

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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PERSPECTIVE NUMBER ONE

The End of Traditional Marriage?

If one is intellectually honest about what is occurring in western civilization, especially in the United States, one would conclude anecdotally that traditional marriage—i.e., the nuclear family—with one man and one woman, married and having children—is non-existent in major parts of the culture. Further, the effects of this social development are not positive. What was once an anecdotal observation is now supported by detailed facts resulting from sociological studies. For example, I just finished reading an article by the culture editor of *Veranda* magazine, Kate Bolick, in the November 2011 edition of the *Atlantic* magazine. For me personally, it was an astonishing article to read. In this *Perspective*, I will summarize the salient parts of this important article and conclude with some thoughts from God’s Word.

- First, a summary of the article. As the American economy deals with the Great Recession and also with the profoundly new social arrangements emerging, “it is time to embrace new ideas about romance and family—and to acknowledge the end of ‘traditional’ marriage as society’s highest ideal.” Part of this cluster of “new ideas” impacting marriage includes the fact of a “post-Boomer ideology that values emotional fulfillment above all else. And the elevation of independence [i.e., personal autonomy] over coupling . . . [as] a second-wave feminist idea. . . .” Bolick quotes social historian Stephanie Coontz on this revolution in social arrangements: “We are without a doubt in the midst of an extraordinary sea change. The transformation is momentous—immensely liberating and immensely scary. When it comes to what people actually want and expect from marriage and relationships, and how they organize their sexual and romantic lives, all the old ways have broken down.” What is the evidence for this astonishing conclusion? Bolick cites several threads of evidence:
 1. In 1960, the median age of first marriage in the US was 23 for men and 20 for women; today it is 28 and 26. Today, a smaller proportion of American women in their early 30s are married than at any other point since the 1950s, if not earlier. There are also major attitudinal shifts about marriage: According to the Pew Research Center, a full 44% of Millennials and 43% of Gen Xers think that marriage is becoming obsolete.
 2. Women no longer need husbands to have children, nor do they have to have children if they do not want to. Biological parenthood in a nuclear family is no longer the norm. In fact, today 40% of children are born to single mothers! Further, gays and lesbians (married and single) and older women are also having children, via adoption and in-vitro fertilization. These developments have shrunk the stigma against single motherhood. Finally, since 1976, the percentage of women in their early 40s who have not given birth has nearly doubled.

3. The gains of the women's movement have also had a significant effect on marriage. Over the past half century, women have steadily gained on—and are in some ways surpassing—men in education and employment. Women are also more likely than men to go to college: In 2010, 55% of all college graduates ages 25 to 29 were female.
 4. Coupled with #3 is the deterioration of the male condition. Men have been rapidly declining—in income, in education attainment, and in future employment prospects—relative to women. As of last year, women held 51.4% of all managerial and professional positions, up from 26% in 1980. Women earned 60% of all bachelor's and master's degrees awarded in 2010 and men are more likely than women to hold only a high school diploma. In addition, nearly 3/4ths of the 7.5 million jobs lost in the depths of the recession were lost by men. Marriage based on men as the primary earners in the family is passing into extinction.
 5. One of the major results of all this data is that American women as a whole are confronted with such a radically shrinking pool of what are traditionally considered to be “marriageable men”—those better educated and those who earn more than they do.
- Second, Bolick then argues that this “crisis in gender” is more profoundly evident in the African-American community and in the “hook-up culture” on the college campus. An astonishing 70% of black women are unmarried and they are more than twice as likely as white women to remain that way. Her argument is that what has already occurred in the black family is beginning to happen to the white family. One example: In 2011, more than 25% of all white children are now born out of wedlock. Regarding the college campus, recent studies confirm that where women outnumber men (as they do on the typical American college campus), the social norms against casual sex weaken. The hook-up culture on campuses has produced college students with many sexual partners and a casual atmosphere about sex that is unprecedented. Contraceptives and abortion remove the stigma of pregnancy and encourage the “free sex” culture.

The broader effect of this “revolution” in sexual behavior is having its effect: The Census Bureau has reported that in 2010, the proportion of married households in America dropped to a record low of 48%. Fifty percent of the adult population is single (compared with 33% in 1950)—and that portion is very likely to keep growing. The median age for getting married has been rising and for the affluent and educated it is even higher. Last year, nearly twice as many single women bought homes as did single men. All of these statistics and data indicate a culture upending social norms and institutional structures.

- Finally, when one places God's Creation Ordinance in Genesis 2:18-25 up against this summary by Kate Bolick, it is difficult to be positive about the state of our culture. God's Creation Ordinance stipulates that marriage is an institution created and ordained by God. It is between a man and a woman—for life and for procreation. What we are witnessing in America is a wholesale abandonment of God's Ordinance. As we are seeing (and will see in increasing degrees), it is the children who suffer the most from this aberrant re-definition of marriage. Marriage is the bedrock institution of civilization—and it is in dismal shape.

See Bolick's article, "All the Single Ladies," in *The Atlantic* (November 2011), pp. 116-136.

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER TWO

"The Age of the Screen"

Recently, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) expressed deep concern about the effects of exposure to "screens" (i.e., TV screens, computer screens, monitors, iPads, smartphones, and other such devices) on children. In fact, the AAP called upon parents to place severe limits on the exposure of young children to such "screens." According to the AAP, 90% of parents reported that their children under the age of two "watch some form of electronic media." These children, parents also reported, watch an average of one to two hours of TV a day. The report also contends that a considerable number of parents indicated that TV "is very important for healthy development," and therefore leave the TV on virtually all waking hours. The doctors of AAP reject such a notion, arguing instead that "unstructured play and face time with parents produce far greater educational outcomes." Indeed, Benedict Carey, reporter for the *New York Times*, indicates that the AAP "makes clear that there is no such thing as an educational program [on TV] for such young children." Here are some of the other findings from this report:

1. TV exposure around bedtime is associated with "poor sleep habits and irregular sleep schedules, which can adversely affect mood, behavior, and learning."
2. By age 3, almost one-third of all children have a TV in their bedroom.
3. About one year ago, the AAP argued that children and adolescents "spend more time engaged in various media than they do in any other activity except for sleeping."
4. The 2010 Kaiser Foundation report suggested that children and teenagers spend more than 7 hours each day engaged with various media. That means that such individuals will have spent 7 to 10 years of their lives watching TV and other media.
5. The number of American homes with TVs outnumbers the number of homes with indoor plumbing. The average American home with children has four TVs, one DVR, up to three DVD players, two CD players, two radios, two computers and two video game units.
6. About 70% of American teenagers have a TV in their bedroom and at least one-third of the nation's teenagers have a computer with internet access in their bedroom.
7. As Albert Mohler reports, "The pediatricians warned that the presence of a TV in a teenager's room is associated with higher rates of substance abuse and sexual activity."

What should we do with the results of this stunning report? Obviously, parents are the ones who put these devices in the bedrooms of young children and of teens. Therefore, it is up to the parents to exercise control and discipline. Permit me to suggest some observations and several guidelines:

- First, the effect on the brain of watching television is staggering. Clement Walchshauer observes that "watching television produces highly altered brain wave states when people watch for a mere twenty minutes." It puts the brain into a totally passive condition unaware of its surroundings and lessening the attention span (*Fundamentalist Journal* [October 1984]:12). In addition, obsessive television watching has further negative effects:

- It demands our time. It is nearly addictive as it draws the viewer in, resulting in more and more time spent in front of the TV and less serving God, family or others.
 - It determines behavior. A national report entitled *Television and Behavior* was issued by the National Institute of Health in 1982. A summary of more than 2,500 studies conducted since 1972, the report demonstrated that there is “overwhelming evidence of a causal link between children’s watching television violence and their performance of violent acts.”
 - It distorts the perception of reality. Children especially confuse real life with TV life and tend to adopt TV’s values. A recent study discovered that ninety percent of boys surveyed would rather watch their favorite TV program than spend time with their fathers. Quentin Schultze reports that “. . . the lure of the television is strong for young boys, who especially like the aggressive characters and automobile violence of the action shows.”
 - It dulls moral sensitivity. A steady diet of soap operas, situation comedies or movies desensitizes and enables one to accept that which not too many years earlier would have been rejected. Adultery, premarital sex, homosexuality, murder, violent rage are all a part of entertainment today. Obsessive viewing of such activities produces an acceptance and toleration of acts repugnant to God.
 - It destroys meaningful family life. When a family spends its time in front of the television, there is no significant communication occurring nor is there time for games, reading, music, etc. It is lethal to creativity and enjoying family relationships.
 - Obsessive viewing of television, then, not only affects creative potential, it likewise produces significant negative behavioral effects. It is next to impossible to see addictive television viewing as anything but harmful and potentially destructive.
- Finally, that exposure to “screens” produces passivity and violent prone and irrational behavior demonstrates the need for some guidelines, rooted in Scripture, to help make wise decisions. Several of those guidelines include:
 1. The principle of stewardship of time (Ephesians 5:15-16). Time is like any other commodity: We must decide how we will use it. This includes entertainment choices and the amount of time those choices require.
 2. The principle of self-control (1 Corinthians 6:12). One of the fruit of the Spirit is self-control (Galatians 5:23). There is no greater test of this virtue than personal discipline in the amount of time devoted to TV and/or movie viewing. Knowing what we know about the effects, this is the **only** wise choice.
 3. The principle of moral purity (Philippians 4:8). This verse in Philippians makes clear that we must make the choice as to what we allow into our mind, allowing our minds to dwell on what is “true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, of good repute, excellence and worthy of praise.” These virtues produce godly living and form the grid through which we make entertainment choices. A steady diet of television and Hollywood movies obviously violates these virtues.
 4. The principle of edification (1 Corinthians 10:23). The believer in Jesus Christ has great

freedom but with that freedom goes immense responsibility. Although we may have the freedom to participate in many forms of entertainment, most of those forms may not edify, build us up in the Christian faith. In fact, a regular diet of this entertainment may actually tear down our faith.

5. The principle of God's glory (1 Corinthians 10:31). In our lives, we do all for God's glory. There are no exceptions, including entertainment choices.

What then should Christians do? Entertainment choices are never easy but in light of the above principles, allow me to suggest several practical guidelines for wise decision-making in the age of the screen:

1. Participate actively in entertainment choices. Always ask yourself, "How is this affecting me?" In short, be a critical thinker when it comes to entertainment. Passivity will simply not cut it!
2. Be creative in choosing family entertainment. The television or the movie theater are not the only choices. Consider a visit to an art museum, to a concert, or to a historical place. Also, consider family reading times, where you read a book out loud together. Starting when the children are young makes it much easier when they reach the teen years.
3. Read carefully and critically program descriptions for television programs and movies. Prepare your children for what they will see and then discuss the entertainment content, themes and worldview presented in the program or movie.
4. Keep a log of how much money is spent by the family on entertainment. Periodically evaluate with the children whether too much is being spent.
5. Do not stare passively at commercials, TV programming or anything else for that matter. Discuss their content and the product with children and with one another.
6. Practice turning off the screen! Explain to your children why you are doing so. Let them see that when things offend or when behavior is becoming addictive, it is wise to exercise such self-control.

In conclusion, Psalm 101:2-3 seems most appropriate:

**I will give heed to the way of integrity. . .
I will walk within my house in the integrity of my heart.
I will set no worthless thing before my eyes;
I hate the work of those who fall away
It shall not fasten its grip on me (NASB).**

See Benedict Carey in the *New York Times* (21 October 2011); AlbertMohler.com (21 October 2011); and James P. Eckman, *Biblical Ethics*, pp. 79-87.