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Marriage... just a piece of paper?

For Christians, marriage transcends the mere physical and material. It has spiritual implications that extend beyond this life into the world to come. But what about the rest of mankind? Is marriage 'just a piece of paper'?

by James McBride

It's unnecessary to repeat here the statistics regarding marriage breakdown. Few of us are unacquainted with divorce - first or second hand. It results in much distress and in the disruption of lives beyond those of the immediate involved family. Children don't escape the pain - pain that stretches beyond the emotional disturbance caused by what is too often a long drawn-out war of attrition leading to the break-up of a home that was established in the warm glow of love and service. Behaviour, education, peer relationships, career are all affected.

Husband and wife, too, suffer. The material break-up of the family home carries severe financial penalty. The comfort of beloved established family traditions is swallowed in the loneliness of separation. Disputes over custody and property blight the family, with mutual recrimination and even a hatred that gnaws for years at the human spirit. Then there's the distress inflicted on *grandparents* and other relatives of both families, on friends, on colleagues.

Clearly divorce is not - usually - a happy situation.. Yet it is, too often, the first resort in foundering relationships. [Request the free articles *Spend a Lifetime - Together and The Edge of Divorce*]

A Valued Institution

No longer in Western society is marriage highly valued - by individuals, by government. In the United Kingdom, for example, financial incentives to encourage marriage have been whittled away to almost zero, while co-habitation and homosexual relationships are being given equal status with marriage.

Yet marriage is a universal cultural institution, though differing in form from society to society. Since the dawn of history the family grouping has been instinctive, and essential to an ordered society - it has "...provided the foundations for the social order in every known society". Marriage is recognized and highly prized by all the major

religions. Among the billion strong Hindu people the family is central, and that religion as such does not approve divorce. According to *Hinduism* marriage is a sacred relationship, a divine covenant and a sacrament - and lasts through several lifetimes! In *Judaism*, there is an elaborate marriage ceremony, and again - divorce is reluctantly permitted through the religious courts. In *Islam*, marriages are usually 'arranged' and are effected by a contract, confirmed by a bride dowry and by her consent in the presence of witnesses. In most Islamic societies, though, the divorce court is restricted to men.

Marriage is highly valued - at least, outside Western 'civilised' societies. Yet even today our society seeks to limit its breakdown. Divorce is not a complete free-for-all. Given the problems and tensions that can arise in marriage, there must be strong reason for such an institution to have been adopted universally - even in primitive tribal systems. Clearly, alternatives are unacceptable. Mere co-habitation is a fragile substitute, with such relationships disintegrating on small pretext, and especially when a child comes along. The homosexual relationship, while satisfying to a very few individuals, yet is a blind ally which would if universally adopted spell the death knell of humanity - by definition, there would be no offspring. Perhaps worse is the ally-cat mentality of rampant sexual permissiveness, with its legacy of broken lives, sexually transmitted diseases and superficial and transient relationships.

How, then, did the concept of marriage come about?

Origins

Evolutionists may say marriage developed as a convenience, the first identifiable humans taking the idea from parings noted among some primates from which they themselves supposedly derived.

Yet the notion of 'family' is deeply imbedded in the human psyche. Indeed it's the building block of civilisation - discounted only by the academic ravings of an elite totally out of touch with reality, and intent on

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justification of their own permissive philandering.

The origin of marriage is much more simple: *God created man and woman within days of one another*. The first man didn't have to wait a zillion years for the first woman to catch up with his evolutionary advance (or *vice versa*). The idea that two incredibly complex individuals who are so perfectly complementary could 'evolve' within a single life-time is the stuff of comic books.

No. *God created* mankind - the pinnacle of His creation: "God created man in his own image...male and female created he them" (Genesis 1:27).

Vital Lessons

Consider ancient Israel - the divine pattern for every sovereign nation. Although never fully embraced by them, God's instructions to Israel - based on His divine purpose for mankind revealed at creation - are a guide to the purpose of marriage. However much society has changed, there are vital lessons for our age. These fundamentals of marriage are the essential social adhesive designed to protect and maintain society. Jesus himself referred his opponents to this creation guidance (Matthew 19:8).

First, the man is to separate from his parents and 'cleave [be 'welded'] to his woman' - his equal, his complement, his counterpart. The pair would become 'one flesh' - physically (through their offspring), emotionally and in their life-style and aspirations. Each couple would establish a new dynasty. It was designed by the Creator to be a lifetime partnership. Adam and Eve (the 'mother of all living') were, said God, to '*be fruitful; multiply; fill the earth and subdue it*' (Genesis 1:28).

Constraints

God 'who inhabits eternity' - Himself a Family - shared life with models of Himself made from the physical elements. To protect and preserve such families God revealed some necessary constraints.

Marriage was a coming together of two 'clans' - it was not a whim, but carefully planned and bound by an agreed legal contract fair to both parties. Because of this, divorce was - originally - rare.

The law protected both children and property, and cared for both orphans and widows. That 'piece of paper' was essential to the stability of society. *It still is*.

Romance was certainly part of marriage, but the framework for stability was the marriage covenant and written contract.

No-go Area

Sexual activity that would frustrate the bearing of children was prohibited.

The people of Israel were warned to remove themselves from the practices of surrounding nations - nations which had abandoned the divine way. They had descended into practices God termed 'detestable': "*Do not lie with a male as with a woman; it is detestable; you shall lie with no animal whatever and defile yourself with it; neither shall a woman stand before an animal to commit lewdness with it; it is perversion. Do not defile yourself in any of these ways, for by all these practices the nations whom I am driving out before you are defiled*" (Leviticus 18:22-24).

The terrible pain inflicted on children coupled with the rising tide of sexually transmitted disease in our day should confirm the wisdom of this. Trampling over God's protective laws - which are '*for our good that he may preserve us alive*' (Deuteronomy 6:24) - always has adverse consequences.

Property rights, too, were among the various constraints on marriage. It's in our nature to be protective of what we have labored for, and marriage laws in Israel were designed to uphold this. The heart-break of broken marriage with its often unfair division of property is a scourge of our time and a drain on personal and community resources.

Maybe worse is the abandonment of children and the chaotic outcome that results from feckless co-habitation.

Children thrive best when settled in a stable home in which they are lovingly nourished and educated in true family values. The life-time commitment of a man and a woman provides the ideal environment for this. Sadly, many of today's parents are in ignorance of the principles that promote a successful life. Easy access to divorce undercuts commitment.

And co-habitation provides an easy escape hatch when faced with the inevitable adjustments within formal marriage. 'Marriage for life' is a challenge. But within its constraints there is the will to work out problems rather than the convenience of an open 'back door'.

Marriage, then, is much more than 'a piece of paper'. Enter it as a commitment for life - a covenant freely agreed between a man and a woman and made formal in the presence of witnesses. That's the divine way.

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