

Marriage In And Out of Favor

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The book market is flooded with publications defending and attacking divorce rates. Ministers speak of tremendous demand for marriage counseling. People ask for stronger words from the pulpit on the sanctity and permanence of marriage. Many teen-agers and young adults vow that they will never marry and have children because "it's not worth the hassle." Dire predictions are given on the disappearance of marriage and the family as we know it. It would appear that the idea of family is out of favor.

Nonetheless, marriage enrichment groups are booming in Roman Catholic and Protestant churches. The field of marriage and family counseling is surging with new practitioners and literature. Marriage is still revered by many.

Why all the fuss? Why all the attention? There was a time when one didn't have to have a well thought-out rationale for the importance of marriages and families. Sociological textbooks provided a description of the functions served, but it was fairly bland and certainly not a stimulating topic for debate.

Now we find ourselves in a world that does debate the value. How do we explain the intensity of feelings that lie on either side? *My impression is that we are living in an era which provides potential for marriage becoming what it is intended to be, and such a possibility is indeed difficult and frightening to many people.*

Our technology, which itself is regarded as both blessing and curse, has slowly removed many of those activities which the sociologists held to be the functions of marriage. Protection, education, and recreation are now the tasks of the culture, not the family. Production is no longer the family business; it is the job or jobs which family members "go out" to do, returning to the family when they are "off." Religious instruction is provided primarily by the church. Even reproduction or procreation has radically lost its centrality in the purpose of marriage as zero population growth and genetic engineering become stronger forces. Single parenthood is "in" as an alternative.

Depending on your point of view, we are being freed *from* the necessity of marriage or freed *for* its real intent. Stripped of the functional necessities, marriage can now *be* for two people, and they can *be with* each other with uninterrupted depth in a way that was formerly more difficult to arrange. But now it is very much a matter of choice. What are our options? What is our assessment about the favor in which marriage should be held?

One option is presented very strongly now. It derives from the technical feats brought about by our technology and the vast amount of information at our disposal. Such accomplishment is very soothing to our pride. We can "see" and "feel" the assurance that our possibilities are limitless. A sense of optimism is bred by such an array of opportunities—an array so tempting that many people pursue them almost breathlessly. It is almost as if there were a desperation to experience every new offering in existence, accompanied by the fear that "missing something" would spell out a falling short of real meaning.

That desperation, ironically, carries with it a fear of relationships of permanence, or at best a reluctance to form one. To “tie oneself down” would be to accept limits, to deprive oneself of a possible “better one” out there in the future. And so there comes a dash from one to the other, an avoidance of intimacy. Robert Weiss, a well-known sociologist, has referred to such behavior in our culture as the “ethic of self-realization.” As he puts it, “we Americans seem to cherish our right to the unimpeded pursuit of happiness, no matter how much sorrow that pursuit may engender.”¹ Thus, if our quest to realize our potential runs into an apparent snag, including a marriage, the ethic says, “get out of it.” For such an ethic, marriage is indeed out of favor.

It is my contention that such an ethic, which is powerful in our society, emerges out of a fear of depth in relationships that is as old as that first couple hiding in the garden. For us to know who we really are and what shame, guilt, anger, and prejudice we carry with us is too much to risk. We are quick to provide barriers to prevent such “knowing” between two people to occur. Our technology has eliminated the old barriers, such as having so many things to do that we have no danger of being and knowing. Now it has presented a new pursuit to avoid that risk—the quest for self-fulfillment through constant change and stimulation. Michael Novak astutely observed that our description of marriage as boring means that it is terrifying. And our description of children as brats comes in the face of our having to be parents in the face of too much clarity about the importance we hold in that developmental process through which children (and we) must go.²

So, to those who are fearful, who don’t want to face those risks, my hope is that marriage will be out of favor until their views and their hopes have deepened. My desire is to offer a different ethic for those with whom marriage is in favor—an ethic that takes depth more seriously than flight and commitment more seriously than self-gratification and achievement.

Genesis 2:18 is an important source for that ethic. There it is observed that being alone is “not good.” It is not in our intended nature to be in flight, though that is an inclination when faced with being known. The choice is to create a partnership characterized by “correspondence,” a partner who is “equal and adequate” but by no means the same. The Biblical view consistently is one of emphasis on permanence, making frequent comparison between the marital relationship and that of God to His people. At the same time there is no shortage on descriptions of problems and difficulties in marriage. Such moments frequently become occasion for growth rather than excuses for separation, and they are not always short-lived. That kind of intimacy and caring is more demanding than many people want to risk. At the same time, there is a richness and depth that I would want to affirm.

It is interesting to find writers such as Masters and Johnson, who have no vested interest in defending marriage, commenting on the apparent deepening of richness in the sexual experience when there is a bond of commitment between two persons as compared to a more fleeting, non-limited, promiscuous character.³ Such a relationship calls upon partners to take responsibility for declaring their needs openly, rather than expecting them to be known. At the same time there must be a willingness to cooperate with and contribute to the requests and needs of the partner. This is a relationship built on giving and receiving, rather than fulfilling one’s own potential. The two are not mutually

exclusive, but their nature differs.

The intimacy that comes in a relationship that can be trusted to endure brings more depth than one which carries a temporary character. As Ed Thornton expresses it, intimacy that has such trust carries a new depth of solitude along with the deepened sense of communion. The sharing may provide more fulfillment than a quest for self-fulfillment.¹

The many functions of marriage may well have prevented, or provided an excuse to avoid, the risk of exploring the meaning of differences, of finding what "corresponding" with each other really means. Marriages held together because they were "necessary for the fabric of society" or "for the sake of the children." Perhaps we could say they were fulfilling the law. But now technology, which we at times regard as demonic, has stripped away many of the laws and functions and provided a freedom to experience partnership and bonds in even more depth. No longer do we have to marry, but we are free to marry. We may find that depth doesn't mean a continual "high," but rather that faithfulness through good and bad times brings a far greater sense of worth and value.

That may mean that there are not as many marriages, because that freedom is frightening to many. But it may also mean there won't be as many divorces. There certainly are many occasions when a marriage can be viewed as having fallen short of the mark (been sinful!). And there may not be a feasible way to repair the damage. But there must be more reason than that marriage "doesn't meet one's needs anymore."

If we hold marriage in favor, then we must take it more seriously, looking beyond what it does for two people socially, sexually, economically, etc. Instead, what can it *be*? Are these two people prepared and committed to living together as different, yet equal partners, and are they adequate to care for each other? If they are, then let us celebrate with favor. But if the risk is one not willingly taken, then let us not look with favor on it simply because it is a marriage. Marriage is more than a label for two people who are happy with each other for the moment. And it is only when we acknowledge the risk and commitment that goes beyond those two people and their needs of the moment that we truly hold marriage in favor.

¹ Robert S. Weiss, *Marital Separation* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1975), p. 8.

² Michael Novak, "The Family Out of Favor," *Harper's*, April 1976, pp. 37-40.

³ William Masters and Virginia Johnson, *The Pleasure Bond* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1974).

⁴ Edward Thornton, "Intimacy in the Christian Life," *Review & Expositor*, Winter 1977, pp. 43-50.