

My Conversion to Eternal Marriage

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I wanted to be married, but my unrealistic expectations led to a cycle of dating failures.

Several years ago I realized that while I had a testimony of the gospel in general, there were some principles to which I was not yet fully converted. Although I had no problem with tithing or the Word of Wisdom for instance, I did struggle with the principle of eternal marriage—my eternal marriage.

A Cycle of Failure

It wasn't that I didn't want to be married; on the contrary, I did—desperately, or so I told myself. I dated locally and had some long-distance relationships. I dated constantly, even to the point of exhaustion. But I became an expert at identifying what I considered to be “flaws” in each of the women I dated. I always justified breaking off a relationship but usually not until I had strung her along for a year or two. Over time I worked myself into such a cycle of failure that I was practically paralyzed with regard to courtship.

I had served a mission. I attended the temple regularly, fasted and prayed for the Lord's guidance, and served faithfully in ward callings. I had strong family support. I counseled regularly with my bishops. I even spent a season working with an excellent Latter-day Saint psychologist. But I was miserable. I couldn't figure out how to get married.

People sympathetic to my plight told me that I just hadn't met “the right one” yet. Others told me, “You just have to take the plunge.” But I had too many doubts and irrational fears to allow me to do so.

I figured marriage would take nothing short of a miracle. Even though I knew I was responsible for my own life and that I couldn't expect any bishop to solve my problems, I hoped that each new bishop I worked with might be able to help me. They were all concerned and told me to stay close to the Church, continue to serve, and try my best.

When I was 45 years old, our ward's bishopric was changed. When the name of the new bishop was announced, my heart sank. The man who had been called was someone with whom I had nothing in common. I foolishly determined that I would have to wait for the next new bishop.

A Direct Conversation

One Sunday not long after, I was on my way to priesthood meeting when this bishop asked if I would come into his office right then for a temple recommend interview. In his office I began my well-rehearsed tale of woe: Nothing was going right for me. Every woman I had dated had some intolerable failing. And maybe I wasn't really cut out for marriage in this life anyway.

The bishop dismissed my complaints, looked me in the eye, and asked, “Do you want to be married or not?” I had to answer that I thought so but that I wasn’t really sure anymore. He continued, “I want you to go home and decide if you really want to be married. If the answer is no, then I’ll feel sorry for you, but you can stop dating and quit beating yourself up over it. If the answer is yes, then come back, and we’ll work on it.”

At that moment, I received the undeniable impression that his counsel would help me.

I walked out of his office sobered. After church I went home, and with a brief but intense wrestle, I decided that the answer had to be yes. I did desire marriage, and I was willing to submit to the counsel of this bishop, whatever it was.

Making this decision was the turning point in my quest to be married. For decades I had been halfhearted in my efforts. Marriage had not really been a high priority for me, even if I had pretended it was. Only when it was convenient did I give marriage serious attention, but other things, such as my professional pursuits as a concert musician and a university professor, usually took precedence. What I needed to learn was how to approach the goal of marriage with the same commitment.

Instructions from My Bishop

When I returned to counsel with my bishop, he spoke as plainly as anyone had ever done. He was not interested in my litany of excuses. He simply said, “Let’s find the glitch—the place where relationships always fall apart for you—and then fix it.” At first I was taken aback, but then I found his directness refreshing. I knew I could trust him. It took some energy and courage to get out of the deep rut I was in, but I began to gain more confidence that I could do it.

His first direction to me was to start looking anew for a companion who had, in his words, faith, integrity, and goodwill—enduring qualities that really mattered—instead of merely some surface qualities I considered essential. (In my mind, she needed to be a blonde, a soprano, and a gourmet cook.) My charge was to cherish her with the same kind of love, to the degree that I could, that our Heavenly Father has for each of us.

My bishop also helped me discover the flaws in my quest for marriage. I conceded that they were not in the women I had dated, as I had maintained for so long. Rather, they were in my own erroneous thinking and unrealistic expectations. He laid out some new rules by which I was to date.

First of all, I had to prepare for change. I was very comfortable in my way of living, and even though I desired marriage in an abstract way, I felt it would upset my routine. I would have to start doing some things differently. I’d been doing it my way for more than 25 years, repeating the same mistakes, and obviously it hadn’t worked. Because I was 45, I had to understand that I didn’t have an unlimited amount of time to date.

Second, dating was not to be about entertainment but rather about identifying a companion who was also seriously interested in and prepared for marriage. This was to be a time for becoming acquainted not just with someone's personality but also, more important, with her spirit.

My bishop also taught me I would be able to tell within a few dates whether a woman had the essential qualities I was looking for. If they weren't present, it was time to move along. To break my pattern of unproductive long-term dating, the bishop gave me a startling ultimatum: I was to follow any serious dating relationship through to marriage or rejection. After a reasonable period of time, I could not turn back unless the woman I was dating turned me down. Previously, my habit had been to walk away rather than commit. This time I would not be allowed to retreat as I had done so often before. In an uncharacteristically bold move, I agreed to the terms.

What I Learned

I started to recognize a few things. For one, I realized that what some call "chemistry" comes after honest and mature conversation, not before. This is one of the most common mistakes people make—they pursue a relationship only if they feel an immediate physical attraction. Some single people also prefer superficial topics to serious discussions and hard questions, avoiding the latter in the vain hope that once "true love" sets in, somehow all the real-life problems will disappear. Actually, it's the other way around. If at the outset you practice honest communication and learn to answer the hard questions, then trust develops. This trust erases fear, which is usually the cause of cold feet, lack of commitment, and ultimately a shaky relationship.

Most important, I learned that love is not about just me. It is primarily about caring for the other person. I had to work on humbling myself and relinquishing the arrogant attitude that maybe no woman was good enough for me.

My Real Conversion

It would be nice if I could say I married the very next woman I met. I dated a few women very briefly and had one longer dating relationship in which I was ultimately turned down. But I exercised faith and followed my bishop's instructions, even though I didn't get immediate results.

The year after I adopted these changes in attitude and perspective, I took a second look at a woman I had known for years. We had actually dated before, but this time I saw her in a different light—as a prospective eternal companion who is delightful and beautiful in every way because she has the qualities that are enduring (and many bonus qualities as well). She was generous enough to give me another chance, and now she is my wife and the mother of our precious children. I love her deeply. Ten years ago, I could not have imagined such fulfillment.

What brought about this conversion? (And it was a real conversion—a turning in a different direction.) I believe the change came about because a bishop taught me how deeply Heavenly Father loves me and wants me to be happy and have all the blessings He has already promised

me. My bishop helped me rearrange the priorities in my life, which had become distorted. He spoke plainly and did not allow me to be distracted by the excuses I had given for so long.

Now I know what conversion feels like. I have had that mighty change of heart regarding this principle, and it has made all the difference in my life. I can trace the moment of my conversion to that day in my bishop's office when it was revealed to me that if I would follow his counsel, I would be blessed.

Indeed I am.