

The Fear of Commitment

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### Abstract

Have you or someone you know ever been afraid to commit to a relationship? Have you ever been afraid to give yourself fully to someone because you were afraid of what might result? If so this paper will be a benefit to you. It will look at some of the more common fears and the reasons behind these fears. Additionally some helpful resources to overcome your fear of commitment are listed and reviewed so you can identify which books are best suited for your particular situation. Although this is not a comprehensive solution to the fear of commitment, having this resource in your hand is one of the first steps along the way to overcoming the fear of commitment.

## Fear of Commitment

In today's society commitment is often seen as a negative thing, especially to those in their late teens and twenties. Growing up in America today people are taught to keep their options open, and try to get the most out of life. There is always something newer and bigger and better being developed or sold. What was once valued and treasured is now tossed aside without any remorse. Not only is technology rapidly changing today, so are attitudes, opinions and even relationships. Commitment is seen as something that limits us, instead of something that actually brings freedom. This paper will examine the attitudes today towards commitment and the reasons why so many people exhibit a fear of commitment, as well as some resources to help deal with the fear of commitment.

If you or someone you know is contemplating marriage, or simply wondering whether or not the relationship you are in is worth working on, the ideas presented in this paper should be of value to you. There are many reasons that people feel terrified of even mentioning the big "M" word. The following is a list of some of the more common fears, although this list is by no means exhaustive.

- What if I choose the wrong person?
- What if someone better comes along?
- What if we aren't really compatible?
- What if it doesn't work out?
- What if my marriage ends up like my parents marriage?
- What if he/she doesn't meet all my needs?
- What if my marriage doesn't have a happily ever after ending?

→ What if, what if, what if?

If you have ever found yourself in a situation where you were afraid to make a commitment, this list probably sounds very familiar to you. Since anyone with a fear of commitment could probably come up with these and many other reasons not to commit, I will not devote any more time to discussing common fears. Rather attention will be given to the reasons behind these fears and also resources for overcoming these fears.

One major reason for fear of commitment is Hollywood. Movies and television today portray a very unrealistic idea of relationships. This causes teenagers to grow up with unrealistic expectations for marriage. In movies, we never see couples making an effort to work out their relationship. We don't see Hollywood couples making sacrifices and we definitely don't see them making and keeping commitments to their spouses. If anything we see just the opposite of this. We see a couple getting in a fight and then in the next scene we see the husband out sleeping with someone else. This sick twisted behavior has come to be seen as normal. It leaves the idea in heads of young people that if one person doesn't meet all your needs, just leave them and find someone else. Also divorce and single parenting is glorified in Hollywood. Teenagers grow up thinking since they have seen it work in movies, that must be the way it works in real life. When faced with the reality of a situation that does not turn out like the movies, people become afraid of commitment.

Another reason for the fear of commitment is past relationship failures. Because of the trend today of teenagers beginning to date so early, people have had quite a bit of experience in the area of relationship by the time they are actually ready to think seriously about commitment. Of course, contrary to popular belief all this dating

“experience” does not end up being positive for most young adults. People bring baggage from past relationships into to current relationships with them. No matter how happy or positive a current relationship seems the people in the relationship have brought with them their fears and pains associated with their past relationship failures.

People look at their current relationship in light of their past relationships and wonder if they really have what it takes to make a relationship work. They see the way things turned out in the past and they are afraid to make the same mistakes again.

Related to this is ‘relationship burnout.’ Many young adults have had painful experiences with relationships, including sexual abuse, date rape, codependency and other dysfunctional situations. Many singles who desire a close relationship find themselves incapable of trust and commitment. Fear of commitment not only causes some to bail out of perfectly good relationships but others to avoid dating all together. The general feeling is, Better not to get too close to anyone; I don’t want to get hurt again (Hsu, 1997, p. 19).

People today are afraid of being rejected. If for example their last relationship ended in rejection, they wonder if the person they are dating will reject them also. Many times dwelling on the past will immobilize people so that they are unable to move forward in the future.

Not only are people afraid to commit to a relationship because of their past mistakes, they are also surrounded by failed marriages and relationships. Young adults have seen their parents, their friends and other people they respect fail in their marriages, and they are afraid of simply becoming another statistic. While the divorce rate today has

been quoted as being as high as one out of two marriages ending in divorce, all we have to do is look around us and see that this is not too far from reality. Although not every marriage will end in divorce, the odds are continuing to increase that a person's marriage will not last like they dreamed it would. This fact alone is enough to keep some weary young adults from jumping head first into marriage. They see the trend around them and wonder why their relationship would turn out differently than those people who end up divorced. Another way that divorce has affected young adults today is that many of them have seen the affects their parents' divorce has had on their lives. Those people who have grown up with divorced parents want to avoid the pain of divorce in their own life, so they run from commitments. They figure it is better not to marry than to end up like their parents. Many people today have felt first hand the affects of divorce on their family while they were growing up. They reason, "I just won't commit to anyone, so I won't have to deal with divorce".

Another major reason for young adults today to fear commitment is the overabundance of options. Everywhere you turn there are many options.

A generation ago, television viewers chose between three networks. Today cable TV and satellite dishes provide fifty to more than a hundred networks to choose from. The corner five-and-dime store is a dying breed— now people shop in malls with hundreds of specialty retailers. Instead of just a burger and fries, a food court offers gyros, falafel, and dim sum. To keep in touch with a friend, you could use a fax machine, cellular phone, pager or email. No longer are we restricted to snail mail (Hsu, 1997, p. 19).

Not only is there a plethora of options available in the mall and on television, there are also many options in college. Today the average college student will change their major several times, before actually deciding on a career path. Many times people only choose a major by default, as graduation approaches. College students are taught to get a degree that will make them the most marketable. Emphasis is placed on keeping their options open, so that if they don't like the field they start out in they can easily switch to something else. It is no wonder that once these same college students get out into the real world and begin looking for a mate, they carry the same attitudes with them. They are looking for a way to keep their options open, and trying to make sure that they don't miss out on a better opportunity that comes along.

Another more recent development that has added to people's commitment phobias is the Internet. Now the whole world is just a click of a button away. While sitting at home on their personal computer people are now able to meet and talk to people from the other side of the globe. Internet dating sites have gained popularity and are actually seen as a valid way of finding a date. Now that the Internet has opened up in this way, the possibility of meeting someone who is "perfect" seems a lot more possible. Thirty years ago people were limited to choosing between the few available people at their school, church or work. Now literally anyone is an option. Even if a suitable mate is found, the internet savvy person is going to wonder if they might meet someone better in a chat room or on a dating service website.

With so many options available to young adults today they tend to react in one of two ways. "On one hand, they many want to try everything, postponing any final choice because they want to keep their options open.... On the other hand, some are simply

overwhelmed by the multitude of choices” (Hsu, 1997, p. 20). What might have seemed like a positive change at the time, increasing people’s options, has in some cases done more harm than good. “The tendency, when given unlimited choices, is to make none” (Hsu, 1997, p. 21).

The next reason for fear of commitment is the view of “the one”. Many people today have grown up with the idea that there is one perfect person out there for them. They focus on the fact that somewhere out there is this person who will meet all their needs and be exactly what they have always wanted. The problem with this view is that people tend to be way too idealistic. They think that when they find this “mystical” person, there won’t be any struggles or conflicts. This mentality ignores the fact that there will be struggles in every relationship, no matter how “perfect” it seems. Thus when struggles come up in a relationship many people tend to take this as a sign that they are not with the right person. “The key is not to find the right person, but to become the right person: a person who has learned to practice Christian love at the most intimate level” (McCallum, 1996, p. 36). Today’s generation expect that they will find someone who requires no work or commitment, but they desire all the benefits associated with a committed relationship.

Today churches do little to combat this idealized standard, in fact many young people actually get some of their ideas of the perfect relationship from church. Growing up in youth groups teenagers hear the message over and over again of, “Don’t settle for less than God’s best”. The message that was meant to encourage young adults not to make unwise choices involving a mate causes them instead to think that there is one perfect person out there for them. Another ideal that adds to this is the misguided

teachings on finding your soul mate or other half. In reality soul mates are made, not discovered accidentally. Becoming someone's soul mate is a process that requires time and energy invested into making a relationship work. Yet another way that churches today add to the disillusionment of young adults today is by encouraging youth to make a list of the type of person they want to marry. Teens today take these lists and turn them into their tools for their search for the "perfect" person, instead of a guideline to help them understand what qualities are important for them to have in a spouse.

Now that we have looked over some of the common fears associated with commitment, and have discussed some of the more prevalent reason for these fears, let's turn our attention to some resources that address these issues. It is important to understand before going any further that this is not a simple problem with cut and dry answers. Instead of looking for a quick fix to your fears, the real goal is to uncover the reasons for these fears and then work on eliminating the false beliefs behind them. You won't find any easy answers in the following books, but you will find some solid principles to help you along the path to commitment. It may also be helpful after checking out some of these resources, to seek guidance from a counselor or other trusted professional to help you walk through this new path to freedom.

#### Helpful Resources

Stanley, Scott. (1998). *The heart of commitment*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

- This book focuses on what it really means to make a commitment to spend the rest of your life with another individual. It goes through things like the costs and benefits associated with making that type of choice. It also shows how to have a

life-long intimate marriage with a proper attitude about commitment. According to the author there are three paths of commitment people find themselves on. The first path is for those people who stick to their commitment. The second one is those who feel mostly stuck in their commitment and the third path is those who simply stop. This book shows the importance of sticking to your commitment instead of ending up stuck or stopped. The principles in this book can help those who are either in a relationship, or who want to fix their misconceptions before they get into another relationship.

- Many people view commitment as some sort of a restraint, but the author debunks this myth and actually shows how commitment leads to greater freedom. There is also a section in this book that discusses the importance of grieving over lost possibilities. Being committed to someone in a relationship doesn't naturally make all other options go away. This book shows how to value the choice you have made and to protect it from other attractive alternatives.
- The second half of this book contains information on developing a long-term view of the relationship, and how to invest in your relationship to make it last for "the long haul". This section of the book is very informative, but it isn't exactly relevant for the topic of fear of commitment. It has principles and advice that may come in handy later on, but for people looking to deal with their fear of commitment, the first section of the book is the most helpful.
- I would say that this book is the most helpful and practical book on the topic of fear of commitment I found. In all of my research I did not find a more relevant book. Although the book doesn't out rightly focus on the fear of commitment, it

does get to the heart of this fear. It basically looks at commitment, and why people avoid it. Anyone who has ever experienced a fear of commitment will find themselves agreeing with the author as practical principles and situations are discussed. Since this book doesn't necessarily claim to discuss the fear of commitment, it is perfect for people who wouldn't admit they are afraid of commitment. It takes the back door approach, since it looks harmless, but anyone who reads this book will walk away from it with a much greater insight into their fear of commitment.

Hsu, Albert Y. (1997). *Singles at the cross roads: A fresh perspective on Christian singleness*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

- This book focuses on dealing with issues that the single person faces in a marriage oriented world. If you visit a book store you will find many books written about marriage. If there are books targeting the single person, they are mainly geared toward finding the right person. Authors today seem to view singleness as a problem to be solved rather than a viable option to be lived out. This book takes a different approach. It looks at what it means to be single? And what should single life look like?
- This book doesn't necessarily devote a specific section to talking about the fear of commitment, but it does go into depth about reasons why people are afraid of commitment. It looks at situations surrounding fear of commitment, and also examines and refutes several major myths associated with being single. This book discusses ways to rearrange our thinking in order to not be controlled by our fears or by myths that are typically associated with singleness and looking for a

mate. It also takes a stand against the concept of there being one perfect person out there waiting to be discovered. Many people believe that there is one person made especially for them. This book does an excellent job of explaining this concept in a biblical light and explaining why this isn't God's plan. "The myth of the perfect partner stems from Plato's view that everything in the material world is merely a temporary copy of an ideal, universal and perfect form" (p. 71). After reading this section anyone who has subscribed to the false notion of the perfect partner will at least have their beliefs called into question.

- This book is a good resource for singles to read, regardless having a fear of commitment or not. It goes over some major issues and life stages that singles face. It is a must for any Christian single in today's society. I would put this book second (behind *The Heart of Commitment*) in importance and quality of information regarding fear of commitment. It gives an overall understanding of singleness, which includes a fear of commitment.

McCallum, Dennis & DeLashmutt, Gary. (1996). *The myth of romance: Marriage choices that last a lifetime*. Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers.

- This book focuses on disproving many of the common myths associated with love and commitment. It also shows the biblical way to prepare for a successful and maturing marriage. It points out ways to overcome the problem attitudes about love today and to beat the odds of failure in marriage.
- This book addresses both singles and married people. For the singles it teaches ways to successfully understand and apply biblical principles to their lives now while they are single. "If you are single, we will explore important choices you

can make before marriage that will help you forge a successful union. For those of you who are already married, this book will help you move ahead to build lasting unity in your relationships while working on your current problems” (p. 11).

- Although this book does discuss reasons why people are not ready to jump into marital commitments, it doesn't do much to deal with overcoming fears of commitment. It is a good book about marriage and about some top myths associated with marriage, but it seems more like a step by step guide to discovering if the person you are with is someone you want to spend the rest of your life with. This is of course a vital part of being afraid of commitment. In order to overcome your fear of commitment, you must begin on the journey of deciding if the person you are dating is someone worth spending the rest of your life with. Once you have done this, than you will be able to move on to the next stages of overcoming your fear of commitment.

Kindig, Eileen Silvia. (1993). *Goodbye prince charming: The journey back from disenchantment*. Colorado Springs, CO: Pinon Press.

- The focus of this book is on how today's culture teaches us to seek a “story book romance”. It discusses how these unrealistic expectations can ruin a good relationship. It also focuses on how to create the type of marriage you have always wanted using the ashes from your story book romance.
- This book is a must read for anyone in or contemplating a serious relationship. The author incorporates important principles as she discusses her own relationship and her expectations for it. Reading this book gives you hope and a desire to

overcome the myth of the Cinderella story and actually live out a true commitment.

- According to the author “commitment is a frightening word because it implies the negative as well as the positive” (p. 31). Since commitment is a scary word for most people, we would rather hold on to false hopes and ideals for marriage, rather than get down to the real business of life. Commitment involves being real with our selves and our partners, and this is a painful process. If people don’t learn to combat the fairy tale mentality before they marry, they will have a harder time recovering from their disenchantment. In commitment we have to accept both the negative and positive aspects of our spouse. The author points out that not only is there no such thing as a perfect relationship, there is also not a perfect prince charming out there. Every person has faults and downfalls, but the joy of commitment is accepting someone where they are and having them accept you in return.

Willimon, William H. (1979). *Saying yes to marriage*. Judson Press: Valley Forge, PA.

- This last book is not one that I would recommend you run out to the store and buy, but it does have some timeless principles that will help you along the way to commitment. This book focuses on the whole concept of marriage and its importance. The author dedicates one chapter labeled “The challenge of commitment”, to fears of commitment. This chapter deals with some principles and concepts that must be kept in mind as a person determines if they really want to make a life long commitment to another person or not. According to the author many people are afraid to make commitments because “if there is one thing we

fear more than risk it is permanence” (p. 68). So many people are reluctant to make commitments, not just because they are unsure of being with the person, but because the permanence of the commitment scares them.

References

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