

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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A Theology of Marriage

It is time in American civilization to recognize the self-destructive nature of both public policy and private behavior when it comes to the institution of marriage, the first institution God created (see Genesis 2:18-25). It is without question an institution in trouble. In this *Perspective*, I hope to address the institution itself in terms of history and then suggest a biblical theology of marriage.

- First, a review of the history of the institution and how it has received the stamp of legitimacy from the state. Stephanie Coontz offers a helpful history of marriage as it relates to the state. A summary of her argument: In much of the ancient world, marriage was a private contract between two families. “The parents’ agreement to the match, not the approval of church or state, was what confirmed its validity.” In the early years of the Christian church, the validity of marriage was confirmed by the church, but not necessarily through a ceremony that occurred in the church. It was in 1215 that the church decreed that “licit” marriages must take place in church. But even “common law” marriages gained legitimacy where the children were considered legitimate, wives inherited the property of their husbands and there were laws governing divorce. In the 16th century, European states began requiring that marriages be performed under the legal auspices of the church and state. In the American colonies, marriages were required to be registered and, in the mid-19th century, state supreme courts routinely ruled that public cohabitation was sufficient evidence of a valid marriage. By the late 19th century, the United States began to nullify common-law marriages and exert control over the institution itself. By the mid-20th century, the US courts began to invalidate interracial marriages and even extended marriage rights to prisoners. Further, marriage licenses were required for survivors’ benefits under the Social Security Act. And marriage licenses were required for health insurance benefits, pension benefits and for the establishment of inheritance rights. But today, in the early 21st century, Coontz summarizes the situation: “. . . possession of a marriage license tells us little about people’s interpersonal responsibilities. Half of all Americans aged 25 to 29 are unmarried, and many of them already have incurred obligations as partners, parents or both. Almost 40% of America’s children are born to unmarried parents. Meanwhile, many legally married people are in remarriages where their obligations are spread among several households. Using the existence of a marriage license to determine when the state should protect interpersonal relationships is increasingly impractical. Society has already recognized this when it comes to children, who can no longer be denied inheritance rights, parental support or legal standing because their

parents are not married.” This current reality creates significant social challenges: For example, a woman who is married to a man for just nine months gets Social Security survivor benefits when he dies. But a woman living for 19 years with a man gets nothing. A newly married wife or husband can take leave from work to care for a spouse, or sue for a partner’s wrongful death. But unmarried couples typically cannot. So what should we do as a civilization? What is the solution?

- The above challenges are indeed enhanced by the changing legal definition of marriage. Consider the 2004 decision by the Massachusetts Supreme Court, which declared marriage to be an “evolving paradigm,” and ruled that marriage could no longer be legally defined as the committed union of one man and one woman. The court declared that the definition of marriage must now include a union of two men or two women. In addition, there has been a strong disconnect between marriage as the legitimate sphere for sexual relationships. One of marriage’s most powerful attractions was now lost. The United States Supreme Court has fully legitimized same-sex marriage, as have many other nations. Further, sexual activity is now increasingly disconnected from procreation, heralding in the words of William Kynes, “a new age of ‘sex without consequences’ and no more unwanted children. The introduction of new reproductive technologies has continued to sever the link between the union of a man and a woman in marriage and the begetting of children. Now, with over thirty-six ways to make a baby, who needs a husband and wife in marriage anymore?” The breaking of that link between sex and marriage has produced a dramatic increase in cohabitation and a corresponding increase in children born outside of marriage. Today in the US more than 4 million couples live together. In 1970 only about 11% of children were born without married parents; now that figure is close to 1/3rd and some segments of the population, it is well over 60%. Biological parents seem like an anachronism. What has also undermined the institution is the creation of no-fault divorce laws. The result is a confusing array of serial marriages and blended families. Kynes concludes that “the emphasis in marriage has shifted dramatically from obligations to benefits, and the purpose of marriage is increasingly seen in terms of personal fulfillment rather than moral or legal responsibility.” Finally, the LGBT movement has further added the singular emphasis on sex in a totally new light. Kynes concludes that the new definition of marriage is “a contract between two consenting adults to enter into a lasting relationship which involves sexual activity, which is entered into for personal gratification, and which is given some state recognition and benefits.”

Few would disagree that we are facing a disaster. So, what do we do as a civilization? We must begin with the Creation Ordinance of God in Genesis 2. We see there that marriage is a divinely ordained institution, now marred by sin, but which can only reach its God-ordained purposes through the Spirit, Who empowers and regenerates. Moreover, throughout Scripture, marriage is a central metaphor for the covenant relationship between God with His people, both Israel and the church. From that Creation Ordinance, we can reach the following conclusions, which then serve as the guiding parameters for a revitalization of this central institution:

1. Marriage is between a man and a woman, giving the divine vocation of procreation and dominion rule over God's world. There is a clear differentiation between the man and the woman in every sense, but they are to function as a perfect complementary whole. Where the one is weak, the other is strong, and vice versa.
2. Kynes writes: "This Genesis account points to the primacy of the marriage relationship above all other human bonds and to a profound sense of personal attachment symbolized, celebrated and nourished in the sexual union they [are] to enjoy with one another."
3. From Ephesians 5:32, we learn that marriage is a symbol, an archetype of how Christ relates to His church and vice versa. Marriage is a powerful metaphor for something supernatural!

Finally, are there clear benefits that current social science evidence provides for marriage as detailed in the Creation Ordinance? Unequivocally, yes!

1. Married men and women live significantly longer, healthier and happier lives and recover more quickly from illness.
2. Married men and women are less likely to suffer from mental illness or commit suicide.
3. Married women are less likely to experience domestic violence than cohabiting or dating women.
4. Marriage reduces child poverty.
5. Children in single-parent families are about twice as likely to drop out of high school.
6. Children from intact married homes have lower rates of drug abuse.
7. Boys growing up without fathers are twice as likely as other boys to end up in prison, and girls raised without a father in the home are five times more likely to become unwed teenage mothers.

So, compelling is the evidence for the social benefits of marriage, that Princeton sociologist, Sara McLanahan, has argued:

"If we were asked to design a system for making sure that children's basic needs were met, we would probably come up with something quite similar to the two-parent ideal. . . Marriage is more than a private emotional relationship. It is also a social good. Not every person can or should marry. And not every child raised outside of marriage is damaged as a result. But communities where good-enough marriages are common have better outcomes for children, women and men than do communities suffering from high rates of divorce, unmarried child-bearing, and high conflict or violent marriages."

William Kynes concludes:

"While it is true that in its civil dimensions, marriage is a creation of the state, a Christian theology of marriage contends that the social legitimacy of marriage has a deeper foundation within a natural moral order. Marriage and family, economic life, cultural life, and religion, all represent separate but intersecting and overlapping spheres of social life. Though all are now

regulated by the state in some sense, they are also all pre-political, having a genesis and continuing life of their own apart from the action of the state and from the actions of others. The state must respect this order. The mandating of same-sex marriage is seen by many as such a gross violation of that order that it threatens to make marriage *only* a civil creation, with devastating social effects. For its flourishing, marriage requires a deeper foundation in the minds of those who enter it and who hope to be sustained in it. This is what the Christian theology of marriage can provide.”

The intersection of theology and the public interest must be maintained because the survival of human society itself demands this. The renewal of civilization begins with the renewal of marriage.

See Stephanie Coontz in the *New York Times* (26 November 2007) and William L. Kynes, “The Marriage Debate: A Public Theology of Marriage,” *Trinity Journal* 28NS (2007): 187-203.