

Starter Marriages?

Marriage is not an idea shaped by movements or the philosophy du jour.

Vanessa Mobley isn't famous. She's a young woman who married and divorced in her 20s. As a result of her experience, she was asked to appear on Good Morning America on Jan. 25, 2001.

Vanessa began her brief journey into the world of matrimony at the age of 22. Young and unsure of herself, she was not prepared for the relationship challenges she faced after the wedding.

It didn't take long for her to conclude that she'd married the wrong person. So in a year's time, she and her husband separated. By age 26, she was divorced.

Vanessa explained her short-lived marriage by saying: "I view marriage as a rehearsal. Now I am ready to play the part better. We, as Gen-Xers, live in a culture of new beginnings where we can fix anything." According to Vanessa, her botched experiment with marriage prepared her for the second time around!

And Vanessa isn't the only one who espouses this skewed view of marriage. The list of "practice marriages" in Hollywood is notable—and includes those of Drew Barrymore, Uma Thurman and Angelina Jolie, who all were married and divorced while still in their 20s.

These "icebreaker marriages," as they are sometimes called, are promoted in the media. The September 2000 issue of Entertainment Weekly lists "divorce in your 20s" as an "in"

thing to do. The headline in Jane magazine's April 2001 issue boldly proclaims, "Young, Hot and Divorced."

This so-called new trend among Generation X is even the subject of a book authored by Pamela Paul, an editor at American Demographics magazine, called *The Starter Marriage and the Future of Matrimony*. She defines first-time marriages that last five years or less and produce no children as "starter marriages." Paul herself experienced a starter marriage, as did the 60 mostly white, college-educated couples between the ages of 24 and 36 she interviewed.

More disturbing than Paul's analysis of the causes of starter marriages are her solutions. One solution is to delay marriage and use cohabitation as a method to confirm couple compatibility. Apparently Paul hasn't read the cohabitation research. Cohabitation does not prevent divorce.

The good news Paul proclaims in her book is, "Older and wiser divorcees wind up with tools and experience needed to make the second trip down the aisle more lasting and rewarding." Marriage is reduced to something you try on for size and then discard when it no longer fits. Gone is the idea of marital covenant.

Baby boomers must admit culpability in the development of such marital attitudes. Xers' view of marriage is strikingly familiar to that of the boomers I counsel—"God just wants me happy." We teach by example, and our example has not been good.

Though our kids still desire to be married for a lifetime, divorce is a viable option. Xers have witnessed divorce

firsthand. And their exposure to biblical teaching on divorce is often minimal because it offends too many in the church. So our kids grow up as children of divorce, ignorant of God's Word and influenced by cultural voices such as Vanessa Mobley.

The validity of starter marriages has little to do with sociopolitical factors or personal gratification, as those who support the phenomenon would lead you to believe. Marriage is not an idea shaped by movements or the philosophy du jour! It is a holy union created by God—a sacred act and covenant relationship.

Perhaps the best way to positively influence marital attitudes against starter marriages is to set an example. So ask yourself: Do I believe marriage is a covenant? Do I seek God when my marriage is rocky? Do I verbally affirm my vows, or do I threaten divorce when I am unhappy?

If needed, would I go to marital counseling? Do I flee from temptation or allow it to slowly erode my resolve? Do I keep God first in my life so that His love permeates my marriage? Am I committed to my spouse for better or worse, in sickness or in health, for richer or poorer?

You don't have to have the perfect marriage or be the perfect mate. Just take your vows seriously and finish what you started.

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