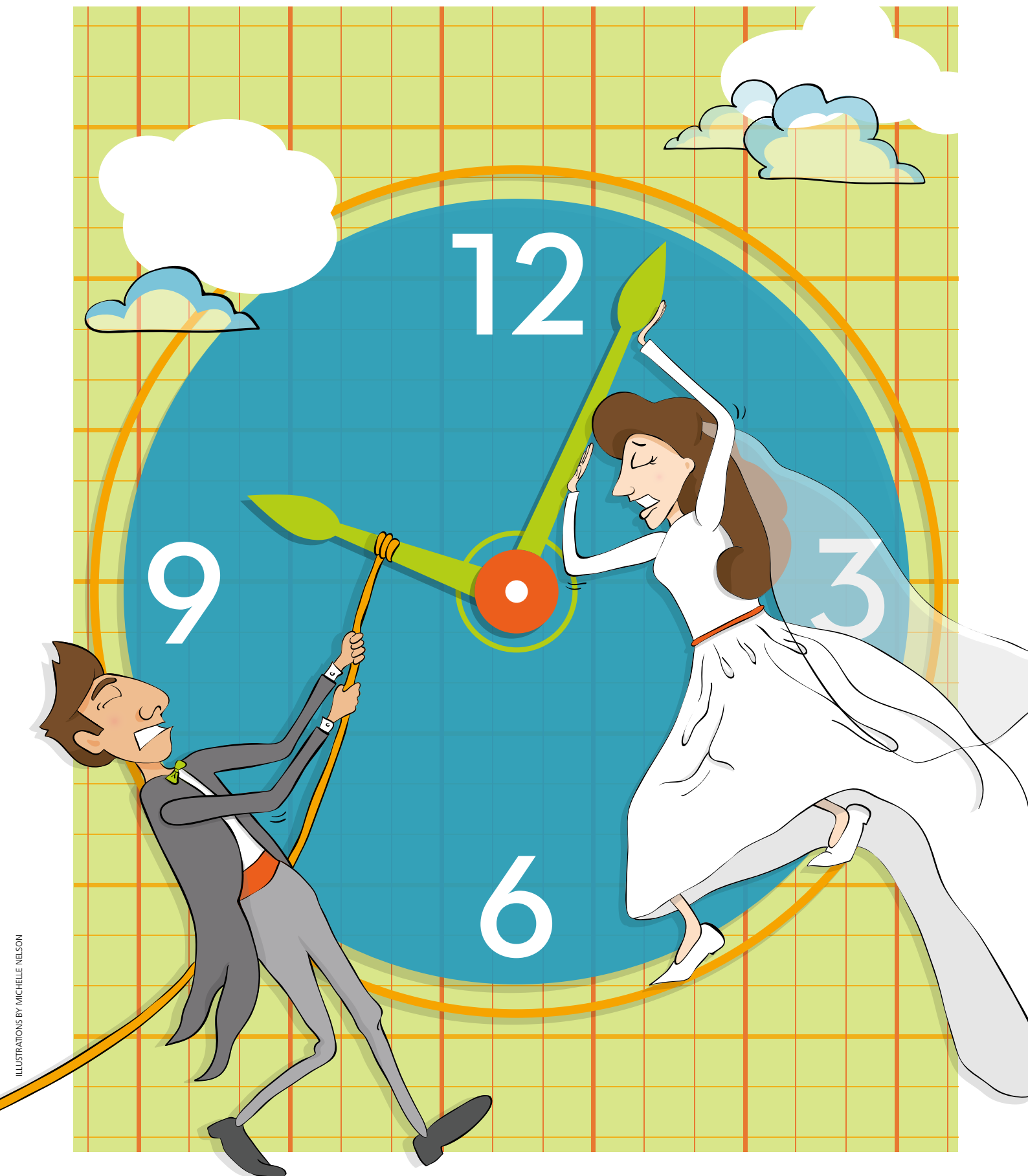
marriage. And couples who are not married and have a child in their 20s are three times more likely to break up before their child’s fifth birthday than are married couples.

Several of the key arguments in favor of intentionally delaying marriage are paradoxical. A paradox is a proposition which, despite apparently sound reasoning from acceptable premises, leads to a conclusion that seems logically unacceptable or self-contradictory.³ These “marriage-

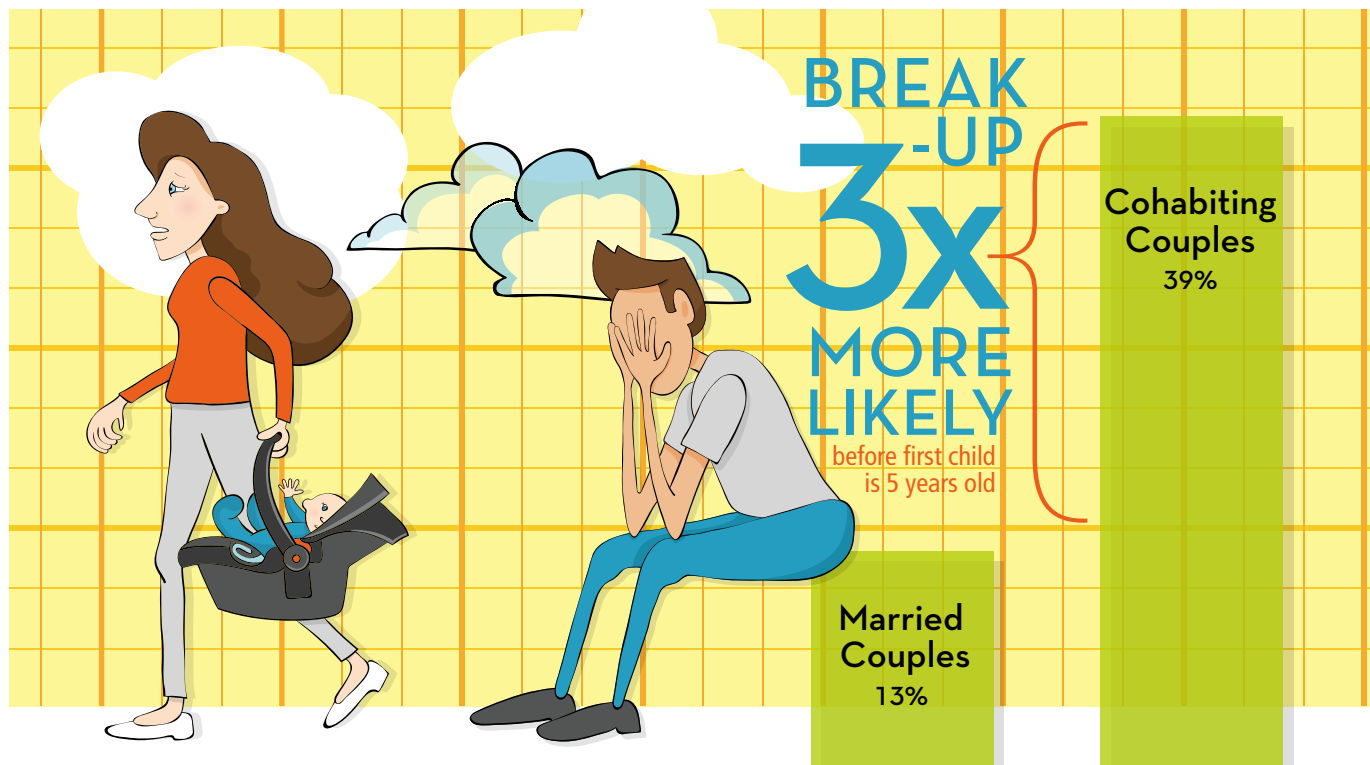
preparation paradoxes” are like turning a jar lid the wrong direction: you may believe you’re trying to loosen the lid to get what you want, but you’re actually turning it the wrong way and making the lid tighter.

Most of those who engage in the marriage-preparation paradoxes that I will mention are not doing so as part of the abandonment of marriage but because they believe these actions will actually strengthen their future marriages.

Shifting priorities in society often “call evil good, and good evil,” leading many to postpone the blessings of marriage.



ILLUSTRATIONS BY MICHELLE NELSON



Cohabiting men and women who have a child in their 20s are three times more likely to break up before their child's fifth birthday than are married couples.

The Book of Mormon warns against this type of paradoxical logic, saying there will be those “that call evil good, and good evil, that put darkness for light, and light for darkness, that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter” (2 Nephi 15:20). Thus, as a result of such paradoxical logic, many young adults are intentionally delaying marriage and are preparing for marriage in ways that are actually producing the opposite of what they intend.

Following are three prevalent marriage-preparation paradoxes that are widely embraced across the world. To be clear, these trends are not common among devout members of the Church, but they are becoming the encouraged norm among young adults in many nations.

1. The Cohabitation Paradox

One common marriage-preparation paradox is the cohabitation paradox. Many young

people are attracted to cohabitation prior to marriage because they believe that it acts as a “test drive.” It is supposedly a way to lessen the risk and chance of divorce. In fact, many of our best and brightest minds in the social sciences back in the 1980s were claiming that we would see a huge reduction in the divorce rate because of the increase in cohabitation. They believed cohabitation would act as a sort of Darwinian “survival of the fittest” mechanism that would weed out the weak relationships and only the strongest would survive into marriage—and divorce rates would thereby decline. This line of thinking is widely believed to be logical. On the surface, the test-drive idea *sounds* quite logical—you wouldn’t buy a car without test-driving it, right?

But that principle doesn’t apply to marriage, and it doesn’t fit the Lord’s pattern. The Lord has made it clear where He stands on this issue. As the Apostle Paul said, “It is the

will of God . . . that ye should abstain from fornication” (1 Thessalonians 4:3; see also 1 Corinthians 6:18; Alma 39:5). The Lord’s wisdom is greater than that of the world. As a second witness of this truth, over 30 years of studies have shown that the opposite of what researchers had anticipated is true: *cohabitation before marriage has historically been associated with greater odds of divorce*. And while some of the newer studies show that there may be a weakening of this association, no study to date has ever shown cohabitation to act as a buffer against divorce.⁴

The numbers demonstrate that despite cohabitation in the name of strengthening a relationship, “happiness in family life is most likely to be achieved when founded upon the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ.”⁵

2. The “Sowing Wild Oats” Paradox

A second paradox is the “sowing wild oats” paradox. In my research on young adults, I have often heard many say that the young adult stage of life is the time to experiment sexually and to “eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die” (see 2 Nephi 28:7). After all, don’t you need to “get this out of your system”? The claim is that such an approach is supposed to help people be ready eventually to “settle down” in marriage.

But a growing body of evidence shows us that quite the opposite is happening.⁶ What we see is that such patterns do not get promiscuity “out of your system,” but rather they get unchaste attitudes and behaviors *into* one’s system—which doesn’t help anyone want to settle down. Dozens of studies have shown that those with higher patterns of sexual promiscuity and more sexual partners actually have a higher likelihood of divorce, not lower,

when they marry. Again, a paradox—the apparent logic doesn’t fit and doesn’t work.

The “sexual chemistry” paradox is an extension of this distorted way of thinking. This is the belief that one needs to test sexual chemistry within a relationship—that the couple shouldn’t move to later stages of commitment until they’ve tested and made sure that the chemistry is a strong and compatible part of their relationship.

Again the research shows that a pattern of sexual restraint—keeping sexual relations within the full commitment of marriage—creates patterns where we see higher-quality marriages and less risk of these relationships dissolving.⁷

3. The “Older Is Better” Paradox

All of this can be tied together in the “older is better” paradox. Too many young people today are growing up with the view that marriage is a transition of loss rather than a transition of gain. Because of this, they see their young adult years as a time to focus on themselves—to get ahead before getting wed.

A number of years ago I worked as a visiting scholar for the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center in Oklahoma, USA. We conducted focus groups all across the country. In these focus groups, the twentysomethings frequently talked about how marriage would ultimately take things away from them. They said they would be losing things like freedom and individuality and failed to realize how marriage can be a transition of gain. In short, they widely believed that marriage takes more than it gives.

The interesting contrast is that we also interviewed twentysomething married couples and they consistently talked about all the benefits



DEFENDING THE LORD’S PLAN

“We need to boldly defend the Lord’s revealed doctrines describing marriage, families, the divine roles of men and women, and the importance of homes as sacred places—even when the world is shouting in our ears that these principles are outdated, limiting, or no longer relevant. . . . If it is the Lord’s plan, it should also be our plan!”

Bonnie L. Oscarson, Young Women General President, “Defenders of the Family Proclamation,” *Ensign*, May 2015, 15.



THE ADVERSARY'S SINGLE PURPOSE

"The single purpose of Lucifer is to oppose the great plan of happiness, to corrupt the purest, most beautiful and appealing experiences of life: romance, love, marriage, and parenthood [see 2 Nephi 2:18; 28:20]."

President Boyd K. Packer (1924–2015), President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, "For Time and All Eternity," *Ensign*, Nov. 1993, 21).

that had come into their lives because of being married. Dozens of studies have documented the emotional, physical, economic, and sexual benefits that lasting marriage brings to individuals and society as a whole.

The Apostle Paul has taught what you and I have to gain from marriage: "Neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 11:11). God made man and woman to complement each other (see Genesis 2:18). He created us to bless, help, and learn from one another in our quest for perfection. He doesn't expect us to become perfect before we get married in order to have a successful marriage. In fact, expecting perfection in oneself or a future spouse sets a marriage up for struggle. President Dieter F. Uchtdorf, Second Counselor in the First Presidency, has taught, "Since you won't find perfection in your partner, and your partner won't find it in you, your only chance at perfection is in creating perfection together."⁸

Thankfully, the vast majority of active single adults in the Church are not following these social trends. In fact, the commitment to chastity and true marriage preparation among devout single members of the Church stands in stark contrast to the patterns we see in the broader culture. Also, it is important to point out that intentionally delaying marriage is a very different pattern from experiencing marriage at a later age than one would prefer. Studies show that many single adults, both in the broader culture and within the Church, still greatly value marriage and that the timing of marriage in their lives has not been a matter of choice.

Rather than selecting arbitrary ages of when marriages will be most successful, we

need to start teaching and fostering a culture of real maturation and marriage readiness and teach the real foundational factors that we know to be the key elements of successful marriages. Religious faith, commitment, communication, relationship skills, healthy sexuality, and personal maturity have proven to be some of these foundational factors.⁹ When young people have come to understand and develop these skills, *that* is the time they ought to move forward with marriage.

Marriage Forgone

Finally, in addition to these paradoxes, we are seeing the forgoing of marriage altogether for a growing segment of society rather than just a delay of it. That's a dramatic social change with implications not only for one's personal spiritual progress but also for society and the economy.

The Doctrine and Covenants teaches us that temple marriage is necessary to receive exaltation:

"In the celestial glory there are three heavens or degrees;

"And in order to obtain the highest, a man [and a woman] must enter into this order of the priesthood [meaning the new and everlasting covenant of marriage]" (D&C 131:1–2; see also 49:15–16).

Thus, as the Lord's pattern for the family is altered and marriage is redefined or abandoned altogether in many countries, we're starting to see patterns of family instability and decreased child well-being. As the wisdom of the world calls "evil good, and good evil," we would do well to look to the Lord's pattern for preparing for a righteous marriage and strengthening the family as the fundamental unit of society. ■



The age of marriage in the United States has been rising steadily since 1970, and in 1980 women passed the previous historical high, a benchmark reached by men 10 years later.

An expanded version of this material can be found at familyinamerica.org/journals/winter-2016/love-or-money/#.V6NlwusrJD8. For additional information related to this article, see twenty-somethingmarriage.org.

NOTES

1. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2010, 129.
2. Between 1970 and 2010, the mean age at marriage increased in 100 of the 114 countries with the required data (see United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *Population Facts*, no. 2011/1 [Dec. 2011], 2). For many countries, these changes are the result of “second-order delay,” meaning marriage is being delayed from the 20s to the 30s, rather than “first-order delay,” where marriage is delayed from the teens to the 20s.
3. See Oxford Living Dictionaries, “paradox,” en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/us/paradox.
4. See Scott M. Stanley, Galena Kline Rhoades, and Howard J. Markman, “Sliding versus Deciding: Inertia and the Premarital Cohabitation Effect,” *Family Relations*, vol. 55, no. 4 (Oct. 2006), 499–509.
5. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” 129.
6. See Dean M. Busby, Brian J. Willoughby, and Jason S. Carroll, “Sowing Wild Oats: Valuable Experience or a Field Full of Weeds?” *Personal Relationships*, vol. 20, no. 4 (Dec. 2013): 706–18.
7. See Dean M. Busby, Jason S. Carroll, and Brian J. Willoughby, “Compatibility or Restraint? The Effects of Sexual Timing on Marriage Relationships,” *Journal of Family Psychology*, vol. 24, no. 6 (Dec. 2010), 766–74; Sharon Sassler, Fenaba R. Addo, and Daniel T. Lichter, “The Tempo of Sexual Activity and Later Relationship Quality,” *Journal of Marriage and Family*, vol. 74, no. 4 (Aug. 2012), 708–25.
8. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “The Reflection in the Water” (Church Educational System fireside for young adults, Nov. 1, 2009), ldschurchnewsarchive.com/archives.
9. See, for example, Jason S. Carroll, Sarah Badger, and Chongming Yang, “The Ability to Negotiate or the Ability to Love? Evaluating the Developmental Domains of Marital Competence,” *Journal of Family Issues*, vol. 27, no. 7 (July 2006), 1001–32.

KEY ELEMENTS OF SUCCESSFUL MARRIAGES

Here are some resources for teaching foundational factors—faith, humility, respect, selflessness—that contribute to successful marriages:

- Robert D. Hales, “Preparing for a Heavenly Marriage,” *New Era*, Feb. 2006, 2–6.
- Eric B. Shumway, “Preparing Yourself for Marriage,” *Ensign*, Oct. 2008, 54–57.
- L. Whitney Clayton, “Marriage: Watch and Learn,” *Ensign*, May 2013, 83–85.
- Mindy Raye Friedman, “Your Current Life, Your Future Family,” *New Era*, June 2012, 42–45.
- Thomas B. Holman, “Choosing and Being the Right Spouse,” *Ensign*, Sept. 2002, 62–67.
- Christian Hägglund, “The Courage to Marry,” *Ensign*, Jan. 2015, 22–23.