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—Kevin T. Bauder

“...Be instant in season,
out of season;
reprove, rebuke, exhort
with all longsuffering
and doctrine.”

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September 16, 2005

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Thinking About Engagement

by

Kevin T. Bauder and Roy Beacham

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If we want a Christian view of marriage, then we need to study what the Bible says about marriage. If we want a Christian view of engagement, however, we must take a different approach for the simple reason that the Bible never discusses engagement directly. Engagement appears to be a custom of our own invention.

Engagement is certainly not the same thing as biblical betrothal or espousal. Betrothal or espousal belonged to a time when marriages were normally arranged by the parents, particularly the fathers. An espoused couple was, in a certain sense, married. They had entered passively into a marriage contract by means of the agreement of their fathers. With the enactment of the agreement, the marriage process had officially begun and the couple was considered to be “husband” and “wife” even though they did not yet live together.

One example of such a couple is Mary and Joseph. Matthew 1:18-19 is clear that when Mary became pregnant with Jesus, she was already espoused or betrothed to Joseph. They had not yet begun to live together, but if he wanted to dissolve the relationship, he would have to divorce her.

Some time after the legal betrothal or espousal, the families of the betrothed couple would finalize the marriage process by means of a wedding ceremony. At the wedding the espoused wife would officially “leave” her father and mother’s domain and dominion to “be joined” to the groom, her espoused husband. Now she was under her husband’s headship and protection, and both husband and wife would finally assume all of the rights, privileges, and responsibilities of marriage. This lengthy marriage process was officially consummated by the couple’s physical union.

Engagement is not the same thing as betrothal, and it is not another form of marriage. A biblical marriage is solemnized by the public swearing of the marriage vow. It rests upon a covenant. Until that oath is sworn, no marriage exists. Therefore, whatever engagement may be, it is not marriage.

This essay is by [Kevin T. Bauder](#), president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary and [Roy Beacham](#), faculty of the same institution. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

Since engagement is not marriage, it does not confer the privilege of cohabitation. A couple is commanded to become “one flesh” only after leaving and cleaving. Until they have vowed themselves to one another in the public marriage covenant, they have no right to give themselves to one another sexually.

While engagement is not a marriage and it does not include a vow, it is a very serious statement of intention. Even though an engaged couple has not yet sworn the marriage oath, they have made a serious commitment to one another. Often this commitment is announced to the public at large and symbolized by a token such as a ring. It is not, however, the ultimate committing of the engaged parties to one another. It is rather a mutual committing of themselves to the intention that they will marry.

Because engagement is a promise of intention, it should not be entered lightly or dissolved easily. Engagement should not be the trial period during which the couple decides whether they really want to marry. The couple should use courtship as their opportunity to explore one another’s maturity, character, and values. Neither party ought to engage to marry the other until satisfied that the marriage is desirable and in the best interests of both parties.

Engagement is a serious commitment. It is not, however, an irreversible commitment. Marriage hinges upon swearing an oath of lifelong and exclusive commitment; it is irreversible as long as both parties are alive. Engagement, on the other hand, expresses a sober but mutable intention. During the engagement period, the engaged couple will naturally continue to grow in their knowledge of one another. Normally their unity and commitment should also deepen. Occasionally, however, one party will reveal herself or himself in such a way as to render the marriage inadvisable. Under such circumstances the engagement should certainly be broken. A broken engagement is not a “premarital divorce.” Breaking an engagement is serious and painful, but it is not immoral. Better the momentary embarrassment of a broken engagement than the lifelong agony of an ill-advised marriage.

Still, a broken engagement is an embarrassment. Such embarrassment is better avoided, and the time to avoid it is before becoming engaged. The only way for this to happen is for the couple to develop a fairly detailed knowledge of one another during courtship. Before agreeing to engagement, they should get to know not only each other’s likes and dislikes, but also each other’s values, habits, hopes, dreams, ambitions, fears, and idiosyncrasies. They should discuss all of these things deliberately, and they should discuss them before becoming engaged.



Jan van Eyck. *The Arnolfini Marriage*. 1434

They should also observe how each other's conduct manifests all of the foregoing. There is no better place to observe this than with each other's family. The man should especially watch how the woman responds to her father, and she should observe how he responds to his mother. People form patterns in these relationships that they carry with them into marriage. It would also be wise for these couples to observe carefully their potential spouse's parents as these husbands and wives interact with one another and with their children. The manner in which each of the couple's families interacts in the home may well resurface either in practice or in expectation after the couple is married.

Courtship is a time for learning one another so well that engagement and marriage will hold few or no major surprises. The couple must get to know each other during courtship so that they will find no surprises during engagement. Obviously this takes time, and the less mature the couple is, the longer it takes. Courtship should not be rushed.

Hasty courtships, while hazardous, are more common than not. Sometimes a couple hurries through courtship because marriage is a matter of either pride or panic. Some people (especially immature ones) see marriage as a badge of adulthood. Other people view a potential spouse as a trophy. Still others are afraid that they might never get another chance to marry. These are all poor motives for engagement. Good marriages sometimes follow such engagements, but they never result from them. *Mutatis mutandis*, rapid and shallow courtship leads to rough or disastrous marriage.

So why bother with engagement at all? If a couple takes courtship so seriously, then why not proceed directly to marriage? Does engagement actually contribute anything?

The answer to these questions is at least twofold. First, engagement serves to demarcate the point at which a person officially moves from being "available" to being "unavailable." Before the engagement, a man and a woman should not necessarily see themselves as bound exclusively to each other. There should always be the mutual understanding that, before engagement, both parties are free to continue exploring their growing interest in each other, to discontinue their exploratory relationship, or even to consider and examine other possible candidates for marriage.

A pre-engaged couple should never assume exclusive rights. Once engaged, however, the promissory intent of the couple is to marry, and thus exclusivity begins with regard to nuptial intentions, marital interests, and mutual affections.

Second, engagement is the time for planning the wedding. Marriage is a public event. Typically, provision needs to be made for the families and friends of both bride and groom. Travel, lodging, and meals take considerable preparation. A wedding dress must be procured. Even a simple wedding celebration (and simplicity is a virtue in weddings) requires significant planning. Engagement is the period for planning the wedding, and it generally should last no longer than the planning requires.

The last point is worth stressing. If courtship has been done correctly, a couple is truly ready for marriage as soon as they are engaged. A long engagement is not necessary. Moreover, the engaged couple will be building unity across a whole range of issues in their relationship. At some point this kind of unity naturally (and rightly!) manifests itself in the yearning for physical intimacy. An unnecessarily long engagement will result in needless and frustrating temptations for such a couple. For both of these reasons, a good rule is to keep the engagement as short as possible.

Engagement is not a biblical category, but it is a necessary category in any culture that practices voluntary (rather than arranged) marriages. Wherever couples decide whom they will marry, some hiatus necessarily occurs between the couple's agreement to marry and the actual wedding ceremony. While engagement is not defined by explicit biblical statements, it can and should be practiced according to biblical ideals. X



Love I.
George Herbert (1593-1633)

IMMORTALL LOVE, authour of this great frame,
Sprung from that beautie which can never fade;
How hath man parcel'd out thy glorious name,
And thrown it on that dust which thou hast made,

While mortall love doth all the title gain!
Which siding with invention, they together
Bear all the sway, possessing heart and brain,
(Thy workmanship) and give thee share in neither.

Wit fancies beautie, beautie raiseth wit:
The world is theirs; they two play out the game,
Thou standing by: and though thy glorious name
Wrought our deliverance from th' infernall pit,

Who sings thy praise? onely a skarf or glove
Doth warm our hands, and make them write of love. X



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