

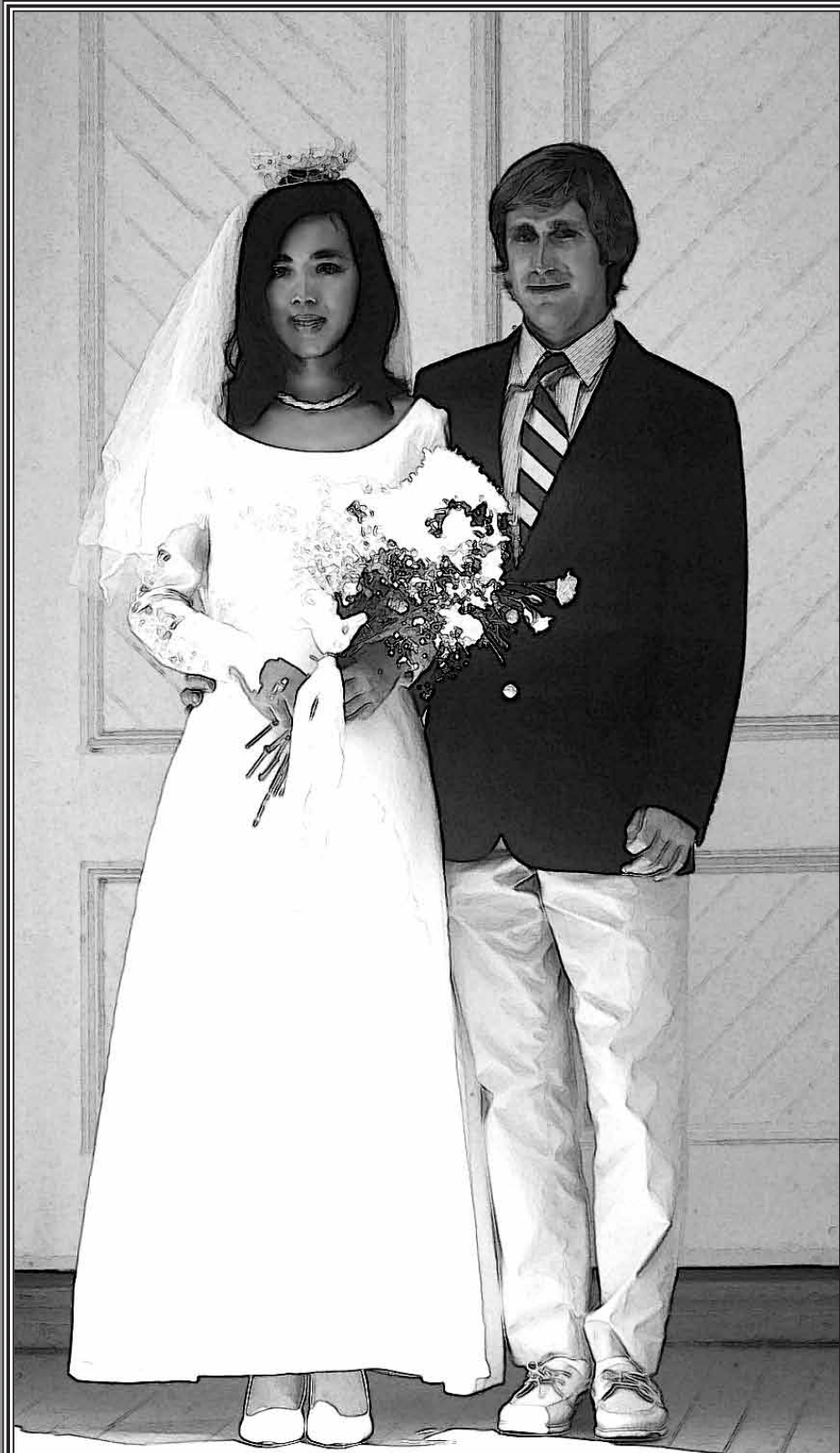
ISSUES

IN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

Summer 2012

Vol. 45, No. 3

Needed: Marriage Education!



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IN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

A PUBLICATION OF CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY, SEWARD, NEBRASKA

Needed: Marriage Education!

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editorials

Marriage . . . It Happens?

I will always remember that day like it was yesterday. We were sitting on the back porch, content from dinner, anticipating mom's brownies. The evening had had an aura of tension that could only be ignored for so long. We were all walking on pins, not wanting to throw anyone's emotions over the edge. With the unease and sensitivity well established, it took only one slightly offensive comment, and before I knew it, it was over. Just like that. I watched as my dad packed his suitcase for the last time, marking the end of a 28-year marriage.

It was that simple: my parental example had come to a crashing halt. I found myself drowning in salty tears, filled with searing pain from confusion, rather than supper and dessert.

Did the divorce *really* happen? I ask myself that every day. It couldn't have; not to me! Other families, maybe; but not mine. Now what am I supposed to do, say, or believe about love, commitment, and marriage? Where am I to find hope and help?

Per my parents' well-intended wishes, I was expected to spill my guts to a counselor—that was *not* about to happen. I am an introvert, and I was not comfortable trusting my innermost disappointments and heartaches



CONCORDESIGN STUDIO
A Student + Faculty Design Collaborative

Layout, design and illustration by CONCORDesign
of Concordia University, Seward, Nebraska.

Artist: W. R. Wolfram, M.F.A.

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What is the definition of marriage? Who decides? Do the Supreme Court, the U.S. Congress, individual states, the President of the United States define marriage? The debate rages currently. On May 31, the U.S. Appeals Court in Boston became the first appeals court to strike down as unconstitutional the federal Defense of Marriage Act (*Lincoln Journal Star*, A3, June 1, 2012). However, need we wait for a governmental entity to define marriage or address marriage education? Absolutely not!

As God's people, we believe, teach and confess that God, at the beginning of time and for all time, defined marriage as the union of one man and one woman. Yet today, in our country and throughout our world, the definition and essence of marriage are under vicious attack. As the *Issues* editorial committee began consideration of this edition, editor Bergman shared the following rationale regarding the importance and relevance of the topic of marriage education. He wrote:

That marriage is being assaulted by powerful societal forces in the USA can be observed easily. An April, 2011, Pew Research Center report found sweeping changes in the structures and views of marriage and family. For example, cohabitation has nearly doubled since 1990, with more than one-half of adults ages 30 to 49 saying that they have cohabited at some point in their lives. Nearly four in ten Americans state that marriage is becoming obsolete. When high school seniors are asked if living together prior to marriage is an acceptable practice, more than one-half affirm this view. Widespread doubt related to the future of marriage in American society is seen in the responses of two of three who say that they are not optimistic about the future of marriage and family as an institution.

There has never been a more appropriate time for the church to boldly and publicly profess its doctrine of marriage. This edition examines the theology of marriage concisely and addresses concretely specific challenges to God's people as we live in an era in which marriage is being redefined and denigrated constantly. The authors' foci are the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the Gospel's power to work through God's gift of marriage. Vasconcellos reminds us: "Marriage is God's creation." Biermann posits: "Education about marriage must be an integral part of life in a Christian congregation. It is not only marriage that is at stake. It is the heart of the Gospel itself." Hannemann asserts: "Lutheran churches, schools, and families now need to make what was an implicit and accepted aspect of family life an explicit matter of formation and education."

It is my prayer that the articles, editorials and reviews in this edition of *Issues* will edify and assist you in providing "cradle to altar to grave" marriage education in your congregation and community.

BRIAN L. FRIEDRICH
President

editorials, continued

of my family's shortcomings with a complete stranger. I was embarrassed, and I did not know where to turn. I wanted the comfort and hope of Christ, but I felt betrayed by Him, and became more distant with that Counselor than I was with the other counselor.

So whose "job" was it to console me? I did not feel that I could turn to my parents who had done the deed, nor that strange counselor, nor Jesus.

We all have the "job" (vocation) to support, encourage, and comfort His children (Ephesians 4:1–16). The sole responsibility does not lie with a counselor, a teacher, or a pastor; it lies with each and every member of the body of Christ—the priesthood of all believers. Together we *are* better. "A cord of three strands is not quickly broken" (Ecclesiastes 4:12).

Now, years later, the pain and apprehension persist. And we, young adults headed to the altar, want some help. We want guidance. We want concrete suggestions. We want more than clichés in the back of our minds (things that we remember hearing in some Sunday school classroom or some sermon somewhere at some time).

We all know what marriage *should* be (a permanent bonding of male and female before God, Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:5), but we do not know *how* marriage should be (because so many of us are products of failed marriages). We know that marriage is more than that tingly feeling we call "love," but what is the "more"? How do we work on and sustain that? If marriage is a lifelong commitment (contrary to what society and the media throw at us), how do we know if we are ready for it when we are only 20 years into our lives?

Marriage is a blessing from God; it is a structure that He intentionally created for our own good. Taylor Swift, a voice many youth follow, sings that "Life makes love look hard." We should be hearing that "Love makes life look easy." God created the bond between a married man and woman as a team effort (Genesis 2:2–24). No more of this individualistic, independent, personal gain-seeking stuff—that is what separates families. We need to be more interdependent, thankful for the blessing of the marriage bond that was given to man and woman, and grateful for the opportunity to work on the commitment made before God every day.

Who will help us? Who will guide us on our walks down the aisles? We, the congregation, not only will, but *must*.

We have a job, a duty, a responsibility, a calling. How are we going to do that? We need marriage education in our curriculum (this will be of more use in our students' lives than mathematics will be!). We need people to talk with us; to share Scripture and wisdom. We need Christian examples of what love and commitment look like in marriage. Be an "ex.," not an "ex-."

There is work to be done! As you read the following articles on the topic of marriage, think about what *you* can do to make a change. Maybe it is leading couples to premarital counseling (Hebrews 10:24), adjusting curriculum (Proverbs 22:6), setting an example of Christian marriage (Ephesians 5:21–33), or simply having a conversation (Hebrews 10:25). Whatever it is that the Lord is calling you to do, do it with all of your heart, joy, and enthusiasm (Revelation 3:16).

Marriage . . . it does happen; so please help us learn how.

Sarah Sprague

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with a Ring on Her Left Hand
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Marriage as Vocation

THE DOCTRINE of vocation is one of Luther's most important theological contributions, describing in detail how Christians are to live out their faith in their everyday lives and relationships. And a key vocation, according to Luther, is that of marriage, with its offices of husband and wife.

According to Luther, Christians have callings in the three estates that God has established as He governs the world: the family, the church, and the state. In marriage, God calls a new family into existence.

Today marriage is a troubled institution, with widespread confusion about what it is and how it should work. Unhappy marriages and divorce plague Christians as well as non-Christians. Many people no longer see marriage as a necessary pre-requisite for either sex or parenthood. But recovering the doctrine of vocation can revitalize marriage—including individual marriages.

What follows applies what is true of vocation in general to marriage in particular:

GOD WORKS THROUGH VOCATION. While other theological treatments of vocation emphasize what we are *to do* in our different callings, Luther stressed that vocation is, above all, about what God does *through* us, granting His gifts by means of human beings acting in their vocations. He gives us our

daily bread by means of farmers; He creates new life by means of mothers and fathers; He heals us through doctors and nurses; He distributes His Word and Sacraments by means of pastors.

In marriage, God blesses husbands through their wives. He blesses wives through their husbands. He does so by joining them together into one flesh (Matthew 19:4–6). In the family they become, the man and the woman become one organism. This includes their sexual union—which God authorizes in the calling of marriage—and also to "helping" each other (Genesis 2:18).

GOD IS PRESENT IN VOCATION. Luther called vocation "a mask of God." God is hidden in the ordinary callings of life. That is to say, in the work of the farmer, the doctor, or the pastor, He is actually present.

In the family callings, God the Father looms behind all parenthood; God the Son is the origin of all childhood. Marriage is an icon of the relationship between Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:22–33). This was not mere symbolism for Luther; rather, Christ and His relationship with the church are *present* in marriage.

THE PURPOSE OF VOCATION IS TO LOVE AND SERVE ONE'S NEIGHBOR. God works through us in our callings when we love and serve our neighbors. We love God because He first loved us and gave His Son to be the propitiation for our sins (1 John 4:10), but then He sends us into our vocations to live out our faith in love for our neighbors (Galatians 5:6). Farmers love and serve their neighbors by growing food for them. Teachers love and serve their pupils. Parents love and serve their children.

Marriage is unique in that it entails only one neighbor to love and serve. Husbands are to love and serve their wives. Wives are to love and serve their husbands.

WE OFTEN SIN IN AND AGAINST OUR VOCATIONS. God's design is for people in all vocations to love and serve each other. Of course, in our sin, we often insist on being served, rather than serving. Instead of loving our neighbors, we use, exploit, and mistreat them.

This happens all too often in marriage. What Milton called "the offices of love" are turned into power struggles. Even Christians often reduce marriage to "who has to obey whom," neglecting His injunction that even authority must be used in love and service to the neighbor. "But whoever would be great among you must be your servant . . . For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many"

(Mark 10:43–45). The sins of marriage are in need of the Gospel.

VOCATION IS A PRIESTHOOD. "If anyone would come after me," said Jesus, "let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). Thus, the Christian life involves self-denial and self-sacrifice for the sake of others. This happens "daily" in vocation, since every act of love and service—on the job or in the family—involves denying the self and putting the neighbor first.

The doctrine of vocation is also called the priesthood of all believers. A priest is someone who offers sacrifice—not the once-and-for-all-sacrifice for sins, which Jesus offered, but the "living sacrifices" of the Christian life (Romans 12:1).

In marriage, husbands and wives must sacrifice themselves for each other. "Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:24–25). The wife's submission and the husband's "giving himself up" are both acts of self-denial and self-sacrifice for the other.

Animating this dynamic is the sacrifice of Christ Himself who inhabits marriage and whose love, grace, and forgiveness are exercised through those whom He has called together.

Gene Edward Veith

Provost, Patrick Henry College; author of *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life* (Crossway, 2002). This editorial is adapted from his latest book, written with his daughter Deaconess Mary Moerbe, titled *Family Vocation: God's Calling in Marriage, Parenting, and Childhood* (Crossway, 2012).
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Needed: Holistic Marriage Education

Throughout my ministry, I've always had the adventure of teaching junior high students. In the course of class discussions, I always touched on Genesis 2:24, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh." When teaching Scripture, I'm in the habit of asking, "What do you think that says?" I usually get a pretty good response.

This verse tends to be a little different.

The kids look down. They avoid eye contact with me, but they do look at each

other . . . and giggle. Eventually, I get one of them to answer, "Is it, like, sex?" More giggles.

In a wedding ceremony, we witness a miracle. Two go in. One comes out. The two become "one flesh." But it's much more than sex.

Marriage education in the church does well to steer clear of any sort of compartmentalized view. Sex is about more than sex. It's also communication. Communication is about more than communication. It's about spiritual unity. Spiritual unity is about more than prayer and devotions. It's about the whole of marriage, including . . . yes . . . sex. Marriage is a holistic reality.

Paul (who's not shy about **any** of those topics!) says as much in his letter to the Ephesians. After quoting that exact passage from Genesis 2:24, he explains, "This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church" (Ephesians 5:32).

It doesn't take a great Bible scholar to realize that God designed marriage as something "mysterious." It's more than just two people trying to get along, be happy, and raise some kids. Marriage is a picture of our relationship with God.

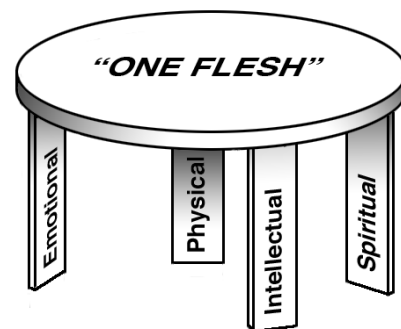
When asked what was the greatest commandment, Jesus answered, "Love the Lord your God with all your *heart* and with all your *soul* and with all your *mind* and with all your *strength*" (Mark 12:30—emphasis added). Those are not four different ways of loving. It's not compartmentalized. Any responsible teacher will tell you "heart, soul, mind, strength" are **all** all-encompassing terms. They are all holistic.

They are also keys to a holistic understanding of what it means to be "one flesh."

I have a table in my house. It's made up of a bunch of pieces, but no one views it as a bunch of components. It's one piece of furniture. It's a table.

Consider that table as a "one-flesh union." Think of the four legs of that table in terms of "heart, soul, mind, and strength." It's consistent with the desire God has placed inside every bride and groom. They want to be "one" emotionally, physically, intellectually, and spiritually. Those aspects of marriage are all interconnected. One area inevitably affects all the others.

Picturing that one flesh union "table," you have a helpful image of where various understandings and expressions of marriage go wrong. Many couples enter and continue in marriage with one (or more!) of these table legs seriously underdeveloped—and maybe even completely unaddressed! Think of the scenarios!



A couple has a well-developed emotional leg, but has never considered their spiritual oneness.

Another couple is physically passionate, but with little regard for substantial communication and emotion.

Another couple is decidedly spiritual (even in the best sense of Christian spirituality!), but neglects their physical oneness.

The combinations of ways this can go wrong are many.

It's on that one-flesh union "table" that couples go forward and try to build a life. On it they stack their hopes and dreams. They add kids . . . along with hopes and dreams for them! But, if the table has an underdeveloped leg, how do you refer to it then? You call it "shaky" or "unstable." Isn't that how we refer to many relationships?

Couples want to lean on their marriage. Over time, unfortunately, they lean less and less on a "shaky" union. Children who are set on shaky one-flesh unions don't have to be told about it. They know it—even if they can't give words to it yet. All involved begin to lean elsewhere for stability. In observable ways, it falls short of what God desires to build.

If we're going to do marriage education in the church (and we need to!), we are wise to do it holistically—aiming at emotional, physical, intellectual, and spiritual oneness. Marriage might be the most widely accessible picture of "Christ and the church." It's the first picture children have. And the most impactful.

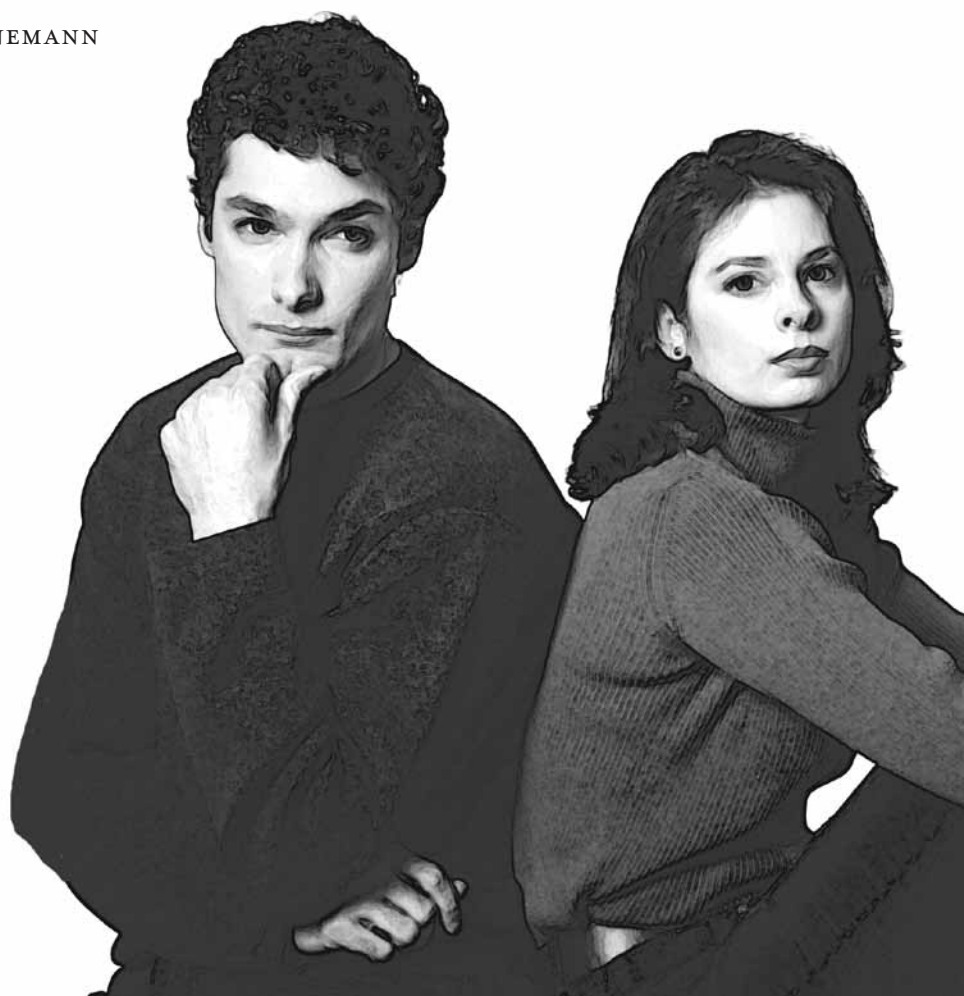
Churches are uniquely positioned to address the holistic needs of a marriage union. It's more than a prescription to pray more and do devotions. It is that, but it is more. Far more. The more we address marriage holistically, the more we foster a full picture of our relationship with God.

There is no downside to that.

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JUSTIN HANNEMANN



How Emerging Adults View Marriage and Sexuality

Tim and Sarah

UNLIKE MOST COUPLES seeking premarital counseling, Tim and Sarah did so voluntarily.¹ What ought to have been a blissful time of engagement following a

candlelit proposal was actually a time of extreme anxiety and apprehension. Tim, a 28-year-old educator, just couldn't understand why the simple act of asking Sarah to marry him would throw the relationship off to the degree it had. Sarah, a 27-year-old attorney, was not able to articulate the source of her fear, only that she wasn't sure they were moving in the right direction. They met three years prior and had been living together for about 16 months. Both reported attending church until they left for college. When they sat down in my office, they appeared bewildered. Neither one of them could articulate what had brought an end to the happiness which they had experienced for nearly three years. They stand at marriage's doorstep, not as blissfully ignorant and idealistic young people, but as wounded and weathered emerging adults.

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While details of this story may be unique to this couple, the narrative elements are anything but idiosyncratic. The current relational zeitgeist not only supports such a scenario, it actually incubates and hatches it. The purpose of this article is to examine the beliefs, assumptions, and relational practices of emerging adults in America and why those beliefs lead to relationships like the one described above. In an effort to better understand these trends some comparisons will be made to the beliefs and practices of other generations. However, contemporary emerging adults receive the bulk of the attention. In the pages to follow you will find statistics and commentary, but you will also find a cultural narrative. Unfortunately, this narrative has many indicators that marriage and secure family life are scarce realities. Scripts have been written for many emerging adults to play in this cultural narrative, and these scripts are often anything but healthy.

What Is Emerging Adulthood?

TIM AND SARAH are in the closing phases of what researchers call “*Emerging Adulthood*.”² It is important to note that the current batch of emerging adults is also called “Millennials” or “Gen-Y’s.” Understanding some of the characteristics of emerging adulthood, as well as the unique opportunities and challenges to which this generation of emerging adults has been exposed, provides insight into their divergent beliefs about, and expressions of, intimate relationships. For God’s people to reverse the current trends in family life, and marriage in particular, we must first understand this generation of emerging adults.

Succinctly put, emerging adulthood is the time of transition from adolescence to full adulthood. While the term *adolescence* was developed to capture the unique characteristics of the transition between childhood and adulthood, *emerging adulthood* is the term now used to capture the observable characteristics of the elongated transition between adolescence and adulthood. Historically, five elements characterized the shift from adolescence

to adulthood: 1) economic independence from one’s parents, 2) residing outside their home, 3) conclusion of schooling and commencement of work, 4) marriage, and 5) children.³ In 1960, 77 percent of women and 65 percent of men had met all five criteria by the age of 30. Today, 46 percent of women and 31 percent of men can report achieving this same milestone.⁴

A complete understanding of all the systemic factors that contribute to the delay of the onset of adulthood may be impossible. Smith et al., in their book, *Lost in Transition*, explore the dark side of emerging adulthood in America. Among other reasons, they cite access to higher education, the global economy, and access to effective birth control as reasons why adulthood seems to emerge much later in life.⁵ This is not to say that the transition into adulthood hasn’t been defined differently by every generation. The end of the 19th century noted a significantly later transition into adulthood than did the middle of the 20th. The important point is that this group of emerging adults is taking longer to enter marriage than any other group in history. Why should they be a focus for an article about why marriage education is needed in the church and in the home? Because they are the ones who are defining the path to adulthood now, which has profound implications for the present and future of marriage.

Too Young . . . Too Old?

REGNERUS AND UECKER report a conundrum in contemporary American society with these two phrases: “13 is the new 18” and “21 is the new 16.”⁶ This captures the reality that individuals in their early teens are exposed to what has been traditionally saved for adulthood, all the while the age of independence climbs ever higher. The identifying markers of arriving at adulthood are shifting dramatically.

If we were to ask Tim and Sarah when they didn’t use a computer or mobile phone, they would probably answer with “I don’t remember; we always have.” The information age has brought with it unprecedented access

to the secular world. The average age for young people to receive their first mobile phone has dropped to an astonishing 11.6 years.⁷ And to call these electronic devices “phones” is a misnomer. They are mobile computers that grant an individual in the middle of Nebraska access to anyone and any digital material in the world. Yet the average age for a man’s first marriage is 28.2, and a woman’s first marriage is 26.1.⁸ This presents a paradox to adolescents and emerging adults. In essence, culture assaults young people with tasks (like managing a complicated sexual relationship) that scream, “grow up,” while systemic factors (like the value placed on higher education) implicitly tell them to slow down. Statistically speaking, Tim saw his first pornographic website at 11 years of age. Yet God’s Word indicates that he ought not be sexually active until he is married, which is the better part of two decades later. This gap is a significant challenge to the development and maintenance of a healthy single life, as well as a thriving marriage in the future.

How Do Emerging Adults Think and Feel about Marriage?

TO ASK AN EMERGING ADULT how they feel about marriage is to ask an emerging adult how they feel about sex. The two topics cannot be divorced. Yet, in Western society, sex has functionally been divorced from marriage. Countless books, articles, and research studies have indicated that the advent of birth control, the women’s rights movement, and the sexual revolution have all had profound impact on the nature of sexual activity across the world. Since the risk of pregnancy can be limited to 1 in 1000, prevailing (non) wisdom indicates that sexual activity need not be functionally limited to the context necessary to care for what sex creates. This isn’t to say that sexual perversion or promiscuity is a uniquely western or modern issue. The Apostle Paul clearly indicates that it was an issue for the people of his age as well.⁹ What is different today is the ease of access to information and population needed to carry out destructive sexual activity.

While modern technology can, and does, effectively eliminate many of the physical results of promiscuous sexual activity, the spiritual, psychological, and relational damage is alive and well in the 21st century. Smith et al. outline these very thoroughly, and in doing so articulate clearly the “dark side” of emerging adulthood.¹⁰

For Christians, sexuality is a moral issue. How we treat our bodies is important to God. How we behave sexually is a relationally systemic matter, and is therefore, a matter of how we treat our neighbor. For this generation of emerging adults, moral individualism best describes their moral compass. Moral individualism is characterized by the phrase so commonly heard from emerging adults, “Well if it makes him/her happy and it doesn’t directly affect me, then it’s fine with me if they . . . ” An individual’s internal psychological state becomes the standard for assessing moral behavior. This is seen quite clearly in the statistics regarding courting practices and sexual behavior among emerging adults.

- 84 percent of never-married 18–23 year-olds have had sex.
- 95 percent of the American public had their first experience of sexual intercourse before they got married.
- The typical 18–23 year-old has had an average of three oral sex partners and three intercourse partners.
- Of those never-married individuals who have had intercourse, the average age of the loss of virginity is 16.¹¹

For some the one-sidedness of these numbers indicates that men and women both have achieved unprecedented and much overdue sexual freedom. For them, sex is finally seen as just another tool toward individual, personal fulfillment. However, Smith et al. report that emerging adults often cite significant regrets regarding this behavior. Emerging adults reluctantly report the following regrets: becoming a parent and pregnancy scares, break-ups, abortion, STDs, loss of virginity, emotional complications, unwanted advances/rape, and the fact that

sex becomes meaningless. What is also clear is that these regrets are often tied to substance use and abuse. These regrets clearly demonstrate what happens when we creatures don't live in accordance with the Creator's Law. We suffer . . . together . . . as a society . . . as a church . . . as a family . . . not only as individuals. This is the problem with the moral individualism that guides the conversation regarding sexuality; human sexuality is never just an individual issue. It is never just an issue for the two, or sometimes more, involved in the act. The notion that "what happens behind close doors is their business" is categorically false.

Ironically, the frequent intimate contact with others for individual reasons leads to a lengthened period of relational isolation. Isolation is another theme that emerging adults report. If attachment to parents gives way to attachment to spouse in adulthood, then it makes sense that a long period without meaningful attachment would leave individuals feeling isolated and alone.

"Hooking-Up," "The Non-Relationship Relationship," and "The Test Drive"

WHAT MARKS THE BEGINNING of a courting relationship? Emerging adults indicate that "hooking up" is an increasingly acceptable way to "try out" compatibility. In fact, a 2007 study indicated that nearly half of unmarried opposite sex couples reported having sex before they began a "relationship."¹² When questioned about their sexuality, Sarah indicated that she had "to make sure she and Tim were sexually compatible. I would hate to be two years into the marriage and just feel like we weren't meant to be together." The two of them indicated that they spent the first two months of their relationship not getting "emotionally involved" but just "hooking up." While outside the realm of possibility for most of the readers of this periodical, this is an increasingly popular way to begin a relationship.¹³ In fact, where a previous generation would have a "one-night stand," never to see one another again for

fear of emotional difficulty, this generation accepts "hooking up" as an officially recognized relationship status. It becomes a "non-relationship relationship."¹⁴

This period of "hooking up" gave way to a short period of dating that ended in the "Test Drive." "I was living at home in my parents' basement, and she was having trouble paying rent after her roommate moved out, so I thought we should take living together for a Test Drive," said Tim about their current living arrangements. This is an astoundingly popular choice for this generation of emerging adults. In fact, for the first time in history, nearly half (49 percent) of the adult population is not married.¹⁵ Also, 44 percent of adults (ages 30–49) report having cohabitated, and 64 percent indicate that cohabitation is an appropriate step toward marriage.

Cohabitation is quickly becoming the norm. The "Test-Drive" isn't the only form of cohabitation. Increasingly, divorced adults, retirement-age adults, the elderly, and emerging adults see marriage as an unnecessary formality. Their reasons are many and various; however, most are tied to finances. Many divorced individuals would lose alimony or child support, widows and widowers would lose Social Security and other income-based financial aid, and many in the older generation see it as an unnecessary burden. Churches struggle to address the topic. I recently spoke with a pastor who indicated that he had a significant falling out with an elder because the elder's cohabitating daughter was to be married at the same time the pastor was asking the Board of Elders to support a stronger policy on cohabitation. This is not a unique story, but only demonstrates the need for a collective intelligence around the very difficult issues facing our churches, schools, and families.

Given that young people are having sex and living together, it shouldn't be surprising that birth rates to unwed mothers are sky-rocketing. Nearly four in ten births in America are to unwed mothers.¹⁶ The traditional picture of an unwed

woman unintentionally getting pregnant is not driving this statistic. Rather, single women, women in committed same-sex relationships, and women in heterosexual relationships with no intention of marriage are intentionally giving birth. The stigma attached to unwed parenthood has all but disappeared in the wider culture.

What about Marriage in Particular?

DON'T BE MISTAKEN; it isn't that emerging adults don't want marriage. In fact, many studies indicate that they are very much interested in lasting marriage.¹⁷ They just don't want their parents' marriage, or the path their parents took to get there. This generation of emerging adults is the product of an extremely high divorce rate. Statistically, nearly half of them bore witness to at least one broken marriage; many have witnessed their parents divorce more than once. Researchers and theorists believe that being the observers of so many broken relationships may contribute to the delay in getting married.¹⁸

The bleak picture painted in this article cannot overshadow the fact that research indicates that emerging adults still value marriage, and see marriage in their future.¹⁹ However, marriage seems like a much more strategic choice than an outpouring of the heart, or a decision to honor God's plan for Christian families. In addition, the previous two generations of emerging adults would have seen marriage in their immediate future. Gen-Ys see marriage as something that they want "someday."²⁰ Emerging adults cite financial stability, tax benefits, and legal benefits as the reasons for moving forward to marriage, while the previous generation cited "love."²¹

Gender

THE DOUBLE STANDARD still exists, and in many ways, it is significantly more damaging. In one ear young women hear that they are free to explore their sexuality, and in the other they are called derogatory names based on their sexual activity. Women, in



particular, report significantly higher levels of regret about their sexual activity than their male counterparts. This may be because men are significantly less likely to talk about or even allow themselves to reflect on those hurts. Whatever the reason, young women seem to bear the brunt of the sexually charged climate.²² Average depression scores for women are positively correlated with the number of sexual partners they have.²³ Sexual health and emotional health are tightly related, especially for women. It is imperative that we take an intentional look at the formation of our young people regarding these issues.



GLBT Issues and Marriage

GAY RIGHTS, same-sex unions, and gay-marriage are all profoundly delicate issues these days. It is outside the scope of this article to adequately address all the trends and implications regarding these issues. It is safe to say that the dominating moral individualism has led this generation of emerging adults to be significantly more tolerant of the idea of gay marriage. In fact, the most recent Pew Research Poll on the topic is titled *Broad Declines in Opposition to Gay Marriage*. The poll indicates that only 30 percent of 18–29 year-olds oppose gay

marriage, while 56 percent of 65+ year-olds oppose the same. More importantly, these numbers, in all age categories, have fallen by as many as 20 percentage points since 2004. Clearly, the traditional definition of marriage being the union of one man and one woman is no longer the norm.

Conclusion

TIM AND SARAH don't fully represent the norm, but by no means do they represent a slim minority. The narrative elements presented above have provided us all with scripts. Maybe the cultural script for the

church has been to “mind our own business” or to “honor the separation of church and state.” The scripts written by our culture for Tim and Sarah and the church need to be evaluated, edited, and the junk discarded. Lutheran churches, schools, and families now need to make what was an implicit and accepted aspect of family life, an explicit matter of formation and education. We might say, “This shouldn’t be a matter of corporate education; it should be taught in the home.” The truth is, the home isn’t as safe as we would like it to be. Shame regarding divorce, regarding poor sexual decisions in their own youth, and significant pressure from a permissive culture has led many parents to leave education regarding human sexuality and marriage up to MTV and Hollywood.

A wise mentor once shared with me that “there is no future in loving what God hates.” God hates sin. He’s not a fan of brokenness. It is safe to say that the faith lives of this generation and the next are linked, in countless systemic ways, to the way our families and marriages function in the world. While many of the statistics and general tone of this article may depress some, we ought to be hopeful. Maybe, through educational efforts like this edition of *Issues in Christian Education*, marriage and family, as it ought to, will reflect the intent of the Creator. There is nothing new under the sun. Throughout the centuries, God has used faithful and faith-filled husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, friends and neighbors as salt and light in hell-bent cultures and contexts. It doesn’t take expert analysis to notice that current trends in marriage and family don’t match up with God’s narrative. He commands us to live according to the scripts he has written for us. Finally, it is our task to educate and form one another in this narrative and these scripts for the sake of the Gospel, for the sake of the church, and for sake of marriages and families.

Notes

- 1 Tim and Sarah’s names and identifying life details have been changed to protect their identities.
- 2 For a discussion of *Emerging Adulthood* see: Arnett, Jeffery. *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).
- 3 Mark Regnerus & Jeremy Uecker. *Premarital Sex In America: How Young Americans Meet, Mate, and Think About Marrying* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 5.
- 4 Regnerus & Uecker, 5.
- 5 Christian Smith, Kari Christoffersen, Hilary Davidson, & Patricia Snell Herzog. *Lost In Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 13.
- 6 Regnerus and Uecker, 5.
- 7 Verizon Wireless study for parenting.com
- 8 US Bureau of the Census
- 9 See 1 Corinthians.
- 10 Chapter 4 of their book is titled “The Dark Side of Sexual Liberation” and is a sobering look at the sexual dysfunction of Gen-Y.
- 11 Smith et al., Chapter 4.
- 12 *Modern romance: Gen-Y is late to the wedding, but wants marriage*. In the February 13, 2012, issue of The Christian Science Monitor-CSMonitor.com.
- 13 Smith et al., 152.
- 14 *Modern romance: Gen-Y is late to the wedding, but wants marriage*. February 13, 2012, issue of The Christian Science Monitor-CSMonitor.com.
- 15 Pew Research Poll
- 16 Pew Research Poll
- 17 Regnerus & Uecker, 169.
- 18 *Modern romance: Gen-Y is late to the wedding, but wants marriage*. February 13, 2012, issue of The Christian Science Monitor-CSMonitor.com.
- 19 *Modern romance: Gen-Y is late to the wedding, but wants marriage*. In the February 13, 2012, issue of The Christian Science Monitor-CSMonitor.com.
- 20 Regnerus & Uecker, 170.
- 21 Pew Research Poll
- 22 Smith et al., Chapter 4.
- 23 Regnerus & Uecker, 140.



PAUL VASCONCELLOS

"The Two Shall Become One Flesh." What Does This Mean?

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MARRIAGE AS UNDERSTOOD by the Judeo-Christian tradition for well over 2,000 years is an embattled institution in America today. What is happening that growing segments of our society no longer share the church's high view of marriage?

Prominent factors certainly include divorce, cohabitation, pre-marital and extra-marital sex, as well as the homosexual political agenda which wants to normalize sinful behaviors and press for gay and lesbian "marriage," and a legal redefinition of marriage based on "equal rights," "justice," and "all you need is love." All of this, and more, is taking place in the context of a heightened cultural relativism,



individualism, and a so-called post-modern, post-Christian “whatever.” One is reminded of the book written by Dr. Karl Menninger, M.D., *Whatever Became of Sin?*

“And the two shall become one flesh.” What does this mean? The following is a discussion of the biblical meaning of marriage. As we highlight and underscore key biblical concepts, we will frame this discussion within the three categories of the Apostles’ Creed: God the Father and Creation, God the Son and Redemption, and God the Holy Spirit and Sanctification.

I. God the Father: In the Beginning

A. Creation

ACCORDING TO GENESIS 1, God made human beings in His own image, “male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). God created the sexual distinction in a unity

(humans as male and female) which forms the background and context of marriage. Whether within marriage or outside of it, this distinction in unity forms an integral and inescapable part of human reality. It denotes the broader relation of the sexes in which no person can exist without the female and no female without the male.

In Genesis 1 God has a purpose for humans as male and female. The commission is given that they should have dominion over the rest of creation. In other words, God appoints them as stewards (Genesis 1:28, “God said to them . . .”). As stewards of God they are to be conservators and trustees. Bound up with this commission is a prior command that they should be fruitful and multiply, not merely as an end in itself, but in order that the stewardship of God’s bountiful creation might be possible.

Propagation of the race demands that man and woman come together in the special union of male and female which makes procreation possible and which distinguishes marriage from every other relationship of the sexes. In creating humans as male and female, God not only creates sexuality in the broad sense as integral to created humanity, but He also institutes marriage as a specific expression and fulfillment of the sexual relation. In this first story, by inference from the divine commission, marriage itself goes back to God’s beginning with us and ours with God. It also carries with it the beginning of the family and the continuing possibility of marriage, so that both marriage first and family second have their origin, basis, and goal in the divine purpose, word, and action.

In Genesis 2 God makes the male first. He notes, however, the inadequacy of the solitary life (2:18). He then provides a companion who is distinct yet no less equally human (“bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (2:23). The coming together of man and woman—their marriage—constitutes a unity (“they become one flesh” (2:24) which carries with it the fullness of fellowship—companionship is emphasized here—and the perfecting of humanity itself. God is the

author of this union, and He establishes the first social relationship upon which human society will be built.

Notice some of the characteristics of this union. Genesis 2:24ff speaks of the man leaving father and mother to cleave to his wife. The words "cleave to" and "become one flesh" say that marriage, according to God's design, is to be a lasting union. Further, it involves an intimacy of fellowship even at the most basic physical level; they are naked to one another without shame (2:25).

What we see then in Genesis 1 and 2 is that God willed to create human beings in His image, male and female. God gave male and female the commission to replenish the earth and subdue it, so that reproduction has a theological and not just a biological and sociological validation. God made man of the dust of the earth and then made of man a similar but different human being who could be a companion and co-steward. As God authored humanity in general, so He authored the primal relation within it which comes to its fullest expression in marriage. Marriage lies within the gracious purpose of God for the human race, and its constitution comes directly with His creative Word, intention, and work, all of which are universal in their scope.

B. The Fall

THE DIVINE BASIS AND CONTEXT of marriage explain why obedience to the will of God is so important for it. Marriage can work only as it conforms to the purpose and work of Him who created and established it. However, marriage stands to lose most if disobedience interferes with the relation to God and hampers the fulfillment of His plan for humanity.

Genesis 3 tells of the disobedience of Adam and Eve. Their disobedience and unfaithfulness may be seen at once in a series of rapid consequences. First, the man and the woman, knowing good and evil, come under the sway of a guilty self-consciousness ("they knew they were naked" (3:7), and shame enters their relationship and spoils it. Second, a distortion of the partnership

itself occurs. This takes the form of male supremacy and rule. God Himself describes the new situation: woman's desire shall be for her husband and the husband shall rule over her (3:16). The mutuality of marriage, injured already in the act of the Fall, gives place to a hierarchy which contains the seeds of brutality, resentment, rivalry, and conflict. If marriage itself remains, its proper realization becomes infinitely more difficult. Third, humans are now estranged from nature. Both male and female forfeit the harmonious environment which God had willed and made for them. They now have to live out their partnership not only with its own inner distortion but also in the damaging circumstances of exacting toil, material care, and pain (3:17ff).

Yet, in pronouncing His judgments, God is not accepting the human-made situation in place of His own original design. He still retains His own purpose. And even before He shows how those who did not want what He planned will be affected by their refusal, He announces His Promise of a work of deliverance and restoration (3:15). In God's saving plan, first the relationship to God Himself will be restored, and with it will come the restoration of human relationships, too, including that of marriage and the family.

Further, there is much more in the Old Testament that gives testimony to the continued importance of marriage according to God's design. When He reveals the Ten Commandments to Moses, He includes two commandments that protect marriage and the family. God said, "You shall not commit adultery," and "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife" (Deuteronomy 5: 18,21). Mosaic law (Leviticus) protects the integrity and sacredness of a person, marriage, and family through prohibitions regarding rape, incest, prostitution, bestiality, and same-sex relations. And through the story of Hosea and Gomer, we see the story of God's unconditional love, mercy, and the redemption of Israel. Hosea also is a great sermon on marital love, mercy, and redemption (2:19).

II. God the Son: The Redeemer and the Redemption

THE HISTORY OF GOD with humanity reaches its uniquely decisive point when God Himself comes on the human scene with the Incarnation of the Word, as the man Jesus of Nazareth, the divine Son, enters into the conditions of human life, lives as a man, and goes through death and resurrection to accomplish the work of redemption and restoration both for this age and for eternity. In one transcendent yet historical event, God brings salvation for the whole human race.

In Jesus' teaching about salvation and the Kingdom of God, the First Commandment takes precedent (Matthew 22:36–38). Commitment to God must have priority over every other commitment. The radical mistake and sin of the human race are pushing God into second, third, or last place, or no place at all, of putting the will of self in place of the will of God, of giving higher value to other goals than to the purpose of God. Jesus cuts right through this. If the human situation is to be remedied, the fault has to be exposed and reversed. In fact, Jesus Himself must put His divinely commissioned ministry first: "Not as I will, but as thou wilt" (Matthew 26:39). So, too, must His disciples, as the bearers of the Good News of salvation accomplished in Him. No restoration of order can ever come without the restoration of a right order of relationship in which the relationship to God comes first, even before that of husband and wife.

Jesus certainly and clearly affirmed the theology of marriage as reflected in Genesis 1 and 2. Such pro-marriage statements, including God's will for permanency, can be seen, for example, in Matthew 19:4–6. Jesus is for marriage, however, only by being against it in the form in which it is attempted by those who do not put the commitment to God first. Man and woman can never achieve marriage as God intended it if they have their priorities wrong. The disorder of a wrong relationship with God will thwart the best intentions and efforts of those who are married. Primary commitment

to God does not compete with a legitimate commitment to marriage. On the contrary, it gives to both the possibility and the reality that they cannot otherwise have. Jesus puts marriage back again on a proper foundation by way of a recognition of the all-embracing sovereignty of God over all human life and destiny. In other words, Jesus puts marriage, as all other human relationships, under a proper First Commandment relationship with God (Matthew 22:34–38).

The dignity and significance of marriage are lifted up as Jesus uses wedding and marriage as metaphors for Christ and the Kingdom (Matthew 2:18ff; John 3:29; Matthew 25:1ff; Luke 14:20).

The Eucharistic sayings, moreover, include interesting references to the future banquet which will occur the next time that Jesus drinks wine with His disciples (Matthew 26:29; Mark 14:25; Luke 22:18). The disciples are those whom Jesus has appointed to eat and drink at His table in His Kingdom (Luke 22:30). The Gospels do not specifically describe this messianic banquet as a marriage feast, but Revelation seems to equate the two when it speaks of the marriage supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19:9; 21:9). If earthly marriage does not last into eternal life, the marriage of God and His people does. It is now portrayed as the marriage of Christ and the church. Here is the perfect relationship—the relationship in and with Christ, which replaces the highest of earthly relationships transcendentally and eternally.

We learn from all of this that as God made man and woman in His own image, so He made earthly marriage in the image of His own eternal marriage with His people. Marriage, for all its inadequacy, can serve as a comparison for Yahweh's relationship to Israel and Christ's to the church because it draws from this relationship its own essential character. This means that we are not to understand the true reality of God's union with us in terms of marriage but vice versa. We know the true reality of marriage from God's way of dealing with us and the inward and eternal fellowship that He established.



Marriage in the situation of human disorder does not measure up to the divine intention for marriage. But the will of God expressed by Jesus is that it should do so.

Unfortunately, on this side of Heaven, the only candidates for marriage are sinners. However, by faith in Jesus who died on the cross to save us, and rose again to bring us "newness of life," we are forgiven sinners (Romans 6:4) and a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). We are sinners and saints living in the tension of God's Law and God's Gospel. Constantly hampered by the old and only too familiar self, we find it hard to believe that we are really new, let alone to put this newness into daily practice. We are in Christ, and we must work out this truth in daily conduct, as God expects and requires of us. In our marriages, for example, we are now new husbands and new wives. Living as

God's children adopted by Him because we are in His Son, we no longer find it so important to get and to rule; we want to give more and to serve more. We see that agape love applies also and precisely in marriage. We are no longer those dead people fighting those dead battles and seeking those dead solutions. By God's gracious work of resurrection in Jesus Christ, we are new people with a new peace and a new basis for reconciliation.

Have we the power really to live out this renewal as those who in Christ are dead to sin and alive to God? In ourselves we certainly do not. God Himself, however, has provided us with the necessary power for renewal. He has done this through His Word and Sacraments and through the faith which they engender. Indeed, as God the Holy Spirit, He Himself is the power.

III. God the Spirit: *Spiritus* Creator and Our Sanctification

IN ROMANS 7:6 Paul says, "We serve . . . in the new life of the Spirit." Living according to the Spirit, we set our minds on the things of the Spirit (Romans 8:5). Therefore we have freedom to live the new life in Christ that can be exercised in every tangled relationship of life. It is ours to exercise in marriage as we follow the directions of the Holy Spirit and experience for ourselves His regenerating and life-renewing ministry. And when we do so, what does this look like? Let's look at some New Testament examples.

The Apostle Paul condemns homosexual conduct of males and females. Such behavior is not in accord with the truth and will of God (Romans 1:24–27; I Corinthians 6:9; I Timothy 1:10). And incest has no place in the Christian church and family (I Corinthians 5:1). Neither do adultery and fornication (Matthew 5:27; 19:18; Romans 13:9; I Corinthians 6:13). The Spirit will lead God's people away from these kinds of relationships and not into them. The renewal by the Spirit for the Christian takes the following form: "That each one of you know how to take a wife for himself in holiness and honor, not in passion of lust like heathen who do not know God . . . For God has not called us for uncleanness, but in holiness" (I Thessalonians 4:4f, 7). Led and inwardly impelled by the Spirit, the new man and the new woman can and should achieve a union of true love, not of conventionalized lust. Further, and therefore, Paul tells Christians to marry only Christians. He says bluntly, "Do not be mismated with unbelievers (2 Corinthians 6:14).

Marriage is good. Hebrews puts this forthrightly: "Let marriage be held in honor among all" (13:14). Part of this honoring consists in keeping the marriage bed undefiled and avoiding adultery. In the situation after the Fall, Paul discerns an additional and more negative reason for marriage: "Because of the temptation to immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own

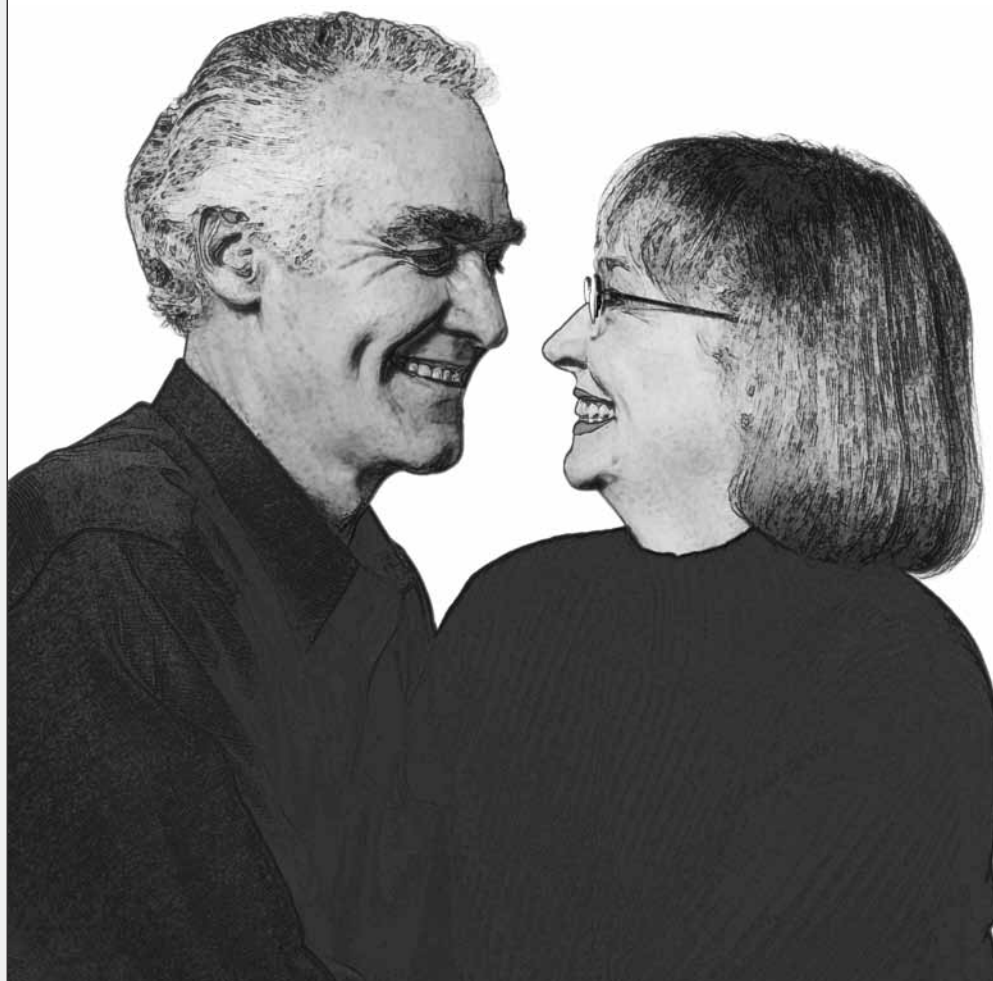
husband" (I Corinthians 7:2). Nor should Christian husbands and wives ever feel that they ought to withhold conjugal rights from one another. They may do this by common consent for limited periods, but in marrying they have given their bodies to one another (I Corinthians 7:3ff).

While marriage is good, it is not obligatory. Celibacy, too, is an option for Christians and should be prayerfully considered and respected (I Corinthians 7:8, 25ff.).

Life in the Spirit leads the new man and the new woman to mutual marital obligations. Three passages deal with these: Ephesians 5:21ff; Colossians 3:18ff; I Peter 3:1–7.

First of all, husbands and wives share equally in the gift of salvation and are joint heirs of the grace of life (I Peter 3:7). Second, husbands and wives share in a life together of mutual service. After all they are servants of Christ who did not come "to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28). All His followers are pledged to the same course. Neither in relation to God nor to one another can they claim the power or privilege of rule. If they want to be great, they can be so only by rendering service to others (Matthew 20:26ff.). And so, husbands and wives must be "subject to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Ephesians 5:21).

The husband is to love his wife as he loves his own body. This means that he is to nourish and cherish her (Ephesians 5:28ff.). And love of this kind excludes harshness (Colossians 3:19). It also calls for considerateness (I Peter 3:7), and honor must be shown to the wife. In her position as the equal second partner in marriage, she is to be accorded full dignity by her husband, as the equal first partner. The wife for her part should express her love by showing to her husband the subjection which denotes respect (Ephesians 5:22; Colossians 3:18). The reverent and chaste behavior of the wife commends the Gospel, and God values highly the inner adornment of a gentle and quiet spirit (I Peter 3:1ff.). The



final recommendation in I Peter 3:6, like the initial one in 3:1ff, suggests that this aspect of the direction applies particularly to wives who have been converted but whose husbands are still non-Christians. These wives have a chance to win their husbands to faith, but they do so best, not by bossing or nagging them, but by showing forth the servant-spirit of Christ in their lives. In similar testimony to the Gospel, Titus 2:4ff recommends that younger wives be taught to love their husbands and to express this love by being sensible, chaste, domestic, kind, and submissive. Young men, for their part, should give evidence of their love by the exercise of self-control (2:6).

St. Paul endorses the teaching of Jesus that Christian marriage be permanent. Paul states this clearly and categorically in I Corinthians 7:10ff. Behind this direction stands the authority of the Lord: "I give charge, not I but the Lord." This injunction thus repeats and interprets Christ's own saying about divorce in the Gospels.

Finally, Scripture offers special instruction to the bishops (presbyters) and

deacons of the church. Both the bishop (I Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:6) and the deacon (I Timothy 3:12) must be the husband of one wife. These ministers should set for all others an example of a solid and lasting marital commitment.

In this brief discussion of marriage in Holy Scripture, we see that marriage is God's creation, and His will is universal, "and the two shall become one flesh." He creates gender distinctiveness and gender complementarity in mutual companionship. His intention is for sexual relations to be between a man and a woman within the covenant of marriage, not outside of it. They shall procreate as stewards of the Creator. However, sin has impacted marriage and the family as all else. Yet God hasn't changed His mind nor His plan for people, for marriage, and for the family. He sends His Son and accomplishes His redemption through the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus the Christ. He calls and gathers a new people by the Spirit through the Word. He empowers them with His Spirit and calls them to faithfulness

and service in all things, and certainly in marriage and family life. As God's people read and hear His Word, they see that Jesus and the Apostles not only affirm God's intention and will for marriage, but also receive the Spirit's instruction for sanctified living in marital and family relations.

Some Concluding Thoughts

THE MINISTRY OF THE CHURCH is both a ministry of proclamation and a ministry of education for all ages and stages. Our contemporary challenge is not just to proclaim and teach the biblical theology of marriage, but also to join this with an education on biblical ethics and morality which will provide God's people with moral guidance and direction for the life of Christian discipleship and stewardship within the Church and also in the public square. In marriage one man and one woman become "one flesh," and they cooperate with the Creator in procreation. They will follow God's will and His normative reality, and they will learn how God's way provides for the health and safety of marriage and the family in the context of a chaste and decent life.

In view of some of the currents of contemporary society and some political agendas, the Church must clearly teach that Christians cannot engage in and/or support homosexual behaviors, partnerships, or "marriages." It must be clear to note that it is not, in the first place, a matter of "mutual consent," and/or "so long as they love each other." It is not in the first or even the second place a matter of "civil rights" or "equal opportunity." It is, in the first place, and always, a matter of biblical ethics and morality. It is a matter of the First Commandment and what that means for faith and life. It is a matter of teaching the biblical message that homosexual behaviors are sinful and contrary to the will of God (e.g. Leviticus 19:22; Romans 1:24–27). Therefore homosexual partnerships, and the sexual behaviors within these partnerships, are sinful, and they cannot in any way be equivalent to the biblical concept

of marriage. And to radically redefine marriage and legalize such partnerships is morally wrong.

For the single person, for the married who are childless, for the married with children, for all Christians in various states and circumstances, St. Paul's words apply: "I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12: 1–2). This, of course, includes "and the two shall become one flesh" with all that this means.

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TODD A. BIERMANN

How Congregations Can Be Proactive and Evangelical in Marriage Education

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How beautiful and pleasant you are,
O loved one, with all your delights!
Your stature is like a palm tree,
and your breasts are like its clusters.
I say I will climb the palm tree
and lay hold of its fruit.
Oh may your breasts be like clusters of
the vine,
and the scent of your breath like apples,
and your mouth like the best wine.

A QUOTE from the latest romance novel? The musings of a teenage boy in the full blown enchantment of youthful lust? NO! They are the words of Solomon in his "Song of Solomon," the seventh chapter . . . right out of the ESV version of the Bible. Too erotic for

such holy pages? Too carnal in their focus? Not at all! These are the beautiful words of a man who is totally in love with his dear beloved bride. They are the words of one who is living out his high calling to be a husband in the way that God intended; a husband who loves his wife with a selfless, unconditional, intoxicating love that delights in the complete beauty of his wife in every way: spirit, mind and body. They are words that bring to vivid life the way each and every Christian is loved by The Bridegroom, Jesus Christ.

The love that Jesus Christ has for us as His bride is wonderful beyond full comprehension. It is a love that led Him to become flesh, to suffer, to die and to rise for us. It is a love that has won our justification. We are now pure and holy in the sight of our heavenly Father. The incredible degree of this gracious love doesn't make sense to our sinful minds. It is for this reason that God has built into creation a living illustration of the love of Christ. God's institution of marriage gives us an incarnate picture of the union between Jesus and every Christian. This is the point made by St. Paul in Ephesians 5:31–32 as he states, "'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church." It is "mysterious" that Jesus can love us so much. Not that it is something we can never comprehend at all, but that it is something which leaves us standing awe-struck and open mouthed when we start to grasp how wide and high and deep is this love of Jesus for . . . me! Jesus is the perfect husband. He fulfills the call of this passage for a man to leave his home, cleave to his wife and become one flesh with her. Jesus left the glory of heaven to be born as a helpless babe in a dirty, stinky world full of the muck and mire of sin. He chose to cleave to us by uniting with us in every way except for sin, taking our sin upon Himself all the way to the cross. He gives Himself to us in the bread and wine of His holy Supper, making us one flesh with Him in a truly incredible and intimate way. In

this way, Jesus claims us as His perfect bride, made holy through our union with Him. Every time a husband and wife love each other in the way that God intends, they are serving as a living picture of the way that Jesus has first loved us. They serve to unravel the mystery of this awesome love. They help an incredulous world see and believe that love can truly be completely selfless and sacrificial. They show that love is not a fleeting feeling, but an enduring commitment that remains true to spouse unconditionally. They make it vividly clear that sexual union is none other than the physical culmination and seal of a sacrificial and unconditional commitment between one man and one woman for life. They provide every one of every age level and from every place on earth with an illustration of Christ's justifying love that makes us one with Him for eternity.

Marriage: Teaching God's Intent

IT IS FOR THIS REASON that education about marriage must be an integral part of life in a Christian congregation. It is not only marriage that is at stake. It is the heart of the Gospel itself. Marriage education should be seen as an important way to place the awesome grace of Christ into a context that is comprehensible.

The starting place for education about marriage in the Christian congregation is for the educators to be in a healthy marriage relationship with Jesus Christ. One can never teach about this relationship if he is not, first, the recipient of its blessings. It is in our relationship with Christ that we receive the benefit of His sacrifice for us. We receive the forgiveness for all our relationship failures that He purchased for us through His death and resurrection. It is also when we stand as the bride of Christ that we learn to truly grasp the depth of unconditional love. The fact that He never ceases to love us even though we turn our back on Him time and time again is overwhelming to us. It humbles us, but also fills us with exultant joy to know that we are still loved even though we don't deserve it at all. Finally, Christians who are touched by the physical love of Christ each



time they kneel to receive His very Body and Blood at His table are led to understand the intimate “one-flesh” union that is possible in the context of perfect love. Marriage, as God intended it to be, is understood most clearly by the bride who continually basks in the perfect love of the Bridegroom, Jesus Christ. One who receives this love of Christ is filled to overflowing with its Gospel power. When an educator is regularly renewed through this marital bond with Christ, he or she is ready to teach others about the blessings of marriage in God’s way.

The first one in the Christian congregation who has tremendous opportunity to teach others about the blessings of marriage in God’s way is the pastor who stands in the stead of Christ in that congregation. A pastor teaches about perfect marital love as he sacrificially reaches out to others in their time of need, as he accepts all people unconditionally, as he freely absolves the sins of the penitent, as he places his hands upon the sick, as he feeds hungry souls with the Body and Blood of Christ . . . as he faithfully

represents the Bridegroom in an incarnate way. The pastor serves as a model for every husband when he stands in the stead of Christ to deliver His gifts to His bride.

The pastor is also a powerful teacher about marriage as he follows Christ’s example in his own family. The pastor who leaves his selfish ways to love his wife unconditionally is providing a visible glimpse into the mystery of Gospel-centered marriage. He teaches about proper physical love between a man and his wife when he shows proper physical care for his wife in public. He should never be ashamed to hug his wife, walk with her hand-in-hand, open doors for her, sit with her at meals, and, most of all, kneel with her at the Lord’s table. He should also be fearless in defending a weekly date night with his wife as an important place-holder in his calendar. Rather than apologizing for such behavior, the pastor should boldly defend these things to be an important part of his high calling to be a teacher of the Gospel of Christ. The first ones to benefit from such education tactics by the pastor will be his wife and

children. They will be touched by the Gospel of Christ in a way that countless sermons could never do. So also, the members of the flock will see and be touched in a profound way by the visible example of a pastor who faithfully portrays the Bridegroom, Christ.

Of course, education about marriage in the Christian congregation is not limited to the work of the pastor. Every church worker has tremendous power to be a positive example and witness about marriage in God's way when he or she allows this teaching to shape his or her entire worldview. Relationships marked by self-sacrifice, unconditional care and appropriate physical affection are ways for every church worker to point all eyes to Christ and His perfect marital love. As these church workers then explain the mystery of such love as being revealed in Christ, they will be able to proclaim the Gospel in a powerful way that will heal those who have been hurt by the selfish, temporary and lustful ways of this world.

A Congregation's Role

EVEN THE DAILY OPERATIONS of the Christian congregation can be a means to teach people about God's way for marriage. Love that is sacrificial, unconditional and incarnational (showing proper physical care for another) should be the hallmark of all activities in the Christian congregation. These values should be held up as the way in which the staff interacts with each other on a daily basis. They should guide the rapport in congregational meetings. They should manifest themselves in activities focused on outreach to the community. People should be led to declare, "See how they love one another . . . with the same kind of love that Jesus Christ has shown to His bride."

That last point may cause you to erupt in cynical laughter, but it brings up a very important point. When a Christian congregation is doing a proper job of educating its members about marriage, it will have an impact far beyond the congregation. Even unbelievers will notice when we are self-sacrificing in our care for each other.

They will see us exhibiting unconditional acceptance of each other and every one we encounter. They will be the eager recipients of our efforts to reach out and care for the physical needs of the sick, the hungry and the homeless. They don't have to know that we're acting in the way we've been taught by our Bridegroom Jesus as He has shown such love to us. They will simply be glad to receive such love. They may also be led by the Holy Spirit to eagerly listen to our Gospel witness as we explain the reason for the way we're behaving. Some may even be moved to repent and receive the joyous gift of being united in marriage with The Bridegroom, Christ.

Still, if a congregation is going to be a witness about marriage and the Gospel for all in the world to see, every member of that congregation should be receiving guidance on how to live it and explain it. They all need to understand their relationship to Christ as His beloved bride that is the recipient of His perfect sacrificial, unconditional and incarnate love. And, having been justified through such gracious love, they need to be led to live by such love in their own relationships. One of the worst things that can happen in a Christian congregation is for the pastors, teachers, leaders and/or members to fall into marriage hypocrisy. This is what happens when they receive the love of Christ with joy, but then go and deny that love by the way they live . . . in selfish, conditional and physically destructive ways. To overcome such hypocrisy, marriage education should begin with the tiniest of children in the congregation and continue throughout the lifetime of every member.

Holistic Marriage Education

THIS IS THE HOLISTIC APPROACH to marriage education that has begun to unfold in my current congregation. It began with pre-marriage counsel shaped by the model of Christ and His love for His bride, the church. In pre-marriage work, I make it a point by always starting with a clear explanation of what it truly means to be a Christian. This includes instruction about the "marital" relationship between Christ

and the church. I unpack the teaching of Ephesians 5:31–32 and point out that Christ has saved us from sin and hell through His actions of leaving His place in heaven (sacrificial love), holding fast to mankind without limit (unconditional love) and taking that love to the point of physical death and resurrection for us (incarnational love). After leading the couple to confession and free absolution from The Bridegroom, I'm then able to direct them on how His love will continually bless their marriage. It will give them the forgiveness they need when they fail. It will guide them to practice the same kind of sacrificial, unconditional and incarnational love that God prescribed as His way for marriage all the way back in Eden (cf. Genesis 2:24). It will lead them to a marital love that will not only endure, but fill them with growing joy and delight in one another for as long as they both shall live. Such pre-marriage counsel has been eagerly received by most couples and has yielded strong and lasting marriages. Of all the couples that I've instructed on marriage in God's way, the ones that I know to have failed are few and are clearly the result of couples who have chosen to abandon the love of The Bridegroom in preference for love according to their own way.

Also flowing out from the same Ephesians 5:31–32 starting point has been effective marriage crisis and enrichment counsel through one-on-one encounters, Bible studies, sermons and seminars. The one-day "Marriage in God's Way" seminars led by my wife and me each quarter have continued to be well-received by married couples and those intending to be married. Couples are living what they're learning in a way that's visible to others. This success has also been seen in the many other places where we've led this "Marriage in God's Way" seminar, from Alaska to Guatemala and Paraguay. God's way for marriage is so foundational that it spans all barriers of culture and age.

Speaking of age barriers, this has been no problem with imparting marriage education based on Ephesians 5:31–32 to all ages in the congregation. Our preschoolers

are instructed about the sacrificial and unconditional love of Jesus. They receive the incarnate love of Jesus from teachers who hug them and kiss their "boo-boos." They, too, are able to grasp that this is the way that mommies and daddies are supposed to love each other. It gives them a healthy foundation of marriage education. From there, we continue to instruct the children in the same principles of sacrificial, unconditional and incarnational love. In junior confirmation instruction, the youth eagerly listen as I instruct them on marriage in God's way. They grasp the fact that they are precious in God's sight as the beloved bride of Christ. This helps them to understand that they don't need to have a boyfriend or girlfriend to be special. They also appreciate that sex outside of marriage is a cheap imitation of the perfect physical union that is possible only between a husband and wife who have left mother and father to hold fast to a spouse in a lifetime bond. Rather than denying them a great source of fun, we give them an early marriage present that is worth the wait. Coming from a context of selfishness, betrayal and abuse, these young people have no problem grasping the value of marital love that is sacrificial, unconditional and appropriately incarnational. They're hungry for more knowledge on how to have such love.

Therefore, they're eager to learn more about their perfect Savior and Bridegroom, Jesus.

Instruction on marriage in God's way is also a core topic in our new member instruction classes. It also has a regular place in sermons, Bible studies, small groups and even gatherings of the seniors group in our congregation. The elderly also see the value of continuing to learn from Christ for their relationship issues. Drawing on the model of Christ, we have a ready tool that addresses the problem of older individuals falling into cohabitation for convenience. Such an arrangement lacks the complete sacrifice and commitment essential to having a close and constructive relationship that is continually drawing on the forgiveness and strengthening of Christ and is providing a faithful witness to the world.

Be Proactive!

MARRIAGE EDUCATION in the congregation must be approached proactively. It cannot wait until a couple is about to stand at the altar. It must start with the youngest of children and continue for life. This education must also remain focused on The Bridegroom, Christ, who forgives our failures and points us to His better way to love in all our relationships, especially in marriage. Such understanding is gained, first and foremost, through regular reception of the means of grace, the Word and Sacraments of Christ. This understanding grows as the Word of Scripture is explained further, particularly starting with an exposition of the "mysterious" truths in Ephesians 5:31–32. Understanding of marriage is certainly enhanced as the pastor, teachers and other church leaders model the marital love of Christ in their own marriages. Walter Trobisch, in his foundational book for marriage education, *I Married You*, wisely states, "Don't forget: the testimony which you give with your own married life does more than a hundred lectures on marriage!" (Trobisch, 1989, p. 69). Marriage education in the congregation is also enhanced by drawing on many other good resources that focus on the model of Christ and His perfect love for the church according to the principles laid out in Ephesians 5:31.

Resources

THE BASIC IDEAS presented in this article are treated at length in my doctoral dissertation, *A Worldview Shaped by Marriage in God's Way*, that will hopefully be published soon. This volume will also include the basic leaders' outline for my *Marriage in God's Way* seminar. Other helpful resources include the Bible study from CPH titled *Marriage by God's Design*, the resource by Dr. David Ludwig titled *From Me to We*, and many items from *Family Life* and *Focus on the Family*. The key is that all marriage education materials should hold up Christ as our source of love in that we must first receive His perfect love before

we can show love. These materials must also point to the model Jesus gives to us as He perfectly exemplifies marriage the way God established it in Eden, marriage that is sacrificial, unconditional and incarnational.

When a Christian congregation acts proactively and evangelistically in its marriage education, it will be fostering marriages that will be strong, enduring and filled with the matchless joy of the Lord. Such education will also support the congregation's effort to fulfill its call to be disciples of Jesus who are making disciples of Jesus. As Chris Mitchell wrote in *The Lutheran Witness*, "... we have the opportunity to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ's redeeming love for His bride, the Christian church. His faithful, exclusive love shapes Christian marriage, which can be an evangelical witness to the world" (Mitchell, 2008, p.7). The congregation that models and teaches marriage in God's way (as summarized in Ephesians 5:31–32) is not only guiding couples to great and lasting marriage, but it's also serving as an instrument of the Holy Spirit to direct eyes to the justifying love of the perfect Bridegroom, Jesus Christ. It's helping them to grasp the wonderful mystery that Jesus says of them (as Solomon reminds us), "How beautiful and pleasant you are, O loved one, with all your delights!" Not only will marriages prosper, but souls *will* be saved.

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book reviews

The State of Our Unions: Marriage in America 2011.

Charlottesville, VA: The National Marriage Project, University of Virginia
and New York: Institute for American Values, 2011.

Founded in 1997 at the University of Virginia, the National Marriage Project, NMA, is an interdisciplinary, nonpartisan initiative whose mission is "to provide research and analysis on the health of marriage in America, to analyze the social and cultural forces shaping contemporary marriage, and to identify strategies to increase marital quality and stability." To accomplish this task, one of the goals of the NMA is to publish *The State of Our Unions*, which annually examines the current health of marriage and family life in America.

The 2011 edition of *The State of Our Unions* examines the impact of parenthood on marital and couple satisfaction. Although a significant amount of literature through the years has shown correlations between parenthood and lower levels of marital satisfaction, it is certainly not true in all cases. For the minority that did not experience declines in marital satisfaction, ten factors are identified that are the best predictors of both men and women successfully navigating the waters of parenthood and marriage. One of those factors, marital spirituality, is very strongly related to happiness in marriage.

The General Social Survey, The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, the "Survey of Marital Generosity" and other research, all with large nationally representative samples, are used to compare married, non-married, and single parents.

While it is beyond the scope of this review to list all the findings and comment on the implications for Christian educators, there are trends and discoveries that may be of interest and may, in fact, be considered profound. Some of the research in charts,

graphs, and in narrative form confirms trends and will come as no surprise to observers of society. However, it may contradict views of pop culture. For example, the portrayal of the joys of single parenting in media is in stark contrast to research showing that single parents are the most likely parent group to experience depression.

The most recent data show few changes in recent trends such as: increasing age at marriage, increasing number of single adults and co-habiting couples, and a steep decline in the number of adults who are married.

However, other data may be surprising, such as:

Declining numbers of households containing children, leading to a less child-centeredness in society [note implications for churches];

Couples where husband and wife both say God is the center of their marriage score sharply higher (26 percentage points) on a marital satisfaction scale. (A profound difference, much greater than a practice of religiosity.);

A high percentage of teens say having a good marriage and family life is very important to them, yet there appears to be no significant reversal in the decline in the number of people who are married; The prevalence, acceptance, and negative impact of co-habitation on future marriages and parenthood are given considerable attention and should be duly noted;

The divorce rate is actually very low if you have a higher than average income and education as well as an intact family of origin and religious affiliation factors;

State of Our Unions is not a book of answers but an excellent diagnostic tool that should have a place along with local assessments in designing programs to strengthen family life. Good programs must be based on accurate assessments, not on popular assumptions that may or may not be valid. *State of Our Unions* provides

nationally representative, high quality research that one can confidently use as a basis for understanding the milieu of contemporary family life in America and how to respond. It is an excellent resource for foundational information. *State of Our Unions* confirms that intentional ministry that strengthens family life, provides marriage preparation, education and enrichment, and partners with parents in rearing children of faith is sorely needed in our churches and schools.

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Family Vocation: God's Calling in Marriage, Parenting, and Childhood.

Gene Edward Veith, Jr. and Mary J. Moerbe. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012.

Expanding on his *God at Work* volume, Gene Veith partners with his daughter, Mary J. Moerbe, to apply Martin Luther's doctrine of vocation to the family. The authors begin with a discussion of the current state of the family and its struggle to survive in the midst of profound cultural confusion of the institution of marriage, parenthood, singleness and sex, with Christian families not being immune to these challenges. On the other hand, while our culture is far from the Reformation, we are not far from the truth of the Gospel and its work within Christian families. And, within the family, each member has one's own vocation, that is, one's own calling. The authors weave an important distinction between calling and responsibility, as calling acknowledges God's work while responsibility is focused only on the Law.

Veith and Moerbe proceed to explore God's calling in three parts: marriage, parenting and childhood. In their discussion of marriage, they highlight the vocation of husband and wife. Husband and wife possess specific callings, with service toward the other as primary. The authors continue this discussion with a thorough Bible study on sex as the "particular and defining work" of marriage. Part One concludes with a look at the power of Christ's forgiveness for us, and the need for spouses to forgive one another, especially as it relates to the potential for bearing crosses within the context of marriage.

Part Two encompasses the vocations of parenthood: parenthood, the offices of mother and father, raising children and the crosses of parenthood. Part Two naturally flows from the authors' earlier considerations of husband and wife joining together as one flesh. This one flesh connection engenders a human life, a product of what God has brought together in marriage, allowing man and woman to participate in His creative process. Father and mother, according to their calling as parents, are to raise their children in an environment of love, respect, boundaries and grace. God does good work for children through their parents.

In Part Three, Veith and Moerbe discuss childhood, growing up and the crosses of childhood, as well as the rest of the family and a conclusion for restoring the family. Despite all human efforts, it is God who works restoration in families. He is the one who builds the family and who is present in the family. He protects and defends the family from all things that threaten its very existence, including cultural forces. He is still the one who calls each of us into families. God still blesses each of us through families. Our Father is the one who has restored each one of us, in spite of our sinful rebellion, by the suffering, death and resurrection of His one and only Son, Jesus Christ.

In terms of *Family Vocation* and its potential influence on marriage education, there are at least two implications for congregations to consider: First, viewing marriage education through the lens of Luther's doctrine of vocation means churches must look beyond

a basic premarital course with the pastor to a much broader scope and sequence which includes marriage and family vocational instruction, beginning in early elementary years and continuing through middle school, high school and young adulthood, with an emphasis on the offices of husband and wife as a calling from God. Second, churches would do well to connect engaged couples with mentor couples who walk alongside them in the early years of marriage to help them through the joys and challenges that occur in all marriages. These mentor couples could be trained to assist husband and wife to more fully understand their calling in the vocation of marriage.

The authors conclude *Family Vocation* with a powerful proclamation: "The message is simple, though the task can be carried out only through the cross of Christ: Love and serve your wife. Love and serve your husband. Love and serve your children. Love and serve your parents. Love and serve."

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Marriage and Relationship Education: What Works and How to Provide It.

W. Kim Halford. New York: The Guilford Press, 2011.

Dr. Halford's book is an invaluable resource for marriage and family counselors and therapists, but even more so, for family life educators. Its applications arrive at a time when those couples who choose to marry are amenable, even eager, not only to continue and maintain their close, strong, mutually satisfying relationship, but to make a good marriage better. While creating and sustaining such a marriage and relationship can be challenging under the best of circumstances, Couple Relationship Education provides models and examples for learning and putting into practice specific skills, behaviors and attitudes to achieve

these goals. These learned and practiced skills perhaps may prove to be even more valuable when stressors, challenges and difficulties arise, as, no doubt, they will from time to time over the years. Also, such positive outcomes benefit not only the couple themselves but the families they create as well—and in the end—a stronger society.

At the heart of Couple Relationship Education is a strong emphasis placed on the notion of "self-change," or the concept of self-regulation. Whereas it is common—and all too human—to assess one's partner's behaviors, attitudes, and perceived foibles, the notion of self-examination, and the resulting act of self-regulation, does not come as easily. By stressing the need, actually the requirement, for self-knowledge and (hopefully) self-regulation, each partner is more likely to understand one another by virtue of having achieved better understanding of oneself. These are important first steps in both creating and maintaining a mutually satisfying relationship—whether between the couple themselves, with their children and extended families, and even among their social acquaintances or in the workplace.

Based on solid research and clinical applications evaluating various models of Couple Relationship Education, Halford offers substantial evidence of its efficacy when it is applied with sufficient duration and intensity. This requires strong emphasis on each partner's expectations for their relationship, the building of communication skills, ways to manage their differences and deal with conflict by assessing issues for self-change. Each of these areas necessarily demands adequate time and effort on the part of the couple to put into practice the information provided and the recommended exercises in order to apply such instruction.

While *Marriage and Relationship Education* is a valuable tool for practitioners, it also serves as a most useful training manual for both undergraduate and graduate students preparing for careers in any area of psychology, mental health, marriage and family therapy, family sociology, and even addiction intervention. Writing in an easy-to-read style complete with dozens of

specific guidelines, tools and lesson plans, Dr. Halford provides or references a full range of pedagogical helps from many models and programs. Included within the text are reproducible inventories, forms and handouts—a complete guide for both student and practitioner.

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TWO LUTHERAN MARRIAGE DVD RESOURCES

Marriage by God's Design

Tim and LeAnn Radkey,
Carl and Heidi Roth, and
Robert C. Baker.
Concordia Publishing House, 2010.
(# 203850WEB; Price: \$149.99)

In the midst of serious questions as to the definition of marriage, even within the Christian church, this DVD series provides a refreshing, penetrating look into the biblical basis of marriage. Throughout this four-session study, deeply connected to Scripture, the wonderful design of God's creation is clearly presented as the blessing of a family unit rooted in the marriage of a man and a woman.

The spiritual nature of marriage goes far beyond the cultural view of "domestic unions" through the power of the "one-flesh" union that is like the incredible union of Christ and the church. In the four sessions, the power of this spiritual union is developed to: 1) build a new family unit; 2) learn the deep meaning of love that binds the marriage together; 3) protect the family members from sin and show the radical, transforming power of God's grace; 4) and teach future generations about God's love in Christ.

Eight couples and three single parents are interviewed in the many DVD segments. This gives a real-life touch to the study,

showing that every marriage and family unit struggles, even in the marriage of President and Mrs. Harrison. These refreshing discussions also show the very real way that God's grace works within these families.

The study allows for ample discussion and would be best undertaken in a small group setting. There is a workbook for each participant and a leader's guide that is well written. Persons who use this resource gain a clear, biblical understanding of God's design for marriage.

The Power of WE

David J. Ludwig.
Concordia Publishing House, 2009.
(#203487WEB; Price: \$69.99
for DVD and DVD ROM)

In the midst of failed and struggling marriages in today's culture, this resource gives clear, practical guidance for building a strong marriage based on the biblical principle regarding the WE (the one-flesh union) as more important than ME (the hurt feelings and sense of unfairness that always swirls within this most-intimate of all relationships). This six-session series will give a couple the tools to develop a healthier relationship, acknowledging the critical role that faith plays in keeping a healthy home atmosphere.

The first four sessions focus on the four pillars of the marriage relationship.

The Intellectual Pillar grows stronger as the couple navigates through the automatic misunderstanding by learning how to listen and search out the other's soul (rather than endlessly refuting each other). The exciting concept of "Painters" and "Pointers" leads to a new way of communicating with each other.

The Emotional Pillar grows stronger as the couple views conflict as good and utilizes their frustration with each other to get to know each other better. Serious spiritual problems come from letting the "sun go down" when the mood shifts, giving

the devil a base of operations to keep a bad mood around ("freeze-dried mood particles").

The Spiritual Pillar grows stronger as the couple deliberately deals with situations (like parenting) by looking at each other and asking, "How are WE going to handle this?" When bad moods build up, the couple learns how to break through this "wall" of sin" through their faith as they pray together.

The Physical Pillar grows stronger as the couple shows appreciation for each other when they are physically present. Such intimate affirmation of each other helps strengthen the WE of their relationship.

The last two sessions take a deeper look at the ways relationships can become destructive and the role of confession and forgiveness in the life of the couple.

The video segments utilize professional actors, providing real-life scenarios for discussion. The actors also provide excellent modeling for the couple to focus on as they work on their own marriages.

The DVD ROM contains the leader's guide and the participant's books and can be printed out or put on a Kindle-type reader. Clear instructions are given to the leader for each of the sessions.

This study can be utilized in a Bible class setting, in small groups, with a mentoring couple (for pre-marriage), or by a couple alone.

This study is also available on Dr. Ludwig's web page: www.thinkwenotme.com. The web page also contains other material written by Dr. Ludwig for family relationships. He has also developed a resource for parenting with Lutheran Hour Ministries: www.parentingfamilies.com.

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