



**MOUNT
N E B O
PAPERS**

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➔ **Is Marriage Worth Defending?**

Executive Summary

By many measures, marriage has weakened in our society over the past two generations. Fewer people marry. More people divorce. Increasing numbers of people move through a series of sexual relationships without ever forming a lasting marriage.

Not only the practice but also the understanding of marriage has shifted. Our society's view of marriage, centered on mutual emotional satisfaction, is already far from classic Christian teaching. Now pro-homosexuality advocates are seeking to radically redefine the institution, reducing it to a relationship between any "two people who love each other." Amidst all this conflict, is it worth the cost for Christians to continue to defend and promote this embattled institution?

The Bible teaches that God brought together man and woman in marriage for the good of all humankind. The love between husband and wife is a temporal image of the eternal bond between God and his people. All major branches of the church bless and honor marriage for the way in which it unites the two sexes as "one flesh," provides the appropriate setting for childbearing and childrearing, offers a legitimate channel for sexual desire, and fosters faithful lifelong companionship between husband and wife.

Marriage is the most basic building block of human society. Almost every known culture distinguishes the marriage of man and woman from other relationships. Typically, marriage is the means by which children are ensured the care of a socially obligated father and mother. The state has a crucial interest in marriage as the incubator for the next generation of citizens. Contemporary social science confirms the benefits of marriage—in terms of physical and psychological health, social adjustment, and economic prosperity—for both adults and children.

As marriage comes under challenge, U.S. Christians face three options: They can yield to the cultural trends devaluing marriage. Or they can admit defeat in society but try somehow to maintain traditional teachings inside the church. Or they can swim against the current and insist that both church and society lend a hand in strengthening marriage. We believe that only this last option is faithful to the Scriptures and conducive to the long-term good of society.



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About Mount Nebo

The Mount Nebo papers are a series of papers offering an overview, from an orthodox Christian perspective, of significant public policy issues. Written by IRD staff and adjunct fellows, the papers are grounded in the best biblical, historical, scientific, economic, and policy scholarship. They are intended to help Christian lay and clergy leaders think through issues from a Christian perspective. They are designed to be read by individuals or studied in a group educational setting.

The papers offer a model of how thoughtful Christians should engage public policy issues. They start with a survey of relevant biblical teachings. They then look for guidance from church history and tradition. The papers next examine the perceived problem facing society. The pros and cons of several policy options are weighed. Attention is given to the positions adopted by church bodies and leaders of various Christian traditions. The papers conclude with a summary of matters on which all Christians should be in agreement, as contrasted with matters that should be left to the prudential judgment of individual believers.

The name Mount Nebo is borrowed from the mountain, in present-day Jordan, from which Moses was permitted to view the Promised Land that he would not be able to enter (Deuteronomy 32:48-52). We find in this biblical incident an apt analogy for what we wish to accomplish in this series of papers.

We are trying to take a broad view of large topics, gaining a sense of the “lay of the land.” We look ahead to the country that is our home and our destiny—God’s kingdom in its fullness, as promised in the Scriptures—while recognizing that we do not dwell in that country today and might not enter it in our earthly lifetimes. We cannot discern every policy road that we will need to follow. But with our eyes fixed on the revelation that God has given us, we can be properly oriented to move forward by faith amidst all the uncertainties of this age.

If you have been blessed by this paper and are not already in contact with the IRD, please join with us in moving forward. Visit our website, www.TheIRD.org, to join our online community and consider helping the IRD develop future Mount Nebo papers by contributing to our work.

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Marriage in the Bible: A Theme All the Way Through

The first word to which Christians must attend in any matter is the Word of God. We receive that Word especially in the incarnate Son of God, Jesus the Christ, as revealed by the Holy Spirit through the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.

Those Scriptures have much to say about marriage, from the first chapter of Genesis to the last chapter of Revelation. The marital relationship opens a window to understanding both God and humankind. Biblically grounded Christians will place a high value on marriage, as Jesus did.

On several occasions Jesus faced interlocutors who raised questions related to marriage. He responded with a very high and demanding view of the institution. Most important is this incident, recounted in the gospels of Mark and Matthew:

Some Pharisees came to him [Jesus], and to test him they asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?” He answered, “Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.” (Matthew 19: 3-6)¹

The Pharisees pose a question about a particular situation, pushing Jesus to see how far a husband might go in extricating himself from an unsatisfactory marriage. But Jesus quickly turns the conversation from human desires to God’s intentions. Jesus affirms that the author of marriage is God, not human society. It is God who “joins together” every husband and wife—not merely the wills of the two spouses.

Jesus also affirms that God’s establishment of marriage goes back to “the beginning,” to God’s providential design in creation. Marriage, in Jesus’ telling, is rooted in God’s choice to “make them [humans] male and female.” It is an essentially “gendered” relationship uniting the two sexes.

Jesus, by explaining marriage in terms of God’s order of creation, makes clear that marriage was instituted for all humankind. The law of Moses contained particular provisions regulating marriage and divorce

within Israel, which was what interested the Pharisees. Jesus, however, looks to a pattern of “a man ... leav[ing] his father and mother and be[ing] joined to his wife” that was practiced far more widely.

Back to Creation

The verses cited by Jesus come from the creation accounts of Genesis 1 and 2. Genesis 1:27-28 says:

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”

These verses suggest a number of insights that are developed later in Scripture and Christian tradition. First, the division of humankind into male and female is no accident. It is, on the contrary, the first feature that the biblical writer mentions about humankind. Being “gendered,” having a male or female body, is a fundamental aspect of our humanity as God created it.

This sexual duality seems to be related somehow to the “image of God” that is found in humankind. Later Christian theologians have speculated that the communion of the three persons of the Trinity is reflected whenever distinct persons join together in community, as a man and woman do in marriage.

Moreover, the creation of humans as male and female is linked to God’s command to “be fruitful and multiply.” Procreation is necessary if humankind is to fulfill its destiny of sharing in God’s gracious dominion over the earth. And, obviously, procreation occurs only through an act involving one man and one woman.

Genesis 2 tells how God brings the man and woman together. God starts with the observation that “[i]t is not good that the man should be alone.” God then resolves to “make a helper for him as his partner.” After none of the animals is found to be suitable for this role:

So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this

¹ This and all subsequent biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version. The issue of divorce, raised in this passage, will be discussed on p. 6.

one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.” Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and they were not ashamed. (Genesis 2: 21-25)

This is the passage in which Jesus, his Jewish compatriots, and the church located the origin of marriage. Alongside the emphasis on procreation in Genesis 1 there is now an emphasis on the companionship of the two spouses of opposite sex. God does not intend for humans to live alone, and so he establishes the first social relationship, the relationship upon which human society will be built.

This marital relationship is intrinsically good—the man joyfully recognizes that “[t]his at last” is the mate who will relieve his solitude. It is also instrumentally good—the man and woman will be matched partners in fulfilling God’s economic purposes. Together, they will “till and keep” the garden, as God had commanded.

The right mate for the man is one who shares his deepest identity—“bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.” But she is also different. She is not a replica of the man; she is his “helper” or “partner” or complement.

The relationship described in Genesis 2 is a deep and intimate bond. Husband and wife “cling” to one another. They “become one flesh.” This last phrase clearly refers to the union of the two bodies in sexual intercourse. But it probably also refers to the strong, durable union of the two persons, surpassing other human relationships. The tie between the two spouses takes precedence even over loyalties to their families of origin, as the man must “leave his father and mother” to be united with his wife.

When sin enters God’s garden in Genesis 3, it distorts every aspect of creation, including marriage. Upon the joyful partnership of the previous chapter falls a curse: “To the woman he [God] said, ‘I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you’” (Genesis 3:16). Henceforth the relationship will be shadowed by desire, domination, and pain. What was given as a divine blessing may now be soured by human abuse.

Old Testament Laws

Nevertheless, the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17 and Deuteronomy 5:6-21) show that marriage remains an important part of God’s design for human life. Twice God enjoins the Israelites against violating the marriage

bond. “You shall not commit adultery,” he warns them, and later he adds, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife.” Other provisions of the Mosaic law prohibit or punish rape, incest, prostitution, bestiality, and same-sex relations. These practices are characterized as “abominations that were done before you [by the Canaanites].” Repeating such practices would cause the land to “vomit you out for defiling it” (Leviticus 19:26-30).

If a Hebrew man takes a liking to a female captive, he is instructed to treat her fairly as his wife rather than a slave (Deuteronomy 21:10-14). The unspoken assumption is that marriage is the proper setting for sexual intercourse. This assumption is visible in another provision:

When a man seduces a virgin who is not engaged to be married, and lies with her, he shall give the bride-price for her and make her his wife. But if her father refuses to give her to him, he shall pay an amount equal to the bride-price for virgins. (Exodus 22: 16-17)

The reasoning seems to be that the young man and woman have effectively consummated a marriage through the act of sexual intercourse.² Therefore, the proper thing to do in most cases is to formalize the marriage through the payment of the bride-price. There does not appear to be an option for a continuing sexual relationship outside of marriage.

Of course, as these passages illustrate, the social setting for marriage and family in ancient Israel was very different from what modern U.S. Christians would find familiar or just. Women did not have equal standing with men, and their interests were often ignored. Slavery and other inequalities of power meant that many marriages lacked the free consent of both spouses. Economic and political advantage for the family often figured more prominently than personal affection in the choice of marriage partners. Old Testament teaching, if properly understood and applied, would have limited the abuses. But the society remained deeply patriarchal.

Polygamy is an example of this dynamic. The practice was never commanded in the Hebrew Scriptures. Indeed, Genesis 2 and other passages presuppose monogamy. Nevertheless, multiple wives are frequently

² The apostle Paul employs similar reasoning in counseling the Corinthians against any involvement with prostitutes. “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?” Paul asks. “Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For it is said, ‘The two shall become one flesh.’” (1 Corinthians 6:15-16) The apostle is saying, in effect, that whoever has sex with a prostitute has married himself to the prostitute.

Stretching Scripture Too Far: Galatians 3:28

One of the subtlest dangers facing Christians in public life is the temptation to “stretch the Scriptures.” Wanting to rest our arguments on biblical authority, we cite a few Bible verses in support of our contemporary agenda. But in doing so, we can sometimes wrest the verses far out of their proper context. We try to make them answer questions that the biblical writers did not address; we try to make them say things that the biblical writers never intended. This temptation must be resisted if we are to hear what God actually says through those writers, rather than what we wish he would have said.

A favorite verse of religious “progressives” today is Galatians 3:28: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” Taking a simplistic reading of this verse, in isolation from the rest of Paul’s letter, they interpret it to mean that Christ has abolished all the distinctions named and that Christians henceforth should pay no attention to any such distinctions.

In particular, radical feminists and other progressives today seek to minimize the distinction between male and female. They prefer to speak of “gender” rather than “sex,” implying that virtually all perceived male-female differences are “socially constructed” fictions. Within the church they like to quote Galatians 3:28 as support for their agenda of deconstructing anything that acknowledges a necessary complementarity of male and female roles.

Marriage is among the institutions that progressives aim to deconstruct. They oppose the notion that marriage requires a man and a woman, because that notion assumes that the husband and wife bring distinct and non-interchangeable contributions to their union. Gender roles should be more fluid, progressives believe. Therefore, they would redefine marriage as simply a union of any “two persons who love each other.” They see no difference between husband-wife couples and relationships involving two men or two women, because “there is no longer male and female.”

This interpretation ignores the context of Paul’s letter to the Galatians. The apostle is arguing against a faction in Galatia that would have made Gentiles second-class members of the church, requiring them to be circumcised and to obey the Jewish law in order to be accepted. Paul insists that this demand is a perversion of the Gospel. He reminds the Galatians that all have come to God on the same basis: “And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law” (2:16)

Paul’s point in 3:28 is that all believers—Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female—are equally members of Christ. The preceding verses state the point directly: “[F]or in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” The apostle is not advocating that Rome abolish slavery. He is not saying that the church should ignore all differences of language and culture. He is not seeking to tear down all distinctions between male and female. He is simply saying that—amidst all these differences, natural or “socially constructed”—all stand on the same ground of God’s grace.

With the passage of time, the logic of that equal grace did undermine the oppressive institution of slavery. It challenged racial and ethnic prejudices. It helped to break down limitations on women’s opportunities that were indeed “socially constructed.” But the message of Galatians 3:28 does not contradict or invalidate God’s common grace in creating two complementary sexes. It does not change God’s design in bringing the two together in marriage. It does not justify the radical, gender-bending egalitarianism of today’s progressives.

reported in the earlier Old Testament narratives. Over the centuries, the incidence of polygamy diminished among the Jews. After the Babylonian exile, one man-one woman marriage apparently became the norm.³

The Hebrew Scriptures do not pretend that God’s law was ever fully obeyed. On the contrary, they bear witness to frequent disobedience with sometimes catastrophic consequences. Even venerated patriarchs and monarchs had marital troubles and dysfunctional

families. The rivalries among Jacob’s wives and sons would have torn apart the chosen family, were it not for God’s grace through Joseph (Genesis 29-50). The hero Samson brought much suffering upon himself and others through his impetuous marriage and foolish sexual liaisons (Judges 13-16).

King David’s adultery with Bathsheba set off a train of deception, bloodshed, and division within the royal household (II Samuel 11-19). David’s son Solomon, who “loved many foreign women,” did no better. “For when Solomon was old,” the Scripture says, “his wives

3 John J. Collins, “Marriage, Divorce, and Family in Second Temple Judaism,” in Leo G. Perdue et al., eds., *Families in Ancient Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 121-122.

turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not true to the LORD his God.” The result was that an angry God decreed the division of Israel—a division that was never healed (I Kings 11).

This passage and several others (e.g., Jeremiah 3:1-14) hint at a deep parallel between the commandments forbidding idolatry and those prohibiting adultery. Sexual promiscuity goes hand in hand with a religious laxity that is willing to worship any number of false gods. On the other hand, monogamy goes with monotheism. Exclusive devotion to the one true God is correlated to exclusive fidelity to one’s spouse.

God’s covenant with Israel, in other words, is like a monogamous marriage. The zealous, jealous love of the human relationship finds its match in the zealous, jealous love of the divine. This metaphor is the lens through which traditional Jewish interpreters saw the eroticism of the Song of Solomon. In an unmistakable image of sexual intercourse, the bride says of her bridegroom:

My beloved has gone down to his garden, to the beds
of spices, to pasture his flock in the gardens,
and to gather lilies.

I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine; he pastures
his flock among the lilies. (Song of Solomon 6:2-3)

The poet praises this “love [that] is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave” (8:6). The immediate reference is to the overwhelming sexual passion between a human bride and bridegroom. Figuratively, however, later Jewish and Christian interpreters saw a portrayal of the all-consuming love between God and his people.

The metaphor is made explicit in the prophecy of Hosea. God asks the prophet to “take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom” as a living illustration of how “the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the LORD” (Hosea 1:2). Hosea’s wife, Gomer, goes after other lovers; however, God (or Hosea) persists: “Therefore, I will now allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her” (2:14). Hosea buys Gomer back out of prostitution, as God will redeem Israel from its apostasy. The promise in both cases is that “I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy” (2:19).

It is hard to imagine a more vivid depiction of God’s unconditional, enduring love for Israel. The implication, too, is that human marital love should have the same qualities, always ready to seek forgiveness and reconciliation with the spouse to whom one has pledged oneself.

The Old Testament does not treat divorce directly or at any length. The most significant reference is a snippet in Deuteronomy (24:1-4) that raises a hypothetical case:

Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house and goes off to become another man’s wife. Then suppose ...

Clearly, divorces did occur in practice. The process of writing out a certificate of divorce was quick and simple. But the acceptable grounds for divorce were not so clear. What constituted “something objectionable” that would justify dissolving a marriage?

There were two schools of thought within ancient Judaism. One held that a husband could initiate a divorce for any reason. Even a burned dinner would be sufficient cause, according to Rabbi Hillel’s interpretation of the law. The other school, represented by Rabbi Shammai, set a higher bar. It held that the “objectionable” or “indecent” behavior justifying a divorce would have to be a specific act of sexual immorality.⁴

Jesus Enters the Debate

The Pharisees invite Jesus to enter this debate when they ask him, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?” (Matthew 19:3, Mark 10:2) Jesus’ response goes beyond Shammai in its strictness. “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her,” Jesus warns in the Gospel of Mark, “and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.” Matthew’s account adds an exception allowing divorce in the case of “unchastity.”

Jesus also explains in that Matthew passage: “It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.” At minimum Jesus affirms that God’s intention is for lifelong marriage, even though sometimes the grave sins of one or both spouses may cause a marriage to fail.⁵

This demanding position on divorce fits into a larger pattern in Jesus’ teaching. In the Sermon on the Mount he summons his followers to a “righteousness

⁴ Mishnah, *Gittin* 90.

⁵ This reading comports with a passage in the late Old Testament prophet Malachi (2:13-16) in which God declares, “I hate divorce.” God tells Malachi that the people’s offerings are unacceptable “[b]ecause the LORD was a witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant.”

[that] exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees” (Matthew 5:20). He extends the prohibition on adultery to cover not only external acts but also internal affections: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” (Matthew 5:27-28)

Elsewhere, Jesus lists adultery and fornication among the “things [that] come from within” and that “defile a person” (Mark 7:18-23). Likewise, the apostles at the Council of Jerusalem stress that although Gentile converts were free from many requirements of the Jewish law, they must take care “to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood” (Acts 15:20). For the New Testament church, as for Old Testament Israel, refraining from violations of the marriage bond is a moral imperative on par with rejecting idolatry.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus performs his first miracle at a wedding in Cana of Galilee (John 2:1-11). Later Christian interpreters have understood his presence at that event as a gesture honoring the institution of marriage. In turning the water into fine wine, Jesus illustrates how the grace of God released through him transforms the natural order and fills it anew with God’s glory. Thus the wedding at Cana becomes an anticipation of the consummation of God’s kingdom at the end of the age.

In a similar vein, two of Jesus’ parables (Matthew 22:1-14 and 25:1-13) compare God’s kingdom to a wedding feast. The returning Christ, it appears, is the bridegroom for whom the wedding is to be celebrated. The same notion appears repeatedly in the Revelation to John. Toward the end the heavenly multitude cries out, “Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb [i.e., Christ] has come, and his bride [the church] has made herself ready” (Revelation 19:7). John sees “the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (21:2).

Advice from the Apostle Paul

In his letter to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul amplifies the marriage metaphor. Paul, like Jesus, looks back to the Genesis 2 verses about how “the two will become one flesh.” The apostle exclaims, “This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ.” Husbands, he says, “should love their wives as they do their own bodies”—

just as Christ loves the church “because we are members of his body.” Paul advises married couples:

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish ... (Ephesians 5:21-27)

It is not possible here to address the disputes about the meanings of “headship” and “subjection” in this passage. It should suffice to note the many apt comparisons between the husband/wife and Christ/church covenants:

1. Both covenants rest on something fundamental held in common: the image of God engraved in humans, male and female.
2. In both covenants, however, there is a fundamental difference between the two parties, a gap that must be bridged.
3. But that gap can be bridged and the two united: man to woman in God’s common grace of marriage, humankind to God in the special grace of Jesus Christ.
4. In this union there is a yielding of self on both sides, as Christ and the husband must “give themselves up” in love for the church and the wife, respectively, while the latter reciprocally subject themselves by identifying their wills with the will of the former.
5. This union demands a total and lasting commitment. Christ made the final and complete sacrifice of his own life for the sake of the church. Likewise, nothing can be withheld when “the two [spouses] become one flesh.”
6. Exclusiveness is the expectation in both covenants. Christ is the “one Lord” of the church, and a church leader is to be “the husband of one wife” (I Timothy 3:2).

7. The object of both relationships is the glory of God, as husbands and wives, Christ and the church prepare for God's kingdom in its fullness.

Yet it is clear in the New Testament that priority goes to the church's commitment to Christ. Jesus tells his followers, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26). He anticipates that many will lose these family attachments "for my sake and for the sake of the good news" (Mark 10:29). His disciples will find their true family in the church: "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." (Mark 3:34-35)

Marriage, while honored among Christians, is only a penultimate good. Jesus, answering a question from the Sadducees, explains, "For when they [humans] rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven" (Mark 12:25). Marriage is only for this life.

In I Corinthians 7 Paul gives delicately balanced advice on marriage and singleness. In a break with traditional Jewish views, he prefers singleness while still acknowledging the sanctity of the marriage bond:

To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am. But if they are not practicing self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion. To the married I give this command—not I but the Lord—that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does separate, let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife. (I Corinthians 7:8-11)

Paul's perspective in this passage is shaped by his sense of "the impending crisis"—events leading up to Christ's return. The apostle sees marriage as a source of "distress" and "anxiety" as the married person "is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please" the spouse. By contrast, the unmarried person can be "anxious about the affairs of the Lord" (7:26-34).

Regarding religiously mixed marriages, Paul advises the Christian spouses to stay in their marriages as long as the unbelieving spouse "consents to live with [them]" (7:12-16). He enjoins all husbands and wives to give one another their "conjugal rights" to sexual intimacy. "For the wife does not have authority over her own body," the apostle reasons, "but the husband does;

likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does" (7:3-4).

In summary, the church received from the Scriptures all these strands of teaching about marriage:

- that marriage was established by God in creation for the good of all humankind;
- that marriage unites the two created sexes, man and woman, as "one flesh";
- that marriage is related to God's command to "be fruitful and multiply";
- that marriage is consummated by sexual intercourse, and thereafter the husband and wife have reciprocal and exclusive claims to one another's sexual intimacy;
- that through marriage the spouses bring one another companionship and help through the vicissitudes of life;
- that the marriage relationship has been corrupted through human sin;
- that violations of the marriage bond are among the most abhorrent sins, comparable in God's eyes to idolatry;
- that God has provided marriage as the proper way to satisfy sexual desires that otherwise might lead to sinful non-marital relations;
- that God intends marriage to be lifelong, and that divorce can be justified only for narrow reasons as a concession to human obstinacy;
- that marriage is an icon of God's relationship with Israel, and of Christ's with the church;
- that faithful marriage is to be honored among Christians, as also a life of celibate singleness is to be honored.

It is through interweaving these strands that the church has developed its doctrines and practices regarding marriage.

The Church Changes the Culture

Church doctrines and practices develop in social contexts—generally ones that reflect human waywardness. The early church confronted pagan cultures that frequently tolerated or condoned polygamy, concubinage, prostitution, incest, and homosexuality. Many marriages had an element of coercion. Roman parents could commit their minor daughters in marriage to older men. Germanic warriors practiced “marriage by capture.”

Ancient slaves could not legally marry; their only option, with the master’s permission, was an informal cohabitation. Many Roman and Greek men used marriage as a means toward social and economic advantage. A wife could display a man’s status, help to manage his household, and bear children to inherit his property. But a man’s closest companions were his male friends, not his wife. It was fairly easy for a man to divorce a wife who had failed to produce an heir or otherwise displeased him.

From the beginning, church leaders challenged these cultural attitudes. For several centuries they had little power to impose Christian teachings on anyone. But the church had the power of persuasion as it laid out an alternative vision of marital life. And, over the course of a millennium, it gradually changed society.

Early Church Fathers

The fourth century Greek preacher John Chrysostom, in a homily on Ephesians, counseled his male hearers: “Let us look for kindness in a wife, and moderation and modesty. These are the true marks of beauty. We should not look for physical beauty...” Chrysostom added: “Let us not seek money, or noble birth in the external sense, but noble birth in the soul. No one should hope to get rich from a wife, for that kind of wealth is base and disgraceful.”⁶

The Greek church father asserted, counter-culturally, that “no relationship between two men is as close as that between a man and a woman, if they are joined together as they should.” He contended that “nothing so welds our lives together as the love of man and woman.” Sexual desire [*erōs*] is “deeply implanted in our nature” by God’s “providential arrangement” to “knit together these bodies of ours.”⁷

When husband and wife are in harmony, Chryso-

stom said, “the children will be brought up well, the household will be properly ordered, and neighbors, friends, and relatives will enjoy the sweet fragrance.” He praised the Christian household as “a little church.”⁸

Chrysostom briefly echoed Paul’s command that “wives be submissive to your husbands, as to the Lord.” But he had much more to say to the husbands:

Show how much you value [your wife’s] company by staying home with her rather than going out in the marketplace. Cherish her more than all your friends, more than the children born of her, and love the children for her sake. If she does anything good, praise and admire it. If she does something wrong, as young girls sometimes do, give her encouragement and advice.⁹

The early church insisted on strict monogamy. “The very origin of the human race supports the law that prescribes a single marriage,” argued the North African Tertullian. “Therefore, the man of God, Adam, and the woman of God, Eve, by observing a single marriage, established a rule for the people of God.” The early third century theologian maintained that a husband and wife could be said to be “one flesh” only when “the union and fusion into one happens only once. But if they marry a second time, or more frequently, there will cease to be one flesh, and they will no longer be ‘two in one flesh,’ but rather one flesh in many.”¹⁰

The early church agreed that Christ’s teaching ruled out not only multiple marriages at the same time (polygamy) but also serial marriages to contemporaneous spouses (called digamy). The fourth century bishop Ambrose of Milan advised, “Do not seek a divorce, because you are not allowed to marry another while your wife is living ... It is the crime of adultery.”¹¹ As to the propriety of widows and widowers remarrying, there was disagreement.

The early church took very seriously Jesus’ warnings against lust. It fastened particularly upon Paul’s advice that “it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion.” Many church leaders agreed with Paul’s view that lifelong celibacy was the best option for a Christian. But if this degree of sexual self-control were not possible,

6 John Chrysostom, “Homily 20 on Ephesians,” excerpted in David G. Hunter, trans. and ed., *Marriage in the Early Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 81–82. These and subsequent quotes naturally speak from a man’s perspective, as the available sources are overwhelmingly male.

7 Ibid, 77.

8 Ibid, 78, 87.

9 Ibid, 93.

10 Tertullian, “An Exhortation to Chastity,” excerpted in Hunter, 39.

11 Quoted in Frances and Joseph Gies, *Marriage and Family in the Middle Ages* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 40.

marriage was seen as a second-best option. Some even regarded marriage as the lesser of evils—not as bad as fornication, but hardly praiseworthy like celibacy.

Augustine

It was this debate that prompted Augustine of Hippo to write the first systematic exposition of Christian doctrine on marriage, his early fifth century treatise on *The Good of Marriage*. He concluded, “Marriage and fornication, therefore, are not two evils, one of which is worse, but marriage and continence are two goods, one of which is better.”¹²

According to Augustine, “human nature is a social reality” and “the first natural union of human society is the husband and wife.” The North African bishop set

a pattern for future Christian teaching by listing three goods to be found in marriage: the procreation of children, the virtue of fidelity exercised between husband and wife, and the “sacramental bond” uniting the two as one flesh.¹³

The priority on procreation was deliberate. “Marriage itself, of course, in all nations exists for the same purpose, the procreation of children,” Augustine explained. “No matter how these children turn out in the end, marriage was instituted in order that they might be born in an ordered and honorable way.”¹⁴

The Latin church father believed that there was always some taint of sin attached to sexual intercourse. For this reason, he saw procreation as the only

12 Augustine, “The Good of Marriage,” excerpted in Hunter, 110.

13 Ibid, 102, 120.

14 Ibid, 117.

Arguments from Nature

Those who would diminish or redefine marriage often accuse Christians defending the institution of “trying to impose their narrow religious views.” They assume that there could be no reason other than Christian faith for treating the lifelong union of man and woman as a unique relationship of crucial social importance. This assumption is false. The observation of nature and human history, apart from any claims to special divine revelation, provides a strong rationale for even a secular society to favor marriage above other sexual relationships.

The Bible itself presents marriage as a common human institution—not a peculiarly Jewish or Christian institution. The passage in Genesis 2 about how “a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife” speaks of all humankind. In the biblical narrative, marriage long predates God’s covenant with Abraham and his new covenant in Jesus Christ. The church has always recognized the validity of marriages between non-Christians.

Modern anthropological research confirms the universality of marriage. David Blankenhorn, in *The Future of Marriage*, concludes:

In all or nearly all human societies, marriage is socially approved sexual intercourse between a woman and a man, conceived both as a personal relationship and as an institution, primarily such that any children resulting from the union are—and are understood by society to be—emotionally, morally, practically, and legally affiliated with both of the parents.¹

Societies show varying degrees of tolerance for non-marital heterosexual and homosexual relationships; however, all distinguish these relationships from marriage.

Blankenhorn argues that marriage is part of what makes human beings human and civilizations civilized. The key is what he calls “social fatherhood.” In almost all other mammal species, fatherhood is merely biological. A male spots a female in heat, impregnates her quickly, and then leaves her to her own devices. Blankenhorn notes: “[M]ost male primates, although they may live near their children, are unable even to identify them. With the exception of humans, no male primates regularly provide food to weaned offspring.”²

Human children need such care because they are uniquely vulnerable. The large size of the human brain, relative to a woman’s birth canal, dictates that an infant must be born before its brain is fully developed. It will not survive without the constant care of adults over many years. Psychologically, too, a human child will not develop properly unless it becomes “attached” to specific adults upon whom it can rely.

“Helping an infant grow over the years into a flourishing human being is the most difficult, time-consuming, and important work of our species,” Blankenhorn declares. Hence the need for not only a mother but also a father:

For the prematurely born, large-brained, slowly developing, psychologically needy human infant, a mother alone is not enough. She needs someone to help provide food. She and the

1 David Blankenhorn, *The Future of Marriage* (New York: Encounter Books, 2007), 91.

2 Ibid, 30.

adequate justification for marital intercourse: “The intercourse that is necessary for the sake of procreation is without fault, and only this belongs properly to marriage. Intercourse that goes beyond the need for procreation follows the dictates of lust [*libido*], not of reason.” Nevertheless, Augustine regarded lust in the marital relationship as a “forgivable fault.”¹⁵

The bishop, however, had no such tolerance for concubinage—a practice in which he had engaged before his conversion to Christianity. “For if a man is living with a woman only until he finds someone else who is worthy either of his position or of his wealth, whom he can marry as an equal,” Augustine said, “in his heart he is an adulterer ... The same applies to the woman, if she is aware of this and is still willing to have

unchaste intercourse with a man, with whom she does not have a commitment as a wife.”¹⁶

Augustine stipulated, “I do not believe that marriage is a good solely because of the procreation of children.” He pointed to the marriages of elderly and childless couples, where “even if it has lasted for many years and even if the youthful ardor between the male and female has faded, the order of charity between husband and wife still thrives.”¹⁷

There is a third good of marriage, according to Augustine, in the “kind of sacramental quality” associated with the divine origins of the relationship. He had in mind the Ephesians 5 description of marriage as a “mystery,” translated as *sacramentum* in Latin.

16 Ibid, 106.

17 Ibid, 104, 116.

15 Ibid, 113, 108.

child need protection from predators and other dangers. She needs someone to relieve, spell, and comfort her. She needs a companion that she can count on. She needs someone to be her partner in raising the child—someone who will love the child (almost) as much as she does and who is willing to sacrifice deeply and permanently for the child’s sake.³

Where is a woman to find such a partner? Here, providentially, biology gives her an assist. Human females are unique in that their ovulation is concealed rather than open. A man cannot tell when a woman is fertile and when she is not. This fact implies, according to Blankenhorn, “that in order to ensure successful reproduction, sexual relationships need to last longer and become more intensive.”⁴

There is a chemical aspect to the bonds that develop between a man, a woman, and the children that are the fruit of their union. The hormone oxytocin is released into a woman’s bloodstream particularly on three occasions: during sexual intercourse, childbirth, and breastfeeding. This hormone “appear[s] to promote emotional intimacy and feelings of love” for the man and then for the child that she holds in her arms. In men there is this biochemical effect: “Studies suggest that marriage—sexually bonding with a spouse—reduces levels of testosterone in men. This hormonal change appears to incline men to less violence, less sexual promiscuity, and more nurturant fatherhood.”⁵

It seems that the biblical language about “the two become one flesh” is more than a colorful metaphor. It has a basis in biological fact. Natural law philosophers such as Germain Grisez, John Finnis, and Robert George argue that “the marital act” of penile-vaginal intercourse is unique in uniting two mated individuals as a single reproductive principle.⁶

This “one flesh” union—marriage, in other words—is the solution to society’s dilemma about how to give human children the intensive personal care that they require. The mother and father bond sexually, and they maintain that bond over a span of decades. The marriage vows ensure that a human father recognizes his child and commits himself to join with the mother in rearing it. As an institution, marriage is how society tries to guarantee that every child has both a mother and a father caring for it.

Marriage works in this fashion today, as an abundance of social science research demonstrates (see pp. 21-24). No other relationship has shown comparable capacity for rearing healthy, happy, well-adjusted children.⁷ This capacity is society’s bottom-line reason for favoring the lifelong union of man and woman above all other sexual relationships. Christians can make that case without asking anyone to believe a single verse of the Bible.

6 See Robert P. George, *The Clash of Orthodoxies* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2001), 75-89.

7 Studies of children reared by same-sex couples are early and inconclusive. Almost all the studies that have been done suffer from serious design flaws. Even those studies show some disturbing differences. See Maggie Gallagher, “(How) Does Marriage Protect Child Well-Being?” in Robert P. George and Jean Bethke Elshtain, eds., *The Meaning of Marriage* (Dallas: Spence Publishing Company, 2006), 197-212.

3 Ibid, 35.

4 Ibid, 31.

5 Ibid, 36.

Augustine rooted the indissolubility of marriage in this “sacramental quality.”¹⁸

The Medieval Architecture of Marriage

There is evidence of church blessings of marriages going back to the second century. But for most of the first millennium marriage remained largely a transaction between the families of the two spouses, regulated by Roman civil law or Germanic customary law. The first complete liturgy for a church wedding dates from around 1000.

By 1200 a massive shift had taken place in Christian Europe. Marriage had come inside the church. Multiple variants of the nuptial mass contained common elements: a priestly blessing of the couple at the church door, a statement of their intention to marry, an exchange of symbolic gifts, the father of the bride giving her away, the vows, the rings, the couple prostrating themselves during the Eucharist, the groom passing the peace to the bride with a kiss.¹⁹

The keystone of the church’s new architecture of marriage was its numbering among the seven sacraments. The greatest of the medieval theologians, the 13th century Italian Thomas Aquinas, explained the rationale. Drawing on Augustine’s three goods of marriage, Thomas taught that “[m]atrimony is instituted both as an office of nature and as a sacrament of the Church.” The natural “end of marriage” and “the most essential thing in marriage” is the offspring. The faith of the spouses in “keeping one’s promises” is also a natural good—“a part of justice.”²⁰

The same institution has an extra dimension for Christians, according to Thomas: “Matrimony, then, in that it consists in the union of a husband and wife purposing to generate and educate offspring for the worship of God, is a sacrament of the Church; hence, also, a certain blessing on those marrying is given by the ministers of the Church.” But in this case the sacrament is not performed by the priest; it is performed by the husband and wife as they take their vows. “And as in the other sacraments by the thing done outwardly a sign is made of a spiritual thing, so, too,” Thomas said, “in this sacrament by the union of husband and wife a sign of the union of Christ and the Church is made.”²¹

The great theologian held that marriage conferred grace upon the spouses to live faithful lives together. In his thinking, the place of marriage among the sacraments made necessary its indissolubility:

Since, then, the union of husband and wife gives a sign of the union of Christ and the Church, that which makes the sign must correspond to that whose sign it is. Now the union of Christ and the Church is a union of one to one to be held forever. For there is one Church, ... and Christ will never be separated from his Church, for he himself says, “Behold I am with you always, even to the consummation of the world (Matt. 28:20)” Necessarily, then, matrimony as a sacrament of the Church is a union of one man to one woman to be held indivisibly ...²²

As this sacrament came under the jurisdiction of the church, a complex system of canon law developed to regulate disputes about marriages. The principle of sacramental indissolubility was the foundation of that medieval system. A husband or wife could petition church courts for “separation from bed and board” for at least three reasons: adultery, desertion, or cruelty. But the separated spouses were encouraged to reconcile whenever possible. Neither was free to remarry as long as the other lived.

Medieval canon law laid down a second challenging principle: a valid marriage required the publicly expressed consent of both spouses. The English Council of Westminster in 1175 decreed: “Where there is no consent of both parties, there is no marriage; and so those who give girls to boys in their cradles achieve nothing—unless both the children give consent after they have come to the age of discretion.”²³ Any evidence of coercion was grounds for blocking a planned marriage, or for voiding a marriage already celebrated.

On the other hand, the medieval church declared that slaves were able to consent and thus could be married. Pope Adrian IV in the 1150s ruled, “Just as in Christ Jesus there is neither a free man nor a slave who may be prevented from receiving the sacraments of the Church, so too ought not marriages between slaves to be in any way prevented.”²⁴ Church weddings were encouraged, but not required until the 16th century.

18 Ibid. 115. Augustine was not naming marriage as one of the seven sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church. Those were not fixed until the 13th century.

19 Christopher N. Brooke, *The Medieval Idea of Marriage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 249.

20 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Question 49, articles 2 and 3, excerpted in Amy A. Kass and Leon R. Kass, eds., *Wing to Wing, Oar to Oar: Readings on Courting and Marrying* (South Bend, IN.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 87-90.

21 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, Book IV, Chapter 78, excerpted in Dana Mack

and David Blankenhorn, eds., *The Book of Marriage: The Wisest Answers to the Toughest Questions* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 2001), 492.

22 Ibid.

23 Brooke, 140.

24 Ibid. 51-52.

Canon law set forth a list of impediments that would cause a marriage to be barred or annulled: duress, fraud, insanity, bigamy, the paganism or apostasy of either spouse, vows of celibacy taken by either party, connections up to the fourth degree with a common ancestor, or the existence of morally repugnant conditions attached to the marriage (e.g., “that we permit each other sexual liberty with others”).²⁵ Marriages that were never consummated by sexual intercourse were accepted as valid; however, such sexless marriages were readily annulled at the request of either spouse.

Marriage, in addition to being a relationship of nature and a sacrament of the church, was also regarded as a contract between the two consenting parties. As a contract, it was enforceable under canon and civil law. Church courts could order couples to live together and to fulfill their sexual obligations to one another. Civil courts could compel husbands and wives to abide by the property arrangements specified in the marriage contract. Adultery brought down upon the perpetrators both civil and ecclesiastical punishments.

It would be a mistake, however, to exaggerate the power of the medieval church over marriage. The main incentive at that time for formalizing a marriage was to ensure the orderly transmission of property to legitimate heirs. For the vast majority of peasants who had few possessions, there was no such incentive. Their marriages were less formal, more shaped by popular custom than by canon law.

Nor was the aristocracy fully committed to the church’s vision of Christian marriage. Tension often arose when a nobleman wished to end a childless marriage and give a second try at producing an heir. The church would say no. Then the nobleman would seek out canon lawyers to find some reason to justify an annulment—often the claim of distant, previously unknown kinship between himself and the wife he wished to put aside. It was such a situation that launched the English Reformation, as King Henry VIII broke with the papacy in 1534 over its reluctance to grant his annulment petition.

Reformation and Counter-Reformation

The Reformation was about many issues besides marriage. But marriage was one of the important matters on which the 16th century Protestants blazed a new path. They aimed a withering critique at what they saw as abus-

es fostered under the medieval church: priests, monks, and nuns carrying on non-marital liaisons because they were prohibited from marrying; separated persons doing the same because they were not allowed to remarry; and annulments secured through legal chicanery.

The reformers’ foremost target was the exaltation of celibacy above marriage. They reversed that order of preference, maintaining that virtually every Christian woman or man would do well to marry. Only those few who had a “special gift” of continence should remain single. “Such persons are rare,” Martin Luther wrote, “not one in a thousand.”²⁶ Luther saw little possibility for sexual self-restraint: “It is certainly a fact that he who refuses to marry must fall into immorality. How could it be otherwise, since God has created man and woman to produce seed and to multiply? ... If this does not occur within marriage, how else can it occur except in fornication or secret sins?”²⁷

The 16th century German reformer gave unreserved affirmation of marriage:

Now the ones who recognize the estate of marriage are those who firmly believe that God himself instituted it, brought husband and wife together, and ordained that they should beget children and care for them. For this they have God’s word, Genesis 1, and they can be certain that he does not lie. They can therefore also be certain that the estate of marriage and everything that goes with it in the way of conduct, works, and suffering is pleasing to God.²⁸

Luther did not share Augustine’s misgivings about the dangers of excessive sexual desire within the marital relationship. He insisted that even the most ordinary tasks of married life were “truly golden and noble works.” He imagined a father praying as he tended his young child:

O God, ... I confess to thee that I am not worthy to rock the little babe or wash its diapers, or to be entrusted with the care of the child and its mother. How is it that I, without any merit, have come to this distinction of being certain that I am serving thy creature and thy most precious will?²⁹

Nevertheless, Luther and the other reformers denied that marriage was a sacrament of the church. Marriage demands no Christian faith and conveys no promise of

25 John Witte, Jr., *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion, and Law in the Western Tradition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 33–34.

26 Quoted in Witte, 50.

27 Martin Luther, “The Estate of Marriage,” excerpted in Mack and Blankenhorn, 372.

28 Ibid, 368.

29 Ibid, 370.

salvation in Christ, they argued. “[N]owhere in Scripture do we read that anyone would receive the grace of God by getting married,” Luther said.³⁰

For this reason, the reformers abolished the church courts that had decided marriage cases. They transferred such cases over to civil magistrates in Germany, Scandinavia, and the Netherlands. Luther pronounced, “No one can deny that marriage is an external, worldly matter, like clothing and food, house and property, subject to temporal authority, as the many imperial laws enacted on the subject prove.”³¹

But this transfer of power did not imply a secularization of marriage. Luther taught that the civil magistrates were equally established by God, and responsible to God, alongside church leaders. He expected the two sets of authorities to cooperate in upholding marriage for the good of society. Together, church and state developed a new marital regime in the Protestant states of Northern Europe.

Central to that regime was the conviction that marriage should be a social institution involving many parties besides the two spouses. In Protestant Europe (except England) secret marriages were forbidden. A couple wishing to be married first had to visit the parish pastor and seek his counsel. Public notice had to be given of the intended marriage. Parents had to give permission for their minor children to be wed. The wedding ceremony had to be held in a church, before at least two witnesses. The marriage was then entered in a public registry kept at the church. Petitions for divorce were made and granted publicly.

During the same period, the Catholic Church also moved to make marriage more public. The Council of Trent in 1573 prohibited secret marriages and mandated that all marriages be held in church and before witnesses. Parental permission was strongly encouraged, although not required.

The Protestant magistrates did not totally cast aside the long tradition of canon law. They retained many of its principles, such as the necessity for consent to marriage and most of the impediments to marriage. Other principles were adapted to fit Protestant readings of Scripture.

Divorce was granted for the same reasons that earlier had led to separation: adultery, desertion, or cruelty. The definitions of these reasons gradually expanded to cover offenses such as emotional desertion

and emotional cruelty. So, through the early modern period, divorce became somewhat easier to obtain in Protestant Europe. But social pressures to avoid the embarrassment of a public divorce case worked to keep divorce rates very low.

A crucial difference was that these new Protestant divorces brought with them the right to remarry. Luther explained, “In the case of adultery, Christ permits divorce of husband and wife so that the innocent person may remarry.”³²

Many of these same patterns held true in the Reformed or Calvinist parts of Europe; however, John Calvin gave a somewhat different theological account of marriage than Luther had. The Genevan reformer preferred to speak of marriage as a “covenant” with three parties: the wife, the husband, and God. Warning against divorce, he preached:

Consider what will be left of safety in the world—of order, of loyalty, of honesty, of assurance—if marriage, which is the most sacred union, and ought to be most faithfully guarded, can thus be violated. In truth, all contracts and all promises that we make ought to be faithfully upheld. But if we should make a comparison, it is not without cause that marriage is called a covenant with God.³³

Calvin saw the various third parties participating in the wedding ceremony as all representing God in one way or another. The parents, as God’s “lieutenants,” prepared the couple for marriage and gave their blessing. The minister, with “God’s spiritual power of the Word,” instructed the couple in their biblical duties to one another. The magistrate, with “God’s temporal power of the sword,” certified the marriage and promised to protect it. The two witnesses, as “God’s priests to their peers,” testified to the vows that were exchanged between husband and wife.³⁴

Calvin’s Geneva developed a unique collaboration between the church consistory and the city council. The council held final authority in recognizing or dissolving marriages. But the consistory gave pastoral admonitions to couples and their families, in an effort to mediate conflicts before they reached the council. The consistory intervened in all sorts of situations, from disputed betrothals to allegations of spousal abuse or adultery.

30 Witte, 52.

31 Ibid, 51.

32 Ibid, 66.

33 John Calvin, Sermon on Deuteronomy 5:18, quoted in Witte, 111.

34 Quotes from Calvin’s sermons and commentaries, Witte, 95.

A Christian Model of Marriage

The combined effect of the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation was to bring European society significantly closer to longstanding Christian ideals regarding marriage and family life. The rate of illegitimate births in many parts of 17th century Europe was in the stunningly low range of two to three percent.³⁵ As late as 1870, the annual divorce rate in England was a miniscule .05 divorces per 1000 marriages.³⁶

Of course, none of this is to claim that those Christian ideals were anywhere near realization at any time in the past. The stench of sin clung to many aspects of marital and family life. Early modern diaries and letters show many instances of loveless and even abusive marriages. Under civil law, wives were often treated as dependents of their husbands, rather than as their partners.

The law courts saw regular cases in which young men had seduced young women with false promises

of marriage. Many brides came to the altar pregnant. Thousands of prostitutes plied the back alleys of Europe's growing cities.

Nevertheless, a Christian model of marriage had been established through the first 1900 years of the church's existence. And in a remarkable number of cases, that model was lived out in joyous, fruitful unions that delivered all three of Augustine's goods of marriage: offspring to serve God and the community, lives of faithful devotion to one another, and a sacred bond that showed the world a fleshly image of the spiritual union between Christ and his church.

³⁵ Lawrence Stone, "Passionate Attachments in the West in Historical Perspective," excerpted in Kass and Kass, 41

³⁶ Witte, 204.

Where We Are Today

The modern era has profoundly altered marital patterns. Several trends have shifted the emphases within marriage and the relationships between the married couple and the rest of society. In most cases, these trends have tended to weaken the marital bond.

First is the ideal of romantic love. This ideal, originally expressed within medieval extramarital relationships, has come to dominate much modern thinking about marriage. Romantic love locates the substance of marriage within the subjective feelings of the spouses toward one another. It is all about "two people who love each other."

For thousands of years, of course, many spouses have cherished affection for one another. But romantic notions stimulate higher expectations: To be married, a couple has to be "in love," consumed by an overwhelming desire for one another. And this desire is expected to persist through the course of the marriage. Husband and wife are to be "soulmates," their love sufficient by itself to sustain them in a hostile world.

Romantic love tends to isolate the couple, marginalizing the traditional third parties to the marriage. The two families, the community, the church, the state,

God himself—all are reduced to spectators applauding the all-conquering love of the two. Indeed, romantics especially applaud couples who marry *against* the wishes of their families and the conventions of society.

The romantic view marginalizes the next generation as much as the previous one. With the focus on the psychological satisfaction of the spouses, children become an afterthought, dependent upon whether they add to or detract from their parents' relationship. Romantics value sexual intercourse mainly as an expression of emotional intimacy, not as a means of procreation.

Romantic notions do not clearly distinguish marriage from other relationships that also involve "two people who love each other." The wedding ceremony is regarded as a mere formality, the vows as a poetic flourish, the marriage certificate as "just a piece of paper." These all are subsidiary, from the romantic perspective, to the powerful passion that they recognize and celebrate. This prioritization of passion naturally feeds the recent drive to equate cohabitation and same-sex relationships with marriage. It exalts the strong feelings that cohabitators and same-sex partners have for one another, even though their relationships differ from

traditional marriages in other important respects (see pp. 22-23 and 30-32).

The romantic perspective places a tremendous weight of emotional expectation upon the two spouses. It leaves little to sustain them when marital realities fall short of expectations. When the romantic emotions waver or disappear, the marriage is thought to be “hol-low,” “loveless”—indeed, hardly a marriage at all. There seems to be little reason to honor vows that were no more than “formalities” to begin with. Divorce appears to be the only honest course of action.

Marriage as Emotional Bond and Legal Contract

A second trend has the same effect of isolating the couple and facilitating divorce. In law and political philosophy, thinkers starting with the 18th century Enlightenment conceived marriage as just another kind of contract. Of course, there had been marriage contracts between families for thousands of years. But modern liberalism narrows the parties to just the two individuals being wed. Those two individuals can set the terms of their contract however they please. Each couple defines its own marriage, rather than looking to God or cultural tradition for some external definition. The recent practice of couples writing their own vows reflects this individualist approach to marriage.³⁷

If marriage is just another contract, then there is no necessary reason that it has to be a permanent or total union. Spouses can choose to withhold property from the union. They and the state can allow in advance for the dissolution of a marriage, if it no longer serves the interests of the contracting parties. The law increasingly treats the spouses as two autonomous individuals in a temporary and limited partnership. The biblical notion of the two sexes becoming one flesh has retreated from view. If marriage is an infinitely flexible contract, then the possibility of marriages joining members of the same sex—or even marriages involving more than two parties—is increasingly plausible.

When disputes arise between husband and wife, parents and children, the powerful modern state is prepared to step in. Yet at the same time, it is increasingly reluctant to use its power to maintain marital unity or compel observance of the marriage vows. Laws penalizing adultery or breach of promise have been repealed or have fallen into disuse.³⁸

This individualist trend culminated in the wave of “no-fault divorce” laws enacted during the 1970s. These laws make it much easier and quicker for a spouse desiring a divorce to obtain one. Instead of having to prove a violation of the marriage vows, the party eager to end the marriage can unilaterally declare it to be “irretrievably broken.” There is no requirement to prove this assertion, and no opportunity to rebut it.³⁹

If the other spouse wishes to save the marriage—as 80 percent of “respondent” spouses do⁴⁰—she or he has no legal leverage to move the divorcing spouse toward an attempt at reconciliation. “No-fault” divorces are granted almost automatically; the only items to be negotiated are the arrangements for dividing property and child custody. Marriage has become one of the least enforceable contracts under U.S. law.

Other modern trends affecting marriage have almost all pushed in an individualist direction:

- The economic functions of the marriage-based family have diminished. In pre-modern times the family served as the most basic unit of production, a principal source of education for the young, and the primary means of social insurance against sickness and old age. Now private corporations and the state have taken over many of those functions, and the bonds uniting husband and wife are correspondingly less important economically.
- Geographic mobility and urbanization separate many couples from the kinship and community networks that help to form and sustain marriages. Young couples are left largely on their own as they try to build lasting marriages.
- The wide availability of contraception has made childbearing within marriage a choice rather than an inevitable, essential part of the deal. Contraception offers the possibility—although hardly a guarantee—of carrying on a long-term sexual relationship without conceiving a child. Similarly, the availability of “assisted reproduction” technology has made it possible to conceive a child without marriage or any other sexual relationship. Marriage, sex, and childbearing—which had formed a strong three-legged stool upholding society—now no longer necessarily go together.

³⁷ See Witte, 194-215.

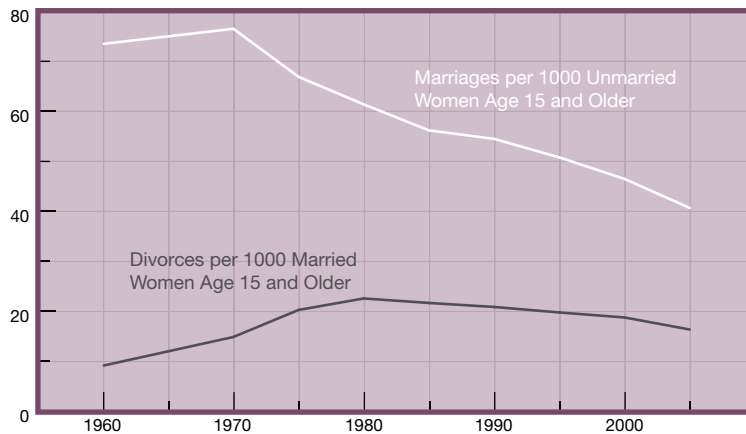
³⁸ See Mary Ann Glendon, *The Transformation of Family Law: State, Law, and Family in the United States and Western Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

³⁹ Judy Parejko, *Stolen Vows: The Illusion of No-Fault Divorce and the Rise of the American Divorce Industry* (Collierville, TN: InstantPublisher, 2002).

⁴⁰ Mike McManus, *How to Cut America's Divorce Rate in Half: A Strategy Every State Should Adopt* (Potomac, MD: Marriage Savers, 2008), 18.

FIGURE 1

NUMBER OF MARRIAGES AND DIVORCES PER 1000 UNMARRIED AND MARRIED WOMEN



Sources: David Popenoe, "The Future of Marriage in America," Figures 1 and 5, in *The State of Our Unions: The Social Health of Marriage in America 2007*; <http://marriage.rutgers.edu/Publications/SOOU/TEXTSOOU2007.htm>.

Marriage Weakens

Current social science statistics bear out the impression that marriage has weakened significantly. The U.S. marriage rate has declined steadily for nearly 40 years. (See Figure 1.) The 2005 rate of 40.7 marriages per 1,000 women age 15 and older is barely half the 1970 rate of 76.5.

The proportion of U.S. adults who are married went down from 68 percent in 1960 to 53 percent in 2007. Meanwhile, the proportion who are divorced climbed from two percent to ten percent.⁴¹ The share of 30 to 44-year-olds who had never been married grew from 7 percent in 1970 to 20 percent in 2005.⁴²

What has happened to all the people who formerly would have married? Mainly, they have been delaying marriage. Surveys show that more than 90 percent of young people intend to marry someday,⁴³ and demographers project that roughly 90 percent will eventually marry.⁴⁴ But the median age at first marriage has been rising. In 1970 it was 21 for women

and 23 for men. By 2007 the median ages were a full 5 years older: 26 for women and 28 for men.⁴⁵

With the average onset of puberty going down from the mid-teens in the 19th century⁴⁶ to about 11 today,⁴⁷ there is a widening span of years during which young people are sexually mature but not yet married. Most of these young people do not remain chaste, as Christian teaching would advise. The average age of first intercourse is 16.9 years for boys and 17.4 for girls.⁴⁸ Between these ages and the age of marriage—the better part of a decade, or more—most young people follow a pattern of serial monogamy, moving along a string of short to medium-term sexual relationships. The median number of sex partners reported by U.S. women is four; for men, seven.⁴⁹

These averages disguise great variations. Nearly 30 percent of men tell of having 15 or more sex partners. On the other hand, 25 percent of women and 17 percent

41 David Popenoe, "The Future of Marriage in America," Figures 2 and 6, in *The State of Our Unions: The Social Health of Marriage in America 2007*, <http://marriage.rutgers.edu/Publications/SOOU/TEXTSOOU2007.htm>.

42 Mike McManus and Harriet McManus, *Living Together: Myths, Risks, and Answers* (New York, Howard Books: 2008), 68.

43 Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially* (New York: Broadway Books, 2000), 183.

44 Kay S. Hymowitz, *Marriage and Caste in America: Separate and Unequal Families in a Post-Marital Age* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006), 129.

45 U.S. Census Bureau, *Population Profile of the United States: 2000* (Internet Release), 5-2, <http://www.census.gov/population/www/pop-profile/files/2000/profile2000.pdf>. Sharon Jayson, "Sooner vs. later: Is there an ideal age for first marriage?" *USA Today*, November 9, 2008.

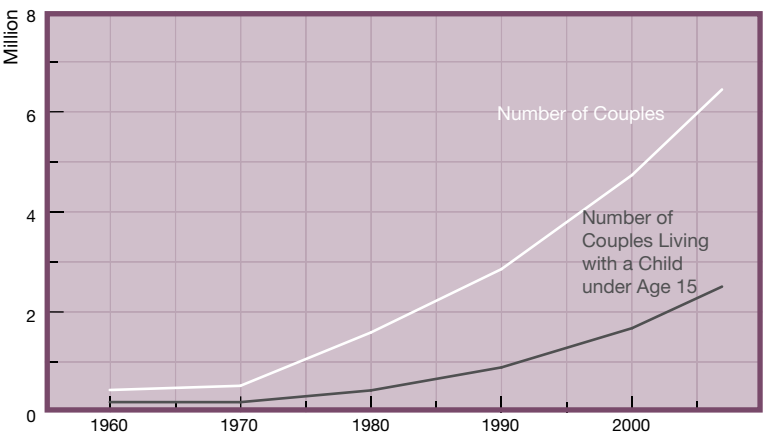
46 Museum of Menstruation and Women's Health, "Average Age of Menarche in Various Cultures," <http://www.mum.org/menarche.htm>.

47 Massachusetts General Hospital for Children, "Puberty," http://www.massgeneral.org/children/adolescenthealth/articles/aa_puberty.aspx.

48 Alan Guttmacher Institute, "Sexual and Reproductive Health: Women and Men," http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/fb_10-02.html#1.

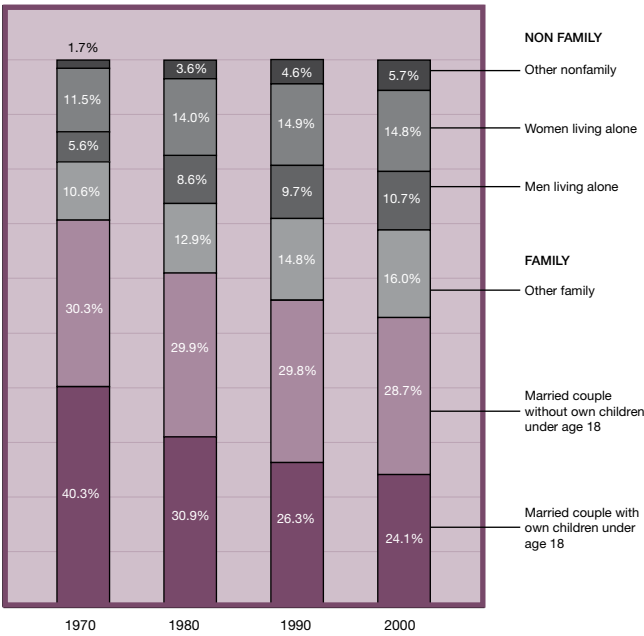
49 Associated Press, "New survey tells how much sex we're having," <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/19374216/>. There are questions as to whether these results are statistically likely. It is probable that the men exaggerated and the women minimized the numbers of sex partners that they claimed.

FIGURE 2
COHABITING, UNMARRIED, ADULT COUPLES OF THE OPPOSITE SEX



Source: Popenoe, Figures 7 and 13. Note that 2007 figures come from U.S. Census Bureau, Table FG9, <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2007.html>.

FIGURE 3
HOUSEHOLDS BY TYPE



Sources: *Population Profile of the United States: 2000 (Internet Release)*, Figure 5-1, <http://www.census.gov/population/www/pop-profile/files/2000/profile2000.pdf>.

of men say they have had only one or no sexual partners in their lifetime.⁵⁰ The Christian ideal of chastity in singleness and fidelity in marriage has not disappeared, although it is clearly a minority lifestyle.

The best documented alternative to marriage is cohabitation. The number of cohabiting opposite-sex couples has increased more than tenfold—from 523,000 in 1970 to 6.4 million today—about 5.5 percent of U.S. households. (See Figure 2.) A quarter of all U.S. women between 25 and 39 are currently living with an unmarried partner, and another quarter have done so previously.⁵¹ About 45 percent of cohabiting couples have children in their household. Most of these are the children of one partner (usually the woman) but not the other.⁵²

The average cohabitation lasts about 15 months. By the two-year mark, almost half of all cohabiting relationships have moved on to marriage. Forty of the other 50 percent have dissolved. Cohabitations lasting more than a decade are statistically insignificant. When a marriage is preceded by cohabitation, the risk of divorce increases by 50 percent. Combining the breakup rates for cohabitation itself and for marriage after cohabitation, the probability that a cohabiting relationship will result in a lasting marriage is about 15 percent.⁵³

Divorce

Not only are fewer marriages being formed today, but those that are formed are less likely to endure. The divorce rate per 1,000 married women skyrocketed a stunning 150 percent between 1960 and 1980. (See Figure 1.) Since 1980 the rate has fallen by more than 25 percent; however, the U.S. divorce rate remains among the world's highest. More than 40 percent of first marriages fail.

Three-quarters of divorced men will re-marry, as will two-thirds of divorced women.⁵⁴

50 Ibid.
51 McManus, *Living Together*, 64.
52 *Population Profile of the United States*, 6-2.
53 McManus, *How to Cut America's Divorce Rate*, 66. McManus, *Living Together*, 9, 69.
54 Paul R. Amato and Alan Booth, *A Generation at Risk: Growing Up in an Era of Family Upheaval* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 10.

But the odds of success for these remarriages are even lower: barely 30 percent. The presence of children from earlier marriages raises the risk of divorce still further. The complicated dynamics of “blended families” often prove difficult for both adults and children. Seventy percent of divorces involve children.⁵⁵

Two-thirds of all divorces are initiated by wives.⁵⁶ Husbands seem more inclined to ignore marital conflicts and try to muddle through, whereas wives seem more driven to take action to escape conflicts that they perceive as intolerable. It is also true that some marriage-shattering offenses, such as adultery and physical abuse, are more often committed by men.

A Gallup poll reported the primary reasons divorced people cited for the breakup of their marriages. The top reason, named by 57 percent, was “incompatibility” evidenced in disagreements over matters such as money, childrearing, relatives, and household responsibilities. Adultery, the second leading cause of divorce, was cited by 17 percent of the poll respondents. Third was substance abuse, cited by 16 percent. Physical abuse was named as the primary reason for divorce by only five percent of the respondents.⁵⁷

“What proportion of divorces are preceded by a long period of overt interparental conflict...?” ask family scholars Paul Amato and Alan Booth. “From our own data we estimate that less than a third of parental divorces involve highly conflicted marriages. Only 28 percent of parents who divorced during the study reported any sort of spousal physical abuse prior to divorce, 30 percent reported more than two serious quarrels in the last month, and 23 percent reported that they disagreed ‘often’ or ‘very often’ with their spouses.”⁵⁸

In the other 70 percent of divorces, Amato and Booth describe the conflicts as “encapsulated”: enough to cause dissatisfaction to the couple, but not enough to disturb their children. Children in such situations experience divorce as a thunderclap out of the blue, upsetting forever what they had assumed to be a stable family.

Another researcher, John Gottman, found few differences between the disagreements experienced by divorcing couples and those reported by couples that stayed together. The real difference appeared to be that the couples who remained married had better strategies for handling their conflicts. They were better able

to keep open lines of communication, confront the issues between them with mutual respect, mix complaints with praise and affection, avoid an escalation of blaming and defensiveness, seek and grant forgiveness, and work out practical compromises.⁵⁹

These kinds of interpersonal skills can be learned and developed. It is not empirically true that an unhappy marriage is doomed to a downward spiral into divorce. Family scholars Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher observe:

The truth is shocking: 86 percent of unhappily married people who stick it out find that, five years later, their marriages are happier.... In fact, nearly three-fifths of those who said their marriage was unhappy in the late ‘80s and who stayed married, rated this same marriage as either “very happy” or “quite happy” in the early 1990s.⁶⁰

Changes for Children

The high divorce rate and lengthening delays in marrying are changing the shape of American society. A Census Bureau comparison of U.S. household types from 1970 to 2000 (Figure 3) shows major shifts. By 2000, married couple households were no longer the undisputed norm. They had declined from 70 percent of all households to 53 percent. Married couples with children had sunk from 40 percent to 24 percent.

More people lived alone—up from 17 to 25 percent of all households. The categories of “other family” (including single-parent households) and “nonfamily” (including cohabiting couples without children) also expanded substantially. Same-sex couples accounted for only 0.7 percent of all U.S. households.⁶¹ In Massachusetts, a state with 2.4 million households,⁶² there have been only 11,000 same-sex marriages registered since those were allowed in 2004.⁶³

The large number of “married couples without own children” are either young couples delaying childbearing or older “empty nesters” whose children have left the parental household. With increased life expectancy, the period during which parents are caring for children at home represents a narrower slice of the life cycle.

⁵⁵ McManus, *How to Cut America's Divorce Rate*, 5, 37.

⁵⁶ E. Mavis Hetherington and John Kelly, *For Better or for Worse: Divorce Reconsidered* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2002), 8.

⁵⁷ McManus, *Living Together*, 2.

⁵⁸ Amato and Booth, 220.

⁵⁹ John Gottman with Nan Silver, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail ... and How You Can Make Yours Last* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994).

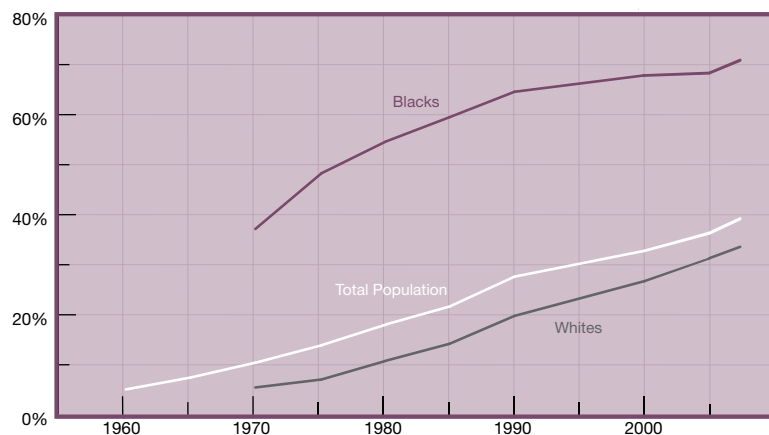
⁶⁰ Waite and Gallagher, 148.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² U.S. Census Bureau, “2007 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, Massachusetts: Selected Social Characteristics,” http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/ADPTable?_bm=y&-geo_id=04000US25&-qr_name=ACS_2007_1YR_G00_DP2&-ds_name=&-lang=en&-redoLog=false.

⁶³ David Filipov, “5 years later, views shift subtly on gay marriage,” *Boston Globe*, November 17, 2008.

FIGURE 4
PERCENTAGE OF LIVE BIRTHS THAT WERE TO UNMARRIED WOMEN



Sources: Popenoe, Figure 12. National Vital Statistics Reports, Vol. 57, No. 5, Brady E. Hamilton, et al. Births: Preliminary Data for 2007, Table 1; www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr57/nvsr57_12.pdf.

Childbearing thus seems to play a smaller role in contemporary marital life, although it remains of crucial social importance.

The total U.S. fertility rate has fallen from 3.7 children per woman aged 15 to 44, in 1960, to near the “replacement level” of 2.1 children per woman. The proportion of women aged 40 to 44 who were childless almost doubled between 1976 and 2000, from 10 percent to 19 percent.⁶⁴ But more than 90 percent of American young people say they want to have children,⁶⁵ more than 80 percent of the women will bear children, and most of those will be born within a marriage.

The changes in marital patterns have altered the situation of American children dramatically. The proportion of children born out of wedlock has risen steadily from 5.3 percent in 1960 to 39.7 percent in 2007. (See Figure 4.) In most cases, the non-marital relationship that produced these children does not last long. A Head Start study showed that, at the time of an out-of-wedlock birth, the chance of the biological parents still being romantically involved was only 80 percent. Four years later, only 20 percent of the parents were still in the relationship. When an unmarried father is no longer involved or living with his child’s mother, it is rare that he plays a significant role in his child’s daily life.⁶⁶

Divorce also separates children from their fathers. The combined effect of divorce and out-of-wedlock births raised the proportion of children living with a single parent—usually a single mother—from 9 percent in 1960 to 28 percent in 2006. (See Figure 5.) Over the same period, the proportion living with two married parents dropped from 88 percent to 67 percent.

The proportion of children residing with their own two biological parents, married to one another, was still lower: a mere 61 percent in 2007.⁶⁷ It is estimated that more than half of all U.S. children will spend a portion of their childhood living apart from their father.⁶⁸ Only 44 percent of teenagers are still living with both married parents.⁶⁹

‘Separate and Unequal Families’

These marital and childbearing patterns play out very differently according to the incomes, educational levels, and races of the parents. Kay Hymowitz, in *Marriage and Caste in America*, goes so far as to speak of America as “a nation of separate and unequal families.” Highly educated, high-income people have a “life script” that instructs them: Get your education first. Then get married. Then have children. Then stay married. In fact, most people in that socio-economic class succeed in following the script. They are less likely to cohabit, and when they do cohabit, they are more likely to turn the relationship into a marriage—and to have children only after it becomes a marriage.

By contrast, Hymowitz explains, people with less education and lower incomes no longer have such a clear script. Poorer and less educated young women, too, would like to get married and have children; however, they no longer necessarily put the one before the other. They do not see enough men whom they trust to be faithful husbands and dependable fathers. So they enter a series of cohabitations and other sexual relationships with little expectation of marriage. Children often result from these relationships, and those children then complicate the prospects for marriage.⁷⁰ When the poorer and less educated do marry, their

⁶⁴ Popenoe, Figure 8. *Population Profile*, 4-1.

⁶⁵ Hymowitz, 153.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁶⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, “America’s Family and Living Arrangements: 2007, Table C9, <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2007.html>.

⁶⁸ Blankenhorn, 5.

⁶⁹ McManus, *How to Cut America’s Divorce Rate*, 11.

⁷⁰ See also Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas, *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005).

marriages are more likely to fail. These higher rates of divorce and out-of-wedlock childbearing are particularly prevalent among African-Americans.

The statistics bear out these generalizations. Among women with a high school education or less who gave birth in 2005, 55 percent were unmarried. In stark contrast, only eight percent of mothers with a college diploma were unmarried.⁷¹ Hymowitz illustrates the difference according to income: “Virtually all—92 percent—of children whose families make over \$75,000 a year are living with both parents. On the other end of the income scale, the situation is reversed: only about 20 percent of kids in families earning under \$15,000 live with both parents.”⁷²

Census Bureau statistics show that, among blacks 35-39 years old in 2007, only 45 percent were married. Over 70 percent of whites in that same age bracket were married.⁷³ Among black children born in 2007, 28 percent were born to married parents and 72 percent out of wedlock. The numbers for non-Hispanic white children were exactly reversed: 72 percent born to married parents and 28 percent out of wedlock. (See Figure 5.) In 2006 only 35 percent of black children lived with two married parents. The figure for whites was more than double: 74 percent.⁷⁴

The Evidence Is In: Marriage Is Better for Adults ...

It is ironic that, at a time when marriage is weakening in so many sectors of U.S. society, the social science evidence has come in strongly affirming the benefits of marriage for both adults and children. Married people are healthier. A team of scholars assembled by the Institute for American values concluded: “In most developed countries, middle-aged single, divorced, or widowed men are about twice as likely to die as married men, and nonmarried women face risks about one and a half times as great as those faced by married women.”⁷⁵

For men the main cause of the health difference appears to be the effect of marriage in reducing the self-destructive habits of many single men: substance abuse, risky driving, getting into fights, and the like. Married men, for example, consume only half as much alcohol as single men.⁷⁶ For women, the access to health

insurance that a husband often brings is an important factor. For both sexes, the presence of a spouse monitoring one’s health and encouraging one to seek appropriate treatment is significant.

Marriage also improves psychological health. Waite and Gallagher report: “According to the latest data, 40 percent of the married said they are very happy with their life in general, compared to just under a quarter of those who were single or who were cohabiting. The separated (15 percent very happy) and the divorced (18 percent very happy) were the least happy groups.” Married people also expressed greater satisfaction with their sex lives.⁷⁷

The Institute for American Values scholars indicate, “Married mothers have lower rates of depression than do single or cohabiting mothers.”⁷⁸ Never-married men are twice as likely as married men to commit suicide, and divorced men are three times as likely.⁷⁹

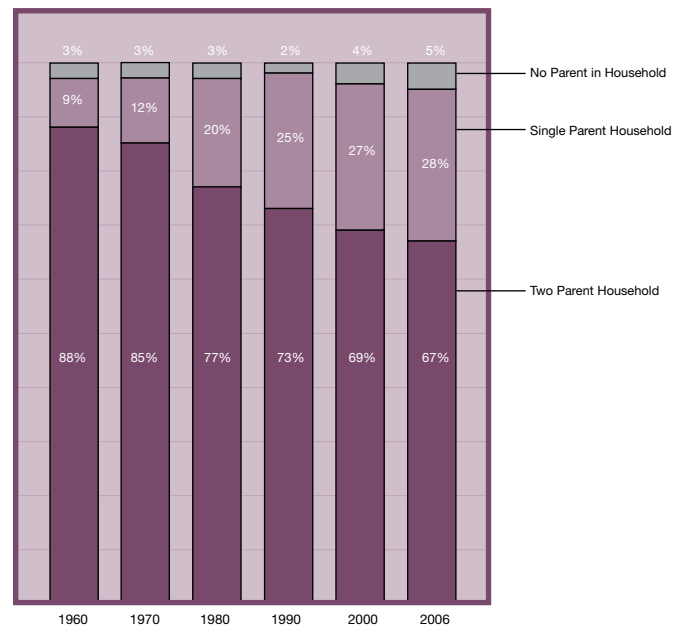
77 Ibid, 67, 82-83.

78 “Why Marriage Matters,” 28.

79 Waite and Gallagher, 52.

FIGURE 5

LIVING ARRANGEMENTS OF CHILDREN UNDER AGE 18, 1960-2006



Sources: Popenoe, Figures 10 and 11.

71 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Vital Statistics System, table for “Births by Demographic Characteristics of Mother,” <http://205.207.175.93/VitalStats/TableViewer/tableView.aspx>.

72 Hymowitz, 22.

73 U.S. Census Bureau, “America’s Family and Living Arrangements: 2007,” Table A1.

74 Popenoe, Figure 11.

75 Institute for American Values, “Why Marriage Matters, Second Edition: Twenty-Six Conclusions from the Social Sciences,” October 24, 2005, 25.

76 Waite and Gallagher, 55.

Cohabitation: Marriage Lite or the New Concubinage?

In ancient times, there was an option for a man who desired a regular sex partner but did not wish to marry her. He could take a low-status woman as a concubine. He could enjoy her company as long as it pleased him, and he could dismiss her at any time. The man made no promises and signed no contract; consequently, the concubine had few legal protections. Any children that she bore would have an inferior legal status.

The early church fought long and hard against concubinage. It insisted that such a sexual relationship, without the permanent and total commitment expressed in marriage vows, was immoral and unjust. Over the course of a thousand years, concubinage retreated into the shadows of social disapproval.

In the past 40 years, it seems, concubinage has come to light again under a different name. Like ancient concubinage, contemporary cohabitation is a deliberately ambiguous relationship. The partners make no promises and have no legal obligations to one another. The arrangement has no specified duration and can be terminated at a moment's notice. Those who cohabit tend to be of lower social status. Their children, on average, do not fare as well as children born to married couples (see pp. 23-24).

Defenders of cohabitation portray it as just a more flexible form of marriage. The love is the same as in marriage, they say; all that is missing is "a piece of paper," the marriage certificate. Some see cohabitation as a "trial marriage." They assume that living together will confirm a couple's compatibility and reduce the odds that a subsequent marriage might end in divorce.

Social science does not support any of these assertions. By every measure, cohabitation is a very different relationship from marriage. Marriages are formed by a series of decisive, publicly announced events: A proposal is made, it is accepted, an engagement is announced, friends and family gather for a wedding, vows and rings are exchanged, and two formerly single persons are declared to be married. By contrast, many couples quietly drift into cohabitation. They gradually spend more time together, one moves his or her possessions piece by piece into the other's residence, one allows his or her lease to expire, and eventually they realize that they are living together full-time.¹

The two relationships differ dramatically in durability. The average marriage lasts several decades; the average cohabitation, only 15 months.² Because their time horizons are longer, married people are much more likely to invest in one

another. Husbands and wives almost always pool their assets. They have a single household budget that does not separate "his" and "her" money. They take responsibility for each other's debts and inherit each other's estates.³

Cohabitors, by contrast, typically split expenses down the middle. Perhaps as a result of this financial separatism, cohabitors do not tend to save money or accumulate assets at the rate that married people do. Cohabiting men boost their earnings by only half the amount that married men do.⁴ There are few mutual legal protections in most cohabitating relationships. A survey showed that only 13 percent of cohabitors have a will, only 10 percent hold property jointly, and only 7 percent have given each other durable powers of attorney for health care decisions.⁵

Cohabitors do not appear to take responsibility for one another's health. Couples who move in together without marrying do not exhibit the same reductions in unhealthy behaviors that married couples do. Cohabitors report levels of physical and mental health in the same range as persons living alone—well below the higher levels of health and happiness reported by married persons.⁶

Cohabitors are particularly vulnerable to one health risk: violence at the hands of their partners. They are three times more likely than married people to report that an argument had become violent during the past year (13 percent versus 4 percent).⁷

Cohabitors are more likely to keep their friends, families, and leisure activities separate. The one thing they do together is have sex. Indeed, cohabitors have sex somewhat more frequently than married couples. But they report less sexual satisfaction.⁸ Apparently, the secure commitment of marriage enriches lovemaking, while the provisional nature of cohabitation may induce some "performance anxiety."

Married couples are more sexually faithful. According to the National Sex Survey, cohabiting men are four times more likely than married men to admit having been unfaithful during the past year. Cohabiting women are eight times more likely than married women to have cheated on their partner.⁹

One reason for these discrepancies may be that the ambiguity of cohabitation leaves wide room for differing interpretations about how exclusive the relationship is. In

1 McManus, *Living Together*, 25.

2 Ibid, 9.

3 Waite and Gallagher, 39-41.

4 Ibid, 39-40, 103-104, 111-112.

5 McManus, *Living Together*, 51.

6 Waite and Gallagher, 63-64, 67, 73-74.

7 Ibid, 155-156. McManus, *Living Together*, 41-43.

8 Waite and Gallagher, 67, 81-83.

9 Ibid, 91.

marriage both spouses know that they have equally vowed to “forsake all others.” But in cohabitation there can be a great inequality in the levels of commitment that the two partners bring to the relationship.

Most often, it is the woman who displays the higher level of commitment. Cohabiting women are more likely to believe that the relationship is sexually exclusive and that it is headed toward marriage. Meanwhile, the cohabiting man may have no intention of marrying anytime soon. He may see the woman as a convenient partner for the time being. He is keeping his options open.¹⁰

There is one category of cohabitation in which the partners more nearly resemble married people in their positive attitudes and behaviors. These are cohabitators with definite plans to marry.¹¹ But even these couples have not avoided all of the pitfalls of cohabitation. Research shows that the experience of living together raises the risk of divorce by 50 percent.¹²

How do we account for this striking fact? Various explanations have been offered. First, there are “selection effects.” That is, cohabitators as a group start out with various characteristics—they are poorer, less educated, less religious, and have a lower view of marriage—that make them less likely to succeed in marriage.¹³

Second, it appears that living together may foster behaviors that are not conducive to a good marriage. Cohabitators, especially serial cohabitators, become accustomed to relationships with limited commitment, limited trust, and limited duration. When disagreements surface, their habit is to dissolve the relationship and move on to the next. It is not so easy to set aside these old patterns of behavior. Living out the total and permanent commitment of marriage may take more work for those who have previously cohabited.¹⁴

Finally, the sexual bond established during cohabitation may render it more difficult for couples to make a wise decision about whether they should marry. Having already become “one flesh,” they may find it harder to consider the possibility of tearing themselves apart. As opposed to couples that are merely dating, first-time cohabiting couples may be more inclined to ignore the “red flags” warning against an ill-matched marriage.

Cohabitation, it turns out, is not at all a good preparation for marriage.

The same scholars also discerned financial benefits in marriage. They summarized, “A large body of research, both in the United States and other developed countries, finds that married men earn between 10 and 40 percent more than do single men with similar education and job histories.”⁸⁰ Waite and Gallagher related the results of a study of wealth accumulation among young families with children:

In Hao’s study, married families had accumulated the most money, with a median net worth of almost \$26,000. Remarried families were almost as well off (\$22,500) as were single-dad families (\$22,930). At the bottom of the heap were both single mothers and (perhaps surprisingly) cohabiting couples who, in marked contrast to married couples, had a median wealth of just \$1,000. Single moms typically had *no* assets at all.⁸¹

Some of these benefits of marriage are due to “selection effects”—that is, the kind of people who marry already lead somewhat healthier lives and are somewhat happier and more industrious. But marriage itself also changes the spouses. Studies have shown that as couples marry, they cut down on their bad habits, become emotionally more settled, and start earning and saving more money. These advantages compound over the years of marriage.

... And for Children

Children reap the benefits of stable marriages. They are physically and mentally healthier than children in single-parent or cohabiting households, or children who have experienced divorce. The Institute for American Values scholars state, “On average, having an unmarried mother is associated with an approximately 50 percent increase in the risk of infant mortality.” They report:

One recent study of the entire Swedish population of children found that boys who were reared in single-parent homes were more than 50 percent more likely to die from a range of causes—such as suicide, accidents, or addiction—than were boys reared in two-parent homes. Moreover, even after controlling for the socioeconomic status and psychological health of parents, Swedish boys and girls in single-parent families were more than twice as likely as children in two-parent families to suffer from psychiatric diseases, suicide attempts, alcoholism, and drug abuse.⁸²

¹⁰ Ibid, 83, 85, 92.

¹¹ Ibid, 37.

¹² McManus, *Living Together*, 69.

¹³ Ibid, 64-65, 71.

¹⁴ Ibid, 72-73.

⁸⁰ “Why Marriage Matters,” 21.

⁸¹ Waite and Gallagher, 111. Emphasis in original.

⁸² “Why Marriage Matters,” 23-24.

One study showed that parental divorce reduced a child's life expectancy by four years.⁸³

The Institute for American Values summary points to the economic damage inflicted when parents break up or never marry:

Divorce and unmarried childbearing increase poverty for both children and their mothers.... In fact, some studies indicate that all of the increase in child poverty since the 1970s can be attributed to increases in single parenthood due to divorce and nonmarital childbearing. When parents fail to marry and stay married, children are more likely to experience deep and persistent poverty, even after controlling for race and family background.⁸⁴

Children living with their two married parents appear less likely to suffer physical or sexual abuse. The institute's scholars note:

Another national study found that seven percent of children who had lived with one parent had been sexually abused, compared to four percent of children who lived with both biological parents, largely because children in single-parent homes had more contact with unrelated adult males. Other research found that, although boy-friends contribute less than two percent of nonparental childcare, they commit half of all reported child abuse by nonparents.⁸⁵

Separation from a parent, either through divorce or failure to marry, raises the risk that children will fail to graduate from high school or college. It makes them twice as likely to commit crimes and end up in prison.⁸⁶ Moreover, the patterns of marital failure can be transmitted from one generation to the next. Waite and Gallagher explain:

Children whose parents divorce or never marry begin sex earlier, get pregnant out of wedlock more often, and more frequently become a teen parent (both married and unmarried). They are less likely to be happily married and more likely to divorce than children whose parents got and stayed married.⁸⁷

It is worth emphasizing that all the above statements about the advantages of marriage and drawbacks of

other childrearing arrangements are based on averages. Individual cases can and do vary greatly. There are many devoted single parents and stepparents who raise healthy and well-adjusted children. There are many children from two-married-parent households who go the wrong way. Nevertheless, the averages hold. Rearing children outside the marriage of their mother and father is a much more difficult task.

This fact is of concern to more than just individuals shaping their own family lives. It also has a powerful impact on the entire society. To the extent that fewer adults today are in lasting marriages, and fewer children grow up within such marriages, federal and state governments can expect to bear higher medical costs. They will have to treat more substance abuse and psychiatric disorders. Entitlement programs serving the poor will face more demands for assistance. Prisons will require greater capacity. One conservative estimate puts the annual taxpayer costs of broken families at \$112 billion.⁸⁸

As marriage weakens, almost every other social problem becomes harder to solve.

⁸³ Ibid, 23.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 19.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 31-32.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 22, 29.

⁸⁷ Waite and Gallagher, 136.

⁸⁸ Benjamin Scafidi, "The Taxpayer Costs of Divorce and Unwed Childbearing" (New York: Institute for American Values, Georgia Family Council, Institute for Marriage and Public Policy, and Families Northwest, 2008), http://www.americanvalues.org/html/coff_mediaadvisory.htm.

Policy Options

What are we to do when large segments of society no longer share the church's high view of marriage? Should U.S. Christians simply accept the demotion of marriage from its privileged position in law and social custom? Or should they somehow strive to reverse the trend?

How should church members deal with traditional teachings exalting the lifelong union of man and woman? Should they downplay those disputed teachings? Should they revise the teachings? Or should they launch fresh efforts to put the teachings into practice? Is it possible to split the difference, upholding the sanctity of marriage within the church while allowing society to equate marriage with any number of other sexual relationships?

These are questions of fidelity to Christian doctrine. But they are also questions of political prudence. In changing social circumstances, what is the best way to help people see and enjoy the blessings that God intended to convey through the institution of marriage? We need to consider at least three broad options, weighing the pros and cons of each.

Option A: Disestablish Marriage in Church and Society

This is the direction in which social practices and attitudes are tending. Growing numbers on the left, and even some on the right, are ready to take the final step: abolishing the distinctions between marriage and other sexual relationships. This move would be the logical end point of modern assumptions about marriage (see pp. 15-16). If the only thing required for a socially approved relationship is the professed emotional attachment of the partners, then virtually every relationship would qualify for the favor that marriage now enjoys. And if marriage is merely another contract, infinitely flexible, then there is no reason why other personal contracts of differing terms and durations should not receive equal recognition.

Under this approach governments would no longer register marriages, or they would automatically register any relationship that an individual chose to enter. Divorce would be as easy as the dissolution of any other relationship.

The number and sexes of the partners in these relationships would make no difference. In the eyes of the law, cohabitation, same-sex relationships, and even polyamorous relationships (with more than two partners) would be equally valid with marriage. Marital

status would not count in determining tax rates, entitlement benefits, child custody, or any other state-regulated arrangements. The state would be indifferent to whether people married or did not marry, whether they had children within wedlock or within some other relationship.

Churches could host weddings, or not, as they pleased. But ministers and priests would no longer be agents of the state in certifying marriages. The ceremony would be a purely private affair of no necessary public interest. The logic of this approach would suggest that churches, too, should welcome all sexual relationships equally. If they blessed marriages, then they should be willing to bless any other domestic arrangements entered freely and in good faith.

Option A is already being pursued to some extent in Canada and several European countries, where same-sex marriages have been recognized and the legal distinctions between marriage and cohabitation have been mostly erased.⁸⁹

An influential 2006 statement advocates a similar course of action in the United States. "Beyond Same-Sex Marriage," endorsed by a host of prominent leftist intellectuals, argues, "All families, relationships, and households struggling for stability will be helped by separating basic forms of legal and economic recognition from the requirement of marital and conjugal relationship." It proposes to "honor the diverse ways in which people find and practice love, form relationships, create communities and networks of caring and support, establish households, bring families into being, and build innovative structures to support and sustain community." Among the "non-conventional partnerships" that it seeks to subsidize are not only same-sex couples but also cohabitators, single-parent households, "queer couples who decide to jointly create and raise a child with another queer person or couple, in two households," and "committed, loving households in which there is more than one conjugal partner" (i.e., polyamory).⁹⁰

Pro: Option A would offer some protection for the legitimate needs of non-marital households. It is better, on the whole, for people to live together and care for one another—even if they may express their love in sexually inappropriate ways. Society benefits when

⁸⁹ See, for example, Stanley Kurtz, "The End of Marriage in Scandinavia: The 'conservative case' for same-sex marriage collapses," *The Weekly Standard*, February 2, 2004.

⁹⁰ "Beyond Same-Sex Marriage: A New Strategic Vision for All Our Families & Relationships," July 26, 2006, http://beyondmarriage.org/full_statement.html.

cohabitators and same-sex couples, for example, provide for one another's health care and economic security. Legal recognition might encourage more to form long-term relationships that would make such provision for one another.

Option A would get the church out of today's traumatic "culture wars" over marriage and sexuality. No longer would U.S. Christians be locked in a position of moral disapproval of cohabitators, same-sex couples, and other non-marital sexual relationships. Instead the church would offer such individuals and households its unconditional blessing. This new openness might attract back into the church some "progressives" who had written it off as too narrow and judgmental.

Finally, Option A would extract the church from its increasingly awkward entanglement with the state in matters of marriage. As social attitudes and laws move further away from a Christian worldview, priests and ministers find themselves in a tricky position certifying marriages on behalf of the secular state. They subject themselves to political or social pressures to solemnize relationships that the church deems morally unacceptable. These clergy might gain moral clarity if they forfeited "the powers vested in me by the state of ..." and instead pronounced couples married solely in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Con: Adopting Option A would constitute a wholesale repudiation of the Christian moral tradition regarding marriage. It would reduce marriage to a private relationship formed by the couple on their own terms, rather than a social institution established by God for the good of all humankind.

By equating marriage with other sexual relationships, Option A would devalue all the unique qualities of marriage as Christians have understood it. This option would teach society that the permanence of marital love made no difference, as it would offer the same recognition to cohabiting relationships that were temporary. It would teach that the one-flesh union of man and woman was nothing special, since it would give equal honor to same-sex relationships where there was no sexual complementarity. This approach would teach that sexual exclusivity was not important, as it would grant the same favor to heterosexual and homosexual relationships where no exclusivity was promised or practiced. It would destroy the normativity of marriage as the proper place for sexual intimacy; instead, almost any kind of voluntary sexual activity would receive the approval of church and state.

Option A would sever the ancient, biblical, and almost universal link between marriage and childbearing. No longer could society say that it was committed to having every child reared by its mother and father, bound for life to one another and to that child. On the contrary, now society would be prepared to convey its full blessing upon cohabiting relationships in which one parent reserved the right to desert the other parent (and the child) at any time. It would look with favor upon same-sex relationships where the child was deliberately separated from one parent and brought into a household with only the other parent and a non-related person (the parent's lover). Society might even be ready to recognize a polyamorous relationship where the paternity of the child was undetermined.

If society gave equal honor and benefits to non-marital sexual relationships, it would be reasonable to expect such relationships to become more common. One could expect out-of-wedlock births to outstrip marital births and larger proportions of children to grow up apart from their fathers. This is, in fact, what has happened in western European countries that have pursued Option A. These countries are also experiencing catastrophically low birthrates, as unmarried couples are nowhere near as fertile as traditional married couples. European birthrates, as low as 1.3 per woman, threaten the economic stability and long-term survival of their societies.⁹¹

Social science research (see pp. 21-24) predicts that this experiment in non-marriage would have negative results. Rising numbers of unmarried adults would have more health and psychological problems. They would earn less and save less. They would be more prone to self-destructive habits.

The consequences for the growing proportion of children separated from their fathers (see pp. 20) would be worse. They, too, would have more health and psychological problems. They would be poorer. They would be more vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse by non-related persons in their households. They would not get as far in school, and they would be more likely to end up on the wrong side of the law.

As these adults and children had more problems, and their non-marital households were less able to help them address those problems, the social costs would be enormous. Government would have to fill the gap with more hospitals, more mental health clinics, more

91 Giampaolo Lanzieri, "Population in Europe 2007: first results," *Eurostat: Statistics in Focus* 81/2008, http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_OFFPUB/KS-SF-08-081/EN/KS-SF-08-081-EN.PDF.

remedial education, more anti-poverty programs, more police, and more prisons.

Option B: Maintain the Church's Understanding of Marriage, but Stop Expecting Society to Share Any of that Understanding

This is the apparently moderate approach favored by many Christians who do not relish fighting “culture wars” over marriage. Under Option B the church would continue to hold before its members the ideal of the lifelong union of one man and one woman. It would celebrate marriages, while advising against non-marital sexual relationships. It would discourage divorce and help members to avoid it or recover from it.

At the same time, Option B would have U.S. Christians abandon their attempts to shape society's attitudes or practices regarding marriage. The assumption is that we live in a post-Christian culture where most people no longer grasp the deep connection between God's steadfast, all-encompassing, jealous love for his people and his requirement that man and woman unite in the same kind of enduring, exclusive, total commitment.

So the church would cease to expect non-believers to form relationships that in any way resembled Christian marriage. It would not be surprised or dismayed if unchurched neighbors felt no need for complementarity or permanence or even monogamy in their sexual relationships. The church would refrain from public criticism of such relationships.

While U.S. Christians would not push to downgrade the legal status of marriage, they would not resist legislation or court decisions having that effect. They would accept the legal equation of marriage with cohabitation or same-sex partnerships as an inevitable reflection of social trends. Ministers and priests would also be prepared to lose their place as agents of the state in certifying marriages. As long as churches remained free to follow their own stricter standards, they would let U.S. society go its way.

Pro: Option B might tone down the “culture wars” over marriage. If Christians unilaterally withdrew from public battles over marriage and sexuality, cultural “progressives” would probably have fewer reasons to attack the church. If those battles are indeed already lost, then withdrawal might be a wise move to contain the damage. Such a strategic retreat might also leave the field more open for fruitful cooperation between traditional Christians and progressives in other areas where their differences were less profound.

The option would preserve the church's doctrine of marriage—at least that part relating to Christians particularly rather than to humankind in general. It would allow the church to concentrate on strengthening the marriages of its own members, over whom it has the most influence. There are good reasons to believe that the church is better equipped than the state for this task of strengthening marriage. Church-based programs such as Marriage Savers (see p. 36-37) seem to be more effective than their secular counterparts in saving troubled marriages.

The church would be backing off only from those unchurched persons over whom it had the least influence in the first place. Like God in Romans 1:24, it would be “giv[ing] them up to the lusts of their hearts.” And perhaps as they experienced the consequences of their choices, they might one day reconsider the wisdom of biblical and traditional models of marriage.

Con: Option B sacrifices a great deal in narrowing its focus to only church members, as if marriage were solely a Christian institution. But the entire biblical and historical record teaches the contrary: Marriage is a virtually universal institution in human societies. The rationale for marriage does not depend upon any special divine revelation (see p. 10-11).

If Christians are concerned for the wellbeing of their non-believing neighbors, as Scripture commands them to be, then they will wish for those neighbors long and happy marriages. They will hope that those neighbors can avoid other sexual relationships that might damage them and their children. And they will take practical steps to help their neighbors form and sustain healthy marriages. Insofar as the state can offer some encouragement for marriage, without preventing citizens from choosing other relationships, then it has sound secular reasons to favor marriage.

The social costs of Option B would be high. If traditional U.S. Christians abandoned the fight for marriage, it is unlikely that any other group would step in to fill the gap. The forces pushing for the total disestablishment of marriage (Option A) would face little resistance and would almost certainly triumph. All the negative consequences of Option A—the threats to the mental and physical health and economic security of adults and children, the lowered birthrates, the burdens on public institutions—would ensue.

Even so, Option B would not end the “culture wars” over marriage and sexuality. Withdrawing into the churches would not protect traditional Christians

from revisionists who press for the equality of all sexual relationships. As we have seen, revisionist thinking is already common within many churches. Only a few bless same-sex relationships, but many wink at cohabitation. Many are silent about the divorces proliferating among their own members. There are many regular churchgoers who would agree that “all you need is love” to make a relationship valid.

Maintaining Christian teaching on marriage will require confrontation even within the churches. Pro-homosexuality movements have made clear that they regard traditional Christianity as the primary force denying them the social approval for which they yearn. They have stated that they intend to carry their battle for acceptance into the churches. Funded in part with grants from secular gay groups, “open and affirming” caucuses consume tremendous amounts of energy with their persistent demands for “justice” in the oldline Protestant denominations.⁹² They are likely to carry those same demands into other denominations as they have the opportunity. Many of the measures that they have promoted would also open church doors to acceptance of cohabitation and other non-marital relationships.

Where churches held fast to Christian doctrines on marriage, Option B would not leave them secure in their freedom. The demands for “marriage equality” would inevitably infringe upon Christian institutions and individuals. It is far from clear that religious liberty would prevail in that contest (see pp. 31-32).

Option C: Renew Our Appreciation of the Biblical and Traditional Doctrines of Marriage, and Take Practical Steps So That More People May Live Out those Doctrines in Society

This is a truly counter-cultural gamble. It would require U.S. churches not merely to affirm Christian teachings on marriage, but even more to reappropriate them. Because marriage is under challenge in our culture, and false assumptions permeate both the culture and the church, the church would have to dig down deep into the meaning of marriage. It is not sufficient to repeat prohibitions against non-marital sex and warnings about its consequences. U.S. Christians would have to rediscover the goods of marriage: the total union of the two created sexes as “one flesh,” mirroring the everlast-

ing bond between God and his people and embodying the love from which children are born and in which they are best reared.

Because Christians understand marriage as God’s blessing for all humankind, they would have to defend it in the public square. They would contest laws or court decisions that equated marriage with cohabitation, same-sex partnerships, or any other type of relationship. They would cite arguments from nature, history, and the social sciences demonstrating the unique social value of the lifelong union of man and woman.

Option C would also involve practical steps to help people—church members as well as non-members—to form and sustain healthy marriages. There would be marriage education for young people, treatment programs for addictive sexual behaviors, intensive premarital counseling, mentor couples to accompany newlyweds, marriage enrichment programs, crisis intervention for troubled marriages, and divorce recovery support groups.

Many of these elements are brought together in the Marriage Savers program designed by syndicated columnist Mike McManus (see p. 36-37). McManus believes that churches are well positioned to help raise the U.S. marriage rate and reduce the divorce rate, if they take the initiative. The impact would be multiplied where churches in an area joined together in a Community Marriage Policy to ensure that all local couples had access to this kind of support.

Option C would also urge non-church actors to recognize their stake in healthy marriages. U.S. Christians would ask governments to eliminate disincentives to marriage in tax and entitlement policies. State agencies could offer marriage education and marriage counseling. Legal revisions could make it harder to obtain a unilateral divorce—especially where children were involved.

Employers, likewise, could do more for marriage. Enlightened corporations should realize that happily married employees will be more productive than those who drift from one unsatisfying relationship to the next. More flexible hours, the availability of marriage counseling, and a clear stance against adulterous relationships might mitigate some of the threats to employees’ marriages.

Pro: Option C is the only approach that takes seriously the whole of church teaching on marriage. In the area of sexuality, it does what the church at its best has always done: It turns a challenge to Christian teach-

92 James D. Berkley, “Secular Windfall to Boost Gay Influence over Churches,” Institute on Religion & Democracy, <http://www.theird.org/NETCOMMUNITY/Page.aspx?pid=773&srcid=773>. See also fact sheets compiled at <http://www.theird.org/NETCOMMUNITY/Page.aspx?pid=804&srcid=183>.

ing into an opportunity to return to the sources of that teaching. And in returning to the sources, it allows the church to appreciate the teaching more deeply than it had previously. It suggests new ways in which Christians can more fully live out the teaching.

Option C does not capitulate to our relativistic culture of individual autonomy. Instead it aims to transform that culture, pointing it back to God's design to unite man and woman. This option does not take the easy and false approach of separating Christian marriage from civil marriage. It does not accept a "marriage lite" that has been reduced to just an emotional attachment between any two persons. It dares to believe that a man and woman are capable of making and keeping vows of total commitment. It seeks to secure for every child a mother and father bonded to one another and to the child.

Many of the marriage-strengthening initiatives in Option C have shown success (see p. 36-37). The vast majority of young people say they want to be happily married one day. When they are ready to be married, the vast majority ask the participation of the church in blessing their union. Many would be open to more intensive Christian counseling about marriage, if the opportunity were available.

Con: The risk of losing the battle is too great. The momentum of the culture is too strong for the church to resist. Every generation since the 1960s has accepted non-marital sexual relationships as normal. Even among professed Christians, the incidence of premarital sex and divorce is not radically different than in the general population.⁹³

It is doubtful how many churches have the will to take the marriage-strengthening measures envisioned under Option C. Many pastors seem quite content to bless whatever couples come to them. They would be reluctant to undertake the kind of aggressive counseling that might challenge the couples' level of commitment. They are silent about cohabitation and divorce, for fear of giving offense.

Yet many people still perceive the church as intolerant. They identify it with an ideal of marriage which they may admire in principle, but from which they or their loved ones have departed in practice. This situation is bound to generate resentment. The church

is seen as standing in judgment over relationships that people cherish. Many distance themselves from the church so as to spare their consciences from the annoyance. They may consequently lose the opportunity to hear the Gospel.

If the church remains the foremost public opponent of sexual revisionism, those who favor that agenda will continue to focus their wrath upon the church. If they do eventually win the political battle to redefine marriage, their revenge against the church could be severe. They would have in their hands the legal means to make major encroachments against religious liberty. Traditional Christians might still be free to worship in their churches; however, their influence on public policy—regarding marriage or any other topic—would be greatly diminished.

93 The research establishing this point comes mostly from the Barna Group. See, for example, "New Marriage and Divorce Statistics Released," March 31, 2008, and "American Lifestyles Mix Compassion and Self-Oriented Behavior," February 5, 2007, <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdates>. There are reasons to believe that the differences between Christians and the general population are somewhat greater when the focus is narrowed to regular churchgoers who affirm the importance of Christian faith in their lives.

What's the Harm in Same-Sex Marriage?

Proponents of same-sex marriage have an argument that they believe trumps all others: "Suppose my same-sex partner and I were to get married," they ask. "How would that harm your heterosexual marriage?" The question is rhetorical. The answer is assumed to be: "My heterosexual marriage would not be harmed in the slightest." The conclusion follows naturally: If same-sex marriage causes you no harm, then why not permit it?

This simple argument conceals an assumption that, once granted, virtually gives away the game to the same-sex advocates. The assumption is that marriage is a purely private affair involving the emotional attachment between two autonomous individuals. If that assumption is true, then the private emotional attachment between two members of the same sex has no necessary effect on the private emotional attachment between their opposite-sex neighbors.

But the entire history of marriage bears witness against that assumption. Heretofore, marriage has never been a purely private relationship. It has been a social institution with a set of rules: It takes two to marry. Everyone has a limited pool of potential mates. You cannot marry a minor. You cannot marry a close relative. You cannot marry someone who is already married. And you cannot marry someone of the same sex. These rules apply equally to all.

Marriage always involves more than the two spouses. That's why witnesses are required. That's why brides and grooms usually seek the presence of parents and other family and friends. That's why the state registers marriages and treats married couples differently from single persons.

The meaning of these practices is this: The community has a stake in every marriage. Every marriage that succeeds strengthens the rest of us. Every marriage that fails weakens the rest of us. No marriage is an island.

We see this truth worked out in practice. When divorces started to rise in the 1970s, they spread like an epidemic. As couples in a community saw their neighbors divorce, they started to doubt the solidity of their own marriage vows. Dissatisfied spouses began to consider divorce more seriously.

Likewise, in a community where people see adultery tolerated in their neighbors' marriages, they are more likely to indulge their own adulterous desires. Where they see spousal or child abuse tolerated in their neighbors' homes, they are more likely to lash out against their own spouse or children. Every married couple sets an example, good or bad, for every other married couple. Obviously, well-established couples may not be affected as much. But newer and less stable couples—and young people forming ideas of mar-

riage for the future—will be more deeply influenced by the examples they see.

A Different Kind of Example

So what kind of example might same-sex couples set for the rest of society? Contrary to blithe assertions that such couples are "just like the rest of us," there are in fact major observable differences between marriage and same-sex relationships.

The proportion of homosexuals who are in partnered relationships is far lower. Census Bureau estimates show only about 30 percent of the U.S. homosexual population living in partnered households. By contrast, 56.3 percent of all Americans above 18 are married and living with their spouse.¹

Where marriage or domestic partnerships have been available to same-sex couples, only a small percentage has come forward to claim the status. Scholars Maggie Gallagher and Joshua Baker estimate that in the Netherlands, where same-sex marriage has been recognized since 2001, only six percent of the homosexual population has chosen to marry. In various Canadian provinces, between 1 and 14 percent of the homosexual population has opted for marriage. In Massachusetts the range is between 10 and 25 percent.² Clearly, when same-sex marriage is allowed, it does not become normative for homosexuals in the way that marriage has historically been normative for heterosexuals.

Same-sex relationships have much shorter durations than marriages. University of Chicago sociologist Edward Lauman reports, "Typical gay city inhabitants spend most of their adult lives in 'transactional' relationships, or short-term commitments of less than six months." A Netherlands study estimates that homosexual men had an average "duration of steady partnerships" of 1.5 years. Only a small minority of same-sex relationships last more than a decade. By contrast, more than 70 percent of marriages reach their tenth anniversary.³ Divorce rates for gay male couples in Norway and Sweden are 50 percent higher than for heterosexuals. Rates for lesbian couples are more than 150 percent higher.⁴

1 Timothy J. Dailey, "Comparing the Lifestyles of Homosexual Couples to Married Couples," Family Research Council, April 7, 2004, <http://www.frc.org/get.cfm?i=IS04C02>. Figures for overall U.S. population living with a spouse come from U.S. Census Bureau, "America's Families and Living Arrangements: 2007," Table A1.

2 Maggie Gallagher and Joshua K. Baker, "Demand for Same-Sex Marriage: Evidence from the United States, Canada, and Europe," *Institute for Marriage and Public Policy Brief* 3, no. 1 (April 26, 2006), <http://www.marriagedebate.com/pdf/imapp.demand-forssm.pdf>. Figures for Massachusetts have been updated to include the 11,000 same-sex marriages registered through 2008.

3 Adrian Brune, "City Gays Skip Long-term Relationships, Study Says," *Washington Blade*, February 27, 2004, 12. Maria Xiridou et al., "The Contributions of Steady and Casual Partnerships to the Incidence of HIV Infection among Homosexual Men in Amsterdam," *AIDS* 17 (2003), 1031. These are cited in Dailey.

4 Gunnar Anderson et al., "The Demographics of Same-Sex Marriage in Norway and Sweden," *Demography* 43 (2006), 79-98.

Same-sex relationships are far more promiscuous than marriages. The 1994 *Sex in America* survey found less than 2 percent of homosexuals to be monogamous, while 83 percent of heterosexuals were in a monogamous relationship. The average number of partners in the past year was 8 for the homosexual respondents, 1.2 for heterosexuals. The average number of lifetime partners was 50 for homosexuals, 4 for heterosexuals.⁵ Prominent homosexual authors such as Andrew Sullivan and Michelangelo Signorile have touted this sexual “flexibility” as an advantage of same-sex relationships.

Homosexuals have a higher incidence of problems such as alcoholism, drug abuse, and some forms of mental illness.⁶ Some homosexual advocates acknowledge these problems; however, they blame them all on negative self-images implanted by a disapproving society. They express the hope that, as homosexual relations are legitimated through marriage, gays and lesbians will acquire more positive self-images and change their behaviors for the better. But so far there is little evidence of such change in countries and regions where homosexuality is now widely accepted.

There are significant questions about whether, in a society that already has too many bad marital models, we should add problematic same-sex relationships into the mix. The normativity, permanence, exclusivity, and other-nurturing qualities of marriage are already called into question through heterosexual misconduct. Same-sex marriage would seem more likely to weaken than to strengthen those threatened qualities.

A Different Lesson for Society

Nevertheless, the question arises: Are there not at least some same-sex relationships that display the desired qualities of permanence, exclusivity, and nurturance? Should not such relationships qualify as marriage?

Here the problem lies in the message that is conveyed by legitimizing same-sex marriage. For to accommodate those few same-sex couples, the definition of marriage must be changed for all other couples too. The law is always a moral teacher, and the lessons imparted by same-sex marriage would differ tremendously from those delivered by traditional marriage.

Traditionally, the law has taught that marriage is about bringing together the two complementary sexes. It has taught that marriage is consummated in a sexual act where the male

and female unite their mated bodies, with the possibility of conceiving a new life out of that union. The law has taught that a central purpose of marriage is to provide the setting where that child can be reared by its biological father and mother. In addition, the Christian tradition has taught that God originated marriage when he created man and woman. It has exalted marriage as a mystical union of dissimilar persons, reflecting the eternal union between a transcendent God and his earthly people.

All these deep meanings would be lost if marriage were reduced to just an attachment between any “two persons who love each other”—as it must be reduced if same-sex couples are to be accommodated. Marriage would be just a convenient social arrangement. It would be little different from any number of other relationships, sexual or non-sexual. All couples would be impoverished by this diminution of marriage.

Ultimately, what’s driving the campaign for “marriage equality” seems to be the desire for a visible expression of society’s blessing. Homosexuals, perhaps still struggling with negative images of themselves and their relationships, are desperate to have society tell them that they are alright. They may not want the substance of marriage, but they crave the symbolic affirmation. Andrew Sullivan remarks, “Including homosexuals within marriage would be a means of conferring the highest form of social approval imaginable.”⁷

But this is precisely the kind of approval that many other Americans, including orthodox Christians, do not wish to grant. Based on both Scripture and natural law reasoning, they cannot approve of homosexual relations. These opponents of same-sex marriage are willing to let gays and lesbians form whatever relationships they choose; however, they do not want the state blessing those relationships. They do not want the state to equate those relationships with marriage.

A Threat to Religious Liberty

Where the state does equate same-sex relations with marriage, it generates an immediate threat to the religious liberties of those who oppose that policy. The Becket Fund for Religious Liberty held a conference (and subsequently published a book) on *Same-Sex Marriage and Religious Liberty: Emerging Conflicts*. Participants included both proponents and opponents of same-sex marriage. All these legal scholars agreed that the conflicts were real and likely to grow; they disagreed over whether courts and

5 R.T. Michael et al., *Sex in America: A Definitive Survey* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1994), 134.

6 Thomas E. Schmidt, *Straight & Narrow? Compassion and Clarity in the Homosexuality Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 112-114.

7 John Cloud, “Will Gay Marriage Be Legal?” *Time*, February 21, 2000.

legislatures should give preference to the claims of same-sex couples or the claims of dissenting religious people and groups. American Jewish Congress lawyer Marc Stern noted the high stakes: "... [S]ame-sex marriage would work a sea change in American law. That change will reverberate across the legal and religious landscape in ways that are unpredictable today."⁸

Sexual revisionists have shown that, when they triumph in the political arena, they will bring state power to bear against private persons and institutions that dissent. This is the logic of their position. Pro-homosexuality advocates regularly portray their cause as a matter of "justice" for "sexual minorities." The high constitutional principle of "equal protection of the law" mandates recognition of same-sex marriages, they claim. These advocates regard any distinction between marriage and same-sex partnerships as an illegal and immoral "discrimination." Frequently, they compare today's defenders of traditional marriage to the racists of an earlier generation.

Once a court or legislature grants the demand for "equal marriage rights" for non-marital relationships, this line of thinking becomes official state policy. Religious people who still see marriage as the lifelong union of one man and one woman become enemies of state policy who must be brought into compliance.

Revisionists sometimes promise that churches would never be forced to perform same-sex weddings. But they do not offer any protections against the more likely forms of pressure: Defenders of traditional marriage (like racists) could be shamed and driven off the airwaves and out of the public square. Teachers and other public employees who voiced "hate speech" against homosexuals could be disciplined or fired. Corporations would have to worry about "anti-discrimination" lawsuits alleging a "hostile environment" created by remarks critical of same-sex relations. The easiest way to guard against such lawsuits would be to stop hiring persons known to hold "bigoted" religious beliefs on the question.

Public schools would teach that same-sex relations were morally equivalent to marriage. Parents who disagreed might not have the option of exempting their children from such indoctrination. Christian businesspeople could be forced to facilitate same-sex weddings. Christian counselors, social workers, and fertility doctors might lose their professional licenses if they refused to assist same-sex couples on an equal

basis. Christian colleges might be compelled to admit and house students in same-sex relationships. Parachurch ministries with policies upholding traditional marriage could forfeit their access to public facilities, tax exemptions, and government contracts. They might be forced to hire employees in same-sex relationships, unless they could demonstrate that adherence to Christian teaching on marriage was essential to the particular job.

We have already seen this process advance in jurisdictions that treat same-sex couples as if they were married. The Roman Catholic Church has been driven out of the adoption business in Massachusetts and Great Britain because it prefers to place children with man-woman married couples. In Canada, Christian broadcasters and schoolteachers have been prosecuted for alleged "hate speech" against homosexuals. Appeals for "the free exercise of religion" may not be sufficient to protect Christian individuals and institutions from such attempts to compel their acceptance of non-marital relationships.⁹

If even a portion of these threats materializes in the United States, it would be a high price to pay in exchange for questionable benefits to a rather small minority. The harm is indeed great.

8 Marc D. Stern, "Same-Sex Marriage and the Churches," in Douglas Laycock, Anthony R. Picarello, Jr., and Robin Fretwell Wilson, eds., *Same-Sex Marriage and Religious Liberty: Emerging Conflicts* (Lanham, MD: Becket Fund for Religious Liberty and Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008), 1.

9 Laycock, et al., 2-7, 96, 102.

What Churches Are Saying about Marriage.....

In surveying official church policies on marriage, one finds a wide agreement on many points. Virtually all Christian churches, in the United States and elsewhere, define marriage as the union of one man and one woman. They understand this union to be established and blessed by God, and intended by him to be exclusive and lifelong.

Churches identify roughly the same purposes served by marriage: as the means by which male and female unite as “one flesh,” as the appropriate setting for childbearing and childrearing, as a legitimate channel for sexual desires, as a source of companionship and mutual care, and as the most basic unit of human society.

Almost all churches disapprove of sexual relations or childbearing outside of marriage. While they may accept divorce as permissible in certain circumstances, they regard it as an unfortunate outcome to be avoided when possible.

In the face of contemporary challenges to marriage, the differences in church doctrine seem minor. Some churches regard marriage as a sacrament; others call it an “institution.” Churches assign varying weights to the different purposes of marriage. They may be somewhat stricter or looser about the conditions under which they would condone divorce or remarriage. But the overwhelming impression is of a striking convergence, centered on the basic biblical teachings discussed previously (see pp. 3-8).

Roman Catholic Church

The Roman Catholic Church is the largest Christian body in the world and in the United States. Its U.S. membership is estimated at 67.1 million.⁹⁴ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* grounds its understanding of marriage in the character of God:

God who created man out of love also calls him to love—the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being. For man is created in the image and likeness of God who is himself love. Since God created him man and woman, their mutual love becomes an image of the absolute and unfailing love with which God loves man.⁹⁵

The catechism teaches:

“God himself is the author of marriage.” The vocation to marriage is written in the very nature of man and woman as they came from the hand of the Creator. Marriage is not a purely human institution despite the many variations it has undergone through the centuries in different cultures, social structures, and spiritual attitudes.⁹⁶

“This institution,” according to the catechism, “is prior to any recognition by public authority, which has an obligation to recognize it.” It adds that “Christ the Lord raised marriage between the baptized to the dignity of a sacrament.” Christian marriage becomes “an efficacious sign of Christ’s presence,” showing forth “the covenant of Christ and the Church.”⁹⁷

The model of divine love sets a high standard for human marriage:

“Conjugal love involves a totality, in which all the elements of the person enter—appeal of the body and instinct, power of feeling and affectivity, aspiration of the spirit and will. It aims at a deeply personal unity, a unity that, beyond union in one flesh, leads to forming one heart and soul; it demands *indissolubility* and *faithfulness* in definitive mutual giving; and it is open to *fertility*.”⁹⁸

“The spouses’ union achieves the twofold end of marriage,” which the catechism identifies as “the good of the spouses themselves and the transmission of life [through procreation of children]. These two meanings or values of marriage cannot be separated without altering the couple’s spiritual life and compromising the goods of marriage and the future of the family.”⁹⁹

The Catholic catechism asserts, “Sexuality is ordered to the conjugal love of man and woman.” It warns, “Sexual pleasure is morally disordered when sought for itself, isolated from its procreative and unitive purposes.” More specifically, “The deliberate use of the sexual faculty, for whatever reason, outside of marriage is essentially contrary to its purpose.”¹⁰⁰ Regarding same-sex relations, the catechism says:

96 Ibid, 400. Quote is from the Vatican II document *Gaudium et spes*, 48, 1.

97 Ibid, 532, 414, 403, 404.

98 Ibid, 410. Quote is from Pope John Paul II’s apostolic exhortation, *Familiaris consortio*, November 22, 1981, 13.

99 Ibid, 568.

100 Ibid, 568, 567, 564-565. The last phrase is quoted from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Persona humana*, December 29, 1975, 9.

94 This and following membership estimates come from Eileen W. Lindner, ed., *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches 2009* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009).

95 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 1994), 401.

Basing itself on Sacred Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity, tradition has always declared that 'homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered.' They are contrary to the natural law. They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved.¹⁰¹

The catechism objects to cohabiting relationships, called "free unions" in Europe. "The expression 'free union' is fallacious: what can 'union' mean when the partners make no commitment to one another, each exhibiting a lack of trust in the other, in himself, or in the future?" the catechism asks. "Carnal union ... demands a total and definitive gift of persons to one another."¹⁰²

The catechism allows, "The *separation* of spouses while maintaining the marriage bond can be legitimate in certain cases." But it takes a different view of divorce:

Divorce is a grave offense against the natural law. It claims to break the contract, to which the spouses freely consented, to live with each other till death. Divorce does injury to the covenant of salvation, of which sacramental marriage is the sign. Contracting a new union, even if it is recognized by civil law, adds to the gravity of the rupture: the remarried spouse is then in a situation of public and permanent adultery.¹⁰³

Eastern Orthodox Churches

The Eastern Orthodox churches comprise the second largest Christian communion worldwide. Within the United States, they claim a total of some 3 million members. The **Standing Conference of Orthodox Bishops in the Americas** declared in 2003:

The Orthodox Christian teaching on marriage and sexuality, firmly grounded in Holy Scripture, 2000 years of church tradition, and canon law, holds that marriage consists in the conjugal union of a man and a woman, and that authentic marriage is blessed by God as a sacrament of the Church. Neither Scripture nor Holy Tradition blesses or sanctions such a union between persons of the same sex.¹⁰⁴

The Orthodox bishops continued:

Holy Scripture attests that God creates man and woman in His own image and likeness (Genesis 1:27-31), that those called to do so might enjoy a conjugal union that ideally leads to procreation. While not every marriage is blessed with the birth of children, every such union exists to create of a man and a woman a new reality of "one flesh." This can only involve a relationship based on gender complementarity.¹⁰⁵

The bishops of the **Orthodox Church in America** in 1992 affirmed, "Sexual intercourse is to be protected as a sacred expression of love within the community of heterosexual monogamous marriage in which alone it can be that for which God has given it to human beings for their sanctification." They explained, "The procreation of children is not in itself the sole purpose of marriage, but a marriage without the desire for children, and the prayer to God to bear and nurture them, is contrary to the 'sacrament of love' (*Orthodox Marriage Service*; St. John Chrysostom, *On Ephesians*, Homily 20)."¹⁰⁶

"The Stand of the Orthodox Church on Controversial Issues" is summarized on the website of the **Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America**. "The Church has frequently deplored the rise of divorce," according to the summary, "and generally sees divorce as a tragic failure. Yet, the Orthodox Church also recognizes that sometimes the spiritual well-being of Christians caught in a broken and essentially nonexistent marriage justifies a divorce, with the right of one or both of the partners to remarry."¹⁰⁷

Evangelical Protestants

Because evangelicalism is more a movement than a church, it is more difficult to count evangelicals or gauge their views. Nevertheless, statements on marriage from all quarters of evangelicalism have many common threads.

The **National Association of Evangelicals** (NAE) has a resolution on homosexuality, adopted in 1985 and reaffirmed in 2004, that begins:

The Scriptures declare that God created us male and female. Furthermore, the biblical record shows that sexual union was established exclusively within the context of a male-female relationship (Genesis 2:24), and was formalized in the institution of marriage. The partner

101 Ibid, 566. The phrase quoted is from *Persona humana*, 8.

102 Ibid, 575.

103 Ibid, 573. Emphasis in original.

104 "SCOPA Statement on Moral Crisis in our Nation," August 13, 2003, <http://www.scoba.us/articles/2003-08-13-moral-crisis.html>.

105 Ibid.

106 Orthodox Church in America, Holy Synod of Bishops, "On Marriage, Family, Sexuality, and the Sanctity of Life," July 1992, <http://www.oca.org/DOCindex-marriage.asp?SID=12>.

107 Stanley S. Harakas, "The Stand of the Orthodox Church on Controversial Issues," <http://www.goarch.org/ourfaith/ourfaith7101>.

for man was woman. Together they were to become one flesh. In the New Testament, the oneness of male and female in marriage pictures the relationship between Christ and His Church (Ephesians 5:22-33).

The NAE resolution goes on to say that homosexual activity “is clearly condemned in the Scriptures” and “is a deviation from the Creator’s plan for human sexuality.”¹⁰⁸

“The Baptist Faith and Message” summarizes the beliefs of the **Southern Baptist Convention (SBC)**, America’s largest Protestant denomination with 16.3 million members. It teaches:

Marriage is the uniting of one man and one woman in covenant commitment for a lifetime. It is God’s unique gift to reveal the union between Christ and His church and to provide for the man and the woman in marriage the framework for intimate companionship, the channel of sexual expression according to biblical standards, and the means for procreation of the human race.¹⁰⁹

Resolutions at annual SBC meetings have criticized court decisions mandating same-sex marriage. The convention has endorsed state and federal constitutional amendments to preserve the traditional definition of marriage. “Legalizing same-sex ‘marriage’ would convey a societal approval of a homosexual lifestyle, which the Bible calls sinful and dangerous both to the individuals involved and to society at large,” the 2003 convention warned.¹¹⁰

The 2.9-million-member **Assemblies of God** has a position paper on “Divorce and Remarriage.” The paper asserts: “Two sexes, male and female, are required to complete the divine image in humankind. Neither male nor female alone may procreate the race and fulfill the divine purposes.”¹¹¹

“Marriage is to be sexually consummated,” the paper says. “At the Creator’s command, the first man and woman were to ‘become one flesh’ for purposes of procreation, bonding, and mutual pleasure in a safe and loving relationship.” It adds that “[m]arriage is to be heterosexual,” “a permanent union,” “monogamous,”

“a solemn binding agreement made first before God and then among people in society,” and “a relationship of mutually sacrificial love.”

The Assemblies document states, “Homosexual and lesbian unions throughout the biblical record are judged to be sinful (Leviticus 18:22; 20:13; Romans 1:26-27; I Corinthians 6:9; I Timothy 1:9-11). There is no biblical precedent for any homosexual liaison that may be termed ‘marriage.’”

“Marriage is the foundation of the family,” according to the Assemblies. “Children, ideally, are born into an intact family with both father and mother present.” The position paper notes, “The divine intention, however, has never guaranteed that sin will not fragment and destroy many families that, in such cases, are not to be despised, diminished, or neglected, but are to be supported with wise counsel and loving fellowship.”

“God hates divorce,” the position paper says. “God’s hatred of divorce, however, is not to be interpreted as condemnation of those who themselves are not at fault, but have been divorced and victimized by the ungodly actions of their spouses.” Such persons are permitted to remarry in the Assemblies.

The most comprehensive statement from the 2.4-million-member **Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS)** is a 1981 paper on “Human Sexuality: A Theological Perspective.” That paper defines marriage as “the lifelong union of one man and one woman entered into by mutual consent.” It adds that ordinarily “this consent and commitment will be public” and “will normally be circumscribed by various civil laws imposed by society.”¹¹²

The 1981 LCMS paper discusses the purposes of marriage:

The earthly estate of marriage is a divine institution. It is therefore subject to certain divine requirements which remain in effect until the close of this age regardless of the social customs, civil laws, or ecclesiastical rites which may come to surround it.... In marriage God intends to provide for (1) the relation of man and woman in mutual love (Gen. 2:18); (2) the procreation of children (Gen. 1:28); and (3) the partial remedy for sinful lust.¹¹³

108 “NAE Resolution on Homosexuality—Adopted in 1985, Reaffirmed March 2004,” <http://nae.net/index.cfm?FUSEACTION=editor.page&pageID=46>.

109 Southern Baptist Convention, “The Baptist Faith and Message,” June 14, 2000, <http://sbc.net/bfm/bfm2000.asp>.

110 Southern Baptist Convention, “On Same-Sex Marriage,” June 2003, <http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/amResolution.asp?ID=1128>.

111 The quotes in this and the following four paragraphs all come from *Assemblies of God, “Divorce and Remarriage,”* adopted by the General Presbytery in 1973 and revised in 2008, http://ag.org/top/Beliefs/Position_Papers/pp_downloads/pp_4189_divorce_remarriage.pdf.

112 Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, Commission on Theology and Church Relations, “Human Sexuality: A Theological Perspective,” September 1981, 8, http://www.lcms.org/graphics/assets/media/CTCR/Human_Sexuality1.pdf#xml_http___www.lcms.org_ca_search_dtsearch.asp_cmd_pdfhits_amp_DocId_818_amp_Index_F_3a_5cinet-pub_5cwwwroot_5clcmsorg_5cdb_5csearch_5clcms_amp_HitCount_176_amp_hits_5a_5f_64_6c_73_7c_87_1.

113 Ibid, 7.

“Sexual intercourse engaged in outside of the marriage relationship is forbidden by the Scriptures and must be condemned by the church,” the paper affirms.¹¹⁴

A 2006 LCMS paper opposes same-sex civil unions “not solely on the basis of what the Bible says about the sinfulness of homosexual unions, but also on the basis of concerns about the social consequences of such legislation. Such concerns include the inevitable undermining of the institution of marriage, the granting of ‘rights’ solely on the basis of sexual orientation and/or behavior, implications for adoption and the raising of children”¹¹⁵

The 2006 statement also quotes a 1995 report taking a more hands-off attitude toward state laws on divorce: “It might be noted that while the Scriptures

speak unambiguously regarding the sinfulness of divorce (except in cases of unfaithfulness and malicious desertion), the Synod has not felt compelled to ... urge the state to enact legislation that reflects Scripture’s teaching on this matter.”¹¹⁶

African-American Churches

There is less evidence on the positions of historically black denominations. They tend to be more congregational, lacking large national structures with detailed policies. But all of the evidence available points to solid support for the traditional Christian understanding of marriage.

The 5.5-million-member **Church of God in Christ** (COGIC), the third largest U.S. Protestant denomination, issued a statement in April 2004 declaring:

114 Ibid, 9, 36.

115 Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, Commission on Theology and Church Relations, “Legislation Regarding Same-Sex Civil Unions,” May 2, 2006, <http://www.lcms.org/graphics/assets/media/CTCR/Same%20Sex%20Union%20Opinion%200506.pdf>. Emphasis in original.

116 Ibid. The 1995 report, also from the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, is entitled “Render unto Caesar ... and unto God: A Lutheran View of Church and State.”

Faith in Action: Marriage Savers

Suppose a congregation became convinced that marriage was worth defending in our society. How could that congregation make a practical difference in strengthening marriage? Of course, Christians should use their political influence so that government will act wisely. But in many respects the tools of government—tax and entitlement incentives, legal stipulations regulating marriage and divorce—are too blunt to repair the damage that has been done to humanity’s most intimate relationship.

The state does not have much expertise in changing hearts; the church does. Indeed, the church may be better positioned than the state to strengthen marriage in our society. More than 85 percent of U.S. couples are married by clergy.¹ Many of these couples are eager to make their marriages successful. There is a tested, proven program by which local congregations can offer effective help in forming and sustaining strong marriages. It is called Marriage Savers (www.marriagesavers.org), and it is the brainchild of syndicated columnist Mike McManus and his wife Harriet.

Marriage Savers congregations deliver comprehensive support to couples through all stages of their relationships:

- Engaged couples are required to go through four to six months of preparation. Each couple takes a scientifically designed survey assessing the strengths

and weaknesses of the relationship. They discuss the results with trained “mentor couples” from the congregation, who share experiences in facing the challenges of marriage. They learn biblical principles and conflict resolution skills. In about 20 percent of the cases, these conversations lead to the breakup of couples at high risk of divorce. The surviving relationships are strengthened through the process.

- Cohabiting couples are welcome to participate in the marriage preparation. But if they wish to be married in the church, they are asked to observe a period of physical separation before the wedding, so that they may enter marriage with a clear conscience and a sense that it is a distinct new stage in their lives.
- After the wedding, the mentor couples keep in touch with the newlyweds, to help them through the adjustments of their early married years. In addition, the church holds at least one annual marriage enrichment event. This may be an intensive retreat or a series of small group sessions. These events often feature “marital inventories” in which couples assess their relationships and identify problems needing attention.

1 McManus, *How to Cut America’s Divorce Rate in Half*, 15.

Marriage between male and female provides the structure for conceiving and raising children. Compliance with this command of God is a physical and biological impossibility in same-sex unions. We, therefore, believe that only marriage between a male and female, as ordained by God, is essential for the procreation of mankind.

*The black Pentecostal denomination adds, "We believe that these [same-sex] unions are sinful and in direct violation of the law of God in that they are a deviation from the natural use and purpose of the body." It concludes, "[W]e resolve that the Church of God in Christ stand resolutely firm and never allow the sanctioning of same-sex marriages by its clergy, nor recognize the legitimacy of such unions."*¹¹⁷

117 Church of God in Christ, "Marriage: A Proclamation to the Church of God in Christ," April 2004, quoted on the website of the Human Rights Campaign, <http://www.hrc.org/issues/4984.htm>.

The 5-million-member **National Baptist Convention USA Inc.**, the fourth largest U.S. Protestant denomination, takes a similar view. Here is how the pro-homosexuality Human Rights Campaign describes the position of the black Baptist body: "Traditionally, however, the denomination has regarded homosexuality as sinful. It also forbids clergy to officiate at commitment ceremonies for same-sex couples."¹¹⁸ The *New York Times* in 2005 paraphrased the convention president, the Rev. Dr. William J. Shaw, as saying that "he does not believe that the Bible permits such [same-sex] unions, but he pointedly rejects a government ban on them."¹¹⁹

The 2.5-million-member **African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church** has spoken up for the traditional

118 Human Rights Campaign, "Stances of Faiths on GLBT Issues: National Baptist Convention USA Inc.," <http://www.hrc.org/issues/4984.htm>.

119 Neela Banerjee, "Black Churches Struggle Over Their Role in Politics," *New York Times*, March 6, 2005.

- The church publicizes the availability of counseling for those whose marriages are in crisis. Frequently, this counseling is given most effectively by trained "back-from-the-brink" couples who had rescued their own marriages. The McManuses believe that up to 80 percent of troubled marriages can be saved by a timely intervention.
- The church sponsors divorce recovery and stepfamily support groups. Mindful of the high divorce rates for second marriages and blended families, it pays special attention to such situations.

Marriage Savers produces or recommends all the resources necessary to operate these programs. It conducts training for pastors and marriage mentors. Nevertheless, many congregations may find it difficult to mount the entire program by themselves.

Marriage Savers has discovered that its approach works best when congregations in a community band together. That is why it has fostered the adoption of "Community Marriage Policies" in more than 220 localities across the country. Groups of churches in these areas have made a pact that they will require all engaged couples to go through the same marriage preparation. Neighboring congregations come together to train mentor couples, hold marriage retreats, and supply counseling for troubled marriages.

Marriage Savers can cite impressive evidence that its approach works. A survey of 288 couples at the McManuses' church who went through marriage preparation over an 8-year period revealed: 19 percent of the couples had decided not to marry, 77 percent did marry and remained married, and only 3 percent had divorced or separated.²

An independent study in 2004 looked at divorce rates in 122 counties where groups of churches had implemented Community Marriage Policies. The study compared these counties to a control group of socioeconomically similar counties that had no Community Marriage Policy. It concluded: "Results indicate that divorce rates declined more rapidly following adoption [of Community Marriage Initiatives], and this decline was larger than that observed in comparison counties. This difference in declines translates into a 2 percent difference annually [2 percent fewer divorces] in favor of CMI counties."³

The researchers estimated that 30,000 divorces had been averted in the 122 counties. This number may seem small; however, one can imagine how it might be multiplied if more churches in larger communities adopted the Marriage Savers approach and pursued it for the long haul.

2 McManus, *Living Together*, 138.

3 Paul James Birch, Stan E. Weed, and Joseph Olsen, "Assessing the Impact of Community Marriage Policies on County Divorce Rates," *Family Relations* 53 (2004), no. 5, 495, <http://www.marriagesavers.org/sites/Resourses/Publications/AssessingCMP.pdf>.

definition of marriage. The Human Rights Campaign reports: “At the AME national convention in July 2004, delegates voted to forbid ministers from performing marriage or civil union ceremonies for same-sex couples. The vote was unanimous, and there was no debate on the topic.”¹²⁰

Oldline Protestant Churches

The oldline Protestant churches are unique in having regular debates about marriage. “Progressive” activist groups in all these denominations are pressing to change the churches’ definition of marriage, so as to equate it with homosexual and other relationships. But they have been successful in only one denomination with more than one million members. All the other oldline bodies basically retain their traditional doctrines on marriage.

The **United Methodist Church**, with 7.9 million U.S. members, is the nation’s second largest Protestant denomination. The United Methodist “Social Principles” state:

We affirm the sanctity of the marriage covenant that is expressed in love, mutual support, personal commitment, and shared fidelity between a man and a woman. We believe that God’s blessing rests upon such marriage, whether or not there are children of the union. We reject social norms that assume different standards for women than for men in marriage. We support laws in civil society that define marriage as the union of one man and one woman.¹²¹

The “Social Principles” go on to say:

God’s plan is for lifelong, faithful marriage. The church must be on the forefront of premarital and postmarital counseling in order to create and preserve strong marriages. However, when a married couple is estranged beyond reconciliation, even after thoughtful consideration and counsel, divorce is a regrettable alternative in the midst of brokenness. We grieve over the devastating emotional, spiritual, and economic consequences of divorce for all involved....¹²²

The Methodist principles recognize sexuality as “God’s good gift to all persons,” but maintain that “sexual relations are affirmed only with the covenant of monoga-

mous, heterosexual marriage.” They specify, “The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.” Same-sex marriages or unions are not to be conducted by United Methodist ministers or in United Methodist churches.¹²³

The **Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)**, America’s fifth largest Protestant denomination with 4.7 million members, adopted a new policy statement on human sexuality at its August 2009 Churchwide Assembly. “Marriage is a covenant of mutual promises, commitment, and hope authorized legally by the state and blessed by God,” the ELCA statement says. “The historic Christian tradition and the Lutheran Confessions have recognized marriage as a covenant between a man and a woman, reflecting Mark 10:6-9”¹²⁴

The statement appears to value the social functions of marriage more than its form: “The critical issue with respect to the family is not whether it has a conventional form, but how it performs indispensable individual and social tasks.” The new ELCA standard for Christian sexual behavior is not marriage but the vaguer concept of “social trust” manifested in relationships that are “loving,” “life-giving,” self-giving,” “fulfilling,” “nurturing,” “truth-telling,” “faithful,” “committed,” “supportive,” “hospitable,” and “a blessing to society.”

The ELCA policy affirms “that the greatest sexual intimacies, such as coitus, should be matched with and sheltered both by the highest level of binding commitment and by social and legal protection, such as found in marriage.” It “opposes non-monogamous, promiscuous, or casual sexual relationships.” But it stops short of saying that all sex outside of marriage is wrong. The ELCA “does not favor cohabitation arrangements outside of marriage”; however, it grants that “some cohabitation arrangements can be constructed in ways that are neither casual nor intrinsically unstable.”

Regarding homosexuality, the policy states that “consensus does not exist.” It presents four “conscience-bound beliefs,” ranging from disapproval of all same-sex relations to honoring them as marriages. The ELCA promises to “include these different understandings and practices within its life.” Pursuant to that promise, the 2009 Churchwide Assembly decided to “allow congregations that choose to do so to recog-

120 Human Rights Campaign, “Stances of Faiths on GLBT Issues: African Methodist Episcopal Church,” <http://www.hrc.org/issues/religion/4957.htm>.

121 *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2008* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2008), 102.

122 Ibid.

123 Ibid, 103, 253.

124 This and subsequent quotations come from Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Churchwide Assembly, “Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust,” August 19, 2009, <http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements/JTF-Human-Sexuality.aspx>.

nize, support, and hold publicly accountable lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships.”¹²⁵

The 2.9-million-member **Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (PCUSA)** is currently studying questions of marriage and sexuality. But its constitutional documents already contain much doctrine on these questions. The denomination’s “Directory for Worship” states:

Marriage is a gift God has given to all humankind for the well-being of the entire human family. Marriage is a civil contract between a woman and a man. For Christians marriage is a covenant through which a man and a woman are called to live out together before God their lives of discipleship.¹²⁶

Among the PCUSA confessions, the Westminster Confession offers the most guidance on marriage. It teaches, “Christian marriage is an institution ordained of God, blessed by our Lord Jesus Christ, established and sanctified for the happiness and welfare of mankind, into which spiritual and physical union one man and one woman enter. . . .” The confession explains, “Marriage is designed for the mutual help of husband and wife; for the safeguarding, undergirding, and development of their moral and spiritual character; for the propagation of children and the rearing of them in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.”¹²⁷

Westminster acknowledges that “the weaknesses of one or both partners may lead to gross and persistent denial of the marriage vows”; however, it warns that “only in cases of extreme, unrepented-of, and irreparable unfaithfulness (physical or spiritual) should separation or divorce be considered.” The confession provides that “[t]he remarriage of divorced persons may be sanctioned by the church, in keeping with the redemptive gospel of Christ, when sufficient penitence for sin and failure is evident, and a firm purpose of an endeavor after Christian marriage is manifested.”

The PCUSA *Book of Order* sets forth “the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman (W-4.9001), or chastity in singleness.”¹²⁸ But a 2000 decision of the

denomination’s Permanent Judicial Commission allowed pastors to bless same-sex couples, provided that there was no “confusion of such services with services of Christian marriage” and no implied “endorsement of homosexual conjugal practice.”¹²⁹

For the **Episcopal Church**, with 2.1 million members, the central document is probably the denomination’s *Book of Common Prayer*. The wedding liturgy in the most recent edition of that book begins with this statement by the priest:

Dearly beloved: We have come together in the presence of God to witness and bless the joining together of this man and this woman in Holy Matrimony. The bond and covenant of marriage was established by God in creation, and our Lord Jesus Christ adorned this manner of life by his presence and first miracle at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. It signifies to us the mystery of the union between Christ and his Church, and Holy Scripture commends it to be honored among all people. The union of husband and wife in heart, body, and mind is intended by God for their mutual joy; for the help and comfort given one another in prosperity and adversity; and, when it is God’s will, for the procreation of children and their nurture in the knowledge and love of the Lord.¹³⁰

This marriage ceremony is clearly intended for a man and a woman. But at its 2003 General Convention, the Episcopal Church accepted “that local faith communities are operating within the bounds of our common life as they explore and experience liturgies celebrating and blessing same-sex unions.”¹³¹

The 1.1-million-member **United Church of Christ**, at its 2005 General Synod, became the first—and so far the only—sizeable U.S. Christian denomination to endorse same-sex marriage. The UCC synod approved a resolution that “affirms equal marriage rights for couples regardless of gender and declares that the government should not interfere with couples regardless of gender who choose to marry and share fully and equally in the rights, responsibilities and commitment of legally recognized marriage.”¹³²

125 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Churchwide Assembly, “Recommendations on Ministry Policies,” August 21, 2009, <http://www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-Three-Expressions/Churchwide-Organization/Office-of-the-Secretary/ELCA-Governance/Churchwide-Assembly/Actions/Voting.aspx>.

126 *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part II: Book of Order 2007/2009* (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 2007), W-4.9001.

127 This and the quotations in the following paragraph come from *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part I: The Book of Confessions* (Louisville, Office of the General Assembly, 1999), 6.131-6.139. The text of the Westminster Confession here is as it had been amended by the PCUSA’s predecessor denominations over the years.

128 *Book of Order*, G-6.0106b.

129 The Permanent Judicial Commission of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), decision in the case of *Marc G. Benton et al. v. Presbytery of Hudson River*, May 22, 2000, 6-7, <http://www.pcusa.org/gapjc/decisions/pjc21211.pdf>.

130 *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church, According to the Use of The Episcopal Church* (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979), 432.

131 General Convention, *Journal of the General Convention of . . . The Episcopal Church*, Minneapolis, 2003 (New York: General Convention, 2004), 615f, http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/formatted_1979.htm.

132 United Church of Christ, Twenty-fifth General Synod, “Equal Marriage Rights for All,” July 4, 2005, <http://www.ucc.org/assets/pdfs/2005-equal-marriage-rights-for-all-1.pdf>.

A Battle Far from Over

Some Christians seem tempted to despair over the future of marriage in U.S. society. They are overwhelmed by the negative trends of the past 40 years: the falling marriage rates, the rising incidence of divorce and single parenthood, the increasing acceptance of cohabitation and homosexuality, the apparent shamelessness with which sexual immorality is exhibited in the media. They fear that the triumph of the sexual revolution is, as the “progressives” claim, inevitable and irreversible. They are weary of being branded as intolerant bigots because they disapprove of these developments. They are inclined to give up the fight for marriage and move on to some other more agreeable topic.

But those tempted to pessimism should ask themselves: Are they responding to reality or to distorted media depictions of reality? America is not a nation where everyone acts like the stars of “Sex and the City.” While there are some disturbing trends, there are also developments that show the enduring strength of marriage. The high tide of sexual irresponsibility in the 1970s and 1980s seems to have receded a bit.

Today, the vast majority of young people say that they want to be married, and they will marry eventually. Over the past two decades, divorce rates have gone down. Teenage sexual activity and pregnancies have also declined.¹ The recognition of the importance of fathers in their children’s lives has become more widespread.

Obviously, departures from the marital ideal remain common. Nevertheless, the ideal retains much power in our society. Christian groups that reinforce and draw upon that ideal have shown some success. Marriage Savers (see p. 36-37) claims that the divorce rate can be brought down if churches come together in a comprehensive effort to build and sustain strong marriages. It has evidence to support that contention.

The vast majority of U.S. churches (see pp. 33-39) hold to a biblical, traditional Christian understanding of marriage. Likewise, U.S. voters have upheld the established definition of marriage whenever they have been given the opportunity to decide the question. In just the past 10 years, 29 states have passed constitutional amendments cementing the one man-one woman definition. Another 15 states have adopted statutes to the same effect.² Marriage referenda have won majorities—often large majorities—even in liberal states

such as Hawaii, Oregon, and Wisconsin. These victories have occurred even in election years, such as 2006 and 2008, when other conservative causes have fared poorly. Constituencies that otherwise lean left, such as African Americans and Hispanics, are strongly supportive of the traditional definition of marriage.

Only once has a marriage amendment been defeated at the polls: in Arizona in 2006. But that result was reversed two years later, when 57 percent of Arizona voters approved an amendment stating, “Only a union of one man and one woman shall be valid or recognized as a marriage in this state.”³

It is judges, not voters, who have delivered almost all the victories for same-sex marriage. By identical 4-3 margins, state supreme courts in Massachusetts (2004), California (2008), and Connecticut (2008) mandated a redefinition of marriage. California voters in November 2008 overturned their court’s decision. Voters elsewhere might have done the same, if their legislatures had given them the opportunity.

As the fictional Mr. Dooley observed, even judges follow the election returns. Many state and federal courts may be reluctant to provoke further controversy by pushing same-sex marriage further than it has gone. The Obama administration, already embroiled in other struggles in which it has more popular backing, has its own reasons for caution. Even though the president has expressed his opposition to the federal Defense of Marriage Act, political prudence might counsel against setting off a firestorm with a proposal to repeal the act.

In short, the battle for marriage is far from over. The question is whether U.S. Christians are ready to move from a defensive position (defeating efforts to redefine marriage) to a more proactive posture (working together to strengthen marriage).

1 Alan Guttmacher Institute, “Facts on American Teens’ Sexual and Reproductive Health,” http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/fb_ATSRH.html.

2 Human Rights Campaign, “Statewide Marriage Prohibitions,” http://www.hrc.org/documents/marriage_prohibitions.pdf.

3 Associated Press, “Arizona voters OK anti-gay marriage amendment,” <http://www.abc15.com/content/news/election/story/Arizona-voters-OK-anti-gay-marriage-amendment/P9rps4pbbUe-175HwhDP4Q.csp>.

Conclusions

There are some **matters on which we find ready consensus** among almost all U.S. Christians. Secular progressives might disagree, but in the church even liberals usually affirm at least these elements of the tradition:

1. Marriage is established and blessed by God, and therefore the church has a major stake in marriage.
2. Marriage reflects the love between God and his people, and therefore the church has something important to say about marriage.
3. Marriage has multiple purposes: as a sexual union of two persons, as a setting for childbearing and childrearing, as an antidote to sexual sin, as a source of companionship, as a means of mutual economic provision, as a building block of society.
4. Marriage is monogamous. Few would attempt to justify adultery or polyamory.
5. Marriage is a norm. Most people desire to marry, and most will marry at some point. Most parents desire to see their children happily married.
6. Marriage is intended to be lifelong. Most people taking the vows are not planning to divorce after a few years. They want a lasting union.
7. Churches should play a role in preparing people for marriage and helping them sustain healthy marriages. These efforts are simply assisting couples to keep the vows that they willingly take.

There are other **matters on which there should be consensus** among Christians today. Revisionists may contest these points; however, the preponderance of biblical teaching and the united witness of all major branches of the Christian faith is so strong as to be overwhelming. In many cases, the evidence of nature, history, and the social sciences concurs. Those who disagree on these points have effectively stepped outside the Christian tradition as regards marriage.

These are truths that all believers should acknowledge:

1. Marriage is necessarily the union of the two sexes that God providentially created for each other. Therefore, it can be only between one man and one woman.
2. Marriage is more than the sum of its functions. The sexual union of man and woman in marriage is inherently good, regardless of what other purposes it may serve.
3. Among the functions of marriage, sexual union and childbearing/childrearing stand above the others in being uniquely associated with marriage. Marriage, sex, and childbearing are a strong three-legged stool on which a healthy society can rest, if the three are kept together.
4. Marriage is beneficial to the husband and wife in numerous ways, and those benefits have positive side effects in the community around them.
5. The marriage of the mother and father is the best arrangement so far identified for rearing well-adjusted children who will be valuable citizens of the community.
6. Other relationships may perform some of the functions of marriage (e.g., companionship, economic support); however, none of them matches the combination that marriage delivers so effectively. None of them fulfills the core functions of sexual union and procreation in the way that marriage does.
7. For all these reasons, the church has a vital interest in commending and blessing marriage above other sexual relationships. The church should not bless or honor—indeed, it should counsel against—any sexual relationships outside of marriage.
8. The state, too, has a vital interest in recognizing and favoring marriage above other sexual relationships. Freedom of association dictates that the state allow non-marital relationships. Nevertheless, the state's concern for the upbringing of its next generation of citizens impels it to elevate marriage. Because marriage is unique, the benefits available to married couples should be unique. The state should not recognize or subsidize non-marital sexual relationships as such.
9. Divorce is always sin or the result of sin. Although circumstances may sometimes make divorce necessary or inevitable, it is never a good outcome. Both church and state should endeavor to find means to restore troubled marriages and to reduce the incidence of divorce.

10. Among the policy options discussed above (pp. 25-29), Option C (reaffirming marriage in church and society) is the preferred choice. It is consonant with the biblical and traditional teaching that marriage is to be honored not only within the church, but also as a blessing God intended for all humankind. If church ministries could effectively strengthen marriages throughout U.S. society, the benefits—in physical and mental health, economic wellbeing, and positive social involvement of both adults and children—would be tremendous.
11. Option A (disestablishing marriage in church and society) is not a faithful choice. It would fly in the face of all the biblical and traditional teaching, historical experience, and social science evidence that set marriage apart from other relationships. It would cause severe damage to individuals and society.

There are other **questions on which consensus is lacking** in the Christian community. Good-faith interpretations of the Bible and the tradition may differ. Much turns on prudential judgments about particular situations. There ought to be some room here for discernment by individuals. Here are some examples of such questions:

1. The extent to which pastors should be directive in counseling couples considering marriage or considering ending their marriages. In some cases and in some denominations, there may be a clear teaching that can be stated directly—for example, in forbidding a certain type of marriage or in ruling out divorce. But in other cases the pastor's role may be to reflect back what the couple is saying about their relationship. Without telling the couple what to do, he or she can thereby help them discern their own suitability for marriage or their own ability to reconcile a broken relationship.
2. Whether it would be wise to aim at lowering the average age of marriage. On the one hand, the lengthened period between the age of sexual maturity and the age of marriage puts a great strain on young people seeking to remain chaste. The result is that many, while delaying marriage, fall into a pattern of serial monogamy that renders it more difficult for them later to form a lasting marriage. The common notion that marriage must be postponed until the attainment of various educational, professional, and financial goals ought to be challenged. Surely, obedience to God's moral law ought to be more important than career ambitions. But on the other hand, statistics show that teenage marriages experience higher rates of divorce. (After about 22, age has little effect on divorce rates.) It would not be wise to push young people into marriage before they were ready to take on adult responsibilities. It seems clear that those who married at a younger age, with less economic security, would require greater support from a network of family and friends.
3. Whether it is wise to encourage single mothers to marry the fathers of their children in situations where the fathers fall short on some measures of "marriageability." On the one hand, a child would do better, on balance, if his father and mother were married to one another. If the problem is simply that the father is poor, then the responsibilities of marriage may induce him to become the economic provider that his child needs. But if the father displays other characteristics (such as substance abuse problems, promiscuity, or violent tendencies) that make it unlikely that he could fulfill the marriage vows, it would be unwise to encourage a union almost certain to fail and to damage all those involved.
4. The conditions under which divorce or remarriage may be an option, a necessity, or a wise choice. There are significant differences in the teachings of Catholic and Protestant churches on this point, rooted in different readings of the relevant biblical passages. There might also be varied judgments about which situations fit the classic reasons for marital separation (adultery, desertion, cruelty). Likewise, pastors might have different evaluations of the extent to which reconciliation was possible in such situations. But all should agree that genuine repentance and reconciliation, wherever possible, is preferable to divorce.
5. The allocation of responsibilities between spouses. Some traditions, especially among evangelical Protestants, emphasize distinctive roles to be played by husbands and wives, fathers and mothers. Frequently, these distinctions are tied to notions of male headship derived from Ephesians 5. Other traditions, particularly among oldline

Protestants, tend to minimize sex differences, stressing the common calling of all spouses to “[b]e subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Ephesians 5:21). There is evidence to back both positions. Many sex differences seem to be deeply rooted in human biology and go back far into human history. Even when apparently free of external pressures, men and women regularly choose different roles. It would be foolish, and probably undesirable, to force husbands and wives into a unisex box. On the other hand, many of our society’s standard sex roles—for example, husbands take out the trash and wives do laundry—are obviously artificial cultural conventions. Household responsibilities have been divided differently in other times and places. Greater flexibility in sex roles makes sense in many situations.

6. The extent to which it is appropriate to extend some benefits to all households, including households constituted by a non-marital sexual relationship (e.g., same-sex partners) as well as households not involving a sexual relationship (e.g., a woman living with her aged mother). The state has an interest in people living together and caring for one another. But that interest is far less than its interest in the upbringing of children within marriage. There does not seem to be a strong demand for domestic partnership benefits for any group besides homosexuals. Insofar as such benefits might serve to legitimize a sexual relationship that many citizens regard as inappropriate and damaging, the subsidy becomes problematic. In any case, domestic partnership benefits should not approximate the benefits attached to the quite dissimilar status of marriage.
7. The best means of preserving the traditional definition of marriage under civil law. Constitutional referenda have proven very effective in many states; however, the referendum process is not accessible to the people in every state. The federal Defense of Marriage Act was passed with the intention of protecting the ability of states and the federal government to refuse to recognize same-sex marriages from another state. But scholars disagree about whether the act will withstand a judicial challenge. A federal marriage amendment would have been the most sweeping solution to the problem; however, that kind of amendment no longer seems

politically possible. Moreover, even some conservatives objected to a federal marriage amendment on the grounds that it intruded into the traditional powers of the states in the area of family law.

8. The time when it may be necessary for the U.S. church to pursue Option B, retreating inside its own walls to preserve its understanding of marriage amidst a hostile culture. That day has not yet arrived. Most people take a positive view of marriage and desire marriage for themselves. In every state where voters have been given a choice regarding same-sex marriage, they have chosen to retain the traditional definition of marriage. The battle for marriage remains to be decided (see p. 40).

We offer two **theses for further study**. These are questions that have not yet been resolved. But we expect that further experience may prove the truth. Here are two experiments worth trying:

1. Community marriage policies (see p. 37) seem to have been effective in the scattered localities where they have been established. They should be implemented more widely to see whether they might have a measurable impact in lowering the divorce rate.
2. Alternatives to no-fault divorce need to be explored. The states might re-establish some barriers—waiting periods, referrals to counseling, penalties for the party deemed more responsible for breaking up the marriage—that would cause some spouses to reconsider their rush toward divorce. These barriers should be higher in cases where children are involved. We do not know how many divorces might be prevented by such measures. In many cases, the marriage may indeed be “irretrievably broken” by the time the divorce petition is filed. If one spouse has already determined to brush aside all pleas for reconciliation, and perhaps has commenced a new sexual relationship, no amount of intercession may deter the divorce-seeking spouse from his or her fixed course. But perhaps other situations are more amenable to reconciliation than we may imagine.

We have no certainty about how these experiments will turn out. We do not know whether the U.S. divorce rate will rise, fall, or stay steady. We cannot predict the future course of other trends—whether the marriage rate will continue to go down, whether out-of-wedlock births will continue to go up.

Nor can we say with certainty what will happen to the very definition of marriage. How many states will reduce marriage to just any “two people who love each other”? To what extent will states erase the distinctions between marriage and cohabitation? Will they eventually recognize polyamorous marriages with more than two partners?

We do not know how many churches will alter their teachings to conform to the culture’s trajectory. A few have already moved a fair distance toward accepting other sexual relationships on a par with marriage. Others will likely follow. But it is equally likely that there will be many churches that resist compromising the biblical and historic teaching of the Church Universal.

We do know this much: Marriage is worth defending, and we have a duty to defend it. To whatever extent we succeed in building communities that honor marriage, in the church and in society, we will glorify the God who designed marriage. In addition, we will bring blessings to many neighbors whose lives are enriched through marriage. To whatever extent we fail in this task, we and our neighbors and the witness of the Gospel will suffer loss.

But we ought not to worry too much about losses that we may suffer. Ultimately, the defense of marriage does not fall on our weak human shoulders. The One who truly upholds marriage is the sovereign God who created man and woman and joined them together in

the marriage bond. God is not mocked. In due time he will vindicate his truth—about marriage, and everything else—so that all eyes may see.

No human trend is irreversible. It is not inevitable that marriages will go down, divorces will go up, and fatherless children will multiply. We can expect that a society that devalues God’s good gift of marriage will not prosper in the long run.

We must believe that, in God’s providence, those who depart from God’s path will eventually experience the consequences. Even in the far country of individual autonomy and moral relativism, the prodigal can recognize the fruitlessness of his ways. He can remember that life was better in his father’s house. He can turn back towards the place where God is ready to receive and restore him.

The Bible and human history are full of these kinds of surprising reversals. The times when “everyone does what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25) and society falls apart are followed by times of repentance and renewal. Sexual license and family disintegration go only so far before a countervailing drive toward family reintegration takes hold.

In Acts 3:19-20 the apostle Peter promises “times of refreshing” for the people of Jerusalem if they will “[r]epent therefore and turn to God.” We pray and work that it may be so in our day and our land.

Study Questions

1. What difference does it make that marriage “goes back to ‘the beginning,’ to God’s providential design in creation” (p. 3)?
2. Both Jesus and the apostle Paul fasten upon the phrase “the two shall become one flesh” as the key to explaining marriage. What difference does it make when we believe that man and woman can truly “become one flesh”?
3. Both the Old and New Testaments draw analogies between the covenant of marriage and the covenant between God and his people. How would our love for our spouses be different if it more closely resembled God’s love for Israel and the church? What kinds of behaviors would we have to change in our society?
4. What were some of the “cultural attitudes and practices” relating to marriage that early “church leaders challenged” (p. 9)? Why did they think these attitudes and practices were unworthy of the followers of Jesus Christ? Are there similar attitudes and practices that the churches need to challenge today?
5. Augustine of Hippo set the pattern for future church teaching when he identified “three goods to be found in marriage: the procreation of children, the virtue of fidelity exercised between husband and wife, and the ‘sacramental bond’ uniting the two as one flesh” (p. 10)? Do you think these three continue to express adequately the goods of marriage? Would you add or subtract from Augustine’s list? Which of these goods are essential to marriage? Which are most important for society?

6. By 1200 the Roman Catholic Church was strongly urging that marriages be celebrated inside the church. Most of the Protestant reformers, for somewhat different reasons, required church weddings. What were the Catholic reasons for this insistence? What were the Protestant reasons? Do you think it is still important today for Christians to marry inside a church? Why or why not?
7. Look at the modern trends listed on pp. 15-16: notions of “romantic love,” the view of marriage as “just another kind of contract,” the narrowing of the family’s economic functions, geographic mobility and urbanization, and the availability of contraception. Do you agree that all of these trends have weakened marriage? Do you see any counter-vailing trends that might strengthen marriage?
8. How should U.S. Christians respond to “the widening span of years during which young people are sexually mature but not yet married”? Should we accommodate our teaching to the fact that “most young people follow a pattern of serial monogamy, moving along a string of short to medium-term sexual relationships” (p. 17)? Or are there ways of helping more young people to practice the traditional Christian virtue of chastity? To what extent should we aim to bring the average age of marriage back down, so that the span of years between sexual maturity and marriage is shorter? What changes would be required to encourage younger marriages?
9. Bearing in mind the most common reasons for divorce (discussed on pp. 18-19), how hopeful are you that the divorce rate in our society could be reduced significantly? Do you believe that an approach like Marriage Savers (p. 36-37) could be successful in your church and community?
10. This paper observes, “It is ironic that, at a time when marriage is weakening in many sectors of U.S. society, the social science evidence has come in strongly affirming the benefits of marriage for both adults and children” (p. 21). Why hasn’t this social science evidence had a greater impact on people’s behavior?
11. Of the three policy options outlined on pages 25-29, which would you choose to pursue? Why do you believe this option is most faithful to Scripture and Christian tradition? Why do you believe it is most beneficial for the church and U.S. society?
12. How would you answer the question “What’s the harm in same-sex marriage?” (p. 30)
13. In the chapter on “What the Churches Are Saying About Marriage” (pp. 33-39), look at the section covering your own denomination or Christian tradition. Are there any of its teachings that surprise you? That impress you? Are there any of your church’s teachings with which you disagree? Why?
14. Are there any teachings of other Christian traditions that surprise or impress you? Are there any with which you disagree strongly? Why?
15. Do you agree that “[i]n surveying official church policies on marriage, one finds a wide agreement on many points” (p. 33)? How would you summarize this consensus in your own words?
16. In the “Conclusions” chapter, read out the lists of “matters on which we find ready consensus” and “matters on which there should be consensus among Christians today” (pp. 41-42). Do you agree with all of these assertions? With which would you disagree? Why?
17. Look at the list of questions on which there ought to be “room for discernment” and disagreement (pp. 42-43). Do you believe that there is or should be a consensus answer to any of these questions?

Selected Resources for Further Study.....

- Blankenhorn, David. *The Future of Marriage*. New York: Encounter Books, 2007. Blankenhorn looks at anthropological and historical evidence, concluding that the universal, unique, and irreplaceable function of marriage is to cement a durable bond between children and their biological father and mother.
- Browning, Don S., and Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, Pamela D. Couture, K. Brynolf Lyon, and Robert M. Franklin. *From Culture Wars to Common Ground: Religion and the American Family Debate*, second edition. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000. Browning and his colleagues seek to bring liberals and conservatives together to support a “critical familism” that affirms marriage while rejecting past patriarchal injustices.
- Edin, Kathryn, and Maria Kefalas. *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005. Edin and Kefalas, in a case study of inner city Philadelphia, reveal the social conditions and male and female attitudes that produce low marriage rates and high numbers of non-marital births.
- Gagnon, Robert A.J. *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001. Gagnon deploys exhaustive linguistic and historical analysis to demonstrate that biblical writers categorically disapproved of homosexual practice.
- George, Robert P., and Jean Bethke Elshtain, eds. *The Meaning of Marriage: Family, State, Market, and Morals*. Dallas: Spence Publishing Company, 2006. Contributors to this anthology survey economic, legal, and cultural factors that have weakened marriage, warning that same-sex marriage would accelerate these destructive trends.
- Gushee, David. *Getting Marriage Right: Realistic Counsel for Saving and Strengthening Relationships*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004. Gushee looks at biblical teaching on marriage as covenant and offers practical advice for keeping the covenant.
- Hunter, David G., trans. and ed. *Marriage in the Early Church*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001. These selections from ancient fathers of the church show how deep and counter-cultural the church’s view of marriage has always been.
- Hymowitz, Kay S. *Marriage and Caste in America*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006. Hymowitz discusses the growing gap between upper class and lower class patterns of sexual relations, marriage, and childbearing.
- Institute for American Values. “Why Marriage Matters, Second Edition: Twenty-Six Conclusions from the Social Sciences.” New York: Institute for American Values, 2005. This 43-page summary documents all the ways—physical and mental health, economic prosperity, social adjustment—in which marriage is better for adults and children.
- Laycock, Douglas, and Anthony R. Picarello, Jr., and Robin Fretwell Wilson, eds. *Same-Sex Marriage and Religious Liberty: Emerging Conflicts*. Lanham, MD: Becket Fund for Religious Liberty and Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2008. Contributors to this volume examine legal precedents suggesting that, if same-sex marriage is recognized as a civil right, courts and legislatures will likely constrict the religious liberties of those who insist on traditional marriage.
- McManus, Mike and Harriet McManus. *Living Together: Myths, Risks and Answers*. New York: Howard Books, 2008. The McManuses explain why cohabitation is not the equivalent of marriage, and how churches can address pastorally those couples that are living together.
- Osiek, Carolyn, and David L. Balch. *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997. Osiek and Balch describe the Jewish, Greek, and Roman social contexts in which the early Christians tried to establish their own distinctive patterns of family life.

Perdue, Leo G., and Joseph Blenkinsopp, John J. Collins, and Carol Meyers. *Families in Ancient Israel*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997. The co-authors sketch the ancient Near Eastern family structures to which the Mosaic laws were addressed.

Satinover, Jeffrey. *Homosexuality and the Politics of Truth*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996. Satinover uses evidence from biological and behavioral sciences to argue that homosexual conduct is not a predetermined variant of human sexuality but a destructive compulsion that can be overcome.

Sullivan, Andrew. *Virtually Normal: An Argument about Homosexuality*. New York: Vintage Books, 1995. Sullivan, speaking as a practicing Catholic, tries to make a “conservative” case for why same-sex marriage would be good for homosexuals and good for society.

Waite, Linda J., and Maggie Gallagher. *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially*. New York: Broadway Books, 2000. Sociologist Waite and popular author Gallagher expound decades of research demonstrating how lifelong marriage outperforms alternative family arrangements.

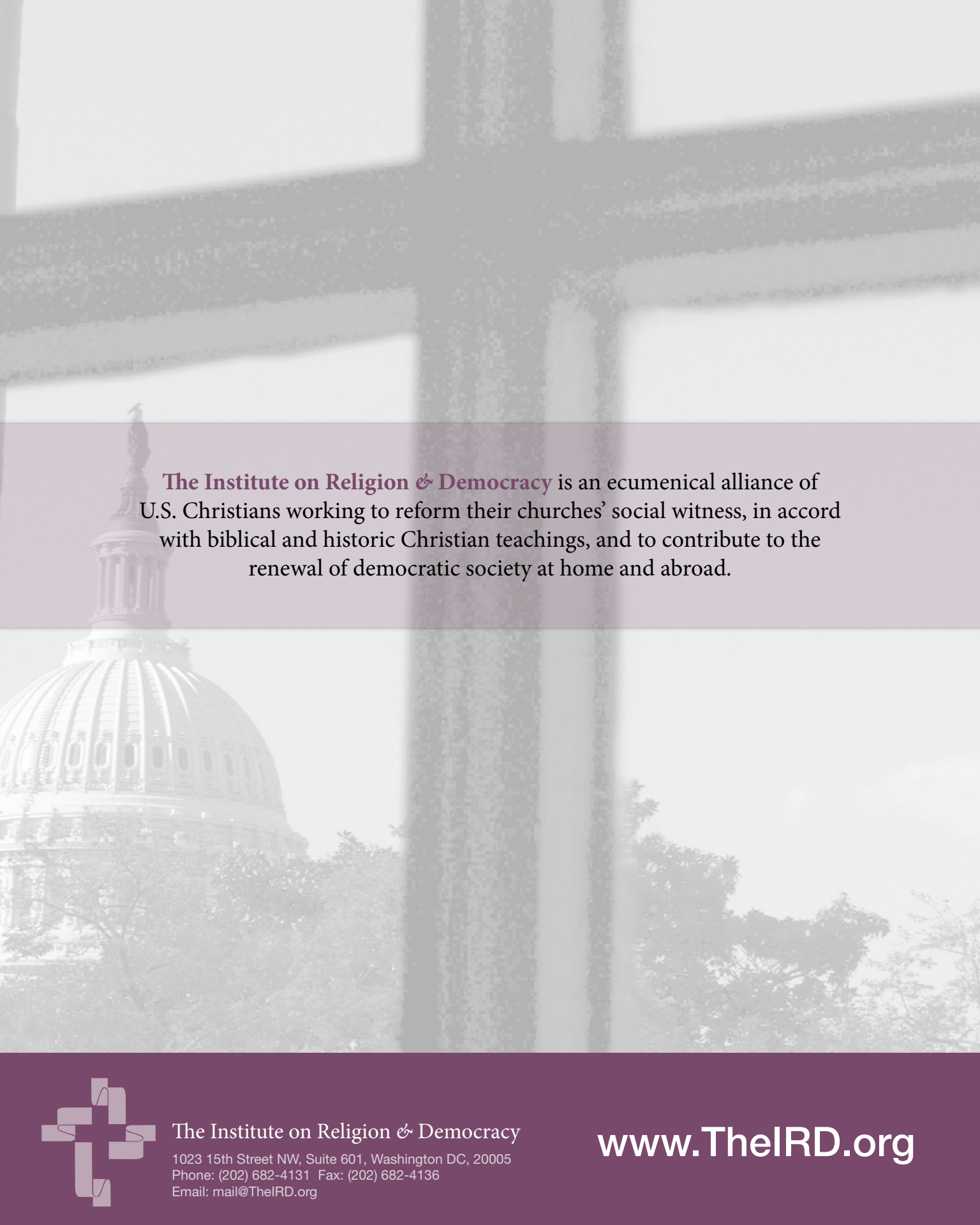
Witte, John, Jr. *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion, and Law in the Western Tradition*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997. Witte describes the development of distinctive Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, and Anglican views of marriage, and how all were challenged by modern liberalism.

Websites

Marriage Savers (www.marriagesavers.org) provides resources for local churches to adopt a comprehensive approach to strengthening marriages in their communities.

The National Marriage Project at Rutgers University (<http://marriage.rutgers.edu/>) publishes an annual “State of Our Unions” report with the latest statistics and analysis on the state of marriage in American society.

Smart Marriages (www.smartmarriages.org) is a clearinghouse for all kinds of information, from scholarly to practical, about how to form and sustain strong marriages.



The Institute on Religion & Democracy is an ecumenical alliance of U.S. Christians working to reform their churches' social witness, in accord with biblical and historic Christian teachings, and to contribute to the renewal of democratic society at home and abroad.



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