

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

Dr. James P. Eckman, President Emeritus
Grace University, Omaha, Nebraska
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Marriage and Family in America (2013)

One of the consistent themes of *Issues in Perspective* is the centrality of the family, the bedrock institution of civilization. From the Christian perspective, it was the first institution God created. From the perspective of sociology and the broader social science disciplines, the family is central to rearing children, to personal well-being and to a stable economy. In fact, a recent report, called “The State of Our Unions,” released by the University of Virginia and Institute for American Values, buttresses the self-evident importance of the family. Indeed, this report argues, among other things, that stable marriages and families are crucial to American society and to the American economy. The report tracks the decline of marriage among the nearly 60% of Americans who have high school but not college educations. Columnist Kathleen Parker summarizes one critical finding of the report: “By one estimate cited in the report, which was written by five family scholars, the cost to taxpayers when stable families fail to form is about \$112 billion annually—or more than \$1 trillion per decade.” The state of marriage in America is not disconnected to our deficit crisis; it is central to it. For example, in the 1980s, only 13% of children were born outside of marriage among moderately educated mothers, but now that number is 44%. But our leaders ignore this important fact. A multitude of studies have confirmed what we intuitively already know: Children do best when raised in a stable environment with two committed parents.

Are our leaders that short-sighted? Are they afraid of being perceived as judgmental? In the past there was significant concern about such issues. Consider the famous Moynihan report in 1965 which drew the nation’s focus to the alarming rise of African-American children born out of wedlock. In the 1990s, increased divorce rates and the growth of single motherhood produced the fatherhood movement and welfare reform. But, as 2013 dawns, the silence about this crisis is deafening. Elizabeth Marquardt, a major author of the University of Virginia report writes: “Marriage is not merely a private engagement; it is also a complex social institution. Marriage fosters small cooperative unions—also known as stable families—that enable children to thrive, shore up communities, and help family members to succeed during good times and to weather the bad times. Researchers are finding that the disappearance of marriage in Middle America is tracking with the disappearance of the middle class in the same communities, a change that strikes at the very heart of the American Dream.” Consequently, as Parker correctly observes, “Our current debate about the fiscal cliff and entitlement spending can’t be separated from the breakdown of marriage. In the absence of stable families, economic and societal need increases. And while most good-hearted should wish to help in distress, we are essentially plugging holes in leaky boats. Shouldn’t we be building better boats?”

Charles Murray of the American Enterprise Institute has recently published a book, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010*, which supports the report cited above from the University of Virginia. Indeed, he argues that fifty years ago America was somewhat united

across the culture and the classic example of that unity was marriage. But that has changed. Among 30- to 49-year olds in the white working class, only 48% are now married. He points out that “Single dads don’t really coach Little League teams very often. Single moms don’t have much time to go to PTA meetings. The community functions very differently, and the whole culture starts to collapse and change.” In an interview published in *World* magazine, Murray connected several other important dots: “The fact of getting married often concentrates people’s attention on spiritual and religious matters—but religious belief is a big prompter for getting married. A loss of religiosity will be associated with lower marriage rates. It’s a feedback loop...The bottom has fallen out of religious observance in the white working class. This collapse of religiosity has profound implications for how working-class communities work: It’s a kind of growing social disorganization that goes to the heart of what in the past made America exceptionally vibrant in community life.” Murray thus connects religious belief, family and a strong community. If he is accurate, and I believe he is, then America, indeed all of western civilization, is facing a crisis of immense proportions. In America, our Founders believed rather strongly that religion, virtue and the survival of the Republic were inextricably linked. But today, America and much of western civilization are thoroughly secular. So, this begs an important question: Can a secular society remain a virtuous society? We have never really had a society as thoroughly secular as the West, and, in my opinion, it is difficult to build a virtuous society without a biblical worldview.

All of this brings me to one final question: Can we as a civilization have values, especially Christian values, if we do not have Christian faith? In other words, can we have cultural Christianity without having biblical Christianity? One of the significant laments of the current generation of American parents is that their children are abandoning belief in God. As the recent Pew study discovered, about 20% of Americans now identify themselves as having “no belief” when it comes to belief in God—and most of those are young adults under 30. The deep-seated Christianity that so defined American civilization was replaced after World War II with a cultural Christianity that is now coming apart. You cannot sustain a civilization on the shared memory of past faith without the spiritual power that accompanied that faith. Cultural Christianity tries to hold on to the values and the ethics rooted in biblical Christianity but lacks the power to do so. Therefore, young adults perceive the shallowness and superficiality of cultural Christianity and are abandoning it for a secular way of living. Personal autonomy is now the chief value and ethic of this Postmodern culture. And in that kind of culture virtue and community are replaced with selfishness and self-indulgence. Marriage and family, which demand an other-centered commitment, do not fit well with that kind of cultural dynamic.

So, we are back to the beginning of this *Perspective*: The decline of marriage and of the family is not an incidental cultural development. That decline is central to our economic and financial crisis and it is absolutely the vital center of any meaningful cultural renewal. As the family declines the state necessarily fills the vacuum. We are thus at a major crossroads in our civilization. Is it the family or is it the state that will be the defining unit of human experience? As cultural Christianity gives way to a growing secular culture, the answer is the state—and that is disastrous. The rebirth and renewal of American civilization that we all long for must begin with a renewal of the spiritual life of American civilization. Our families, our children and our entire way of life depend on it.

A final thought: One of my favorite holiday movies is Frank Capra's classic, *It's a Wonderful Life*, starring Jimmie Stewart and Donna Reed. This Christmas I read a book entitled *52 Lessons from It's a Wonderful Life*, by Bob Welch. Although critics often deem the movie (in the words of Mr. Potter, the movie's antagonist) "sentimental hogwash," Welch argues that the movie offers us solutions to life's challenges and promotes the values, virtues and ethical framework for a life that is worth living. Arguably a Christian, Welch presents the case that George Bailey is the richest man in Bedford Falls because of his family, his other-centered approach to life and because he lived his life in an eternally significant manner. For George Bailey, his wife, Mary, and his children, honesty, integrity and hard work are all knitted together into the fabric of a "wonderful life." Mr. Potter and George Bailey are distinct opposites: Potter represents greed, self-centeredness and the epitome of selfishness, while George Bailey represents generosity, other-centeredness and grace. George Bailey shows us quite powerfully that the essence of life is relationships—and the most important social relationship is centered in marriage and the family. At the beginning of the book, Welch quotes Oswald Chambers: "The great need is not to do things, but to believe things." As a Christian, that "belief," I would argue, begins with Jesus Christ and genuine biblical Christianity. Frank Capra's movie illustrates the difference one man—and one family—can make in a small town. Near the beginning of his book, Welch mentions that a bank president in the Oregon town where he lives requires that all new bank employees watch *It's a Wonderful Life*. It gives focus to what really matters in life and to the importance of honesty and integrity in living a meaningful life. Viewed through the grid of biblical Christianity, Capra's film gives clarity to the path of cultural renewal—marriage and the family. Make we heed this message, for the health of our marriages, our families and our civilization depend on it.

See Kathleen Parker in the *Washington Post* (17 December 2012) and *World* (3 November 2012), pp. 32-36.