

Theology Matters

A Publication of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry

Vol 16 No 2 • Mar/Apr 2010

Is Marriage Worth Defending? Part II

by Alan F. H. Wisdom

Where We Are Today

The modern era has profoundly altered marital patterns. Several trends have shifted the emphases within marriage and the relationships between the married couple and the rest of society. In most cases, these trends have tended to weaken the marital bond.

First is the ideal of romantic love. This ideal, originally expressed within medieval extramarital relationships, has come to dominate much modern thinking about marriage. Romantic love locates the substance of marriage within the subjective feelings of the spouses toward one another. It is all about “two people who love each other.”

For thousands of years, of course, many spouses have cherished affection for one another. But romantic notions stimulate higher expectations: To be married, a couple has to be “in love,” consumed by an overwhelming desire for one another. And this desire is expected to persist through the course of the marriage. Husband and wife are to be “soulmates,” their love sufficient by itself to sustain them in a hostile world.

Romantic love tends to isolate the couple, marginalizing the traditional third parties to the marriage. The two families, the community, the church, the state, God himself—all are reduced to spectators applauding the

all-conquering love of the two. Indeed, romantics especially applaud couples who marry *against* the wishes of their families and the conventions of society.

The romantic view marginalizes the next generation as much as the previous one. With the focus on the psychological satisfaction of the spouses, children become an afterthought, dependent upon whether they add to or detract from their parents’ relationship. Romantics value sexual intercourse mainly as an expression of emotional intimacy, not as a means of procreation.

Romantic notions do not clearly distinguish marriage from other relationships that also involve “two people who love each other.” The wedding ceremony is regarded as a mere formality, the vows as a poetic flourish, the marriage certificate as “just a piece of paper.” These all are subsidiary, from the romantic perspective, to the powerful passion that they recognize and celebrate. This prioritization of passion naturally feeds the recent drive to equate cohabitation and same-sex relationships with marriage. It exalts the strong feelings that cohabitators and same-sex partners have for one another, even though their relationships differ from traditional marriages in other important respects (see pp. 13-14 of Part 1 in Jan/Feb issue of *Theology Matters*; and pp. 6-8 in this issue).

The romantic perspective places a tremendous weight of emotional expectation upon the two spouses. It leaves little to sustain them when marital realities fall short of expectations. When the romantic emotions waver or disappear, the marriage is thought to be “hollow,” “loveless”—indeed, hardly a marriage at all. There seems to be little reason to honor vows that were no more than “formalities” to begin with. Divorce appears to be the only honest course of action.

Marriage as Emotional Bond and Legal Contract

A second trend has the same effect of isolating the couple and facilitating divorce. In law and political philosophy, thinkers starting with the 18th century Enlightenment conceived marriage as just another kind of contract. Of course, there had been marriage contracts between families for thousands of years. But modern liberalism narrows the parties to just the two individuals being wed. Those two individuals can set the terms of their contract however they please. Each couple defines its own marriage, rather than looking to God or cultural tradition for some external definition. The recent practice of couples writing their own vows reflects this individualist approach to marriage.¹

If marriage is just another contract, then there is no necessary reason that it has to be a permanent or total union. Spouses can choose to withhold property from the union. They and the state can allow in advance for the dissolution of a marriage, if it no longer serves the interests of the contracting parties. The law increasingly treats the spouses as two autonomous individuals in a temporary and limited partnership. The biblical notion of the two sexes becoming one flesh has retreated from view. If marriage is an infinitely flexible contract, then the possibility of marriages joining members of the same sex—or even marriages involving more than two parties—is increasingly plausible.

When disputes arise between husband and wife, parents and children, the powerful modern state is prepared to step in. Yet at the same time, it is increasingly reluctant to use its power to maintain marital unity or compel observance of the marriage vows. Laws penalizing adultery or breach of promise have either been repealed or have fallen into disuse.²

This individualist trend culminated in the wave of “no-fault divorce” laws enacted during the 1970s. These laws make it much easier and quicker for a spouse desiring a divorce to obtain one. Instead of having to prove a violation of the marriage vows, the party eager to end the marriage can unilaterally declare it to be “irretrievably broken.” There is no requirement to prove this assertion, and no opportunity to rebut it.³

If the other spouse wishes to save the marriage—as 80 percent of “respondent” spouses do⁴—she or he has no legal leverage to move the divorcing spouse toward an attempt at reconciliation. “No-fault” divorces are granted almost automatically; the only items to be negotiated are the arrangements for dividing property and child custody. Marriage has become one of the least enforceable contracts under U.S. law.

Other modern trends affecting marriage have almost all pushed in an individualist direction:

- The economic functions of the marriage-based family have diminished. In pre-modern times the family served as the most basic unit of production, a principal source of education for the young, and the primary means of social insurance against sickness and old age. Now private corporations and the state have taken over many of those functions, and the bonds uniting husband and wife are correspondingly less important economically.
- Geographic mobility and urbanization separate many couples from the kinship and community networks that help to form and sustain marriages. Young couples are left largely on their own as they try to build lasting marriages.
- The wide availability of contraception has made childbearing within marriage a choice rather than an inevitable, essential part of the deal. Contraception offers the possibility—although hardly a guarantee—of carrying on a long-term sexual relationship without conceiving a child. Similarly, the availability of “assisted reproduction” technology has made it possible to conceive a child without marriage or any other sexual relationship. Marriage, sex, and childbearing—which had formed a strong three-legged stool upholding society—now no longer necessarily go together.

Marriage Weakens

Current social science statistics bear out the impression that marriage has weakened significantly. The U.S. marriage rate has declined steadily for nearly 40 years. (See Figure 1 at www.theologymatters.com, Mar/Apr issue). The 2005 rate of 40.7 marriages per 1,000 women age 15 and older is barely half the 1970 rate of 76.5.

The proportion of U.S. adults who are married went down from 68 percent in 1960 to 53 percent in 2007. Meanwhile, the proportion who are divorced climbed from two percent to ten percent.⁵ The share of 30 to 44-year-olds who had never been married grew from 7 percent in 1970 to 20 percent in 2005.⁶

What has happened to all the people who formerly would have married? Mainly, they have been delaying marriage. Surveys show that more than 90 percent of young people intend to marry someday,⁷ and demographers project that roughly 90 percent will eventually marry.⁸ But the median age at first marriage has been rising. In 1970 it was 21 for women and 23 for men. By 2007 the median ages were a full 5 years older: 26 for women and 28 for men.⁹

With the average onset of puberty going down from the mid-teens in the 19th century¹⁰ to about 11 today,¹¹ there is a widening span of years during which young people are sexually mature but not yet married. Most of these young people do not remain chaste, as Christian teaching would advise. The average age of first intercourse is 16.9 years for boys and 17.4 for girls.¹² Between these ages and the age of marriage—the better part of a decade, or more—most young people follow a pattern of serial monogamy, moving along a string of short to medium-term sexual relationships. The median number of sex partners reported by U.S. women is four; for men, seven.¹³

These averages disguise great variations. Nearly 30 percent of men tell of having 15 or more sex partners. On the other hand, 25 percent of women and 17 percent of men say they have had only one or no sexual partners in their lifetime.¹⁴ The Christian ideal of chastity in singleness and fidelity in marriage has not disappeared, although it is clearly a minority lifestyle.

The best documented alternative to marriage is cohabitation. The number of cohabiting opposite-sex couples has increased more than tenfold—from 523,000 in 1970 to 6.4 million today—about 5.5 percent of U.S. households. (See Figure 2.) A quarter of all U.S. women between 25 and 39 are currently living with an unmarried partner, and another quarter have done so previously.¹⁵ About 45 percent of cohabiting couples have children in their household. Most of these are the children of one partner (usually the woman) but not the other.¹⁶

The average cohabitation lasts about 15 months. By the two-year mark, almost half of all cohabiting relationships have moved on to marriage. Forty of the other 50 percent have dissolved. Cohabitations lasting more than a decade are statistically insignificant. When a marriage is preceded by cohabitation, the risk of divorce increases by 50 percent. Combining the breakup rates for cohabitation itself and for marriage after cohabitation, the probability that a cohabiting relationship will result in a lasting marriage is about 15 percent.¹⁷

Divorce

Not only are fewer marriages being formed today, but those that are formed are less likely to endure. The divorce rate per 1,000 married women skyrocketed a stunning 150 percent between 1960 and 1980. (See Figure 1.) Since 1980 the rate has fallen by more than 25 percent; however, the U.S. divorce rate remains among the world's highest. More than 40 percent of first marriages fail.

Three-quarters of divorced men will remarry, as will two-thirds of divorced women.¹⁸ But the odds of success for these remarriages are even lower: barely 30 percent. The presence of children from earlier marriages raises the risk of divorce still further. The complicated dynamics of “blended families” often prove difficult for both adults and children. Seventy percent of divorces involve children.¹⁹

Two-thirds of all divorces are initiated by wives.²⁰ Husbands seem more inclined to ignore marital conflicts and try to muddle through, whereas wives seem more driven to take action to escape conflicts that they perceive as intolerable. It is also true that some marriage-shattering offenses, such as adultery and physical abuse, are more often committed by men.

A Gallup poll reported the primary reasons divorced people cited for the breakup of their marriages. The top reason, named by 57 percent, was “incompatibility” evidenced in disagreements over matters such as money, childrearing, relatives, and household responsibilities. Adultery, the second leading cause of divorce, was cited by 17 percent of the poll respondents. Third was substance abuse, cited by 16 percent. Physical abuse was named as the primary reason for divorce by only five percent of the respondents.²¹

“What proportion of divorces are preceded by a long period of overt interparental conflict...?” ask family scholars Paul Amato and Alan Booth. “From our own data we estimate that less than a third of parental divorces involve highly conflicted marriages. Only 28 percent of parents who divorced during the study reported any sort of spousal physical abuse prior to divorce, 30 percent reported more than two serious quarrels in the last month, and 23 percent reported that they disagreed ‘often’ or ‘very often’ with their spouses.”²²

In the other 70 percent of divorces, Amato and Booth describe the conflicts as “encapsulated”: enough to cause dissatisfaction to the couple, but not enough to disturb their children. Children in such situations experience divorce as a thunderclap out of the blue, upsetting forever what they had assumed to be a stable family.

Another researcher, John Gottman, found few differences between the disagreements experienced by divorcing couples and those reported by couples that stayed together. The real difference appeared to be that the couples who remained married had better strategies for handling their conflicts. They were better able to keep open lines of communication, confront the issues between them with mutual respect, mix complaints with praise and affection, avoid an escalation of blaming and defensiveness, seek and grant forgiveness, and work out practical compromises.²³

These kinds of interpersonal skills can be learned and developed. It is not empirically true that an unhappy marriage is doomed to a downward spiral into divorce. Family scholars Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher observe:

The truth is shocking: 86 percent of unhappily married people who stick it out find that, five years later, their marriages are happier.... In fact, nearly three-fifths of those who said their marriage was unhappy in the late '80s and who stayed married, rated this same marriage as either "very happy" or "quite happy" in the early 1990s.²⁴

Changes for Children

The high divorce rate and lengthening delays in marrying are changing the shape of American society. A Census Bureau comparison of U.S. household types from 1970 to 2000 (Figure 3) shows major shifts. By 2000, married couple households were no longer the undisputed norm. They had declined from 70 percent of all households to 53 percent. Married couples with children had sunk from 40 percent to 24 percent.

More people lived alone—up from 17 to 25 percent of all households. The categories of "other family" (including single-parent households) and "nonfamily" (including cohabiting couples without children) also expanded substantially. Same-sex couples accounted for only 0.7 percent of all U.S. households.²⁵ In Massachusetts, a state with 2.4 million households,²⁶ there have been only 11,000 same-sex marriages registered since those were allowed in 2004.²⁷

The large number of "married couples without own children" are either young couples delaying childbearing or older "empty nesters" whose children have left the parental household. With increased life expectancy, the period during which parents are caring for children at home represents a narrower slice of the life cycle. Childbearing thus seems to play a smaller role in contemporary marital life, although it remains of crucial social importance.

The total U.S. fertility rate has fallen from 3.7 children per woman aged 15 to 44, in 1960, to near the "replacement level" of 2.1 children per woman. The proportion of women aged 40 to 44 who were childless almost doubled between 1976 and 2000, from 10 percent to 19 percent.²⁸ But more than 90 percent of American young people say they want to have children,²⁹ more than 80 percent of the women will bear children, and most of those will be born within a marriage.

The changes in marital patterns have altered the situation of American children dramatically. The proportion of children born out of wedlock has risen steadily from 5.3 percent in 1960 to 39.7 percent in 2007. (See Figure 4.) In most cases, the non-marital relationship that produced these children does not last long. A Head Start study showed that, at the time of an out-of-wedlock birth, the chance of the biological parents still being romantically involved was only 80 percent. Four years later, only 20 percent of the parents were still in the relationship. When an unmarried father is no longer involved or living with his child's mother, it is rare that he plays a significant role in his child's daily life.³⁰

Divorce also separates children from their fathers. The combined effect of divorce and out-of-wedlock births raised the proportion of children living with a single parent—usually a single mother—from 9 percent in 1960 to 28 percent in 2006. (See Figure 5.) Over the same period, the proportion living with two married parents dropped from 88 percent to 67 percent.

The proportion of children residing with their own two biological parents, married to one another, was still lower: a mere 61 percent in 2007.³¹ It is estimated that more than half of all U.S. children will spend a portion of their childhood living apart from their father.³² Only 44 percent of teenagers are still living with both married parents.³³

'Separate and Unequal Families'

These marital and childbearing patterns play out very differently according to the incomes, educational levels, and races of the parents. Kay Hymowitz, in *Marriage and Caste in America*, goes so far as to speak of America as "a nation of separate and unequal families." Highly educated, high-income people have a "life script" that instructs them: Get your education first. Then get married. Then have children. Then stay married. In fact, most people in that socioeconomic class succeed in following the script. They are less likely to cohabit, and when they do cohabit, they are more likely to turn the relationship into a marriage—and to have children only after it becomes a marriage.

By contrast, Hymowitz explains, people with less education and lower incomes no longer have such a clear script. Poorer and less educated young women, too, would like to get married and have children; however, they no longer necessarily put the one before the other. They do not see enough men whom they trust to be faithful husbands and dependable fathers. So they enter a series of cohabitations and other sexual relationships with little expectation of marriage. Children often result from these relationships, and those children then complicate the prospects for marriage.³⁴ When the poorer and less educated do marry, their marriages are more likely to fail. These higher rates of divorce and out-of-wedlock childbearing are particularly prevalent among African-Americans.

The statistics bear out these generalizations. Among women with a high school education or less who gave birth in 2005, 55 percent were unmarried. In stark contrast, only eight percent of mothers with a college diploma were unmarried.³⁵ Hymowitz illustrates the difference according to income: “Virtually all—92 percent—of children whose families make over \$75,000 a year are living with both parents. On the other end of the income scale, the situation is reversed: only about 20 percent of kids in families earning under \$15,000 live with both parents.”³⁶

Census Bureau statistics show that, among blacks 35-39 years old in 2007, only 45 percent were married. Over 70 percent of whites in that same age bracket were married.³⁷ Among black children born in 2007, 28 percent were born to married parents and 72 percent out of wedlock. The numbers for non-Hispanic white children were exactly reversed: 72 percent born to married parents and 28 percent out of wedlock. (See Figure 5.) In 2006 only 35 percent of black children lived with two married parents. The figure for whites was more than double: 74 percent.³⁸

The Evidence Is In: Marriage Is Better for Adults ...

It is ironic that, at a time when marriage is weakening in so many sectors of U.S. society, the social science evidence has come in strongly affirming the benefits of marriage for both adults and children. Married people are healthier. A team of scholars assembled by the Institute for American Values concluded: “In most developed countries, middle-aged single, divorced, or widowed men are about twice as likely to die as married men, and nonmarried women face risks about one and a half times as great as those faced by married women.”³⁹

For men the main cause of the health difference appears to be the effect of marriage in reducing the self-destructive habits of many single men: substance abuse,

risky driving, getting into fights, and the like. Married men, for example, consume only half as much alcohol as single men.⁴⁰ For women, the access to health insurance that a husband often brings is an important factor. For both sexes, the presence of a spouse monitoring one’s health and encouraging one to seek appropriate treatment is significant.

Marriage also improves psychological health. Waite and Gallagher report: “According to the latest data, 40 percent of the married said they are very happy with their life in general, compared to just under a quarter of those who were single or who were cohabiting. The separated (15 percent very happy) and the divorced (18 percent very happy) were the least happy groups.” Married people also expressed greater satisfaction with their sex lives.⁴¹

The Institute for American Values scholars indicate, “Married mothers have lower rates of depression than do single or cohabiting mothers.”⁴² Never-married men are twice as likely as married men to commit suicide, and divorced men are three times as likely.⁴³

The same scholars also discerned financial benefits in marriage. They summarized, “A large body of research, both in the United States and other developed countries, finds that married men earn between 10 and 40 percent more than do single men with similar education and job histories.”⁴⁴ Waite and Gallagher related the results of a study of wealth accumulation among young families with children:

In Hao’s study, married families had accumulated the most money, with a median net worth of almost \$26,000. Remarried families were almost as well off (\$22,500) as were single-dad families (\$22,930). At the bottom of the heap were both single mothers and (perhaps surprisingly) cohabiting couples who, in marked contrast to married couples, had a median wealth of just \$1,000. Single moms typically had *no* assets at all.⁴⁵

Some of these benefits of marriage are due to “selection effects”—that is, the kind of people who marry already lead somewhat healthier lives and are somewhat happier and more industrious. But marriage itself also changes the spouses. Studies have shown that as couples marry, they cut down on their bad habits, become emotionally more settled, and start earning and saving more money. These advantages compound over the years of marriage.

... And for Children

Children reap the benefits of stable marriages. They are physically and mentally healthier than children in single-parent or cohabiting households, or children who have experienced divorce. The Institute for American

Values scholars state, “On average, having an unmarried mother is associated with an approximately 50 percent increase in the risk of infant mortality.” They report:

One recent study of the entire Swedish population of children found that boys who were reared in single-parent homes were more than 50 percent more likely to die from a range of causes—such as suicide, accidents, or addiction—than were boys reared in two-parent homes. Moreover, even after controlling for the socioeconomic status and psychological health of parents, Swedish boys and girls in single-parent families were more than twice as likely as children in two-parent families to suffer from psychiatric diseases, suicide attempts, alcoholism, and drug abuse.⁴⁶

One study showed that parental divorce reduced a child’s life expectancy by four years.⁴⁷

The Institute for American Values summary points to the economic damage inflicted when parents break up or never marry:

Divorce and unmarried childbearing increase poverty for both children and their mothers.... In fact, some studies indicate that all of the increase in child poverty since the 1970s can be attributed to increases in single parenthood due to divorce and nonmarital childbearing. When parents fail to marry and stay married, children are more likely to experience deep and persistent poverty, even after controlling for race and family background.⁴⁸

Children living with their two married parents appear less likely to suffer physical or sexual abuse. The Institute’s scholars note:

Another national study found that seven percent of children who had lived with one parent had been sexually abused, compared to four percent of children who lived with both biological parents, largely because children in single-parent homes had more contact with unrelated adult males. Other research found that, although boyfriends contribute less than two percent of nonparental childcare, they commit half of all reported child abuse by nonparents.⁴⁹

Separation from a parent, either through divorce or failure to marry, raises the risk that children will fail to graduate from high school or college. It makes them twice as likely to commit crimes and end up in prison.⁵⁰ Moreover, the patterns of marital failure can be transmitted from one generation to the next. Waite and Gallagher explain:

Children whose parents divorce or never marry begin sex earlier, get pregnant out of wedlock more often, and more frequently become a teen parent

(both married and unmarried). They are less likely to be happily married and more likely to divorce than children whose parents got and stayed married.⁵¹

It is worth emphasizing that all the above statements about the advantages of marriage and drawbacks of other childrearing arrangements are based on averages. Individual cases can and do vary greatly. There are many devoted single parents and stepparents who raise healthy and well-adjusted children. There are many children from two-married-parent households who go the wrong way. Nevertheless, the averages hold. Rearing children outside the marriage of their mother and father is a much more difficult task.

This fact is of concern to more than just individuals shaping their own family lives. It also has a powerful impact on the entire society. To the extent that fewer adults today are in lasting marriages, and fewer children grow up within such marriages, federal and state governments can expect to bear higher medical costs. They will have to treat more substance abuse and psychiatric disorders. Entitlement programs serving the poor will face more demands for assistance. Prisons will require greater capacity. One conservative estimate puts the annual taxpayer costs of broken families at \$112 billion.⁵²

As marriage weakens, almost every other social problem becomes harder to solve.

Excursus on Cohabitation: Marriage Lite or the New Concubinage?

In ancient times, there was an option for a man who desired a regular sex partner but did not wish to marry her. He could take a low-status woman as a concubine. He could enjoy her company as long as it pleased him, and he could dismiss her at any time. The man made no promises and signed no contract; consequently, the concubine had few legal protections. Any children that she bore would have an inferior legal status.

The early church fought long and hard against concubinage. It insisted that such a sexual relationship, without the permanent and total commitment expressed in marriage vows, was immoral and unjust. Over the course of a thousand years, concubinage retreated into the shadows of social disapproval.

In the past 40 years, it seems, concubinage has come to light again under a different name. Like ancient concubinage, contemporary cohabitation is a deliberately ambiguous relationship. The partners make no promises

and have no legal obligations to one another. The arrangement has no specified duration and can be terminated at a moment's notice. Those who cohabit tend to be of lower social status. Their children, on average, do not fare as well as children born to married couples (see pp. 5-6).

Defenders of cohabitation portray it as just a more flexible form of marriage. The love is the same as in marriage, they say; all that is missing is "a piece of paper," the marriage certificate. Some see cohabitation as a "trial marriage." They assume that living together will confirm a couple's compatibility and reduce the odds that a subsequent marriage might end in divorce.

Social science does not support any of these assertions. By every measure, cohabitation is a very different relationship from marriage. Marriages are formed by a series of decisive, publicly announced events: A proposal is made, it is accepted, an engagement is announced, friends and family gather for a wedding, vows and rings are exchanged, and two formerly single persons are declared to be married. By contrast, many couples quietly drift into cohabitation. They gradually spend more time together, one moves his or her possessions piece by piece into the other's residence, one allows his or her lease to expire, and eventually they realize that they are living together full-time.⁵³

The two relationships differ dramatically in durability. The average marriage lasts several decades; the average cohabitation, only 15 months.⁵⁴ Because their time horizons are longer, married people are much more likely to invest in one another. Husbands and wives almost always pool their assets. They have a single household budget that does not separate "his" and "her" money. They take responsibility for each other's debts and inherit each other's estates.⁵⁵

Cohabitors, by contrast, typically split expenses down the middle. Perhaps as a result of this financial separatism, cohabitors do not tend to save money or accumulate assets at the rate that married people do. Cohabiting men boost their earnings by only half the amount that married men do.⁵⁶ There are few mutual legal protections in most cohabitating relationships. A survey showed that only 13 percent of cohabitors have a will, only 10 percent hold property jointly, and only 7 percent have given each other durable powers of attorney for health care decisions.⁵⁷

Cohabitors do not appear to take responsibility for one another's health. Couples who move in together without marrying do not exhibit the same reductions in unhealthy behaviors that married couples do. Cohabitors report levels of physical and mental health in the same range as

persons living alone—well below the higher levels of health and happiness reported by married persons.⁵⁸

Cohabitors are particularly vulnerable to one health risk: violence at the hands of their partners. They are three times more likely than married people to report that an argument had become violent during the past year (13 percent versus 4 percent).⁵⁹

Cohabitors are more likely to keep their friends, families, and leisure activities separate. The one thing they do together is have sex. Indeed, cohabitors have sex somewhat more frequently than married couples. But they report less sexual satisfaction.⁶⁰ Apparently, the secure commitment of marriage enriches lovemaking, while the provisional nature of cohabitation may induce some "performance anxiety."

Married couples are more sexually faithful. According to the National Sex Survey, cohabiting men are four times more likely than married men to admit having been unfaithful during the past year. Cohabiting women are eight times more likely than married women to have cheated on their partner.⁶¹

One reason for these discrepancies may be that the ambiguity of cohabitation leaves wide room for differing interpretations about how exclusive the relationship is. In marriage both spouses know that they have equally vowed to "forsake all others." But in cohabitation there can be a great inequality in the levels of commitment that the two partners bring to the relationship.

Most often, it is the woman who displays the higher level of commitment. Cohabiting women are more likely to believe that the relationship is sexually exclusive and that it is headed toward marriage. Meanwhile, the cohabiting man may have no intention of marrying anytime soon. He may see the woman as a convenient partner for the time being. He is keeping his options open.⁶²

There is one category of cohabitation in which the partners more nearly resemble married people in their positive attitudes and behaviors. These are cohabitors with definite plans to marry.⁶³ But even these couples have not avoided all of the pitfalls of cohabitation. Research shows that the experience of living together raises the risk of divorce by 50 percent.⁶⁴

How do we account for this striking fact? Various explanations have been offered. First, there are "selection effects." That is, cohabitors as a group start out with various characteristics—they are poorer, less educated, less religious, and have a lower view of marriage—that make them less likely to succeed in marriage.⁶⁵

Second, it appears that living together may foster behaviors that are not conducive to a good marriage. Cohabiters, especially serial cohabiters, become accustomed to relationships with limited commitment, limited trust, and limited duration. When disagreements surface, their habit is to dissolve the relationship and move on to the next. It is not so easy to set aside these old patterns of behavior. Living out the total and permanent commitment of marriage may take more work for those who have previously cohabited.⁶⁶

Finally, the sexual bond established during cohabitation may render it more difficult for couples to make a wise decision about whether they should marry. Having already become “one flesh,” they may find it harder to consider the possibility of tearing themselves apart. As opposed to couples that are merely dating, first-time cohabiting couples may be more inclined to ignore the “red flags” warning against an ill-matched marriage.

Cohabitation, it turns out, is not at all a good preparation for marriage.

Policy Options

What are we to do when large segments of society no longer share the church’s high view of marriage? Should U.S. Christians simply accept the demotion of marriage from its privileged position in law and social custom? Or should they somehow strive to reverse the trend?

How should church members deal with traditional teachings exalting the lifelong union of man and woman? Should they downplay those disputed teachings? Should they revise the teachings? Or should they launch fresh efforts to put the teachings into practice? Is it possible to split the difference, upholding the sanctity of marriage within the church while allowing society to equate marriage with any number of other sexual relationships?

These are questions of fidelity to Christian doctrine. But they are also questions of political prudence. In changing social circumstances, what is the best way to help people see and enjoy the blessings that God intended to convey through the institution of marriage? We need to consider at least three broad options, weighing the pros and cons of each.

Option A: Disestablish Marriage in Church and Society

This is the direction in which social practices and attitudes are tending. Growing numbers on the left, and

even some on the right, are ready to take the final step: abolishing the distinctions between marriage and other sexual relationships. This move would be the logical end point of modern assumptions about marriage (see pp. 1-2). If the only thing required for a socially approved relationship is the professed emotional attachment of the partners, then virtually every relationship would qualify for the favor that marriage now enjoys. And if marriage is merely another contract, infinitely flexible, then there is no reason why other personal contracts of differing terms and durations should not receive equal recognition.

Under this approach governments would no longer register marriages, or they would automatically register any relationship that an individual chose to enter. Divorce would be as easy as the dissolution of any other relationship.

The number and sexes of the partners in these relationships would make no difference. In the eyes of the law, cohabitation, same-sex relationships, and even polyamorous relationships (with more than two partners) would be equally valid with marriage. Marital status would not count in determining tax rates, entitlement benefits, child custody, or any other state-regulated arrangements. The state would be indifferent to whether people married or did not marry, whether they had children within wedlock or within some other relationship.

Churches could host weddings, or not, as they pleased. But ministers and priests would no longer be agents of the state in certifying marriages. The ceremony would be a purely private affair of no necessary public interest. The logic of this approach would suggest that churches, too, should welcome all sexual relationships equally. If they blessed marriages, then they should be willing to bless any other domestic arrangements entered freely and in good faith.

Option A is already being pursued to some extent in Canada and several European countries, where same-sex marriages have been recognized and the legal distinctions between marriage and cohabitation have been mostly erased.⁶⁷

An influential 2006 statement advocates a similar course of action in the United States. “Beyond Same-Sex Marriage,” endorsed by a host of prominent leftist intellectuals, argues, “All families, relationships, and households struggling for stability will be helped by separating basic forms of legal and economic recognition from the requirement of marital and conjugal relationship.” It proposes to “honor the diverse ways in which people find and practice love, form relationships, create communities and networks

of caring and support, establish households, bring families into being, and build innovative structures to support and sustain community.” Among the “non-conventional partnerships” that it seeks to subsidize are not only same-sex couples but also cohabitators, single-parent households, “queer couples who decide to jointly create and raise a child with another queer person or couple, in two households,” and “committed, loving households in which there is more than one conjugal partner” (i.e., polyamory).⁶⁸

Pro: Option A would offer some protection for the legitimate needs of non-marital households. It is better, on the whole, for people to live together and care for one another—even if they may express their love in sexually inappropriate ways. Society benefits when cohabitators and same-sex couples, for example, provide for one another’s health care and economic security. Legal recognition might encourage more to form long-term relationships that would make such provision for one another.

Option A would get the church out of today’s traumatic “culture wars” over marriage and sexuality. No longer would U.S. Christians be locked in a position of moral disapproval of cohabitators, same-sex couples, and other non-marital sexual relationships. Instead the church would offer such individuals and households its unconditional blessing. This new openness might attract back into the church some “progressives” who had written it off as too narrow and judgmental.

Finally, Option A would extract the church from its increasingly awkward entanglement with the state in matters of marriage. As social attitudes and laws move further away from a Christian worldview, priests and ministers find themselves in a tricky position certifying marriages on behalf of the secular state. They subject themselves to political or social pressures to solemnize relationships that the church deems morally unacceptable. These clergy might gain moral clarity if they forfeited “the powers vested in me by the state of ...” and instead pronounced couples married solely in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Con: Adopting Option A would constitute a wholesale repudiation of the Christian moral tradition regarding marriage. It would reduce marriage to a private relationship formed by the couple on their own terms, rather than a social institution established by God for the good of all humankind.

By equating marriage with other sexual relationships, Option A would devalue all the unique qualities of marriage as Christians have understood it. This option would teach society that the permanence of marital love made no difference, as it would offer the same

recognition to cohabiting relationships that were temporary. It would teach that the one-flesh union of man and woman was nothing special, since it would give equal honor to same-sex relationships where there was no sexual complementarity. This approach would teach that sexual exclusivity was not important, as it would grant the same favor to heterosexual and homosexual relationships where no exclusivity was promised or practiced. It would destroy the normativity of marriage as the proper place for sexual intimacy; instead, almost any kind of voluntary sexual activity would receive the approval of church and state.

Option A would sever the ancient, biblical, and almost universal link between marriage and childbearing. No longer could society say that it was committed to having every child reared by its mother and father, bound for life to one another and to that child. On the contrary, now society would be prepared to convey its full blessing upon cohabiting relationships in which one parent reserved the right to desert the other parent (and the child) at any time. It would look with favor upon same-sex relationships where the child was deliberately separated from one parent and brought into a household with only the other parent and a non-related person (the parent’s lover). Society might even be ready to recognize a polyamorous relationship where the paternity of the child was undetermined.

If society gave equal honor and benefits to non-marital sexual relationships, it would be reasonable to expect such relationships to become more common. One could expect out-of-wedlock births to outstrip marital births and larger proportions of children to grow up apart from their fathers. This is, in fact, what has happened in western European countries that have pursued Option A. These countries are also experiencing catastrophically low birthrates, as unmarried couples are nowhere near as fertile as traditional married couples. European birthrates, as low as 1.3 per woman, threaten the economic stability and long-term survival of their societies.⁶⁹

Social science research (see pp. 5-6) predicts that this experiment in non-marriage would have negative results. Rising numbers of unmarried adults would have more health and psychological problems. They would earn less and save less. They would be more prone to self-destructive habits.

The consequences for the growing proportion of children separated from their fathers (see pp. 4) would be worse. They, too, would have more health and psychological problems. They would be poorer. They would be more vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse by non-related persons in their households. They would

not get as far in school, and they would be more likely to end up on the wrong side of the law.

As these adults and children had more problems, and their non-marital households were less able to help them address those problems, the social costs would be enormous. Government would have to fill the gap with more hospitals, more mental health clinics, more remedial education, more anti-poverty programs, more police, and more prisons.

Option B: Maintain the Church's Understanding of Marriage, but Stop Expecting Society to Share Any of that Understanding

This is the apparently moderate approach favored by many Christians who do not relish fighting “culture wars” over marriage. Under Option B the church would continue to hold before its members the ideal of the lifelong union of one man and one woman. It would celebrate marriages, while advising against non-marital sexual relationships. It would discourage divorce and help members to avoid it or recover from it.

At the same time, Option B would have U.S. Christians abandon their attempts to shape society's attitudes or practices regarding marriage. The assumption is that we live in a post-Christian culture where most people no longer grasp the deep connection between God's steadfast, all-encompassing, jealous love for his people and his requirement that man and woman unite in the same kind of enduring, exclusive, total commitment.

So the church would cease to expect non-believers to form relationships that in any way resembled Christian marriage. It would not be surprised or dismayed if unchurched neighbors felt no need for complementarity or permanence or even monogamy in their sexual relationships. The church would refrain from public criticism of such relationships.

While U.S. Christians would not push to downgrade the legal status of marriage, they would not resist legislation or court decisions having that effect. They would accept the legal equation of marriage with cohabitation or same-sex partnerships as an inevitable reflection of social trends. Ministers and priests would also be prepared to lose their place as agents of the state in certifying marriages. As long as churches remained free to follow their own stricter standards, they would let U.S. society go its way.

Pro: Option B might tone down the “culture wars” over marriage. If Christians unilaterally withdrew from

public battles over marriage and sexuality, cultural “progressives” would probably have fewer reasons to attack the church. If those battles are indeed already lost, then withdrawal might be a wise move to contain the damage. Such a strategic retreat might also leave the field more open for fruitful cooperation between traditional Christians and progressives in other areas where their differences were less profound.

The option would preserve the church's doctrine of marriage—at least that part relating to Christians particularly rather than to humankind in general. It would allow the church to concentrate on strengthening the marriages of its own members, over whom it has the most influence. There are good reasons to believe that the church is better equipped than the state for this task of strengthening marriage. Church-based programs such as Marriage Savers (see www.marriagesavers.org) seem to be more effective than their secular counterparts in saving troubled marriages.

The church would be backing off only from those unchurched persons over whom it had the least influence in the first place. Like God in Romans 1:24, it would be “giv[ing] them up to the lusts of their hearts.” And perhaps as they experienced the consequences of their choices, they might one day reconsider the wisdom of biblical and traditional models of marriage.

Con: Option B sacrifices a great deal in narrowing its focus to only church members, as if marriage were solely a Christian institution. But the entire biblical and historical record teaches the contrary: Marriage is a virtually universal institution in human societies. The rationale for marriage does not depend upon any special divine revelation (see pp 12-13 of Part 1, Jan/Feb 2010 issue of *Theology Matters*).

If Christians are concerned for the wellbeing of their non-believing neighbors, as Scripture commands them to be, then they will wish for those neighbors long and happy marriages. They will hope that those neighbors can avoid other sexual relationships that might damage them and their children. And they will take practical steps to help their neighbors form and sustain healthy marriages. Insofar as the state can offer some encouragement for marriage, without preventing citizens from choosing other relationships, then it has sound secular reasons to favor marriage.

The social costs of Option B would be high. If traditional U.S. Christians abandoned the fight for marriage, it is unlikely that any other group would step in to fill the gap. The forces pushing for the total disestablishment of marriage (Option A) would face little resistance and would almost certainly triumph. All the negative consequences of Option A—the threats to

the mental and physical health and economic security of adults and children, the lowered birthrates, the burdens on public institutions—would ensue.

Even so, Option B would not end the “culture wars” over marriage and sexuality. Withdrawing into the churches would not protect traditional Christians from revisionists who press for the equality of all sexual relationships. As we have seen, revisionist thinking is already common within many churches. Only a few bless same-sex relationships, but many wink at cohabitation. Many are silent about the divorces proliferating among their own members. There are many regular churchgoers who would agree that “all you need is love” to make a relationship valid.

Maintaining Christian teaching on marriage will require confrontation even within the churches. Pro-homosexuality movements have made clear that they regard traditional Christianity as the primary force denying them the social approval for which they yearn. They have stated that they intend to carry their battle for acceptance into the churches. Funded in part with grants from secular gay groups, “open and affirming” caucuses consume tremendous amounts of energy with their persistent demands for “justice” in the oldline Protestant denominations.⁷⁰ They are likely to carry those same demands into other denominations as they have the opportunity. Many of the measures that they have promoted would also open church doors to acceptance of cohabitation and other non-marital relationships.

Where churches held fast to Christian doctrines on marriage, Option B would not leave them secure in their freedom. The demands for “marriage equality” would inevitably infringe upon Christian institutions and individuals. It is far from clear that religious liberty would prevail in that contest (p. 15 of Part 1, Jan/Feb 2010 issue of *Theology Matters*).

**Option C:
Renew Our Appreciation of the Biblical and Traditional Doctrines of Marriage, and Take Practical Steps So That More People May Live Out Those Doctrines in Society**

This is a truly counter-cultural gamble. It would require U.S. churches not merely to affirm Christian teachings on marriage, but even more to reappropriate them. Because marriage is under challenge in our culture, and false assumptions permeate both the culture and the church, the church would have to dig down deep into the meaning of marriage. It is not sufficient to repeat prohibitions against non-marital sex and warnings about its consequences. U.S. Christians would have to

rediscover the goods of marriage: the total union of the two created sexes as “one flesh,” mirroring the everlasting bond between God and his people and embodying the love from which children are born and in which they are best reared.

Because Christians understand marriage as God’s blessing for all humankind, they would have to defend it in the public square. They would contest laws or court decisions that equated marriage with cohabitation, same-sex partnerships, or any other type of relationship. They would cite arguments from nature, history, and the social sciences demonstrating the unique social value of the lifelong union of man and woman.

Option C would also involve practical steps to help people—church members as well as non-members—to form and sustain healthy marriages. There would be marriage education for young people, treatment programs for addictive sexual behaviors, intensive premarital counseling, mentor couples to accompany newlyweds, marriage enrichment programs, crisis intervention for troubled marriages, and divorce recovery support groups.

Many of these elements are brought together in the Marriage Savers program designed by syndicated columnist Mike McManus. McManus believes that churches are well positioned to help raise the U.S. marriage rate and reduce the divorce rate, if they take the initiative. The impact would be multiplied where churches in an area joined together in a Community Marriage Policy to ensure that all local couples had access to this kind of support.

Option C would also urge non-church actors to recognize their stake in healthy marriages. U.S. Christians would ask governments to eliminate disincentives to marriage in tax and entitlement policies. State agencies could offer marriage education and marriage counseling. Legal revisions could make it harder to obtain a unilateral divorce—especially where children were involved.

Employers, likewise, could do more for marriage. Enlightened corporations should realize that happily married employees will be more productive than those who drift from one unsatisfying relationship to the next. More flexible hours, the availability of marriage counseling, and a clear stance against adulterous relationships might mitigate some of the threats to employees’ marriages.

Pro: Option C is the only approach that takes seriously the whole of church teaching on marriage. In the area of sexuality, it does what the church at its best has always done: It turns a challenge to Christian teaching into an

opportunity to return to the sources of that teaching. And in returning to the sources, it allows the church to appreciate the teaching more deeply than it had previously. It suggests new ways in which Christians can more fully live out the teaching.

Option C does not capitulate to our relativistic culture of individual autonomy. Instead it aims to transform that culture, pointing it back to God's design to unite man and woman. This option does not take the easy and false approach of separating Christian marriage from civil marriage. It does not accept a "marriage lite" that has been reduced to just an emotional attachment between any two persons. It dares to believe that a man and woman are capable of making and keeping vows of total commitment. It seeks to secure for every child a mother and father bonded to one another and to the child.

Many of the marriage-strengthening initiatives in Option C have shown success. The vast majority of young people say they want to be happily married one day. When they are ready to be married, the vast majority ask the participation of the church in blessing their union. Many would be open to more intensive Christian counseling about marriage, if the opportunity were available.

Con: The risk of losing the battle is too great. The momentum of the culture is too strong for the church to resist. Every generation since the 1960s has accepted non-marital sexual relationships as normal. Even among professed Christians, the incidence of premarital sex and divorce is not radically different than in the general population.⁷¹

It is doubtful how many churches have the will to take the marriage-strengthening measures envisioned under Option C. Many pastors seem quite content to bless whatever couples come to them. They would be reluctant to undertake the kind of aggressive counseling that might challenge the couples' level of commitment. They are silent about cohabitation and divorce, for fear of giving offense.

Yet many people still perceive the church as intolerant. They identify it with an ideal of marriage which they may admire in principle, but from which they or their loved ones have departed in practice. This situation is bound to generate resentment. The church is seen as standing in judgment over relationships that people cherish. Many distance themselves from the church so as to spare their consciences from the annoyance. They may consequently lose the opportunity to hear the Gospel.

If the church remains the foremost public opponent of sexual revisionism, those who favor that agenda will continue to focus their wrath upon the church. If they do eventually win the political battle to redefine marriage, their revenge against the church could be severe. They would have in their hands the legal means to make major encroachments against religious liberty. Traditional Christians might still be free to worship in their churches; however, their influence on public policy—regarding marriage or any other topic—would be greatly diminished.

Excursus: A Battle Far from Over

Some Christians seem tempted to despair over the future of marriage in U.S. society. They are overwhelmed by the negative trends of the past 40 years: the falling marriage rates, the rising incidence of divorce and single parenthood, the increasing acceptance of cohabitation and homosexuality, the apparent shamelessness with which sexual immorality is exhibited in the media. They fear that the triumph of the sexual revolution is, as the "progressives" claim, inevitable and irreversible. They are weary of being branded as intolerant bigots because they disapprove of these developments. They are inclined to give up the fight for marriage and move on to some other more agreeable topic.

But those tempted to pessimism should ask themselves: Are they responding to reality or to distorted media depictions of reality? America is not a nation where everyone acts like the stars of "Sex and the City." While there are some disturbing trends, there are also developments that show the enduring strength of marriage. The high tide of sexual irresponsibility in the 1970s and 1980s seems to have receded a bit.

Today, the vast majority of young people say that they want to be married, and they will marry eventually. Over the past two decades, divorce rates have gone down. Teenage sexual activity and pregnancies have also declined.⁷² The recognition of the importance of fathers in their children's lives has become more widespread.

Obviously, departures from the marital ideal remain common. Nevertheless, the ideal retains much power in our society. Christian groups that reinforce and draw upon that ideal have shown some success. Marriage Savers claims that the divorce rate can be brought down if churches come together in a comprehensive effort to build and sustain strong marriages. It has evidence to support that contention.

The vast majority of U.S. churches hold to a biblical, traditional Christian understanding of marriage. Likewise, U.S. voters have upheld the established definition of marriage whenever they have been given the opportunity to decide the question. In just the past 10 years, 29 states have passed constitutional amendments cementing the one man-one woman definition. Another 15 states have adopted statutes to the same effect.⁷³ Marriage referenda have won majorities—often large majorities—even in liberal states such as Hawaii, Oregon, and Wisconsin. These victories have occurred even in election years, such as 2006 and 2008, when other conservative causes have fared poorly. Constituencies that otherwise lean left, such as African Americans and Hispanics, are strongly supportive of the traditional definition of marriage.

Only once has a marriage amendment been defeated at the polls: in Arizona in 2006. But that result was reversed two years later, when 57 percent of Arizona voters approved an amendment stating, “Only a union of one man and one woman shall be valid or recognized as a marriage in this state.”⁷⁴

It is judges, not voters, who have delivered almost all the victories for same-sex marriage. By identical 4-3 margins, state supreme courts in Massachusetts (2004), California (2008), and Connecticut (2008) mandated a redefinition of marriage. California voters in November 2008 overturned their court’s decision. Voters elsewhere might have done the same, if their legislatures had given them the opportunity.

As the fictional Mr. Dooley observed, even judges follow the election returns. Many state and federal courts may be reluctant to provoke further controversy by pushing same-sex marriage further than it has gone. The Obama administration, already embroiled in other struggles in which it has more popular backing, has its own reasons for caution. Even though the president has expressed his opposition to the federal Defense of Marriage Act, political prudence might counsel against setting off a firestorm with a proposal to repeal the act.

In short, the battle for marriage is far from over. The question is whether U.S. Christians are ready to move from a defensive position (defeating efforts to redefine marriage) to a more proactive posture (working together to strengthen marriage).

Conclusions

There are some **matters on which we find ready consensus** among almost all U.S. Christians. Secular progressives might disagree, but in the church even

liberals usually affirm at least these elements of the tradition:

1. Marriage is established and blessed by God, and therefore the church has a major stake in marriage.
2. Marriage reflects the love between God and his people, and therefore the church has something important to say about marriage.
3. Marriage has multiple purposes: as a sexual union of two persons, as a setting for childbearing and childrearing, as an antidote to sexual sin, as a source of companionship, as a means of mutual economic provision, as a building block of society.
4. Marriage is monogamous. Few would attempt to justify adultery or polyamory.
5. Marriage is a norm. Most people desire to marry, and most will marry at some point. Most parents desire to see their children happily married.
6. Marriage is intended to be lifelong. Most people taking the vows are not planning to divorce after a few years. They want a lasting union.
7. Churches should play a role in preparing people for marriage and helping them sustain healthy marriages. These efforts are simply assisting couples to keep the vows that they willingly take.

There are other **matters on which there should be consensus** among Christians today. Revisionists may contest these points; however, the preponderance of biblical teaching and the united witness of all major branches of the Christian faith is so strong as to be overwhelming. In many cases, the evidence of nature, history, and the social sciences concurs. Those who disagree on these points have effectively stepped outside the Christian tradition as regards marriage.

These are truths that all believers should acknowledge:

1. Marriage is necessarily the union of the two sexes that God providentially created for each other. Therefore, it can be only between one man and one woman.
2. Marriage is more than the sum of its functions. The sexual union of man and woman in marriage is inherently good, regardless of what other purposes it may serve.
3. Among the functions of marriage, sexual union and childbearing/childrearing stand above the others in being uniquely associated with marriage. Marriage, sex,

and childbearing are a strong three-legged stool on which a healthy society can rest, if the three are kept together.

4. Marriage is beneficial to the husband and wife in numerous ways, and those benefits have positive side effects in the community around them.

5. The marriage of the mother and father is the best arrangement so far identified for rearing well-adjusted children who will be valuable citizens of the community.

6. Other relationships may perform some of the functions of marriage (e.g., companionship, economic support); however, none of them matches the combination that marriage delivers so effectively. None of them fulfills the core functions of sexual union and procreation in the way that marriage does.

7. For all these reasons, the church has a vital interest in commending and blessing marriage above other sexual relationships. The church should not bless or honor—indeed, it should counsel against—any sexual relationships outside of marriage.

8. The state, too, has a vital interest in recognizing and favoring marriage above other sexual relationships. Freedom of association dictates that the state allow non-marital relationships. Nevertheless, the state's concern for the upbringing of its next generation of citizens impels it to elevate marriage. Because marriage is unique, the benefits available to married couples should be unique. The state should not recognize or subsidize non-marital sexual relationships as such.

9. Divorce is always sin or the result of sin. Although circumstances may sometimes make divorce necessary or inevitable, it is never a good outcome. Both church and state should endeavor to find means to restore troubled marriages and to reduce the incidence of divorce.

10. Among the policy options discussed above (pp. 8-12), Option C (reaffirming marriage in church and society) is the preferred choice. It is consonant with the biblical and traditional teaching that marriage is to be honored not only within the church, but also as a blessing God intended for all humankind. If church ministries could effectively strengthen marriages throughout U.S. society, the benefits—in physical and mental health, economic wellbeing, and positive social involvement of both adults and children—would be tremendous.

11. Option A (disestablishing marriage in church and society) is not a faithful choice. It would fly in the

face of all the biblical and traditional teaching, historical experience, and social science evidence that set marriage apart from other relationships. It would cause severe damage to individuals and society.

There are other **questions on which consensus is lacking** in the Christian community. Good-faith interpretations of the Bible and the tradition may differ. Much turns on prudential judgments about particular situations. There ought to be some room here for discernment by individuals. Here are some examples of such questions:

1. The extent to which pastors should be directive in counseling couples considering marriage or considering ending their marriages. In some cases and in some denominations, there may be a clear teaching that can be stated directly—for example, in forbidding a certain type of marriage or in ruling out divorce. But in other cases the pastor's role may be to reflect back what the couple is saying about their relationship. Without telling the couple what to do, he or she can thereby help them discern their own suitability for marriage or their own ability to reconcile a broken relationship.

2. Whether it would be wise to aim at lowering the average age of marriage. On the one hand, the lengthened period between the age of sexual maturity and the age of marriage puts a great strain on young people seeking to remain chaste. The result is that many, while delaying marriage, fall into a pattern of serial monogamy that renders it more difficult for them later to form a lasting marriage. The common notion that marriage must be postponed until the attainment of various educational, professional, and financial goals ought to be challenged. Surely, obedience to God's moral law ought to be more important than career ambitions. But on the other hand, statistics show that teenage marriages experience higher rates of divorce. (After about 22, age has little effect on divorce rates.) It would not be wise to push young people into marriage before they were ready to take on adult responsibilities. It seems clear that those who married at a younger age, with less economic security, would require greater support from a network of family and friends.

3. Whether it is wise to encourage single mothers to marry the fathers of their children in situations where the fathers fall short on some measures of "marriageability." On the one hand, a child would do better, on balance, if his father and mother were married to one another. If the problem is simply that the father is poor, then the responsibilities of marriage may induce him to become the economic provider that his child needs. But if the father displays other characteristics (such as substance abuse problems, promiscuity, or

violent tendencies) that make it unlikely that he could fulfill the marriage vows, it would be unwise to encourage a union almost certain to fail and to damage all those involved.

4. The conditions under which divorce or remarriage may be an option, a necessity, or a wise choice. There are significant differences in the teachings of Catholic and Protestant churches on this point, rooted in different readings of the relevant biblical passages. There might also be varied judgments about which situations fit the classic reasons for marital separation (adultery, desertion, cruelty). Likewise, pastors might have different evaluations of the extent to which reconciliation was possible in such situations. But all should agree that genuine repentance and reconciliation, wherever possible, is preferable to divorce.

5. The allocation of responsibilities between spouses. Some traditions, especially among evangelical Protestants, emphasize distinctive roles to be played by husbands and wives, fathers and mothers. Frequently, these distinctions are tied to notions of male headship derived from Ephesians 5. Other traditions, particularly among oldline Protestants, tend to minimize sex differences, stressing the common calling of all spouses to “[b]e subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Ephesians 5:21). There is evidence to back both positions. Many sex differences seem to be deeply rooted in human biology and go back far into human history. Even when apparently free of external pressures, men and women regularly choose different roles. It would be foolish, and probably undesirable, to force husbands and wives into a unisex box. On the other hand, many of our society’s standard sex roles—for example, husbands take out the trash and wives do laundry—are obviously artificial cultural conventions. Household responsibilities have been divided differently in other times and places. Greater flexibility in sex roles makes sense in many situations.

6. The extent to which it is appropriate to extend some benefits to all households, including households constituted by a non-marital sexual relationship (e.g., same-sex partners) as well as households not involving a sexual relationship (e.g., a woman living with her aged mother). The state has an interest in people living together and caring for one another. But that interest is far less than its interest in the upbringing of children within marriage. There does not seem to be a strong demand for domestic partnership benefits for any group besides homosexuals. Insofar as such benefits might serve to legitimize a sexual relationship that many citizens regard as inappropriate and damaging, the subsidy becomes problematic. In any case, domestic partnership benefits should not approximate

the benefits attached to the quite dissimilar status of marriage.

7. The best means of preserving the traditional definition of marriage under civil law. Constitutional referenda have proven very effective in many states; however, the referendum process is not accessible to the people in every state. The federal Defense of Marriage Act was passed with the intention of protecting the ability of states and the federal government to refuse to recognize same-sex marriages from another state. But scholars disagree about whether the act will withstand a judicial challenge. A federal marriage amendment would have been the most sweeping solution to the problem; however, that kind of amendment no longer seems politically possible. Moreover, even some conservatives objected to a federal marriage amendment on the grounds that it intruded into the traditional powers of the states in the area of family law.

8. The time when it may be necessary for the U.S. church to pursue Option B, retreating inside its own walls to preserve its understanding of marriage amidst a hostile culture. That day has not yet arrived. Most people take a positive view of marriage and desire marriage for themselves. In every state where voters have been given a choice regarding same-sex marriage, they have chosen to retain the traditional definition of marriage. The battle for marriage remains to be decided (see pp. 12-13).

We offer two **theses for further study**. These are questions that have not yet been resolved. But we expect that further experience may prove the truth. Here are two experiments worth trying:

1. Community marriage policies, in which churches in a locality join together to state common expectations for couples seeking to be married, have shown some success. They should be implemented more widely to see whether they might have a measurable impact in lowering the divorce rate.

2. Alternatives to no-fault divorce need to be explored. The states might re-establish some barriers—waiting periods, referrals to counseling, penalties for the party deemed more responsible for breaking up the marriage—that would cause some spouses to reconsider their rush toward divorce. These barriers should be higher in cases where children are involved. We do not know how many divorces might be prevented by such measures. In many cases, the marriage may indeed be “irretrievably broken” by the time the divorce petition is filed. If one spouse has already determined to brush aside all pleas for reconciliation, and perhaps has commenced a new sexual relationship, no amount of intercession may deter the divorce-seeking spouse from

The Rev. Dr. Kari McClellan is President of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry (PFFM). Rev. Susan Cyre is Executive Director and Editor of *Theology Matters*. The Board of Directors of PFFM includes 12 people, clergy and lay, women and men. PFFM is working to restore the strength and integrity of the PC(USA)'s witness to Jesus Christ as the only Lord and Savior, by helping Presbyterians develop a consistent Reformed Christian worldview. *Theology Matters* is sent free to anyone who requests it. Please donate today to this vital ministry.

**We can be contacted at
scyre@swva.net; phone 540-898-4244;
www.theologymatters.com.**

Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry
P.O. Box 3940
Fredericksburg, VA 22402-3940

NON-PROFIT
ORGANIZATION
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
AUTOMATED
MAILING
SYSTEM

Change Service Requested

his or her fixed course. But perhaps other situations are more amenable to reconciliation than we may imagine.

We have no certainty about how these experiments will turn out. We do not know whether the U.S. divorce rate will rise, fall, or stay steady. We cannot predict the future course of other trends—whether the marriage rate will continue to go down, whether out-of-wedlock births will continue to go up.

Nor can we say with certainty what will happen to the very definition of marriage. How many states will reduce marriage to just any “two people who love each other”? To what extent will states erase the distinctions between marriage and cohabitation? Will they eventually recognize polyamorous marriages with more than two partners?

We do not know how many churches will alter their teachings to conform to the culture's trajectory. A few have already moved a fair distance toward accepting other sexual relationships on a par with marriage. Others will likely follow. But it is equally likely that there will be many churches that resist compromising the biblical and historic teaching of the Church Universal.

We do know this much: Marriage is worth defending, and we have a duty to defend it. To whatever extent we succeed in building communities that honor marriage, in the church and in society, we will glorify the God who designed marriage. In addition, we will bring blessings to many neighbors whose lives are enriched through marriage. To whatever extent we fail in this task, we and our neighbors and the witness of the Gospel will suffer loss.

But we ought not to worry too much about losses that we may suffer. Ultimately, the defense of marriage does not fall on our weak human shoulders. The One who truly upholds marriage is the sovereign God who created man and woman and joined them together in the marriage bond. God is not mocked. In due time he will

vindicate his truth—about marriage, and everything else—so that all eyes may see.

No human trend is irreversible. It is not inevitable that marriages will go down, divorces will go up, and fatherless children will multiply. We can expect that a society that devalues God's good gift of marriage will not prosper in the long run.

We must believe that, in God's providence, those who depart from God's path will eventually experience the consequences. Even in the far country of individual autonomy and moral relativism, the prodigal can recognize the fruitlessness of his ways. He can remember that life was better in his father's house. He can turn back towards the place where God is ready to receive and restore him.

The Bible and human history are full of these kinds of surprising reversals. The times when “everyone does what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25) and society falls apart are followed by times of repentance and renewal. Sexual license and family disintegration go only so far before a countervailing drive toward family reintegration takes hold.

In Acts 3:19-20 the apostle Peter promises “times of refreshing” for the people of Jerusalem if they will “[r]epent therefore and turn to God.” We pray and work that it may be so in our day and our land.

Footnote references and figures appear on our website www.theologymatters.com

Alan F. H. Wisdom is vice president of the Institute for Religion and Democracy (IRD). Reprinted with permission from IRD. The full paper is available on the IRD website: www.theird.org.

Donate today to this vital ministry:

**Theology Matters
P.O. Box 3940
Fredericksburg, VA 22402**

