

What happens when a girl won't respond to the commitment pattern?

THE SIXTH STEP

By Jace Anderson

*Therefore shall a man leave his father and mother,
and shall cleave unto his wife.*

—GENESIS 2:24

HOME FROM MY MISSION ONLY A WEEK, I SAT alone at the kitchen table—filled to the brim, both in thought and in stomach. Though I was slightly out of shape, and still awkwardly recovering from the effects of faithfully avoiding females for two years on my mission, it was at that moment that I audaciously decided I would be engaged to be married by the end of the month. Then, in a fit of righteousness, I broke the news to my parents who received the startling declaration with open arms and a few tears.

This marriage epiphany had not come out of left field. I had it in mind that my life was to follow a successive plan. Childhood led to adolescence, which took me to my mission, which advanced me to marriage. Since up until that point in my life none of those steps had let me down, it seemed only logical to move on to the next. This idea received further fuel from the Sunday school lesson that day.

Since it was my first Sunday in a singles ward, I was new to what I later came to learn was the most common lesson in a singles ward. It starts out with the teacher cleverly asking what the six steps to exaltation are. Baptism and receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost are shouted out almost before the teacher can finish writing the question on the board. Then the smart kids speak up from the back and knock out receiving your temple endowments and, if you're a man, getting the priesthood. The guy on the front row (the one who has already told three unrelated mission stories) takes care of enduring to the end. The teacher responds affirmatively to each of these, . . . and then an awkward stillness fills the room. After about thirty seconds of silence, the teacher strides to the chalkboard and, with a grin on his face, writes the word "marriage."

That night I pulled out my newly purchased cell phone and scrolled through the few phone numbers I had acquired since



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my homecoming. I decided I would give several girls the opportunity to help me cross out that elusive sixth step.

But my smile vanished as I dialed the first number. It was dawning on me that I was going to have to try to flirt with a girl. Maybe even touch one (something I hadn't done since hugging my sister goodbye more than two years previously). But as the phone began ringing, it occurred to me that asking girls out should be as easy as asking a potential investigator to hear the discussions. That thought gave me confidence. I decided that I would just be calm and deploy the missionary's subtlest tool, the commitment pattern.

I had first heard about the commitment pattern in the MTC. Halfway through the introductory lesson, a huge smile had crept over my face. I was convinced no one would ever be able to say no to baptism if only I could master this technique of obtaining commitments. My teacher taught me that the commitment pattern consists of three simple steps: First, prepare by building a relationship of trust. Second, confidently invite until a commitment is made. And third, follow up on previous commitments.

The girl (let's call her Stacy) picked up the phone, and the conversation went something like this:

STACY: Hello?

JACE: Hey Stacy, this is Jace, how are you?

STACY: I'm good Jace, what's new with you?

(Build relationship of trust, check.)

JACE: Oh, not a whole lot. Just trying to get back to normal life. Hey, I was wondering if you wanted to go up to Temple Square and see the Christmas lights with me?

(Invite, check)

STACY: Oh, I can't tonight. I'm going out on a date.

(Invite, uncheck)

JACE: ... Oh, okay. Well maybe later on in the week. Would it be better for you on weekends or weekdays?

STACY: What? I don't know... I might have to work or something.

(Panic sets in)

JACE: Ah... ok, um... if you don't work, is it usually better for you in the evenings or the day?

STACY: Uh... I don't know. I'll just give you a call or something.

(Anything to get out of the most awkward conversation of my life)

JACE: Ok, yeah, call me anytime... or you can text me... it's the same number that you would call me on... later. So, ok, I'll talk to you later then, or read you... if it were a text, ha ha...

STACY: Ok, sounds good. See ya.

(Click)

I sat there in stunned silence as I reviewed the conversation. "It's the same number..." what was that all about? It wasn't that the commitment pattern had never produced the age old "Don't call me, I'll call you" excuse before; it was just that for the first time, it wasn't my message that was being rejected, it was me. This realization hit me like an uppercut to the chin, and my confidence that I was going to reach my goal by the end of the month hit the proverbial mat.

Stacy never called. Neither did any of the other girls I tried to commit that night. The stark realization that maybe I wasn't quite as suave as I had thought pushed my end-of-month goal not only onto the back burner but completely off the stove. Having nothing else cooking, I went back into an old pattern: hanging with my buddies.

WE'VE BEEN THE same crew of six since the seventh grade. Whether it was scarfing down huge quantities of dirt as freshman or sending a personalized valentine to the hottest girl in the school, "the buddies," as we called ourselves, knew how to lighten any situation or how to make fools of ourselves—whichever was more fun.

Avoiding girls in high school was easy. The Church taught: date after you were sixteen, but avoid having a serious girlfriend. For us buddies, this admonition was coupled with the knowledge that if we were to go on a date, we'd miss out on the night's jokes. I got away with dating a girl for a few months my junior year, but anytime I returned to my buddies, I seemed to be on the outside of all the inside jokes, so I quickly ended the relationship and found my way back in.

Upon our return from our missions, the Church gave us the green light to go ahead and start dating seriously. The six of us decided to join forces and nip this sixth step in the bud together. At first we attempted group dates. Group dating sounded a lot easier than entering the dating world alone, but we soon ran into trouble.

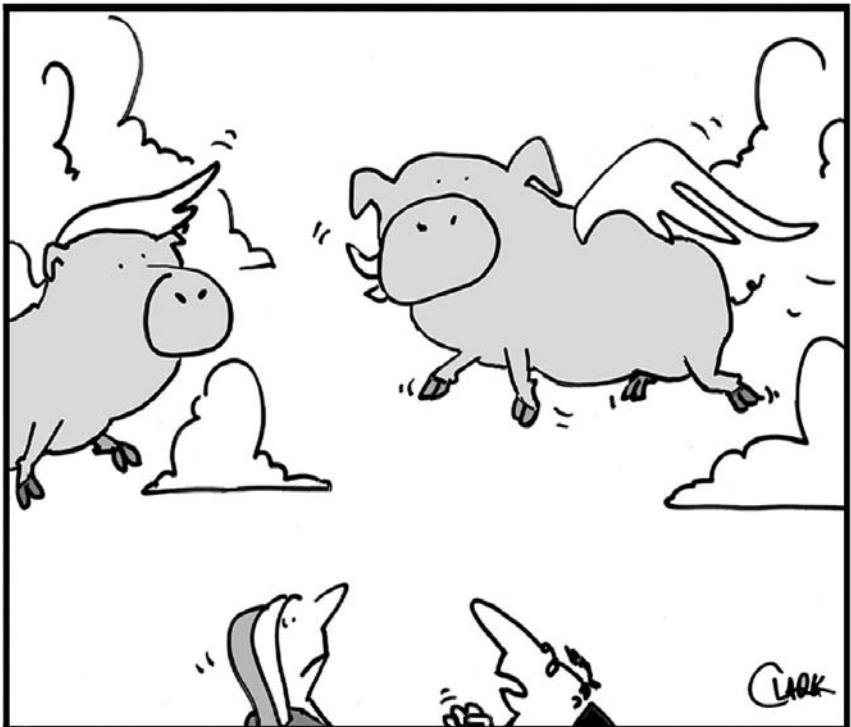
We found that our tastes in women were so similar that we often ended up all liking the same girl, which led to some awkward situations. Picture it, six guys crowded around an "eight-cow" girl, while the "three-cow" girls who are ostensibly on the same group date with us are left to their own devices.

This, surprisingly, never engendered any animosity among us as buddies, but it also didn't land us any second dates. The whole situation was like when the entire team leaps to grab a rebound in basketball. Initially each player is so anxious to secure the ball from the other team that he doesn't realize he is competing only against his teammates. Once this realization hits, all the team members drop the ball at the same time, not wanting to exert any more unnecessary effort. Which is when the opposing team typically scoops the loose ball up and heads for the basket.

Once this had happened several times, we all gave up for a while. After all, none of us were twenty-five yet (official "menace to society" age) and, aside from an occasional gaze at a pair of shapely ankles, we had each other, and that was enough.

I RECENTLY HAD an epiphany about marriage. I am not naïve enough to claim this is the case with all couples who get married, but I believe it applies to the majority. A lot of people I saw getting married either had no friends or friends who would bore even Al Gore. If you have no friends, all you have to do is find one person dumb enough to hang out with

HONEST JON by Jonathan David Clark



"Yeah, baby. Now you have to marry me!"

you all day, and your problem is solved. At this point in my life, I had all the friends and all the fun I needed. It was like high school again but with more money and no curfew.

But living that kind of life in Utah Valley became hard after a while. The constant nagging from parents and Church leaders to find that lucky lady and get a mortgage and a house with a front gate and some little ones to play in that yard started to wear on us. We agreed that we all needed to put the life of midnight basketball games and Friday nights at the local arcade behind us. Eventually one of my friends, the one renowned for being "on the ball," started dating a girl relatively seriously. After about a year of dating this girl, the pressure started to mount because he had not yet proved he could take the next big step. The stress finally forced him down onto one knee with a diamond ring in his hand. I was away in Texas when he proposed, but upon my return, I could see that something was wrong.

Though the buddies supported our friend's decision, I was ambivalent about the whole situation. On the one hand, I was happy to see that he had grown up and was ready to move on with his life. But it was also quite clear that doubt was eating away at him. His fiancée was great. She was smart, pretty, and sweet. But for some reason, she just wasn't right for him. On the surface, my friend seemed to be choosing the right, but no matter how many times he was congratulated in elders quorum, or how often he was told that he was setting a good example for the rest of us, he just felt his engagement was wrong. After three sleepless nights, he broke it off. So now another year has come and gone, and the buddies remain single.

DURING A RECENT Sunday dinner, my mother lovingly pointed out that I have only a few more "good" years left before I start to lose my hair and metabolic vigor. Apparently my mother knows enough about my genes to predict that if I wait much longer, I'll have to comb my hair over and suck in my gut until I can trick some nearsighted girl into taking the ring. Then after I lock her in for time and all eternity, I will finally be able to allow a relieved smile to creep over my face as I brush my remaining hair back to my head's bad side, undo my belt a few notches, and reveal that the joke is on her. Sorry, Mom, if a girl is not smart enough to notice my receding hair line and understand the basic concepts of aging, I'm not so sure I want to hang out with her for time or eternity either.

Several months ago, I was given some decent advice in church. One of the married women assigned to attend our singles ward stood up and declared that "it is better to marry the right person at the wrong time than to marry the wrong person at the right time." I began to wonder how many returned missionaries are pressured into thinking the "right time" is when they step off the plane ride home. I know I was. In how many cases is the end result that they are married at the perfect moment to the wrong person? Kind of like a tattoo that seemed like such a great idea at the time.

I am ready to accept the right person at the wrong time but not the other way around.

To that certain crowd that still shakes its head disapprovingly at me, I simply declare that I do want to get married. I completely agree with the author of Genesis who counsels me to replace my mother and father with a young woman. I know that there is a happiness that comes only from finding that special someone and having kids and grandkids and going on a couple's mission. But for now, since I haven't met the right person, I am going to ask that same crowd to spare me the rolled eyes after hearing my response to the question, "So, are there wedding bells in your future?" I'm going to get married when the person is right. Trust me, I'm not planning to be that guy at the family reunion who shows up forty minutes late in an X-Terra, Bluetooth in ear, and a way-too-young-for-him girlfriend on his arm.

In a perfect world, I would get both the girl and the timing right, and that would definitely be cause for celebration. Maybe even a wedding. But for now, while I still have friends, and there isn't any girl I'm doing back-flips over, I think I'm just going to continue to live my life—without the timetable. ☺



YOU, ME (AND BACH)

Long roads threading through desert sage and blush
skirting Las Vegas,
the calm before L.A. . . .

Enclosed in the car
with pour and pause of talk, we recall

a Salzburg concert,
shin splints in American Fork Canyon,

your broken Chrysler key,
love in a castle.

Tennis rackets rattle, mingle
with duffle-rolled T-shirts, shorts,
a six-pack of V-8.

Tires massage the road,
my fingers walk your neck,

unwind knots that lump
beneath your raven fringe of hair,
the gray insisting.

Your dinner jacket and starched shirt
hang over one door in the back,

my black sequined dress guards the other.

High-class scarecrows,
they keep the world at bay.

—MARILYN BUSHMAN-CARLTON