

*Breaking the Marriage Idol:
Reconstructing Our Cultural and
Spiritual Norms*

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*“Marriage became the solution to
the problem of one’s sexual angst,
the cure for a lifetime of
loneliness.”*

Waiting on True Love, Kissing Dating Goodbye, and Bringing Up Princes and Princesses

As a teenager, my perspective was that church leadership seemed to take most of its cues about sex from Reagan’s war on drugs. As if it were crack-cocaine (only slightly worse), we were told to “just say no.” I readily admit that my views were colored by the adolescent hormones coursing through my veins at the time, but the basic (albeit mixed) message about the connections between married life, single life, and sex that I received from my faith community went something like this: “Sex is a *beautiful* gift from God. But it will most certainly *destroy* you. So don’t think about doing it, talk about doing it, or watch TV or movies where someone is doing it. And *definitely* don’t do it yourself! Until you get married, of course. At that point, something . . . magical . . . happens. In fact, if you can just ‘save yourself’ for marriage, your sex life will pretty much take care of itself. But if you fail in your all-important pursuit of purity, well, we don’t even want to think about that, so we won’t. Again, it’s all very simple: *Just. Say. No.*”

And that was that. In the interim, we weren’t advised to *do* anything with our sexuality as single people, other than suppress it through sheer force of will. Well-meaning adults and youth pastors would often invoke Song of Solomon 8:4: “[Don’t] awaken love until the time is right” (NLT). But what they didn’t talk about was what it meant for us to live as sexual creatures, whether we were married, formerly married, or waiting to get married (in what felt like a state of permanence). We never considered how we might integrate our basic sexuality into our lives as a matter of Christian discipleship.

Don’t get me wrong. “Just say no” does have some practical value. In fact, it’s pretty solid advice for those considering whether or not to experiment with illicit narcotics. But I’m not so sure it works the same way when it comes to sex. It’s thus no small wonder that, along with many of my contemporaries, I began to see marriage as a kind of Christian loophole—the only religiously sanctioned site for experiencing the ultimate (and otherwise forbidden) human pleasure. Marriage became the solution to the problem of one’s sexual angst, the cure for a lifetime of loneliness. As if by some kind of mysterious alchemy, marriage was capable of transforming sex from an act that was inherently destructive and even life-threatening into one that was productive and life-giving. The lone requirement was to utter the magical incantation “I do” — a small price to pay for having all of one’s sexual desires fulfilled, not to mention a housemate who could do the laundry *and* split the cost of video game purchases. And why wouldn’t we believe that marriage and sex worked in this way? I mean, as anyone who’s ever been married knows, marriage is exactly the kind of relationship that all thirteen-year-old boys imagine it to be.

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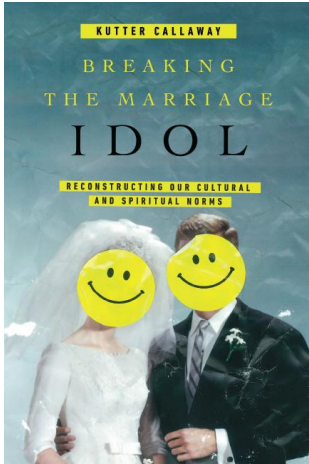
BOOK EXCERPT



Kutter Callaway (PhD, Fuller Theological Seminary) is assistant professor of theology and culture at Fuller Theological Seminary. He is the author of *Watching TV Religiously: Television and Theology in Dialogue* and *Scoring Transcendence: Contemporary Film Music as Religious Experience*. Prior to teaching at Fuller, Callaway served in pastoral ministry for nearly a decade, focusing primarily on young and emerging adults. He writes for *Christianity Today*, Fuller's Reel Spirituality website, and the *Huffington Post*.

I am intentionally being playful here, but it is not an exaggeration to say that the marriage-as-antidote-to-sexual-promiscuity narrative I inherited from my church community shaped my awareness of the world on a fundamental level—that is, on the level of my imagination. And as I hope to demonstrate, my experience is not at all unique. In fact, as the remainder of this chapter unfolds, it will become increasingly clear that the vision of marriage, singleness, and sexuality that I am describing here—a picture of reality that not only captured my imagination as a young person but also made its presence known during my time in pastoral ministry—is the same one that is currently holding the broader community of faith hostage. Like most fairytales, it's a story that is simply too good to be true. But it's also more than that. In its own insidious way, it's a lie.

— Taken from chapter 2, “The Internal Narratives of Contemporary Evangelicalism”



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Redefining Idols of the Heart

Should all Christians be married? Although we might quickly respond no, our cultural stories and norms – including those in the church – often communicate yes. Theologian and husband Kutter Callaway considers why marriage, which is a blessing from God, shouldn't be expected or required of all Christians. Through an examination of Scripture, cultural analysis, and personal accounts, he reflects on how our narratives have limited our understanding of marriage and obscured our view of the life-giving and kingdom-serving roles of single people in the church. In doing so, Callaway helps the church craft a new story that transforms the way we look at marriage and affirms the contributions of all to the body of Christ.

- Why did you want to turn the paradigm of marriage on its head? Why is rethinking the importance of marriage critical now?
- You're an expert in examining the meaning of cultural artifacts. How does that come into play when we look at writing and art related to marriage?
- You write that both single and married people struggle with the church's concept of marriage. Can you unpack that?
- Why is the language of "just say no" or "true love waits" problematic?
- Why would this book work in both a pastoral setting and an academic setting?
- You write that the evangelical church idolizes marriage. How is that a problem?
- Why is it important for the church to view marriage as non-normative?
- Why is it important for all of us, even single people, to take marriage seriously? Why is it important for all of us, even married people, to take singleness seriously?
- Why is a married-single segregation in churches and ministries a concern in your book?
- What about the assumption that "everyone wants to be married" are you trying to counter?
- What is your definition of family?
- You write that "the church is radically uncomfortable directly addressing the human person as a fundamentally sexual being." How does this create a burden for marriage?

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