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The State of Our Unions: The Social Health of Marriage in America 2003

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In recent years, marriage has enjoyed something of a comeback in the popular culture. From hit movies like *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* to top-rated dating reality shows like *The Bachelor* to best-sellers on sexier marriage, popular attention has turned to the pursuit and pleasures of matrimony.¹ But the revived enthusiasm for marriage is mostly about romantic relationships and lavish weddings. It has little to do with the importance of marriage for children, or the connection between marriage and parenthood. Indeed, though Americans aspire to marriage,

The National Marriage Project is a nonpartisan, nonsectarian and interdisciplinary initiative located at Rutgers, the State University of NJ. The Project's mission is to provide research and analysis on the state of marriage in America and to educate the public on the social, economic and cultural conditions affecting marital success and wellbeing. The project is codirected by David Popenoe, Ph.D. and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, Ph.D. Popenoe, a professor and former social and behavior sciences dean at Rutgers, is the author of numerous publications including, Life Without Father: Disturbing the Nest. Whitehead writes extensively on issues of marriage, family and child wellbeing. She is author of The Divorce Culture and the Atlantic Monthly article, "Dan Quayle Was Right."

they are ever more inclined to see it as an intimate relationship between adults rather than as a necessary social arrangement for rearing children.

To be sure, marriage is not only about children, nor are children essential to marriage. A couple does not have to have children in order to participate in the privileges and obligations of marriage. Yet, throughout the nation's history and through much of the world today, marriage is first and foremost an institution designed to unite men and women in the shared tasks of child rearing. The possibility or presence of children is the key reason why the state and society treat marriage differently from other intimate partnerships. But in American society today, this institutional role is eroding.

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Marriage is undergoing legal, social and cultural changes, and many of these changes are shifting its meaning and purpose away from children and toward adults.

Chief among these changes is the weakening connection between marriage as a couple relationship and marriage as a parental partnership. The two used to be joined together. Today, however, the couple relationship is increasingly independent of the procreative and parental partnership. As a consequence, there is a growing split between adults' and children's experience of marriage. Though most adults continue to prize marriage and to seek it for themselves, children are less able to count on their parents' marriage as the secure foundation of their family lives. Indeed, if there is a story to be told about marriage over recent decades, it is not that it is withering away for adults but that it is withering away for children.

The Separation of Parenthood From Marriage

Marriage used to be the principal pathway into parenthood, but that is changing. About a third of all children and more than two-thirds of African-American children are born out of wedlock. In addition, since 1960, there has also been an 850 percent increase in the number of cohabiting couples who live with children. An estimated 40 percent of all children today are expected to spend some time in a cohabiting couple household during their growing up years. The persistently high rate of divorce is still another factor separating marriage and parenthood. Roughly a million children each year experience parental divorce and its aftermath. As a consequence of these combined forces, 69 percent of all children are living with two married parents compared to 85 percent as recently as 1970. Only 38 percent of black children live with two married parents compared to 58 percent in 1970.²

Recent signs of a shift toward two-married-parent families offer hope that this trend can be reversed. At the same time, it will be hard to sustain a turnaround in the face of growing acceptance of parenthood outside of marriage, especially among the young. In a Gallup survey of twenty-something young adults, commissioned by the National Marriage Project in 2001, less than half (44 percent) of the young men and women agree that "it is wrong to have a child outside of marriage." For young adults, unwed parenthood is often viewed as a "choice" rather than the result of an unplanned or unwanted pregnancy. In the same survey, 40 percent of single women agreed with the statement that "although it might not be the ideal option, you would consider having a child on your own if you reached your mid-thirties and had not found the right man to marry." Notably, the proportion of unwed births among women, 20-24, has gone up, from 48.2 percent in 1990 to 61.7 in 2001.

Indeed, in the minds of many single young adults, the connection between marriage and parenthood is fading. Getting married and becoming a parent seem to be entirely

separate life pursuits, with different requirements for each. Likewise, single young adults are changing their views of the timing of marriage and parenthood. Marriage used to come before parenthood in the sequence of life events. Today, however, the sequence is reversed, according to a recent analysis of findings from the General Social Survey. The survey asked people to identify the "normal" age for selected events traditionally associated with the transition to adulthood, like marrying, buying a home, and having children. Survey respondents who were divorced, married, and widowed put the "normal" age of marrying as slightly younger than the age of having a child (by 0.5-1.1 years), while never-married people put having a child 0.5 years before getting married.³

The Retreat of Fathers From Children

Though most women think it would be a good thing if men shared more fully in the rearing and nurturing of children, trends are moving in the opposite direction. Men are increasingly disengaged from daily tasks of nurturing and providing for their children. They are staying single longer before they marry, having more children out of wedlock, cohabiting rather than marrying, and divorcing in large numbers. A small but growing percentage may be foregoing marriage altogether. Eighteen percent of men, ages 35 to 44, today have never married compared to seven percent in 1970. The result is that, compared to children in mid-twentieth-century America, the proportion of children living apart from their biological fathers has increased sharply, from 17 percent in 1960 to 34 percent in 2000.

Of course, these figures don't tell the whole story. Perhaps more than at any time in the past, many fathers are actively participating in child rearing from the moment their offspring are born. They change diapers, comfort cranky babies at two a.m., and take the kids to the pediatrician. Indeed, the pattern in American fatherhood today is confounding: while a growing number of fathers are highly engaged in their children's lives, there are also more fathers who are disengaged or entirely absent. The key factor contributing to this divergent pattern is marriage.

Ideally, fathers would provide lifelong nurture and support for their offspring, whether they were married or not. But in reality, marriage is the social glue that holds fathers to their offspring. Marriage encourages regular and routine father involvement. When marriage and fatherhood come unglued, father involvement often weakens. Some fathers become entirely disconnected from their children. According to one recent study, 28 percent of children with nonresident fathers had no contact with them in the past year.⁴ Compared to married fathers, men who are not married to their children's mothers are significantly less likely to be consistently and positively involved with their children during their growing up years. Unmarried cohabiting fathers fail to show as much warmth or put in as much time or money in the care of their biological children as do married fathers.⁵ And cohabiting men who

are living with nonbiological children pose a risk of physical or sexual abuse to such children.⁶

Recent changes in the early adult life course also affect men's attitudes toward marriage and fatherhood. Today's young adults are putting off marriage until older ages. The delay of marriage is due to several well-recognized factors: more years of schooling, an effort to achieve economic independence after the end of formal schooling, and a more prolonged and often ragged transition from the parental home to living on one's own continuously. Young men today take longer than young women to leave home and are more likely to return home after they have left for the first time.⁷

Men's delay of marriage pushes plans for fatherhood into the distant future. Though most single young men want children once they get married, they aren't ready to think about having them anytime soon. In the meantime, however, they are leading sexually active lives that put them at increased risk of unmarried fatherhood. Perhaps for that reason, they express ambivalence and wariness about children. In a recent National Marriage Project study of young never-married men, a significant number viewed children negatively, as a source of burdensome financial obligation, conflict and even "trickery" by women.⁸ Most said they avoided dating women with children, for fear of conflict with the child's biological father or fear that their girlfriend was chiefly interested in finding a father for her child. They also worried that a "one-night" stand would lead to unplanned fatherhood and a long-lasting parental relationship with a woman they did not care about and would not want to marry. (This fear did not make them renounce one-night stands, however.) And they are concerned that their sexual partners might deliberately deceive them about "being on the pill" or "being infertile" and get pregnant "on purpose." Some expressed the view that the legal deck is stacked against men in divorce, so why risk marriage at all?

A Shift From Child-Centered Marriage to Soul-Mate Marriage

Americans today tend to see marriage as a couples relationship, designed to fulfill the emotional needs of adults, rather than as an institution dedicated to bringing up children. In a recent cross-national comparison of industrialized nations, nearly 70 percent of Americans *disagreed* with the statement that "the main purpose of marriage is having children," compared with just 51 percent of Norwegians and 45 percent of Italians.⁹ An even higher percentage of younger Americans—more than 79 percent of men and women, ages twenty to twenty-nine—disagree with the same statement, according to the National Marriage Project's 2001 Gallup survey.

Of course, the focus on the couple relationship is not new. The ideal of romantic friendship in marriage is a distinctive part of a long-standing marriage tradition in western societies. In many ways, this vision of marriage has been positive. It has inspired past and present efforts to

enhance and improve the quality of the couple relationship. Today, however, the ideal of friendship in marriage, or what sociologists call companionate marriage, has been notched up to a more demanding ideal. People now expect their marriages to be a spiritualized union of souls.

The soul-mate view of marriage is particularly strong among young adults. An astonishing 94 percent of single men and women, ages twenty to twenty-nine agree with the statement that "when you marry, you want your spouse to be your soul mate, first and foremost." Eighty-eight percent believe that there is one person "out there" who is specially destined to be their soul mate.¹⁰

It is understandable that people are seeking at least one enduring, intimate attachment in their lives. Amid the frazzling pace and fragmented relationships in a mobile society and dynamic economy, marriage holds out the promise of the kind of emotional closeness and solicitude that is missing in other domains of adult life. Unfortunately, the very time-pressured and work-stressed conditions that fuel the hunger for emotional intimacy also may undermine the chances for achieving it. Building a soul-mate relationship takes a commitment to permanence, and permanence is going out of style in contemporary American relationships.

Moreover, in unexpected ways, the pursuit of a soul-mate relationship may weaken marriage as an institution for rearing children. For one thing, it changes the characteristics one is likely to seek in a future spouse. In times past, people who were thinking about marriage tended to think about their future spouse's capacity to be a good mother or a good father. Today, however, fitness for future parenthood is less important in evaluating a mate. In general, people tend to be far pickier about the person they marry than the person they conceive a child with.

Also, the exacting emotional requirements of a soul-mate relationship are likely to make marriages unhappier and potentially more fragile. There is a natural tension between adult desires for intimacy and privacy and children's needs for security and attention. Heightened expectations for couple intimacy during the prime child-rearing years may intensify this tension and lead to higher levels of marital discontent and discord. This is not to say that parents should neglect each other's sexual or emotional needs during the child-rearing years, but it is to suggest that the new soul-mate ideal may create unrealistic expectations for intimacy that, if unfulfilled, may lead to disappointment, estrangement and even a search for a new soul mate. Indeed, this may help explain why marital satisfaction has declined in recent decades, despite the fact that the easy availability of divorce might be expected to reduce the number of unhappy marriages.

The emphasis on more adult-centered measures of marital happiness also figures in the persistently high rate of parental divorce. In the past, when marriage was more closely linked to the tasks of rearing children, most

Americans believed that parents had an obligation to stay together “for the sake of the children.” Today, only 15 percent of the population agree that “when there are children in the family, parents should stay together even if they don’t get along.” (See “Loss of Child Centeredness” at www.marriage.rutgers.edu) Moreover, the definition of “getting along” has been liberalized to include more subjective individual measures of marital satisfaction. As many as two-thirds of the divorces in recent years occur not because of high conflict or physical violence but because of “softer” forms of psychological distress and unhappiness.¹¹

The demands of work also take their toll. Many married parents with young children, especially those who also have full-time jobs outside the home, are often chronically stressed, time-starved and sleep-deprived, and their harried state probably contributes to the decline in marital satisfaction during the most demanding child-rearing years. At the same time, the popular culture pushes images of sexy singles and hot romance, a portrait that hardly fits the reality of many working parents’ lives or confers social value on their commitment to marriage and children.

A Population Shift Away from Married-Parent Households

Demographic trends play a role in the social shift away from children. Compared to earlier generations, Americans today live longer, have fewer children, and spend a longer proportion of the life span as single adults than they do in continuous marriage. In 1960 the proportion of one’s life spent living with a spouse and children was 62 percent, the highest in our history. By 1985, this proportion had dropped to 43 percent, the lowest in our history.¹² The percentage of households with children has also dropped dramatically in recent decades, from nearly half of all households in 1960 to less than one-third today. Census Bureau projections suggest that by 2010, married couples with children will account for only 20 percent of total households, and families with children will account for little more than one-quarter of all households—the lowest share in recorded U.S. history. By contrast, the percentage of one-person households is projected to reach close to 27 percent of total American households by 2010.¹³

The number of children in a family household is projected to decline slightly as well. Among family households with children, one-child families are growing rapidly. Childlessness among American women is also on the rise. In 1998, 19 percent of women ages 40-44 were childless compared to just 10 percent in 1980.

The combined effects of these demographic changes are profound: within families and communities today, and into the future, adults are less likely to be living with children, neighborhoods are less likely to contain children, and children are less likely to be a presence in daily life. Children are pushed to the margins of the society and—except when they cause mayhem—to the sidelines of our social consciousness.

Faltering Public Focus on Children

In the public realm, there has been another kind of shift from the needs and interests of children. Children don’t vote or join unions or run for public office. They depend on adults to represent their political interests, and their parents are the most likely voters to do so. However, the proportion of parents with dependent children has declined while other voting groups such as single adults and empty-nest couples are on the rise. Also, the society is aging. And aging Americans have pressing political priorities of their own, such as expanded health care, prescription drug benefits, and low real estate taxes. Since seniors vote in high numbers, these priorities tend to dominate the domestic political agenda.

A strong libertarian strain in American politics plays a part in this trend as well. In the libertarian view, society is made up of free, rights-bearing adults. This political philosophy leaves little room for children who, by virtue of their age, legal status, and developmental immaturity, depend on others to represent their political interests and to fulfill their basic needs. Moreover, in the libertarian perspective, the conduct of intimate relationships is a private matter. A couple’s intimate relationship is nobody’s business but the two people involved, unless, of course, their relationship hurts, taxes, or impinges on another’s liberties. According to this view, marriage is just one kind of intimate relationship between freely consenting adults and thus does not warrant special privileges by the state. The special status of children, as dependents who do not freely choose their parents but who have a stake in their parents’ marriage, is little acknowledged, much less considered as a reason for the state to treat marriage differently from other kinds of intimate partnerships.

Apparently, the libertarian perspective on marriage is gaining ground among young adults. According to the 2001 Gallup survey, eight out of ten men and women, ages 20-29, agree that marriage is nobody’s business but the two people involved; forty-five percent agree that the government should not be involved in licensing marriages; and four out of ten agree that government should provide cohabiting couples the same benefits provided to a married couple.¹⁴

Legal Trends in Marriage and Parenthood

In law, as in the society, the connection between marriage and parenthood has weakened in recent decades. Family law has increasingly moved in the direction of treating parenthood as a status independent of marriage.

For centuries, marriage has been the legal institution governing parenthood. It has been the means of establishing paternity, legitimacy, and the rights and responsibilities of parents for their children. However, as marriage has weakened as the primary institution for bearing and rearing children, the law has sought to establish new rules governing parent-child relationships

independent of marriage. In this overall trend, two developments have major implications for children's family lives. The first is a shift toward greater legal oversight over parent-child relationships. In response to the growing number of unwed, divorced, and cohabiting parents, laws governing parent-child relationships have proliferated in recent decades. Though there is strong public resistance to the law's presence in the bedroom, there is growing acceptance of the law's presence in the family room. As the late sociologist William J. Goode has observed: "People have come to expect that the government and thus new laws must try to solve an expanding array of problems that are related to the family, from welfare to gender equality."¹⁵ This trend has occurred simultaneously, and probably not accidentally, with the public's rejection of extralegal measures, such as social pressure and stigma, to enforce norms of married parenthood.

The second trend affecting children's family lives is the legal recognition of the "social parent." This refers to an adult whose parentage is based on the nature and duration of the adult's relationship to the child rather than on the bonds of blood, marriage or legal adoption. Though the law still takes biological parenthood seriously, it is clearly moving toward greater recognition of parenthood as a matter of affectionate rather than genetic bonds.

This legal innovation reflects the challenge of assigning children to parents in a society where marriage no longer reliably serves as the legal basis for parenthood. Yet the law is a blunt instrument. It is poorly designed as the means of regulating the intricate complexities of parent-child relationships. And its limitations are manifest. Despite stepped-up efforts to establish paternity, enforce child support obligations, and develop workable child custody arrangements, the law has been unable to coerce from unmarried or unrelated "parents" the same level of financial commitment, cooperation and sustained dedication that is typically volunteered by married parents. What's more, in its attempt to do so, it has institutionalized family arrangements that have been empirically demonstrated to be less advantageous to children.

A Poverty of Connectedness

The weakening of marriage has contributed to a new kind of poverty among the young. It is a poverty of connectedness. Four decades of persistently high levels of marital disruption and nonmarriage have taken a toll on children's primary sources of emotional nurturance and security. Parent-child, and especially father-child ties, have become more fragile, inconsistent and distant. Children's emotional lives have become more turbulent, insecure, and anxiety-filled as a result.

Amid a society of material abundance, there are growing signs of emotional want and deprivation even among some of the most economically privileged young. There has been a notable increase in emotional and psychiatric

distress. Problems such as anxiety, depression, eating disorders, and other psychosocial difficulties are on the rise. For example, one recent study found that levels of anxiety among a nonclinical population of children and college students have appreciated substantially in recent decades. In fact, the average American child in the 1980s reported more anxiety than child psychiatric patients in the 1950s.¹⁶ Another study, published in the journal *Pediatrics*, found a substantial increase between 1979 and 1996 in clinician-identified psychosocial problems among 4-15 year olds who came in to primary care offices, such as depression and suicidal ideation.¹⁷ A third study, of college students seeking counseling, found that those treated for depression doubled between 1989 and 2000.¹⁸ Finally, a systematic review of social indicators between 1975 and 1998 found that the indices for social relationships and emotional/spiritual well-being "show long-term declines across the three decades studied," concluding that improvements in other areas of children's lives have been offset by declining levels of emotional wellbeing. Thus, according to the researchers, the overall quality of life of children/youth in the United States was, on balance, not better in 1998 than in 1975.¹⁹

Of course, not all these problems can be directly attributed to family disruption. A number of social and cultural forces contribute to these problems, including the stresses of an achievement-oriented culture, the pressures of peer culture, the pervasive influence of violent and sexually graphic popular entertainment, the "hurried child" syndrome, the isolation of children from the larger community, and the persistent threat of gang, school and street violence, especially for children in some inner city neighborhoods. The rise in the incidence of psychological problems may also reflect increased reporting, a greater readiness to medicalize behavior that might once have been dismissed as "growing pains" or "adolescent angst," and the growing availability of psychotropic drugs to treat these problems.

However, in searching for proximate sources of this trend, it is impossible to ignore what has happened in children's family lives over the past four decades. Children reared in nonintact families have more than twice the risk of social and behavioral problems as children reared in married parent families. It defies common sense to think that the rise in nonintact families would not have an impact on children's emotional wellbeing.

Indeed, recent reports and studies point toward family structure changes as a source of children's psychosocial distress. Most children who experience parental divorce do not suffer severe emotional problems. Nonetheless, there is evidence that divorce is an emotionally distressing experience for children. For example, in its official 2002 policy statement on divorce, the American Academy of Pediatrics identifies a number of age-related psychosocial symptoms associated with divorce, including distress among the very young: for infants, crying, sleep disturbance, and gastrointestinal problems; for four-to-five year olds, nightmares, aggression and clinginess; for

school-aged children, discomfort with gender identity, aggression, and moodiness; for adolescents, substance abuse, inappropriate sexual behavior, and depression.²⁰ Other studies link higher rates of emotional distress and mental illness among children who experience parental divorce.²¹ One recent study of youth suicide observes that the “increased share of youths living in homes with a divorced parent” explains as much as two-thirds of the increase in youth suicides over time.²²

Recent studies also point to the persistence of emotional distress among some children of divorce, a shift from earlier thinking. In the 1970s and ‘80s, the emotional impact of family breakup on children was thought to be short-term, like a bout of the flu. This view was based on studies of children’s divorce experience that relied heavily on mothers’ reports and on small, unrepresentative samples of divorced families. Today, however, clinical and social science research, based on large representative samples and longitudinal clinical studies, point to long-lasting emotional damage associated with broken or disrupted family bonds. Apparently, the emotional effects of family breakup on some children more closely resemble a debilitating chronic ailment than a brief bout of the flu. As the American Academy of Pediatrics notes, the experience of divorce is more than a set of discrete symptoms. It is “a long searing experience” for children.²³ A study following more than 11,000 British children from birth through age thirty-three concluded that “a parental divorce during childhood or adolescence continues to have a negative effect [on mental health] when a person is in his or her twenties or thirties.”²⁴ In her twenty-five year clinical study of middle-class children of divorce, Judith Wallerstein found that the experience of divorce has long-term effects on the young adults’ pursuit of happy, lasting relationships. Compared to young adults from intact families, adult children of divorce have a harder time dealing with even moderate conflict, are more fearful of failure, are more insecure about relationships, and more likely to experience a divorce themselves.²⁵

The increase in youthful psychosocial and mental health problems could not have come at a worse time. American society today requires ever-higher levels of individual competence and educational achievement for a successful adult life. To meet these demands, children need strong characters as well as healthy bodies and able minds. Warm, consistent, and firm attachments to parents help children defer gratification, set and stick to goals, and resist harmful peer pressures. Close parent-child bonds protect teens from emotional distress as well as risky behaviors such as early sexual activity, smoking, drinking and drug use.²⁶ Young adults’ ability to form strong, lasting marriages enhances their own emotional wellbeing and confers psychological benefits on their children as well.

Solving the problem of children’s declining emotional and mental health poses special challenges to the society. Some effects of family breakup, such as child poverty, loss of family income, poor quality housing, and lack of health

insurance, can be addressed through law, public policy or increased public spending on child health, daycare, family tax credits, better housing, more effective policing, and innovative youth programs. By contrast, emotional impoverishment associated with the loss or lack of stable family connections is harder to remediate through laws, programs or public spending alone. In Sweden, where there is a strong social safety net for children and where the poverty rate among single mothers is low, the emotional problems found among children living with a single parent are similar to those found among American children in single parent families, according to a 2003 study in the British medical journal, *The Lancet*. After examining such problems as psychiatric disease, suicide or attempted suicide, injury and addiction the study concluded that “even when a wide range of demographic and socioeconomic circumstances are included in multivariate models, children of single parents still have increased risks of mortality, severe morbidity, and injury.”²⁷

Given this evidence and given the shortcomings of other possible interventions, such as putting more and more children on Prozac, Paxil or Ritalin or sending them off to treatment centers and boot camps, it seems clear that the most effective way to foster children’s emotional wellbeing is to increase their chances of growing up in a household with both married parents who get along with each other.

Conclusion

Someone once observed that the brunt of rapid social change falls disproportionately on the young. This is surely the case when it comes to marriage. Children have borne more than a fair share of the burdens associated with the weakening of marriage in recent times.

It is easy to ignore children’s interests in marriage, when marriage is defined primarily as a couple relationship. Yet, children have a compelling stake in their parents’ marriage. It is a source of social and economic advantage for them. It provides a reliable means of attaching their fathers to the family household over the long term. It brings together under one roof the two people who have brought them into the world and who have a mutual interest in their wellbeing.

At the same time, children are powerless to preserve or defend their stake in their parents’ marriage. In the past, social strictures and sanctions against divorce and illegitimacy helped protect children’s stake in marriage. But today, these strictures have vanished. Nor has the law been any more successful in representing children’s interests. Indeed, no-fault divorce has contributed to the easy and unilateral dissolution of marriages with children. More surprisingly, the revolution in no-fault divorce law occurred with almost no consideration of its impact on children. And finally, the revived enthusiasm for marriage in popular media has ignored children, focusing on the cult

of the wedding rather than on building a marriage culture in which children can flourish.

One of the best things that the society can do for children is to create the conditions for healthy marriages. Achieving this goal does not mean pushing marriage at any cost on everyone. But it does mean increasing the proportion of parental marriages that are low in conflict and high in mutual respect, cooperation and duration. It also means reducing the economic and social obstacles that stand in the way of successful and long-lasting marriage. Finally, it means creating a culture where marriage is reconnected to parenthood and where married parents are encouraged, supported and valued for their long-term commitment to marriage.

The difficulty of achieving this goal cannot be underestimated. Long-term trends militate against easy success. However, there are signs of hope. In some key areas, child wellbeing has improved in the past few years. Child poverty has dropped from 23 percent in 1993 to about 16 percent in 2000, the lowest level in more than 20 years.²⁸ Teen pregnancy and birth rates have steadily declined for the past 12 years. The percentage of teens who have ever had sexual intercourse dropped from 54.1 percent in 1991 to 49.9 percent in 1999.²⁹ Youth violent crime peaked in 1993 and has since been followed by a sustained decline.³⁰ Other clustered risk behaviors associated with young people, such as cigarette smoking, drinking alcohol, and illicit drug use, have dropped or remained relatively stable in recent years.³¹

The climate of opinion about children's family lives has changed as well. The polarizing debate about the impact of family disruption on children is over. Experts have reached a working consensus, based on a robust body of research, that marriage benefits children. Along with policy consensus, there is social activism on behalf of marriage. A grass-roots marriage movement, dedicated to providing people with the resources and skills to prepare for and achieve long-lasting healthy marriages is gaining momentum and adherents.³² A handful of states are experimenting with projects designed to lower the divorce rate or strengthen marriage.³³ Some communities are organizing coalitions of faith, business and public groups to develop a common strategy for supporting healthy marriages.³⁴ As part of welfare reform, the Bush administration is seeking funding for pilot projects designed to help low-income couples who choose to be married to gain access to marriage education, skills training and counseling resources. Think tanks and research centers across the political spectrum are studying and reporting on people's attitudes, behavior and readiness to marry.³⁵ Other experts are involved in evaluating the effectiveness of current marriage preparation and education programs.

Altogether, these efforts mark a new chapter in the society's response to marriage decline. Where there was once a sense of inevitability about the decline of marriage, there is now a sense of possibility about reversing that

decline. Where once there was a sense of despair about the chances of improving marital relationships, there is now a growing sense of optimism that relationships can be repaired, that steps can be taken to improve children's chances of growing up in married parent families, that skills can be taught to help parents form and sustain good marriages, and that the institution of marriage can be revitalized through public as well as private action. Whether recent initiatives will lead to a sustained trend toward two-married-parent families remains to be seen. But they represent the most promising development to come along in four decades.

Notes

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What Marriage Is For

By Maggie Gallagher

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Gay marriage is no longer a theoretical issue. Canada has it. Massachusetts is expected to get it any day. The Goodridge decision there could set off a legal, political, and cultural battle in the courts of 50 states and in the U.S. Congress. Every politician, every judge, every citizen has to decide: Does same-sex marriage matter? If so, how and why?

The timing could not be worse. Marriage is in crisis, as everyone knows: High rates of divorce and illegitimacy have eroded marriage norms and created millions of fatherless children, whole neighborhoods where lifelong marriage is no longer customary, driving up poverty, crime, teen pregnancy, welfare dependency, drug abuse, and mental and physical health problems. And yet, amid

the broader negative trends, recent signs point to a modest but significant recovery.

Divorce rates appear to have declined a little from historic highs; illegitimacy rates, after doubling every decade from 1960 to 1990, appear to have leveled off, albeit at a high level (33 percent of American births are to unmarried women); teen pregnancy and sexual activity are down; the proportion of homemaking mothers is up; marital fertility appears to be on the rise. Research suggests that married adults are more committed to marital permanence than they were twenty years ago. A new generation of children of divorce appears on the brink of making a commitment to lifelong marriage. In 1977, 55 percent of American teenagers thought a divorce should be harder to get; in 2001, 75 percent did.

A new marriage movement—a distinctively American phenomenon—has been born. The scholarly consensus on the importance of marriage has broadened and deepened; it is now the conventional wisdom among child welfare organizations. As a Child Trends research brief summed up: “Research clearly demonstrates that family structure matters for children, and the family structure that helps children the most is a family headed by two biological parents in a low-conflict marriage. Children in single-parent families, children born to unmarried mothers, and children in stepfamilies or cohabiting relationships face higher risks of poor outcomes.... There is thus value for children in promoting strong, stable marriages between biological parents.”

What will court-imposed gay marriage do to this incipient recovery of marriage? For, even as support for marriage in general has been rising, the gay marriage debate has proceeded on a separate track. Now the time has come to decide: Will unisex marriage help or hurt marriage as a social institution?

Why should it do either, some may ask? How can Bill and Bob's marriage hurt Mary and Joe? In an exchange with me in the just-released book *Marriage and Same Sex Unions: A Debate*, Evan Wolfson, chief legal strategist for same-sex marriage in the Hawaii case, *Baer v. Lewin*, argues there is “enough marriage to share.” What counts, he says, “is not family structure, but the quality of dedication, commitment, self-sacrifice, and love in the household.”

Family structure does not count. Then what is marriage for? Why have laws about it? Why care whether people get married or stay married? Do children need mothers and fathers, or will any sort of family do? When the sexual desires of adults clash with the interests of children, which carries more weight, socially and legally?

These are the questions that same-sex marriage raises. Our answers will affect not only gay and lesbian families, but marriage as a whole.

In ordering gay marriage on June 10, 2003, the highest court in Ontario, Canada, explicitly endorsed a brand new vision of marriage along the lines Wolfson suggests: “Marriage is, without dispute, one of the most significant forms of personal relationships.... Through the institution of marriage, individuals can publicly express their love and commitment to each other. Through this institution, society publicly recognizes expressions of love and commitment between individuals, granting them respect and legitimacy as a couple.”

The Ontario court views marriage as a kind of Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval that government stamps on certain registered intimacies because, well, for no particular reason the court can articulate except that society likes to recognize expressions of love and commitment. In this view, endorsement of gay marriage is a no-brainer, for nothing really important rides on whether anyone gets married or stays married. Marriage is merely

individual expressive conduct, and there is no obvious reason why some individuals' expression of gay love should hurt other individuals' expressions of non-gay love.

There is, however, a different view—indeed, a view that is radically opposed to this: Marriage is the fundamental, cross-cultural institution for bridging the male-female divide so that children have loving, committed mothers and fathers. Marriage is inherently normative: It is about holding out a certain kind of relationship as a social ideal, especially when there are children involved.

Marriage is not simply an artifact of law; neither is it a mere delivery mechanism for a set of legal benefits that might as well be shared more broadly. The laws of marriage do not create marriage, but in societies ruled by law they help trace the boundaries and sustain the public meanings of marriage.

In other words, while individuals freely choose to enter marriage, society upholds the marriage option, formalizes its definition, and surrounds it with norms and reinforcements, so we can raise boys and girls who aspire to become the kind of men and women who can make successful marriages. Without this shared, public aspect, perpetuated generation after generation, marriage becomes what its critics say it is: a mere contract, a vessel with no particular content, one of a menu of sexual lifestyles, of no fundamental importance to anyone outside a given relationship.

The marriage idea is that children need mothers and fathers, that societies need babies, and that adults have an obligation to shape their sexual behavior so as to give their children stable families in which to grow up.

Which view of marriage is true? We have seen what has happened in our communities where marriage norms have failed. What has happened is not a flowering of libertarian freedom, but a breakdown of social and civic order that can reach frightening proportions. When law and culture retreat from sustaining the marriage idea, individuals cannot create marriage on their own.

In a complex society governed by positive law, social institutions require both social and legal support. To use an analogy, the government does not create private property. But to make a market system a reality requires the assistance of law as well as culture. People have to be raised to respect the property of others, and to value the traits of entrepreneurship, and to be law-abiding generally. The law cannot allow individuals to define for themselves what private property (or law-abiding conduct) means. The boundaries of certain institutions (such as the corporation) also need to be defined legally, and the definitions become socially shared knowledge. We need a shared system of meaning, publicly enforced, if market-based economies are to do their magic and individuals are to maximize their opportunities.

Successful social institutions generally function without people's having to think very much about how they work. But when a social institution is contested—as marriage is today—it becomes critically important to think and speak clearly about its public meanings.

Again, what is marriage for? Marriage is a virtually universal human institution. In all the wildly rich and various cultures flung throughout the ecosphere, in society after society, whether tribal or complex, and however bizarre, human beings have created systems of publicly approved sexual union between men and women that entail well-defined responsibilities of mothers and fathers. Not all these marriage systems look like our own, which is rooted in a fusion of Greek, Roman, Jewish, and Christian culture. Yet everywhere, in isolated mountain valleys, parched deserts, jungle thickets, and broad plains, people have come up with some version of this thing called marriage. Why?

Because sex between men and women makes babies, that's why. Even today, in our technologically advanced contraceptive culture, half of all pregnancies are unintended: Sex between men and women *still* makes babies. Most men and women are powerfully drawn to perform a sexual act that can and does generate life. Marriage is our attempt to reconcile and harmonize the erotic, social, sexual, and financial needs of men and women with the needs of their partner and their children.

How to reconcile the needs of children with the sexual desires of adults? Every society has to face that question, and some resolve it in ways that inflict horrendous cruelty on children born outside marriage. Some cultures decide these children don't matter: Men can have all the sex they want, and any children they create outside of marriage will be throwaway kids; marriage is for citizens—slaves and peasants need not apply. You can see a version of this elitist vision of marriage emerging in America under cover of acceptance of family diversity. Marriage will continue to exist as the social advantage of elite communities. The poor and the working class? Who cares whether their kids have dads? We can always import people from abroad to fill our need for disciplined, educated workers.

Our better tradition, and the only one consistent with democratic principles, is to hold up a single ideal for all parents, which is ultimately based on our deep cultural commitment to the equal dignity and social worth of all children. All kids need and deserve a married mom and dad. All parents are supposed to at least try to behave in ways that will give their own children this important protection. Privately, religiously, emotionally, individually, marriage may have many meanings. But this is the core of its public, shared meaning: Marriage is the place where having children is not only tolerated but welcomed and encouraged, because it gives children mothers and fathers.

Of course, many couples fail to live up to this ideal. Many of the things men and women have to do to sustain their

own marriages, and a culture of marriage, are *hard*. Few people will do them consistently if the larger culture does not affirm the critical importance of marriage as a social institution. Why stick out a frustrating relationship, turn down a tempting new love, abstain from sex outside marriage, or even take pains not to conceive children out of wedlock if family structure does not matter? If marriage is not a shared norm, and if successful marriage is not socially valued, do not expect it to survive as the generally accepted context for raising children. If marriage is just a way of publicly celebrating private love, then there is no need to encourage couples to stick it out for the sake of the children. If family structure does not matter, why have marriage laws at all? Do adults, or do they not, have a basic obligation to control their desires so that children can have mothers and fathers?

The problem with endorsing gay marriage is not that it would allow a handful of people to choose alternative family forms, but that it would require society at large to gut marriage of its central presumptions about family in order to accommodate a few adults' desires.

The debate over same-sex marriage, then, is not some sideline discussion. It *is* the marriage debate. Either we win—or we lose the central meaning of marriage. The great threat unisex marriage poses to marriage as a social institution is not some distant or nearby slippery slope; it is an abyss at our feet. If we cannot explain why unisex marriage is, in itself, a disaster, we have already lost the marriage ideal.

Same-sex marriage would enshrine in law a public judgment that the desire of adults for families of choice outweighs the need of children for mothers and fathers. It would give sanction and approval to the creation of a motherless or fatherless family as a deliberately chosen “good.” It would mean the law was neutral as to whether children had mothers and fathers. Motherless and fatherless families would be deemed just fine.

Same-sex marriage advocates are startlingly clear on this point. Marriage law, they repeatedly claim, has nothing to do with babies or procreation or getting mothers and fathers for children. In forcing the state legislature to create civil unions for gay couples, the high court of Vermont explicitly ruled that marriage in the state of Vermont has nothing to do with procreation. Evan Wolfson made the same point in *Marriage and Same Sex Unions*: “[I]sn't having the law pretend that there is only one family model that works (let alone exists) a lie?” He goes on to say that in law, “marriage is not just about procreation—indeed is not necessarily about procreation at all.”

Wolfson is right that in the course of the sexual revolution the Supreme Court struck down many legal features designed to reinforce the connection of marriage to babies. The animus of elites (including legal elites) against the marriage idea is not brand new. It stretches back at least thirty years. That is part of the problem we face, part of the

reason 40 percent of our children are growing up without their fathers.

It is also true, as gay-marriage advocates note, that we impose no fertility tests for marriage: Infertile and older couples marry, and not every fertile couple chooses procreation. But every marriage between a man and a woman is capable of giving any child they create or adopt a mother and a father. Every marriage between a man and a woman discourages either from creating fatherless children outside the marriage vow. In this sense, neither older married couples nor childless husbands and wives publicly challenge or dilute the core meaning of marriage. Even when a man marries an older woman and they do not adopt, his marriage helps protect children. How? His marriage means, if he keeps his vows, that he will not produce out-of-wedlock children.

Does marriage discriminate against gays and lesbians? Formally speaking, no. There are no sexual-orientation tests for marriage; many gays and lesbians do choose to marry members of the opposite sex, and some of these unions succeed. Our laws do not require a person to marry the individual to whom he or she is most erotically attracted, so long as he or she is willing to promise sexual fidelity, mutual caretaking, and shared parenting of any children of the marriage.

But marriage is unsuited to the wants and desires of many gays and lesbians, precisely because it is designed to bridge the male-female divide and sustain the idea that children need mothers and fathers. To make a marriage, what you need is a husband and a wife. Redefining marriage so that it suits gays and lesbians would require fundamentally changing our legal, public, and social conception of what marriage is in ways that threaten its core public purposes.

Some who criticize the refusal to embrace gay marriage liken it to the outlawing of interracial marriage, but the analogy is woefully false. The Supreme Court overturned anti-miscegenation laws because they frustrated the core purpose of marriage in order to sustain a racist legal order. Marriage laws, by contrast, were not invented to express animus toward homosexuals or anyone else. Their purpose is not negative, but positive: They uphold an institution that developed, over thousands of years, in thousands of cultures, to help direct the erotic desires of men and women into a relatively narrow but indispensably fruitful channel. We need men and women to marry and make

babies for our society to survive. We have no similar public stake in any other family form—in the union of same-sex couples or the singleness of single moms.

Meanwhile, *cui bono*? To meet the desires of whom would we put our most basic social institution at risk? No good research on the marriage intentions of homosexual people exists. For what it's worth, the Census Bureau reports that 0.5 percent of households now consist of same-sex partners. To get a proxy for how many gay couples would avail themselves of the health insurance benefits marriage can provide, I asked the top 10 companies listed on the Human Rights Campaign's website as providing same-sex insurance benefits how many of their employees use this option. Only one company, General Motors, released its data. Out of 1.3 million employees, 166 claimed benefits for a same-sex partner, *one one-hundredth of one percent*. People who argue for creating gay marriage do so in the name of high ideals: justice, compassion, fairness. Their sincerity is not in question. Nevertheless, to take the already troubled institution most responsible for the protection of children and throw out its most basic presumption in order to further adult interests in sexual freedom would not be high-minded. It would be morally callous and socially irresponsible.

If we cannot stand and defend this ground, then face it: The marriage debate is over. Dan Quayle was wrong. We lost.

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I Do?

By David Blankenhorn

To understand why the United States has the highest divorce rate in the world, go to some weddings and listen to what the brides and grooms say. In particular, listen to the vows: the words of mutual promise exchanged by couples during the marriage ceremony. To a remarkable degree, marriage in America today is exactly what these newlyweds increasingly say that it is: a loving relationship of undetermined duration created of the couple, by the couple, and for the couple.

Our tendency may be to shrug off the significance of formal marriage vows, viewing them as purely ceremonial, without much impact on the “real” marriage. Yet believing that the vow is only some words is similar to believing that the marriage certificate is only a piece of paper. Both views are technically true, but profoundly false. Either, when believed by the marrying couple, is probably a sign of a marriage off to a bad start.

In fact, the marriage vow is deeply connected to the marriage relationship. The vow helps the couple to name and fashion their marriage’s innermost meaning. The vow is foundational: the couple’s first and most formal effort to define, and therefore understand, exactly what their marriage is.

Recent research into the determinants of marital success, especially the significance in marriage of what the scholars Scott M. Stanley and Howard J. Markman call “dedication,” underscores the central importance of the vow. As much as shared interests, or good communications skills, or even erotic attraction or feelings of true love, it is the content and integrity of the dedicating promise itself—what we say and mean when we say “I do”—that shapes the nature and destiny of the marriage.

In recent years, two basic innovations have transformed the marriage vow in the United States. Both innovations are particularly widespread in both mainline and evangelical Protestant churches, in which about half of all U.S. marriages occur.

First, as Barbara Dafoe Whitehead points out in *The Divorce Culture*, marriage vows today commonly

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downplay or avoid altogether any pledge of marital permanence. The old vow was “till death us do part” or “so long as we both shall live.” Most new vows simply leave the question of marital duration unasked and unanswered, as if the issue were either irrelevant or beyond knowing. Other new vows incorporate hopeful but qualified phrases such as “as long as love lasts.”

Either way, the underlying philosophy is the same. To pledge marital permanence would be to make a false guarantee. We are in love today, but the future is

something that should not or cannot be promised. How long will our love last? We hope forever, but only time will tell. As one bride puts it in a recent book called *Creative Weddings*: “It was important for me not to make promises or to predict the future, but to make intentions and commitments.... We avoided using words like ‘forever,’ but focused on what was honest for the moment and nothing more than that.”

The second change is more subtle, but far more profound. Today, growing numbers of couples—perhaps most couples—compose their own vows. My wife and I did in 1986; most couples we know did. I cannot find data to verify the dimensions of this trend, but my sense is that, principally excepting Orthodox Jewish and most Catholic weddings, self-composed vows are more the rule than the exception among newlyweds today. As one wedding book flatly asserts: “The majority of brides and grooms these days are rejecting traditional wedding vows and reciting their own personalized vows instead.”

One wedding book by Steven Neel, an ordained minister, advises couples that “Your wedding ceremony can be highly distinctive and individualized if you use your imagination to personalize your expression of love and commitment.” Consequently, Neel urges couples today to “accept the challenge of writing your own vows” which “contain the unique expression of your feeling.”

It would be hard to exaggerate the symbolic importance of this shift toward self-composed vows. The old vows were created by society and presented to the couple, signifying the goal of conforming the couple to marriage. The new vows are created by the couple and presented to society, signifying the goal of conforming marriage to the couple. The two approaches reflect strikingly divergent views of marriage and of reality itself.

In one view, the vow is prior to the couple. The vow exists on its own, exerting social and sacred authority that is independent of the couple. In this sense, the vow helps to create the couple. For in making the same promise that others before them have made, and that others after them will make, the couple vows on their wedding day to become accountable to an ideal of marriage that is outside of them and bigger than they are.

In the new view, the couple is prior to the promise. The vow is not an external reality, like gravity or the weather, but instead a subjective projection, deriving its meaning solely from the couple. From this perspective, the couple approaches the vow like a painter approaches a canvas. Rather than the vow creating the couple, the couple creates the vow. As a result, each marriage becomes unique, like a painting or a snowflake.

With this one procedural change in the making and exchanging of vows, a ceremony of continuity and idealized forms is displaced by a ceremony of creativity and personal expression. Subject and object trade places. Theologically, the transcendent becomes mundane as couples, in effect, become the gods of their own marriages.

A reality in which the marriage is larger than the couple is replaced by a reality in which the couple is larger than the marriage.

Of course, many of the motivating ideas behind the new vows are understandable and even admirable. Couples want to avoid hypocrisy. They want the ceremony to be dramatic and personally meaningful. In part, the new vows represent a practical response to the growing phenomenon of mixed-tradition marriages.

But the essence of this change reflects a dramatic shrinking of our idea of marriage. With the new vows, the robust expectation of marital permanence shrinks to a frail, often unstated hope. Marriage as a vital communal institution shrinks to marriage as a purely private relationship. Marriage as something that defines me shrinks to something that I define.

Finally, as the idea of marriage gets weaker, so does the reality. In this sense, the new vows are important philosophical authorizations for our divorce culture. They are both minor causes and revealing results of a society in which marriage as an institution is decomposing before our eyes.

Who is to blame for this transformation of the vow? There are three possible answers: society, the couples, and the pastors. All things considered, I suggest that we blame the clergy.

I understand, of course, that many large social forces and institutions, from trash TV to the legal profession, are conspiring to weaken and privatize marriage. I also understand why many couples might aspire to confect, rather than inherit, the meaning of their marriage. But I do not understand why the clergy, the custodians of our marriage tradition, so willingly relinquish their authority and, in effect, collaborate in their own marginalization. Why have the teachers agreed to trade places with the students?

Much of the content of contemporary weddings, of which vows are only one aspect, stems from a massive transfer of authority—generally, from the community to the individual, and specifically, from the pastor to the couple. As the brides' magazines and wedding books endlessly emphasize: "It's *your* day!" Throughout this advice literature, the master recommendation is to "personalize" your wedding.

By accepting and even embracing these ideas, many pastors become little more than entertainers, bit players, in the weddings they conduct and in the marriages they launch. Many couples choose a church for their wedding primarily on the basis of architecture. Cut loose from enduring communal forms, which are the foundations of all true ceremony, weddings today increasingly become occasions for what Judith Martin calls "amateur theatrics about sex and philosophy." Consequently, despite the sincere hopes and the intensive planning, what is most important about the wedding is increasingly overshadowed. The party gets bigger; the embrace of the marital promise gets smaller.

What is to be done? Here are four proposals. First, individual pastors, and ultimately denominational leaders, should reclaim the historic responsibility inhering in communities of faith to promulgate and maintain the integrity of the marriage vows exchanged in their churches. Central to this reclamation would be the revival of the vow of marital permanence.

Second, pastors should agree to marry couples in their churches only when at least one member of the couple is also a member of the church. Third, pastors should require all couples who marry in their churches to participate in a serious program of church-sponsored premarital education. And finally, individual churches should formally embrace the goal of strengthening marriage and lowering the divorce rate in their congregation, specifically through on-going programs aimed at marital enrichment and "marriage saving," and generally by seeking to create a marriage culture within the faith community that is distinct from the divorce culture in the larger society. (Pastors can also take heart from growing signs of public dissatisfaction with the divorce culture, such as Louisiana's new "covenant marriage" law in which individual couples can now choose to opt out of the no-fault system and enter into a legally more binding marriage.)

Together, these policies would convey a clear message to engaged couples. Couples who get married here learn what marriage is. Couples who get married here understand and accept as their own the marriage promise that this community of faith requires, including the vow of marital permanence. Couples who get married here become part of a community that affirms and supports marriage. As a result, couples who get married here are more likely to be able to keep their promises, in part because they make promises worth keeping.

The Nordic Track

By Gene Edward Veith

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No matter what happens in the homosexual-marriage/civil-union controversies, marriage as an institution isn't going away, is it?

Yes, it is. Marriage has already all but disappeared in Scandinavia. Other Europeans are heading down that Nordic track. And, if gay marriage is legalized, so will we.

That is the conclusion of Stanley Kurtz, a research fellow at the Hoover Institution, whose article, "The End of Marriage in Scandinavia" was published in *The Weekly Standard*.

Sweden was the first country in Europe to legalize homosexual unions in 1989, and Denmark and Norway followed soon thereafter. Today, a majority of children in those countries are born out of wedlock. Although some older couples are getting married after having more than one child, younger couples are dispensing with marriage altogether. Southern Seminary president Al Mohler reports that in Sweden, the few young couples who do get married often do not like to admit it, since what they have done is so far out of the norm that they feel embarrassed.

Couples just live together for a while. If the woman has a baby, the father—unlike in the United States—will typically stay around until the baby reaches a certain age. Until recently, if they had a second child together, they would typically get married, but this has changed for the new generation. Once the children are grown, the parents typically go their separate ways.

What role has gay marriage played in the disappearance of marriage in Scandinavia? "Scandinavian gay marriage has driven home the message that marriage itself is outdated," says Mr. Kurtz, "and that virtually any family form, including out-of-wedlock parenthood, is acceptable."

More direct causes Mr. Kurtz cites include the Scandinavian welfare state, which means that the family unit is no longer necessary for economic support. Plus, to support that welfare state, taxes are so high that both

parents have to work. A vast state day-care system has taken over many of the child-care duties that once were the job of families. Also, the universities are even more radical than they are in the United States, with socialists, feminists, and other social revolutionaries—including those who denounce marriage as being intrinsically oppressive—having a huge influence in public policy.

Homosexual marriage has contributed to the dissolution of marriage as a significant institution in Scandinavian cultures primarily by contributing to the notion that marriage need have nothing to do with having children.

Most instructive for Americans is what happened with Norway, traditionally the most conservative of the Scandinavian states. Sweden and Denmark have always been far more liberal, and in those nations the public wanted gay marriage. In Norway, though, the general public had gay marriage foisted upon it from above, by elite judges and lawmakers. The state Lutheran church opposed not only gay marriage but the growing trend of cohabitation and having children out-of-wedlock. The church also fought an internal battle over the ordination of those in homosexual unions.

The media covered the church's debates over these issues, taking every opportunity to attack and ridicule Christian teachings about sexuality and marriage. As a result, the church's traditionally strong influence in Norwegian society declined. When the dust settled, the liberal pro-gay and cohabitation theologians, who were once a minority, took over the leadership of the church.

Another important finding about the Scandinavian experience with what Mr. Kurtz describes as "de facto" gay marriage—actually, they are "civil unions"—is how few homosexuals actually enter into them. A study published by Yale's William Eskridge in 2000 showed that after nine years, only 2,375 homosexual couples took advantage of the Danish law allowing gay unions. After four years, only 749 gay Swedes and only 674 gay Norwegians bothered to get married."

Today's gay activists in Scandinavia, having gotten everything they wanted, now admit that their case for homosexual marriage—particularly that allowing gays to marry will encourage a monogamous lifestyle—was only a tactical argument. The goal, says Mr. Kurtz, citing two prominent gay thinkers, "was not marriage but social approval for homosexuality."

They achieved that goal, but now there is little social approval for marriage.

Study of the Heidelberg Catechism

Study 2: Questions 3-11

by Rev. Dr. Stephen Eyre, College Hill Presbyterian Church, Cincinnati, OH

Unlike sex, in our culture today, sin is not something you mention in public. Since tolerance is the essential virtue in our democratic secularized society, Alan Bloom in his book, *The Closing of the American Mind* noted that the only sin left today is to say that there is sin. Can you imagine anything more rude than to call someone a sinner? It's worse than burping in public!

Even in the church today sin is not a particularly welcome subject. Cornelius Plantinga Jr. in his book on sin, one of the few books published in recent years addressing the subject, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*, observes that while preachers of the past used to thunder about sin, today we hardly mumble about it.

What happened? Somehow the 1500 year teaching of Christendom authoritatively articulated by Augustine in the 5th century concerning the flawed and sinful character of the human race was displaced in a matter of 200 years by Rousseau's teaching on the basic goodness of humanity.

The Heidelberg Catechism, written in the 16th century, a period of Christian history in which sin was taken seriously, provides helpful corrective instruction for a 21st century church that needs to rediscover the reality of sin.

After a brilliantly concise overview of the Christian doctrine in the second question, the Heidelberg Catechism addresses the issue of sin in a brief span of 9 questions. After having worked through those nine questions we will know:

"how great our sin and misery are"
so that we will be eagerly ready to learn
"how we are set free from all our sins and misery."
(Question 2)

What is Sin?

The first two questions in this section on the human condition, questions 3 and 4, set sin in the context of both law and relationship.

In earlier ages the church was tempted to understand sin as the breaking of rules required by God. In a post modern culture that places priority on relationships, we can be tempted to see sin as merely a failure to love. Observe how the Heidelberg addresses the issue of sin:

Question 3. How do you know your misery? A. The law of God tells me.

Question 4. What does God's law require of us? A. Christ teaches us this in summary in Matthew 22—Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and all your mind and with all your strength. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

These two questions taken together avoid a polarization of law and relationship, bringing together both love and obedience.

Character and Conduct

Sin is never merely a matter of conduct but of character, as God is not merely concerned with our sins, but our sin. Questions 5-11, explore the questions of character that sin raises with an eye both to the character of God and the character of the human race.

Question 5 "Can you live up to all this perfectly?"	addresses our human innate inclination to sin
Questions 6 "Did God create people so wicked and perverse?"	addresses our human innate twisting from the original condition of righteousness
Question 7 "Then where does this corrupt human nature come from?"	lodges the original human corruption with our first parents, Adam and Eve.
Question 8 "But are we so corrupt that we are totally unable to do any good and inclined toward all evil?"	articulates our human inability to change without the help of God
Question 9 "But doesn't God do us an injustice by requiring in his law what we are unable to do?"	speaks to the character of God as a just God for judging us
Question 10 "Will God permit such disobedience and rebellion to go unpunished?" and Question 11 "But isn't God also merciful?"	together articulate the necessity of God to judge us for sin even in the light of his mercy.

Reflection on the Catechism

As you read over the questions and the issues they address what responses do you have?

1. What do you like about the way the Heidelberg addresses sin?
2. What make you uncomfortable about the way the Heidelberg addresses sin?
3. What questions or concerns do you have about sin that are not addressed?

Reflection of Scripture

1. In Romans 3:9-20 Paul provides a penetrating analysis of sin. Observe the number of times Paul uses the phrase, “no one.” How does Paul’s concept of the universality of sin relate to the Heidelberg?
2. Notice the different body parts that are mentioned: how is Paul’s understanding of the pervasiveness of sin reflected in the Heidelberg?
3. How is the role of the “law” in this passage similar or different from the use of the law in the Heidelberg? How does Paul’s use of the law compare to the way you think of the law of God?

4. Given the influence of our culture to discount sin, how conscious are you of sin in your life?
5. How conscious are you of sin in the world?
6. How would you say your consciousness or lack of consciousness of sin impacts your experience of your life in Christ?
7. What might have to change in your thoughts and actions to appropriately “give sin its due”?

Conclusion

It is worth noting that these 9 questions on sin together comprise the entire content of section I. The remaining two sections will take 119 questions!

The Heidelberg Catechism portrays sin as an essential strand in the web of the Christian faith. Take sin away and the whole matrix of beliefs which comprise Christian doctrine unravels. Give sin its due and the majestic redemption of the world achieved by Christ opens up to us.

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