The Changing American Family

Kerby Anderson looks at the latest data on the American family and highlights trends that are changing the nature of family in America as well as debunking some sensationalist headlines. From a biblical worldivew perspective, Christians should be concerned about these trends which reflect an ongoing breakdown of family in America.

Introduction

Are we headed toward a post-marital society where marriage is rare and the traditional family is all but extinct? One would certainly think so by reading some of the stories that have appeared lately. A *New York Times* headline in 2003 warned of "marriage's stormy future" and documented the rise in the number of nontraditional unions as well as the rising percentage of people living alone.{1} A 2006 *New York Times* article documented the declining percentage of married couples as a proportion of American households and thus declared that married households are now a minority.{2} And a 2007 headline proclaimed that "51% of women are now living without a spouse."{3}

Well, let's take a deep breath for a moment. To borrow a phrase from Mark Twain, rumors about the death of marriage and family are greatly exaggerated. But that doesn't mean that marriage as an institution is doing well and will continue to do well in the twenty-first century.

Let's first take on a few of these headlines pronouncing the end of marriage. The October 2006 *New York Times* headline proclaimed that "To Be Married Means to Be Outnumbered." In other words, married households are now a minority in America and unmarried households are the majority. But the author had to manipulate the numbers in order to come to that conclusion. This so-called "new majority" of unmarried households includes

lots of widows who were married. And this claim only works if you count households and not individuals. For example, if you have two households—one with two married people and three children and another with a single widow living alone—they would be split between one married household and one unmarried household. But one household has five people, and the other household has one person.

What about the January 2007 *New York Times* headline proclaiming that "51% of Women Are Now Living Without a Spouse"? Columnist and radio talk show host Michael Medved called this journalistic malpractice({4} and the ombudsman for the *New York Times* took his own paper to task for the article.{5} The most recent available figures showed that a clear majority (56%) of all women over the age of twenty are currently married.

So how did the author come to the opposite conclusion? It turns out that the author chose to count more than ten million girls between the ages of fifteen and nineteen as "women." So these so-called "women" are counted as women living without a spouse (never mind that they are really teenage girls living at home with their parents). This caused the ombudsman for the *New York Times* to ask this question in his op-ed: "Can a 15-year-old be a 'Woman Without a Spouse'?"{6}

It is also worth mentioning, that even with this statistical sleight of hand, you still cannot get to the conclusion that a majority of women are living without a spouse. The article's author had to find a way to shave off an additional 2% of the married majority. He did this by including those women whose "husbands are working out of town, are in the military, or are institutionalized."{7}

Conflicting Attitudes about Marriage and

Family

It is certainly premature to say that married couples are a minority and women living without a husband are a majority. But there has been a definite trend that we should not miss and will now address. The definition of marriage and the structure of family in the twenty-first century is very different from what existed in the recent past.

A few decades ago, marriages were the foundation of what many commentators referred to as "the traditional family." Now marriages and families are taking some very unfamiliar shapes and orientations due to different views of marriage and family.

Americans are not exactly sure what to think about these dramatic changes in marriage and family. On the one hand, they believe that marriage and family are very important. A *Better Homes and Garden* survey found that their readers rated their relationship to their spouse as the single most important factor in their personal happiness.{8} And a MassMutual study on family values (taken many years ago) reported that eight out of ten Americans reported that their families were the greatest source of pleasure in their lives—more than friends, religion, recreation, or work.{9}

On the other hand, Americans are much less sanguine about other people's marriages and families. I call this the "Lake Wobegon effect" where "all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are about average." In other words, *their* marriage and family are fine, but the rest of the marriages and families are *not*. While the MassMutual Family Values Study found that a majority (81%) pointed to their family as the greatest source of pleasure, it also found that a majority (56%) rated the family in the U.S. "only fair" or "poor." And almost six in ten expected it to get *worse* in the next ten years. The survey concluded that "Americans seem to see the family in decline everywhere but in their own

home."{10}

Similar results can be found in many other nationwide polls. A Gallup poll found that Americans believe the family is worse off today than it was ten years ago. And they believed it would be worse off in the future as well.{11} Americans also demonstrated their ambivalence toward marriage and family not only in their attitudes but their actions. One trend watcher predicted more than a decade ago in an article in *American Demographics* that marriage would become in the 1990s and the twenty-first century "an optional lifestyle."{12}

Changing Trends in Marriage

While it may be too early to put the institution of marriage on the endangered species list, there is good reason to believe that changing attitudes and actions have significantly transformed marriage in the twenty-first century. The current generations are marrying later, marrying less, and divorcing more than previous generations.

A major transition in attitudes toward marriage began with the baby boom generation. From 1946 to 1964, over seventy-six million babies were born. By the 1960s the leading edge of the baby boom generation was coming of age and entering into the years when previous generations would begin to marry. But baby boomers (as well as later generations) did not marry as early as previous generations. Instead, they postponed marriage until they established their careers. From the 1960s to the end of the twenty-first century, the median age of first marriage increased by nearly four years for men and four years for women.

Some of those who postponed marriage ended up postponing marriage indefinitely. An increasing proportion of the population adopted this "marriage is optional" perspective and never married. They may have had a number of live-in

relationships, but they never joined the ranks of those who married. For them, singleness was not a transition but a lifestyle.

Over the last few decades, the U.S. Census Bureau has documented the increasing percentage of people who fit into the category of "adults living alone." These are often lumped into a larger category of "non-family households." Within this larger category are singles that are living alone as well as a growing number of unmarried, cohabiting couples who are "living together." The U.S. Census Bureau estimated that in 2000 there were nearly ten million Americans living with an unmarried opposite-sex partner and another 1.2 million Americans living with a same-sex partner.

These numbers are unprecedented. It is estimated that during most of the 1960s and 1970s, only about a half a million Americans were living together. And by 1980, that number was just 1.5 million.{13} Now that number is more than twelve million.

Cohabiting couples are also changing the nature of marriage. Researchers estimate that half of Americans will cohabit at one time or another prior to marriage.{14}And this arrangement often includes children. The traditional stereotype of two young, childless people living together is not completely accurate; currently, some 40% of cohabiting relationships involve children.{15}

Couples often use cohabitation to delay or forego marriage. But not only are they postponing future marriage, they are increasing their chance of marriage failure. Sociologists David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, in their study for the National Marriage Project, wrote: "Cohabitation is replacing marriage as the first living together experience for young men and women." They conclude that those who live together before they get married are putting their future marriage in danger.{16}

Finally, we should note the impact of cohabitation on divorce. When the divorce rate began to level off and even slightly decline in the 1980s, those concerned about the state of marriage in America began to cheer. But soon the cheers turned to groans when it became obvious that the leveling of the divorce rate was due primarily to an increase in cohabitation. Essentially the divorce rate was down because the marriage rate was down. Couples who break up before they marry don't show up as divorce statistics.

Many marriages today are less permanent than in previous decades. There have always been divorces in this country, but what used to be rare has now become routine. Changing attitudes toward marriage and divorce in this country are reflected in the changing divorce rate.

A graph of the divorce rate shows two significant trends. One is a sharp increase in divorces in the late 1960s that continued through the 1970s. The second is a leveling and even a slight decline in the 1980s. Both are related to the attitudes of the baby boom generation toward marriage and divorce.

The increasing divorce rate in the 1970s was due to both attitude and opportunity. Baby boomers did not stay married as long as their parents due to their different attitudes towards marriage and especially their attitude toward commitment in marriage. It is clear from the social research that the increase in the divorce rate in the 1970s did not come from empty nesters (e.g., builders) finally filing for divorce after sending their children into the world. Instead it came from young couples (e.g., baby boomers) divorcing even before they had children. {17}

The opportunity for divorce was also significant. When increasing numbers of couples began seeking divorce, state legislatures responded by passing no-fault divorce laws. Essentially a married person could get a divorce for any

reason or no reason at all.

Economic opportunity was also a significant factor in divorce. During this same period, women enjoyed greater economic opportunities in the job market. Women with paychecks are less likely to stay in a marriage that was not fulfilling to them and have less incentive to stay in a marriage. Sociologist David Popenoe surveying a number of studies on divorce concluded that "nearly all have reached the same general conclusion. It has typically been found that the probability of divorce goes up the higher the wife's income and the closer that income is to her husband's."{18}

The second part of a graph on divorce shows a leveling and even a slight decline. The divorce rate peaked in 1981 and has been in decline ever since. The reasons are twofold. Initially, the decline had to do with the aging of the baby boom generation who were entering into those years that have traditionally had lower rates of divorce. But long term the reason is due to what we have already discussed in terms of the impact of cohabitation on divorce. Fewer couples are untying the knot because *fewer couples are tying the knot*.

Changing Trends in Family

We have already mentioned that starting with the baby boom generation and continuing on with subsequent generations, couples postponed marriage. But not only did these generations postpone marriage, they also postponed procreation. Unlike the generations that preceded them (e.g., the builder generation born before the end of World War II), these subsequent generations waited longer to have children and also had few children. Lifestyle choice was certainly one factor. Another important factor was cost. The estimated cost of raising a child during this period of time rose to over six figures. Parents of a baby born in 1979 could expect to pay $66,000 to rear a child to eighteen. For a baby born in 1988, parents

could expect to pay $150,000, and that did not include additional costs of piano lessons, summer camp, or a college education.{19}

When these generations did have children, often the family structure was very different than in previous generations. Consider the impact of divorce. Children in homes where a divorce has occurred are cut off from one of the parents and they suffer emotionally, educationally, and economically.

Judith Wallerstein in her research discovered long-term psychological devastation to the children.{20} For example, three out of five children felt rejected by at least one parent. And five years after their parents' divorce, more than one-third of the children were doing markedly worse than they had been before the divorce. Essentially she found that these emotional tremors register on the psychological Richter scale many years after the divorce.

The middle class in this country has been rocked by the one-two punch of divorce and illegitimacy, creating what has been called the "feminization of poverty." U.S. Census Bureau statistics show that single moms are five times more likely to be poor than are their married sisters.{21}

An increasing percentage of women give birth to children out of wedlock. This increase is due in large part to changing attitudes toward marriage and family. In a society that is already changing traditional patterns (by postponing marriage, divorcing more frequently, etc.), it is not surprising that many women are avoiding marriage altogether. Essentially, the current generation disconnects having children and getting married. In their minds, they separate parenthood from marriage, thus creating an enormous increase in the number of single parent homes.

Greater social acceptance of out-of-wedlock births, divorce, and single parenting tends to reinforce the trends and

suggests that these percentages will increase in the future. Young adults who contemplate marriage may be less inclined to do so because they were raised in a home where divorce occurred. A young woman raised by a single mom may be less inclined to marry when they are older, convinced that they can raise a child without the help of a husband. Better employment options for young women even encourage them to "go it alone."

These changes in attitudes and changes in the structure of marriage and family have created a very different family in the twenty-first century. One writer imagined the confusion that children would feel in this futuristic scenario:

> *On a spring afternoon, half a century from today, the Joneses are gathered to sing "Happy Birthday" to Junior. There's Dad and his third wife, Mom and her second husband, Junior's two half brothers from his father's first marriage, his six stepsisters from his mother's spouse's previous unions, 100-year-old Great Grandpa, all eight of Junior's current "grandparents," assorted aunts, uncles-in-law and stepcousins. While one robot scoops up the gift wrappings and another blows out the candles, Junior makes a wish . . . that he didn't have so many relatives.{22}*

Notes

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18. David Popenoe, *Disturbing the Nest: Family Change and Decline in Modern Societies* (New York: de Gruyter, 1988), 223.
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20. Judith Wallerstein and Sandra Blakeslee, *Second Chances: Men, Women and Children A Decade after Divorce* (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1989).
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World Report, 9 May 1983, A3.

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In Celebration of Fathers

Turn on most American TV shows today and try to find a dad who is respected, honored, and followed as he does his best to lead his family.

Good luck with that.

One of the greatest sources of pain and dysfunction in our culture is what has happened to fatherhood. On the one hand, fathers are dismissed as superfluous by social and cultural policies such as no-fault divorce and the wholesale acceptance of single mothering. On the other, many men passively refuse to resist the gigantic lie that they don't matter and are not important, producing the disaster of wholesale fatherlessness. The rates of the four major youth pathologies—teen pregnancy, teen drug abuse, school dropouts and juvenile crime—are tightly correlated with fatherlessness, often more so than with any other socioeconomic factor.{1}

God has a very different perspective on fathers and fatherhood. The God of the Bible has revealed Himself to us not just as Creator or Sovereign of the Universe. He has revealed Himself to us as *Father*. Even beyond that is a staggering revelation: the Lord Jesus called Him "Abba"—Daddy{2}, and we are invited to do the same.{3}

Because of this, earthly fathers have an incredibly important responsibility and privilege: to show their children what the Heavenly Father is like. Every father, whether he wants to or not, whether he's aware of it or not, makes a powerful

statement about God with his life that is either true or false. By their modeling, some fathers show God to be warm, accepting, loving, kind, and protective. Others declare that God is distant, cold, disconnected, and punishing. Many believers grow up without a father or with one who is difficult and detached; for them, spiritual and emotional health means learning to recognize and renounce the false image of God they were given and embrace the true Father-heart of God.

Children infer their own value from the way their fathers relate to them. Being ignored or neglected assures a child that she is invisible and worthless. Being treated as a vicarious means to achieve a man's own goals, or worse, as a sexual object, diminishes a child into a thing. But when a dad spends time simply being with his kids, they feel like they matter. When a dad invests in the ordinary moments of life by being fully *present* with his son, a boy learns how to be a male and that he belongs in the world of men. When a dad treats his daughter with respect and dignity, cherishing her femininity regardless of the form it takes—girly-girl or jockette tomboy—she learns that it's safe and good to be a girl. (And she learns what kind of treatment to expect from young men as she grows older.)

Sometimes, the simplest things can make all the difference in the world. On one life-changing Oprah show, someone offered a true word of wisdom, suggesting that a child knows his father really loves him when he sees his daddy's eyes light up. Fathers who heard this and starting putting it into practice reported that it immediately changed their family dynamics as their children felt more loved. Regardless of a child's individual "love language,"{4} there is something profound about being able to see evidence of a father's delight. This is a lovely reflection of the much grander truth that we all long to see the lit-up face of God's attention, affirmation and affection when He looks at us. Consider the deeply moving

Aaronic blessing from Numbers 6:

> The LORD bless thee, and keep thee:
> The LORD make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee:
> The LORD lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.

I respectfully suggest this is a picture of Abba-Daddy's eyes lit up as He looks at His beloved child, giving us "face time" because He loves us and He wants us to know and *feel* we are loved.

Dad's, this Sunday is your day. Enjoy it, knowing that God has given you the great gift of your irreplaceable influence in the family and in the world. That memorable line from the first "Spiderman" movie is memorable because it's biblical: "With great power comes great responsibility."

The Lord bless you as you use the power of your masculine strength to love and serve your families to the glory of God.

Notes

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2. Mark 14:36
3. Rom. 8:15, Gal. 4:6
4. Dr. Gary Chapman, "The Five Love Languages," www.fivelovelanguages.com.

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Your Money, Your Life or Your Wine

Could offering a cup of human kindness save your life sometime? It helped protect guests from a menacing gunman at a recent Washington, DC, dinner gathering.

Comedian Jack Benny had a famous skit in which an armed robber pointed a gun at Benny, whose comedy often poked fun at his own miserly show business persona. In the routine, Benny told the robber to put the gun down. The robber persisted. "Your money or your life!" demanded the crook, irritated by the delay. "I'm thinking it over," deadpanned Benny.{1}

Quick thinking helped save the DC dinner guests.

Give me your money!

The Washington Post reports{2} that some friends had enjoyed steak and shrimp at a DC home and were sitting on the back patio sipping wine around midnight. A hooded gunman slipped in through an open gate and held a pistol to a fourteen-year-old girl's head. "Give me your money, or I'll start shooting," demanded the intruder.

The guests—including the girls parents—froze. Then one adult—Cristina "Cha Cha" Rowan—had an idea.

"We were just finishing dinner," Rowan said to the uninvited guest. "Why don't you have a glass of wine with us?"

The robber sipped their French wine and said, "Damn, that's good wine."

Michael Rabdau, the girl's father, offered the man the glass. Rowan offered the bottle. The man—with hood down, by this point—sipped more wine and sampled some Camembert cheese. Then

he stowed the gun in his pocket and admitted, “I think I may have come to the wrong house. I’m sorry. Can I get a hug?”

Rowan hugged the man. Then Rabdau, his wife and the other two guests each hugged him. The man asked for a group hug; the five adults complied. He left with the wine glass. There were no injuries, no theft. The stunned guests entered the house and stared at each other silently. Police came. Investigators discovered the empty and unbroken wine glass on the ground in a nearby alley.

“I was definitely expecting there would be some kind of casualty,” Rabdau recalled, according to the *Post*. “He was very aggressive at first; then it turned into a love fest. I don’t know what it was.”

“There was this degree of disbelief and terror at the same time,” Rabdau observed. “Then it miraculously just changed. His whole emotional tone turned—like, we’re one big happy family now. I thought: Was it the wine? Was it the cheese?” The entire encounter lasted about ten minutes. DC police chalked it up as strange but true.

Gentle Answers

An old Jewish proverb says, “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” {3} I suspect her friends are extremely grateful that Cha Cha Rowan had the presence of mind to offer a gentle reply to the intruder’s demands.

Sometimes the psychological approach can deter disaster. Kindness and hospitality often can defuse tension and help open hearts and minds. Was the robber lonely? Feeling sad or rejected? Weary of his lifestyle? Hungry for acceptance and friendship? Rowan and her friends struck an emotional chord that resonated, apparently deeply.

Brute force and overwhelming arguments are common cultural responses to danger or opposition and, of course, theyre

sometimes necessary. Most of us are glad Hitler was defeated and that legislators outlawed slavery. But could gentle answers improve any disputes—or families, marriages, workplaces, political relationships—that you've seen?

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Starting Over: Facing the Future after Significant Loss

February 13th fell on a Tuesday that year, but it seemed like my unlucky day.

My wife of twenty years was divorcing me; it would be final in two days. February 1, my employer had shown me the door—on the twenty-fifth anniversary of my employment. Now, on February 13, I was in my physician's office getting test results. Unaware of my difficulties, he asked, "Have you been under stress recently?" Perhaps he was assessing my emotional state to help him gently ease into the difficult subject he was about to address.

He said I might have cancer.

That evening, a longtime friend called to encourage me. As we spoke, I felt the weight of my world crashing in. Would the haunting pain of spousal rejection ever end? Where would I work? What of my life's mission? Would life itself last much longer? I wept into the phone as I struggled to make sense of the swirling vortex of uncertainty.

Relationships, work and health absorb our time, energy, memories and hopes. Ever had a fulfilling relationship turn to ashes? Maybe you've excelled at work; then a new or insensitive boss decides your services are no longer wanted or affordable. Or perhaps your health falters. Your parent or best friend dies suddenly of a heart attack or perishes in an auto wreck.

What do you feel? Shock? Grief? Anger? Desires for revenge or justice? Discouragement and depression? How do you cope with the loss, and how can you start over again?

Over dinner, a new friend told me he had lost both his parents in recent years. "How did you cope?" I inquired. He related painful details of their alcohol-related deaths. I listened intently and tried to express sympathy. "But how did you deal with their deaths?" I asked, curious to know how he had handled his feelings. "I guess I haven't," he replied. Painful emotions from deep loss can be difficult to process. Some seek solace by suppressing them.

My wife lost her father, then her mother, during a five-year span in her late twenties and early thirties. Focusing on her mother's needs after her father's passing occupied much of her thought. After her mother's death, she felt quite somber. "People who always were there, whom you could always call on for advice, were no longer around," she recalls. "That was very sobering." Over time, the pain of grief diminished.

How can you adjust to significant loss and start over again? I certainly don't have all the answers. But may I suggest ideas

that have worked for me and for others along life's sometimes challenging journey?

Grieve the loss. Don't ignore your pain. Take time to reflect on your loss, to cry, to ask questions of yourself, others or God. I remember deep, heaving sobs after my wife left me. I would not wish that pain on anyone, but I recommend experiencing grief rather than ignoring and stuffing it. This tends to diminish ulcers and delayed rage.

A little help from your friends. During divorce proceedings and my rocky employment ending, good friends hung close. We ate meals together, watched football games, attended a concert and more. A trusted counselor helped me cope. A divorce recovery group at a nearby church showed me I was not the only one experiencing weird feelings. Don't try to handle enormous loss alone.

Watch your vulnerabilities. In our coed divorce recovery group, I appreciated learning how women as well as men processed their pain. It also was tempting to enter new relationships at a very risky time. Some members, not yet divorced, were dating. Some dated each other. Attractive, needy divorcés/divorcées can appear inviting. After each group session, I made a beeline to my car. "Guard your heart," advises an ancient proverb, "for it affects everything you do."{1}

Look for a bright spot. Not every cloud has a silver lining, but maybe yours does. After my divorce and termination, I returned to graduate school and saw my career enhanced. My cancer scare turned out to be kidney stones, no fun but not as serious. I met and—four years after the divorce—married a wonderful woman, Meg Korpi. We are very happy.

CNN star Larry King once was fired from the *Miami Herald*. "It was very difficult for me when they dropped me," he recalls. King says one can view firing as "a terrible tragedy" or a

chance to seek new opportunities.{2}

Cherish your memories. Displaying treasured photos of a deceased loved one can help you adjust gradually to their loss. Recall fun times you had together, fulfilling experiences with coworkers or noteworthy projects accomplished. Be grateful. But don't become enmeshed in past memories, because the time will come to. . .

Turn the page. After appropriate grieving, there comes a time to move on. One widow lived alone for years in their large, empty house with the curtains drawn. Her children finally convinced her to move but in many ways she seemed emotionally stuck for the next three decades until her death.

Significant steps for me were taking down and storing photos of my ex-wife. Embracing my subsequent job with enthusiasm made it fulfilling and productive. Consider how you'll emotionally process and respond to the common question, "Where do you work?" Perhaps you'll want to take a course, exercise and diet for health, or develop a hobby. Meet new people at volunteer projects, civic clubs, church, or vacations. Consider what you can learn from your loss. Often, suffering develops character, patience, confidence and opportunities to help others.

Sink your spiritual roots deep. I'm glad my coping resources included personal faith. Once quite skeptical, I discovered spiritual life during college. Students whose love and joy I admired explained that God loved me enough to send His Son, Jesus, to die to pay the penalty due for all my wrongdoing. Then He rose from the dead to give new life. I invited Him to enter my life, forgive me, and become my friend. I found inner peace, assurance of forgiveness, and strength to adapt to difficulties. Amidst life's curve balls, I've had a close Friend who promised never to leave.

One early believer said those who place their faith in Christ

“become new persons. They are not the same anymore, for the old life is gone. A new life has begun!”{3} Jesus can help you start all over with life itself. He can help you forgive those who have wronged you.

As you grieve your loss, seek support in good friends, watch your vulnerabilities, and seek to turn the page. . . may I encourage you to meet the One who can help you make all things new? He’ll never let you down.

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Notes

1. Proverbs 4:23 NLT.
2. Harvey Mackay, *We Got Fired!…And It’s the Best Thing That Ever Happened to Us* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2004), pp. 150-153 ff.
3. 2 Corinthians 5:17 NLT.

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Christian Discernment

We are confronted with ethical choices and moral complexity. We must apply biblical principles to these social and political issues. And we must avoid the pitfalls and logical fallacies that so often accompany these issues.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

Turn on a television or open a newspaper. You are immediately presented with a myriad of ethical issues. Daily we are

confronted with ethical choices and moral complexity. Society is awash in controversial issues: abortion, euthanasia, cloning, race, drug abuse, homosexuality, gambling, pornography, and capital punishment. Life may have been simpler in a previous age, but now the rise of technology and the fall of ethical consensus have brought us to a society full of moral dilemmas.

Never has society needed biblical perspectives more to evaluate contemporary moral issues. And yet Christians seem less equipped to address these topics from a biblical perspective. The Barna Research Group conducted a national survey of adults and concluded that only four percent of adults have a biblical worldview as the basis of their decision-making. The survey also discovered that nine percent of born again Christians have such a perspective on life.{1}

It is worth noting that what George Barna defines as a biblical worldview would be considered by most people to be basic Christian doctrine. It doesn't even include aspects of a biblical perspective on social and political issues.

Of even greater concern is the fact that most Christians do not base their beliefs on an absolute moral foundation. Biblical ethics rests on the belief in absolute truth. Yet surveys show that a minority of born again adults (forty-four percent) and an even smaller proportion of born again teenagers (nine percent) are certain of the existence of absolute moral truth.{2} By a three-to-one margin adults say truth is always relative to the person and their situation. This perspective is even more lopsided among teenagers who overwhelmingly believe moral truth depends on the circumstances.{3}

Social scientists as well as pollsters have been warning that American society is becoming more and more dominated by moral anarchy. Writing in the early 1990s, James Patterson and Peter Kim said in *The Day America Told the Truth* that there was no

moral authority in America. “We choose which laws of God we believe in. There is absolutely no moral consensus in this country as there was in the 1950s, when all our institutions commanded more respect.”{4} Essentially we live in a world of moral anarchy.

So how do we begin to apply a Christian worldview to the complex social and political issues of the day? And how do we avoid falling for the latest fad or cultural trend that blows in the wind? The following are some key principles to apply and some dangerous pitfalls to avoid.

Biblical Principles

A key biblical principle that applies to the area of bioethics is the sanctity of human life. Such verses as Psalm 139:13-16 show that God’s care and concern extend to the womb. Other verses such as Jeremiah 1:5, Judges 13:7-8, Psalm 51:5 and Exodus 21:22–25 give additional perspective and framework to this principle. These principles can be applied to issues ranging from abortion to stem cell research to infanticide.

A related biblical principle involves the equality of human beings. The Bible teaches that God has made “of one blood all nations of men” (Acts 17:26). The Bible also teaches that it is wrong for a Christian to have feelings of superiority (Philippians 2). Believers are told not to make class distinctions between various people (James 2). Paul teaches the spiritual equality of all people in Christ (Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11). These principles apply to racial relations and our view of government.

A third principle is a biblical perspective on marriage. Marriage is God’s plan and provides intimate companionship for life (Genesis 2:18). Marriage provides a context for the procreation and nurture of children (Ephesians 6:1-2). And finally, marriage provides a godly outlet for sexual desire (1

Corinthians 7:2). These principles can be applied to such diverse issues as artificial reproduction (which often introduces a third party into the pregnancy) and cohabitation (living together).

Another biblical principle involves sexual ethics. The Bible teaches that sex is to be within the bounds of marriage, as a man and the woman become one flesh (Ephesians 5:31). Paul teaches that we should “avoid sexual immorality” and learn to control our own body in a way that is “holy and honorable” (1 Thessalonians 4:3-5). He admonishes us to flee sexual immorality (1 Corinthians 6:18). These principles apply to such issues as premarital sex, adultery, and homosexuality.

A final principle concerns government and our obedience to civil authority. Government is ordained by God (Rom.13:1-7). We are to render service and obedience to the government (Matt. 22:21) and submit to civil authority (1 Pet. 2:13-17). Even though we are to obey government, there may be certain times when we might be forced to obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29). These principles apply to issues such as war, civil disobedience, politics, and government.

Biblical Discernment

So how do we sort out what is true and what is false? This is a difficult proposition in a world awash in data. It underscores the need for Christians to develop discernment. This is a word that appears fairly often in the Bible (1 Samuel 25:32-33; 1 Kings 3:10-11; 4:29; Psalm 119:66; Proverbs 2:3; Daniel 2:14; Philippians 1:9 [NASB]). And with so many facts, claims, and opinions being tossed about, we all need to be able to sort through what is true and what is false.

Colossians 2:8 says, “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of

the world, rather than according to Christ." We need to develop discernment so that we are not taken captive by false ideas. Here are some things to watch for:

1. Equivocation – the use of vague terms. Someone can start off using language we think we understand and then veer off into a new meaning. Most of us are well aware of the fact that religious cults are often guilty of this. A cult member might say that he believes in salvation by grace. But what he really means is that you have to join his cult and work your way toward salvation. Make people define the vague terms they use.

This tactic is used frequently in bioethics. Proponents of embryonic stem cell research often will not acknowledge the distinction between adult stem cells and embryonic stem cells. Those trying to legalize cloning will refer to it as "somatic cell nuclear transfer." Unless you have a scientific background, you will not know that it is essentially the same thing.

2. Card stacking – the selective use of evidence. Don't jump on the latest bandwagon and intellectual fad without checking the evidence. Many advocates are guilty of listing all the points in their favor while ignoring the serious points against it.

The major biology textbooks used in high school and college never provide students with evidence against evolution. Jonathan Wells, in his book *Icons of Evolution,* shows that the examples that are used in most textbooks are either wrong or misleading.{5} Some of the examples are known frauds (such as the Haeckel embryos) and continue to show up in textbooks decades after they were shown to be fraudulent.

Another example would be the Y2K fears. Anyone who was concerned about the potential catastrophe in 2000 need only read any of the technical computer journals in the 1990s to see that no computer expert was predicting what the Y2K fear

mongers were predicting at the time.

3. Appeal to authority – relying on authority to the exclusion of logic and evidence. Just because an expert says it, that doesn't necessarily make it true. We live in a culture that worships experts, but not all experts are right. Hiram's Law says: "If you consult enough experts, you can confirm any opinion."

Those who argue that global warming is caused by human activity often say that "the debate in the scientific community is over." But an Internet search of critics of the theories behind global warming will show that there are many scientists with credentials in climatology or meteorology who have questions about the theory. It is not accurate to say that the debate is over when the debate still seems to be taking place.

4. Ad hominem – Latin for "against the man." People using this tactic attack the person instead of dealing with the validity of their argument. Often the soundness of an argument is inversely proportional to the amount of ad hominem rhetoric. If there is evidence for the position, proponents usually argue the merits of the position. When evidence is lacking, they attack the critics.

Christians who want public libraries to filter pornography from minors are accused of censorship. Citizens who want to define marriage as between one man and one woman are called bigots. Scientists who criticize evolution are subjected to withering attacks on their character and scientific credentials. Scientists who question global warming are compared to holocaust deniers.

5. Straw man argument – making your opponent's argument seem so ridiculous that it is easy to attack and knock down. Liberal commentators say that evangelical Christians want to implement a religious theocracy in America. That's not true.

But the hyperbole works to marginalize Christian activists who believe they have a responsibility to speak to social and political issues within society.

Those who stand for moral principles in the area of bioethics often see this tactic used against them. They hear from proponents of physician assisted suicide that pro-life advocates don't care about the suffering of the terminally ill. Proponents of embryonic stem cell research level the same charge by saying that pro-life people don't care that these new medical technologies could alleviate the suffering of many with intractable diseases. Nothing could be further from the truth.

6. Sidestepping – dodging the issue by changing the subject. Politicians do this in press conferences by not answering the question asked by the reporter, but instead answering a question they wish someone had asked. Professors sometimes do that when a student points out an inconsistency or a leap in logic.

Ask a proponent of abortion whether the fetus is human and you are likely to see this tactic in action. He or she might start talking about a woman's right to choose or the right of women to control their own bodies. Perhaps you will hear a discourse on the need to tolerate various viewpoints in a pluralistic society. But you probably won't get a straight answer to an important question.

7. Red herring – going off on a tangent (from the practice of luring hunting dogs off the trail with the scent of a herring fish). Proponents of embryonic stem cell research rarely will talk about the morality of destroying human embryos. Instead they will go off on a tangent and talk about the various diseases that could be treated and the thousands of people who could be helped with the research.

Be on the alert when someone in a debate changes the subject.

They may want to argue their points on more familiar ground, or they may know they cannot win their argument on the relevant issue at hand.

In conclusion, we have discussed some of the key biblical principles we should apply to our consideration and debate about social and political issues. We have talked about the sanctity of human life and the equality of human beings. We have discussed a biblical perspective on marriage and on sexual ethics. And we have also talked about a biblical perspective on government and civil authority.

We have also spent some time talking about the importance of developing biblical discernment and looked at many of the logical fallacies that are frequently used in arguing against a biblical perspective on many of the social and political issues of our day.

Every day, it seems, we are confronted with ethical choices and moral complexity. As Christians it is important to consider these biblical principles and consistently apply them to these issues. It is also important that we develop discernment and learn to recognize these tactics. We are called to develop discernment as we tear down false arguments raised up against the knowledge of God. By doing this we will learn to take every thought captive to the obedience to Christ (2 Corinthians 10:4-5).

Notes

1. “A Biblical Worldview Has a Radical Effect on a Person’s Life,” The Barna Update (Ventura, CA), 1 Dec. 2003.
2. “The Year’s Most Intriguing Findings, From Barna Research Studies,” The Barna Update (Ventura, CA), 12 Dec. 2000.
3. “Americans Are Most Likely to Base Truth on Feelings,” The Barna Update (Ventura, CA), 12 Feb. 2002.
4. James Patterson and Peter Kim, *The Day America Told the Truth* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1991).

5. Jonathan Wells, *Icons of Evolution: Science or Myth?* (Washington: Regnery Publishing, 2000).

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Overcoming Anxiety: Finding Real Peace When Life Seems Crazy

What makes you feel anxious? Being late or unprepared for work or appointments? Maybe unresolved interpersonal conflict. Airline travel? Public speaking? Fears of losing love? Serious illness or a friend's death?

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

What makes you feel anxious? Being late or unprepared for work or appointments? Maybe unresolved interpersonal conflict. Airline travel? Public speaking? Fears of losing love? Serious illness or a friend's death?

Pressures from the trivial to the traumatic can prompt feelings of fearfulness or apprehension.

Once at a booksellers convention my wife and I spent an exhausting day on our feet promoting a new book. Late that night, after a reception crowd had thinned down to mostly authors and our publisher, we stood in a circle engaged in conversation. I had to leave her side momentarily to attend to a matter.

Upon returning to the circle, I walked up behind my wife and began gently to massage her shoulders. She seemed to enjoy

this, so I started to put my arms around her waist to give her a little hug. Just then, I looked up at the opposite side of the circle and saw … my wife.

I had my hands on the wrong woman!

In that instant, I knew the true meaning of fear. Fear of circumstances. Even fear of death! Confusion clouded my mind. Heat enveloped my back, shoulders, neck and head. My face reddened; my stomach knotted.

You've probably had embarrassing moments that generate anxiety. What about more serious causes?

Your Greatest Fear?

Fear of death is perhaps humans' greatest fear. In college, the student living next door to me was struck and killed instantly by lightening on a golf course one springtime afternoon. Shock gripped our fraternity house. "What does it mean if life can be snuffed out in an instant?" my friends asked. "Is there a life after death and, if so, how can we experience it?" Confusion and anxiety reigned.

If you can't answer the question "What will happen when you die?" you may become anxious.

How can you find real peace in a chaotic world? Consider a possible solution. It involves the spiritual realm.

As a university student, I wrote a paper for an abnormal psychology class investigating a biblical therapy for anxiety. I had come to faith as a freshman and found it brought me peace of mind. Complex psychological disorders often stem from more basic problems like anxiety, problems for which faith offers practical solutions.

I sent a copy of my paper to the author of our textbook, a prominent UCLA psychologist. A month later, he replied that he

liked the paper and asked permission to quote from it in his revised textbook.

Somewhat amazed, I readily agreed. I also sent a copy of his letter to my parents in Miami, who were beginning to wonder about their son's campus spiritual involvement.

This professor felt that the principles in the paper—which certainly were not original with me—had both academic and personal relevance. Several months later, we met at his lovely home in Malibu overlooking the Pacific Ocean. As we sat in his back yard, this professor told me he lacked personal peace and wanted to know God personally. I showed him a simple four-point outline based on one of Jesus' statements: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life."{1}

We discussed God's unconditional love for us, our dilemma of being unplugged from Him and the flaws (selfishness and "sins") that result. I noted that Jesus, through His death in our place and return to life, came to plug us back into God by paying the penalty we owed for our sins.

Finding Real Peace

This professor decided to place his faith in God and asked Jesus to forgive him and enter his life. We kept in touch. Later, over the phone, he told me that as he looked out over the ocean and saw the setting sun, "I really believe I'm a part of all this. Before I didn't, but now I do." He was seeing how he fit into God's universe. An internationally acclaimed scholar linked up with, if you will, the greatest Psychologist.

One of Jesus' earlier followers wrote to some friends about a divine aid for anxiety: "Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. If you do this, you will experience God's

peace, which is far more wonderful than the human mind can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus."{2}

Faith in God does not make life perfect and is no automatic solution to anxiety. Illness, chemical imbalance, emotional wounds and more can hamper coping. But a good starting place is to become linked with the One who loves us and knows best what makes us fulfilled.

Might it be time for you to consider Him?

Notes

1. John 3:16 *NLT* (*New Living Translation*).
2. Philippians 4:6-7 (*NLT*).

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Despite Media Claims, Condoms Don't Prevent STDs

If terrorists were caught attempting to manipulate the environment at America's colleges and universities so that 85 percent of all coeds would graduate infected with a life threatening virus, they would be vilified and prosecuted to the full extent of the law. Many media reports on a recent study about the effectiveness of condom use in deterring the spread of HPV have the potential to produce the same result. Irresponsible and/or ignorant journalism producing a false sense of security may be able to accomplish what the most sophisticated terrorist operation would be unable to pull off.

Human papilloma virus (HPV)—which can cause cervical cancer, genital warts and vaginal, vulvar, anal and penile cancers—is the most common sexually transmitted disease, infecting about 80 percent of young women within five years of becoming sexually active. One of the arguments for abstinence prior to marriage is that condoms have not been shown to be effective in protecting against HPV and other sexually transmitted diseases. A new study report, published in the June 22 edition of the *New England Journal of Medicine*, is titled "Condom Use and the Risk of Genital Human Papillomavirus Infection in Young Women"{1}. This study was structured to provide better information on the impact of male condom use on the likelihood of women contracting HPV.

What new insights are gained from this study on the relationship of condom use and HPV? The most important result is that sexually active college women whose male partners used condoms 100 percent of the time (both with the women in the study and with other sexual partners) have roughly a 38 percent chance of contracting HPV within the first year of becoming sexually active.{2} If she has at least one different partner per year for four years, the probability that she will leave college with an HPV infection is greater than 85 percent. The obvious conclusion of the study is that **condom use is not an effective means of preventing HPV**.

The study did find that sexually active college women whose male partners used condoms less than 100 percent of the time had a probability of contracting HPV within the first year of becoming sexually active ranging from 62 percent to virtually 100 percent depending upon the regularity of condom use by their male partners. Although the study does show that male condom use did reduce the probability of sexually active women contracting HPV, it did not reduce it to a level that any thinking person would consider safe. Based on the study results, it is reasonable to conclude that any woman who is sexually active with multiple partners during her college

years will almost certainly contract HPV whether she ensures their partners use condoms or not.

One would expect the headlines for the media reports on this topic to read, “Condoms Shown to be Ineffective Against HPV.” The body of the article would point out that these results vindicate the proponents’ of abstinence emphasis in preventing the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. However, the exact opposite is being purported by the media. Here are some samples from the headlines:

• **Condoms Reduce HPV Risk After All, Without Increasing Likelihood of Sex**
(American Council on Science and Health)
• **Condoms Proven to Protect Against Virus**
(Associated Press, *Yuma Sun*)
• **Condoms Reduce Risk of Cervical Cancer, Survey Says**
(*Dallas Morning News*, June 22, 2006)

These headlines take a half truth and present it in a way that is designed to further a political agenda while endangering the health of America’s youth and young adults. Even more dangerous is the first line of the Associated Press report, “For the first time, scientists have proof that condoms offer women **impressive protection** against the virus that causes cervical cancer.” I do not consider an 85 percent chance of catching the virus in four years impressive. I would consider it dismal! The AP report then adds insult to injury by including this quote from an obscure expert:

> *That’s pretty awesome. There aren’t too many times when you can have an intervention that would offer **so much protection**, said Dr. Patricia Kloser, an infectious-disease specialist at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey who was not a part of the study.*

The use of the words “impressive protection” and “so much protection” in conjunction with the results of this study

borders on criminal. We need to hold our journalists to task for such biased (or, in the best case, shoddy) reporting. Even more important, we need to get out the real conclusion supported by the study: Abstinence or a completely monogamous relationship is the only effective protection against sexually transmitted diseases. As Christians, we would point to marriage as the only valid venue for a monogamous relationship, but that is outside the scope of the study.

To determine the number of coeds at risk, we need to consider how many are sexually active. In order to participate in this study, the college coeds had to have refrained from vaginal intercourse prior to the two weeks preceding the start of the study. In other words, the participants were virgins at the beginning of the study. Over the three year study period, 45 percent of those originally enrolled remained virgins. According to a report from the U.S. Center for Disease Control{3}, in 2002, 70 percent of never-married teens under the age of 18 had not engaged in sex. Taking the 55 percent from the study who started sexual activity in college with the 30 percent who were already sexually active, one would predict that 68.5 percent of college coeds would be sexually active. This tracks well with the CDC data that 68 percent of never-married females have engaged in sex before they were 20. Thus, if coed sexual activity remains at the same level and 100 percent condom use is practiced, we can expect approximately 60 percent of college coeds to graduate with an HPV versus 68 percent with 50 percent condom usage. In contrast, if we could cut the number of sexually active coeds in half, the HPV infection rate among graduates could drop to 33 percent or less regardless of condom usage.

Notes

1. *New England Journal of Medicine*, Volume 354, June 22, 2006, Number 25, “Condom Use and the Risk of Genital Human Papillomavirus Infection in Young Women,” Rachel L. Winer, Ph.D., James P. Hughes, Ph.D., Qinghua Feng, Ph.D., Sandra

O’Reilly, B.S., Nancy B. Kiviat, M.D., King K. Holmes, M.D., Ph.D., and Laura A. Koutsky, Ph.D.
2. Study actually calculates rate per 100 hundred at risk years which is somewhat different than the probability of occurrence since some women reported multiple infections over the course of the study.
3. “Teenagers in the United States: Sexual Activity, Contraceptive Use, and Childbearing,” 2002, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, December 2004.

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Leftist Jewish Journalist Survives Evangelical Beat

Quiz: What do you get when you take one leftist Jewish journalist, assign him to the evangelical Christian beat for major newspapers on both US coasts, sprinkle in some fiery sermons and politically conservative speeches, mix thoroughly, and bake with the heat of fiercely contested national elections?

Note: This is not a joke.

Sound like a recipe for nitroglycerin shortcake? Maybe you’d expect mutual animosity: “Those wacko God-squaders are at it again, imposing their beliefs and politics on the rest of us sane people.” “He’s just another example of the biased secular humanist liberal media that’s ruining America.”

Yet this cake hides no explosives. The leftist Jewish journalist made a significant discovery on the road to meeting

deadlines, one he feels can instruct his colleagues and us all.

He says to effectively cover the strange tribe to which he was assigned, it helps to know its members as neighbors and friends. His lesson has affected his writing in ways that have conservative evangelicals commending him for fairness and that provide useful illustrations for managing today's turbulent culture wars.

A Jew Among the Evangelicals

Mark Pinsky's new book, *A Jew Among the Evangelicals: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Westminster John Knox), tells how this "nice Jewish boy from Jersey" ended up attending church "more often than many Christians" and sometimes more often than he attends his own synagogue. During his ten years covering religion for the *Los Angeles Times*, he focused on leaders of major evangelical ministries and had little connection with local grassroots evangelicals.

When he moved to Florida in 1995 to write for the *Orlando Sentinel*, they were everywhere: In the neighborhood, at kids sporting events, birthday parties, PTA meetings, Scouts, "I encountered evangelicals simply as people, rather than as subjects or sources of quotes for my stories."

Still a committed Jew, Pinsky found they were neither monolithic nor, as *The Washington Post* once claimed, ""poor, uneducated and easy to command." They displayed surprising diversity on a range of issues including the Iraq war, environmentalism, tax policy, women in leadership, and immigration.

The Readable Radical

Disclaimer: Pinsky, whom I've known since our university days, is a personal friend, so I'm biased. But I've also observed a

curious development here that merits wider consideration. His *Duke Chronicle* column was entitled “The Readable Radical” and he was at the vanguard of late-1960s campus leftist causes. I didn’t always agree with his politics, but I admired his concerns about justice, hypocrisy and the disenfranchised.

He still votes with the Democratic left, but he also understands the Christian subculture he covers better than many of its members. Mutual respect characterizes his relations with its leaders.

Pinsky is not without good natured humor as he highlights evangelical quirks. Example: the Orlando golf club that hyped its Easter sunrise service and “Easter Egg Scramble” golf tournament. And, perhaps-not-so-tongue-in-cheek, he admits he especially likes about evangelical Christians that “if you are sorry, they have to forgive you.” He knows their boss said, “When you are praying, first forgive anyone you are holding a grudge against{1}.

Lessons for Life in the Larger World

His book draws lessons from his peculiar and unlikely journey for life in the larger world. His stories of “how people just like you wrestle with feelings, values, and beliefs that touch the core of their beings” provide “a glimpse of someone learning to understand and get along with folks whose convictions differ from his own.”

Get to know your intellectual and philosophical adversaries, he recommends. Take them to lunch. Ratchet down the rhetoric. Maybe connection can produce understanding and civility can grow into bridgebuilding.

Not bad advice in a world too-often filled with brickbats and name calling.

Note

1. Mark 11:25 *New Living Translation*.

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Reflections of a Caregiver

Former Probe staff member Rick Rood lovingly cared for his wife Polly through their twenty-year battle with the degenerative ravages of Huntington's Disease. He wrote this intensely personal and insightful essay a couple of months after Polly's death in the fall of 2003. We gratefully provide his reflections on that journey.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

During these first few months of adjusting to being alone without my dear wife Polly, I've had occasion to reflect quite a bit not only on our nearly 32 years of marriage, but particularly on these past twenty years of walking with her through her journey with Huntington's Disease (HD). And particularly how they impacted me personally. I admit that this is going to be a very personal essay. And parts of it may be tedious at best. But I feel that at the end of this twenty year journey, this is an appropriate time for me to share some of my thoughts, and to fill in some of the gaps in Polly's story. My purpose is not only to share some of my heart, but also to provide a glimpse at some of the ways in which the Lord was at work through this experience, at least to my perception.

Polly and I met during our college years at Seattle Pacific University, and got to know each other well during the year that we both served in student government. I remember to this day being "captured" by Polly's disarming warmth and

cheerfulness, as well as by her servant heart. Polly used to spend her summers working at Christian camps. And the summer before we served in student government together, she served as a summer missionary among the Indians of British Columbia. Polly was an elementary education major, and also was a very good pianist. When she was younger she had also been a cheerleader, and was a member of her school's swim team.

When we married on Sept. 11, 1971, we had no idea that thirteen years later, almost to the day, our lives would be impacted in the way they were when she was diagnosed with HD. There was no clinical test for HD back then. No way to know that you carried this illness, until the symptoms began to reveal themselves. But over the course of a year, and two visits to the University of Texas Health Science Center in Dallas, Polly's doctor concluded that he was "99% certain" that she had this illness. From that moment on, no aspect of our life would be untouched by this reality—physical, emotional, relational, social, vocational, and spiritual. We also knew that her health would gradually decline over the course of the next fifteen years or so, and that only a very small percentage of HD patients survive more than twenty years after onset.

I could detail every step of Polly's journey with HD (and later also with cancer), and fill several pages. But that's not my purpose in this essay. I will only say that her limitations affected every aspect of her person, and that they proceeded slowly and gradually over the course of the next nineteen years, until she was taken home to heaven on August 6 of this year. There were, however, certain "milestones" along the way which I will share with you. The most notable of these was when it became obvious to us that it was time for her to take up residence in a nursing home in August of 1992. Polly never held back from the challenges she was confronted with by this illness. She continued to do all she possibly could. But she gradually had to give up one activity after another:

driving, cooking, dressing and feeding herself, etc., etc.

The year prior to her entering the nursing home, I was able to work almost entirely at home for the ministry I served with at the time (International Students). It was unsafe to leave Polly alone, since she easily lost her balance. And she needed someone to feed her at mealtimes, and help her with the other aspects of her life. We had discussed nursing home residency in the past, though it was not something either of us was entirely comfortable with. But I well remember the day when she sat in our living room and said to me, “Rick, I think it’s time for me to move to a nursing home.” I think we both knew it was time. Polly needed someone with her at all hours of the day and night. Yet we also had two children to continue raising (Jeff and Jill were 12 and 15 at the time), and a full-time ministry to pursue.

The day I helped Polly move into her room at the nursing home, I stayed with her over the lunch hour. I had never spent much time in nursing homes before. And looking around the room, I realized that we were entering a very different world. Most of the people in this nursing home were quite disabled. It was a culture shock! But with my nightly visits, and development of relationships with the staff and the other residents, Polly’s nursing home soon became my home as well. Her world became my world. The highlight of my day for the next eleven years was to drive to her nursing home to be with her in the evening, and when I could to go at lunchtime to feed her her meal! At first, Polly used a walker, and we would walk down to the dining room to sit alone at a table, and talk about our day. She always wanted me to get a Dr Pepper or iced tea, and lift it to her mouth so she could drink it by straw. She loved for me to read to her from various books, and especially from the Bible. I think we read through most of the Bible together—some books several times. She loved Genesis, Isaiah, the Psalms, and the Gospels. Soon Polly was in a wheelchair, and I used to wheel her outside to a bench that was shaded by trees. We

would sit and watch the birds, and pray together.

A statement Polly made to me a few days after she entered the nursing home reveals something of what kind of person Polly was. She said to me, “Rick, do you think I should start witnessing to the people here?” I’ve encountered people through the years whose zeal for witnessing probably had the opposite effect they desired. But Polly was not one of them. Just her quiet perseverance and cheerful manner spoke volumes to me, as I believe it did to many others around her. The social worker at the nursing home where she spent her first four years made these comments about her: “Polly was a very cheerful person. Whenever you would see her she had a smile on her face that could cheer up the world. She was always complimenting others for things they do. She loved a challenge. She played a major part on our balloon volleyball team. Although her health condition limited her in doing some things by herself, she did as much as she could by herself, trying so hard to be independent as much as she could. I remember her face when she used to tell me that she was going out on pass to go to a ballgame, she was so excited. Polly was a very kind and sweet individual who loved her family and she will be missed.”

Many fun activities were provided by the nursing home staff, including “balloon volleyball” (which Polly seemed to enjoy a lot), special holiday dinners (she would dress up in her finest dress, and accompany me down the hall to the dining room), outings to various events in the city (e.g. to concerts, the state fair). Actually, Polly’s move to the nursing home enhanced our life in many ways. For the year prior to her taking up residence, almost all our time was devoted to “keeping our head above water” (which we didn’t always manage to do). We were beginning to sink under the load of all the activities necessary just to maintain our life. But with all the assistance of the nursing home staff to cover many of these things, the time we spent together could now be

devoted to other things that added to Polly's quality of life.

For several years I always brought Polly home on the weekends, and always scheduled a special outing or two—to a ballgame, a concert, a movie, a drive to a lake, etc., etc. I found that the anticipation of these events brought an element of hope and joy to Polly during the long weeks at the nursing home. We all need hope—the little hopes of a change of pace each weekend. I well remember one day probably 8 or 9 years ago now when Polly looked at me and said in her then slurred speech, "Rick, you help make my life worthwhile." My reporting that to you sounds self-serving, and maybe it is. But I will tell you that that one statement stayed in my heart for many years! On another occasion I recall asking Polly how she kept going in spite of the at times overwhelming difficulties. She simply said to me, "I have the Lord. And I have my family."

About six years ago it became very difficult for Polly to continue eating, and she decided to permit her physician to insert a feeding tube in her stomach. For a while I continued bringing Polly home on the weekends. But with the tube feedings every four hours, neither of us got much sleep, and by Sunday night we were both exhausted. But even after we discontinued her coming home for these extended stays, we still went out Friday evenings (mostly to high school ballgames) and Saturday afternoons, and even to church Sunday mornings (where we sat at the back of the sanctuary). These outings brought me great joy. And it was so satisfying to see Polly smiling, even though she could barely speak anymore.

Polly's physical condition was declining pretty rapidly now. And it was getting much more difficult to transport her places. I well remember one day I think nearly four years ago, when I realized that this particular Saturday was the last time I would likely ever by able to take her out. It was. From that day on, Polly rarely was removed from her bed, except when we transported her to the shower room. Henceforth, it became a matter no longer of bringing Polly to places she

could enjoy, but of bringing joy to Polly in her room. While we continued many of our daily routines, it seemed to me that worship became more and more our most meaningful activity. Polly couldn't speak at all anymore, and I am not much of a musician. But I could tell that the worship music that we frequently listened to brought a great deal of comfort to her . . . and to me too. In fact, the past few years it was worship that brought most comfort and joy to my own heart as Polly's caregiver and husband . . . to the very last day of her life. Just before she left us, I was preparing to play some music. We never got to it. But I'm convinced that she was welcomed into heaven by far more beautiful music and meaningful worship than anything I could provide for her!

As I have reflected more and more on these past twenty years, I've asked many questions. It was only natural, especially at first, to ask "Why?" But we knew that we live in a fallen world, and none of us can claim immunity from life's struggles and even tragedies. It never really entered my mind to ask "What?" That is, "What shall I do as Polly's husband?" I knew that I was with her for the "long haul." No matter what. But I did at times ask "How?" "How are we going to do this?" How am I going to care for her, raise our two children, continue in full-time ministry, and for a few years during this journey also help care for my mother with Alzheimer's, and my dad when he was so seriously ill as a result of working so hard at caring for her. It didn't take me long to realize that apart from the Lord there was no way to do this. It was an impossible task. But I also knew that we weren't "apart from the Lord." He had shown himself faithful to us in so many ways through the years. He couldn't stop now.

Shortly after Polly was diagnosed with HD in 1984, I was reading through the Psalms, and I came to this statement: "Cast your burden upon the Lord and he will sustain you; He will never allow the righteous to be shaken (literally "totter")" (Psalm 55:22). In the margin I read that the word

“burden” could be rendered “what He has given you.” At that moment, the Lord impressed on me that the burden we had been handed was also in some mysterious way I could not yet understand, a “gift” from the Lord. Not something He had caused. But something that He could touch and transform. It would be many years before I would even begin to see how this could possibly by true. As I progressed through my reading of the Psalms, I also came to this statement: “Blessed be the Lord, who *daily* bears our burden” (Ps. 68:19). I knew that if we were going to finish this race, it would be by doing what these two verses urged us to do . . . and to do it one day at a time. I had for some time kept a journal in which I recorded evidences of God’s hand on our life. And over the next twenty years I returned to this discipline many times. Today, this journal is one of my most precious possessions, because it is full of the record of God’s faithfulness to us, even though at times my own personal faith was very much of the “mustard seed” variety, if even that! I was also very aware that we needed the prayer support of many other people. And I cannot tell you the encouragement it was for both of us to hear from so many friends across the country that they were praying for us even daily. When I encounter people in the hospital who are under a burden too heavy for them to bear, I always encourage them to enlist the daily prayer support of as many friends as possible. And to ask them to keep praying until they go to heaven!

As I read through this journal, I find evidence of the Lord’s activity in our lives in two primary ways. First, in the many things that He did ***for*** us. I’m sure that there were innumerable ways in which He was working in our behalf, of which we were totally unaware. But I will mention a few of the ways of which I *was* aware. For one, it became evident to me as the years went by that God had been *preparing* us for this long chapter of our lives—primarily by providing models for us. I think for instance of my own paternal grandparents. Among my earliest memories in life are those of watching my grandmother

care for my grandfather during the years following his major stroke, in the early 1950s. Then there was the model He provided for us of Bill and Dorothea Hart, who were members of our church in the Seattle area in the late 1970s. Bill suffered from Parkinson's for many years. And he and his dear, caring wife were regular attendees at the church I pastored for five years. What a sterling example they were to us. There was the model of Polly's mother Elsie, who tirelessly cared for Polly's brother Chris for so many years. There was my own father who was so dedicated in caring for my mom during all her years with Alzheimer's. There was the couple we met in Hayward, CA in 1987, Sherwood and Harvette Peters. Harvette had M.S., and relied on Sherwood's loving care for many years before her homegoing. There were our neighbors, Al and Jeane Olson, who lived directly across the street from us. (Little did we know what a blessing they would be to us when we bought our home, not even knowing they lived there!) Al suffered from a neurological disorder for many years, and his wife Jeane provided such a wonderful model by patiently caring for him. I could mention others, such as Greg and Lisa Hatteberg at Dallas Seminary, who are still contending with Lisa's M.S. And so many others whom God brought across our path to serve as models and examples, particularly for me.

In addition to preparing us, it was also evident that the Lord was *guiding* us and *providing* for us. God's guidance and provision was evident first of all in his enabling me to remain in full-time ministry through these past twenty years, but in ways that allowed me the flexibility to provide the increasing level of care that Polly needed. I frankly did not know how this could be. But how grateful I am for the years I was allowed to serve at Dallas Seminary, International Students, Probe Ministries, and since 1996 in hospital chaplaincy. And for the many, many faithful friends who have supported us in these efforts!

I think of the special families who lived near us, and who

helped us shepherd our dear children during the years they were growing up, and we were being stretched beyond our capacities.

The Lord's guidance and provision was also evident at points along the way when we had to make important decisions. I think for instance of when it came time for Polly to enter the nursing home. It was our neighbor Melanie Miller, a nurse, who informed us of Brentwood Place—the one facility in Dallas County that had a preponderance of younger residents (Polly was only 41); and then four years later when Polly's needs were increasing, she informed us of the opening of a new nursing home on the shores of Lake Ray Hubbard (Sr. Care) where Polly resided for over seven years. I remember also when Polly and I were discussing this decision, being captivated by a story on the evening news that very week about a couple's going through the process of making the same decision we were.

When she first entered the nursing home, we had to jump through a number of legal and financial hoops, including applying for Medicaid assistance for Polly. This was the only way we could afford this level of care. Only those whose total assets fall under a certain limit are able to qualify for this assistance, which ours did at that time. We later learned, however, that if we had waited one more month to apply, we would have been disqualified, and Polly would not have been able to enter the home for perhaps two more years. This was the Lord's doing, and his timing for her.

At other times of decision it seemed that God brought people across our path who had just the insight or encouragement we needed at that particular time. When Polly had to make a decision about a feeding tube for example (which really is a huge decision), the very day that we were contemplating it I entered a room at the hospital where I serve as chaplain, only to find a HD patient and her husband. She had made the same decision Polly was contemplating. I only encounter HD patients in the hospital about once a year! But I encountered her on

the very day I needed some encouragement with regard to Polly's decision.

One of our most constant companions these past twenty years was the temptation to discouragement. I'm convinced that there is a spiritual battle that surrounds issues such as these in our lives. There is an enemy who wants to defeat and destroy us. And I found that one of the ways that the Lord encouraged us (I'm speaking for myself here), was through the many small evidences of his presence in our lives. If you were to read several pages of my journal, you would conclude that I had recorded a number of interesting "coincidences" in our life. But when you string together so many events like these over the course of not only years but decades, it becomes not "coincidence" but "providence."

For example, I remember a day in the early 90s when a package containing a book came to my desk at Probe Ministries, where I was serving as Director of Publications. Accompanying this package was a letter from the authors of the book. They were asking if we would consider marketing and distributing this book. This was the only request like this that I remember receiving during the years I worked there. I noticed from the cover that the book was a biography or story. How they happened to send this book to us at Probe (an academic/educational ministry), I still do not know. The authors had no way of knowing me, or anything about our life. But what surprised me when I opened the book was that it was the life story of a couple, the husband being affected by HD! Polly's illness. What are the odds? We eventually met the sweet surviving wife of this man about whom the book was written!

I remember another time not long after Polly entered the nursing home that I brought her one evening to a concert at a large church in Dallas. About 4,000 were in attendance. We were a few minutes later than planned, and the lights were already dimmed. It was packed. But there was one seat at the

end of one pew on the ground floor, where Polly could sit next to me in her wheelchair. We took our place. I turned to my right, and found that the person right next to me was the director of nursing from her nursing home! I didn't even know she was a believer, or that she would be there that night. What are the odds? There was also the time when I had just finished reading a portion of a book to Polly at the nursing home, then left to attend a service at a nearby church. The pastor's message was on exactly what I had just read to Polly. What are the odds?

Given any one of these instances, I would not think a great deal about it. But these kinds of events formed a pattern over the course of many years to the very last day of Polly's life! I recounted in my memorial letter about Polly some of the evidences of God's fingerprints on our life during her final weeks and days. But for those who have not read that account, I repeat some of it here. The morning before Polly entered the hospital for the last time, I was preparing for my day and listening to a Christian radio station in the background. As is my custom, before leaving my room I walked over to my bed to sit down and read the day's selection from the devotional "Daily Bread." As I sat down, I reached over to turn off the radio. But before I did, the last words uttered by the spokesperson on the radio caught my attention. He said, "If you knew that today would be your loved one's last day, what would you say to them?" An interesting thought. Then I opened my devotional, and the reading for the day was entitled "Say It Now!" These words appeared in the article: "Recalling the good qualities of deceased friends or relatives at their funeral is appropriate, but how much better to give sincere praise to them while they are still living. It may be the encouragement they desperately need . . . . Don't put it off. Say it today. Tomorrow may be too late!"

That night when I went to see Polly, I made a special point to be alone with her and to tell her how much I loved her and

thanked God for her, and to thank her for all she had done for us as a family through the years. Polly had been unable to speak at all the past few years. But the look in her sweet brown eyes spoke more than words could tell. Little did I know that this indeed would be her last full day in the nursing home. The next night I would be sitting with her in the emergency room as she entered the hospital for the last time. Two weeks later I was up early on the morning of August 6, preparing my breakfast before returning to the hospital. The same radio station was playing in the background as two weeks before. This time a commentator came on the air and said, "You know, when it comes time to die, the relationships that will support us during our time of need, are the ones we have cultivated and nurtured all our life. We die the way we lived." Less than two hours later I was standing at Polly's bed as she left this world for heaven.

I share these events with you to simply illustrate how over time I learned to take them as reminders, or "markers" along the way, of God's presence and shepherding care over our life. Even in our most difficult hours. One of the many things that the Lord did for us during Polly's long illness.

But just as important as what the Lord was doing *for* us, if not more so, was what I eventually saw as his work ***in*** us. At least I knew He was seeking to do this in me. Shortly after Polly died, our daughter Jill said to me (and I quickly corrected her), "Dad, I think the reason God put you with Mom was because He knew you had the qualities that would be needed to care for her." I know my heart better than she does, and I said, "Jill, I think one reason the Lord put us together was because He knew I needed to *acquire* the qualities needed to care for Mom." And it's true. I well remember a day (a moment, really), probably five years after Polly was diagnosed, that it dawned on me what God was doing in my life in this regard. And how much growing I needed to do. I can only speak for myself, but I know that when Polly became ill, God enlisted me

in a life shaping process. Part of this process involved his gently and patiently chipping away at qualities that He knew needed to diminish in my life. The other part was gradually instilling in my heart the qualities He wanted me to acquire. And I saw primarily three.

The first of these was a sounder *faith* in the Lord. Not that there wasn't faith in our hearts before. But this assignment required faith at a different level than I know I personally had. I'm not necessarily speaking of faith in God's healing power (though I know it's real). Candidly, there were occasions over the years when well-meaning individuals urged us to have faith that God would heal Polly miraculously. One fellow once told me that if we had real faith we would discontinue all of Polly's medications. I don't need to tell you that I didn't think about this suggestion very long. The kind of faith I sensed God was aiming at growing in us was a trust in His goodness, and the goodness of His purposes, even when it was unknown to us what they really were. Even though life was getting harder every year. This kind of faith comes only from God.

Over the years the Lord used such things as the reading of scripture, times of prayer, the prayers of others, and the recording of instances like those mentioned above, to nourish our faith in Him. Not that we didn't experience times of doubt or discouragement. We did. One thing I did learn, however, was that the experience of pain and sorrow is not inconsistent with faith in the Lord. Paul's letter to the Philippians is full of exhortations to joy and peace, and contains a wonderful affirmation of our hope that to be with Christ is "better by far." But in the middle of this letter Paul makes the honest confession that if his friend Epaphroditus were to die as a result of his recent illness, he would have experienced "sorrow upon sorrow" (2:27). God's word is so realistic and balanced. That fact helped me endure the stormier seasons (as it does now).

The second quality I sensed God working on, and this is really an outgrowth of the first, was *hope*. I am not by nature a very hopeful person. But I learned to grow in this area. I see hope as simply "faith oriented to the future." (I read this somewhere.) An expectation not just of "good times to come," but that as God's goodness has been revealed in the past, so it will be unveiled in the future—even if it comes through encounter with illness and pain. That what the enemy may intend for evil (and which is evil), God can and ultimately will use for good. Even in the face of death (that alien invader into God's created order), there is the wonderful hope of eternal life in heaven, and the resurrection to come!

The third quality God was working on is the most important. That was *love*. I say "most important" because the New Testament tells us that if faith doesn't produce love, we are "nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:2). It is useless and dead. I loved Polly before. But this illness tested our love, and took aim at it. Speaking for myself, God used this illness to transform my love for Polly. I learned just how much I needed to grow in genuine self-giving and self-sacrificing love. Not that I didn't need to take time to care for myself. It is possible to neglect your own legitimate needs as a caregiver. And I see some caregivers in the hospital who do this. I remembered that even the "Good Samaritan" delegated some of his caregiving to others so that he could tend to his other obligations (Luke 10:35). But there is a difference between taking care of our needs, and catering only to our own desires. And this is what the Lord was showing to me.

He was showing me just how many ways there are to spell "love." Dressing, bathing, feeding, carrying, smiling, laughing, crying, reading, singing, just sitting quietly . . . . I learned that in a society that places its highest premium on appearance and ability, it is very easy for people whose illness robs them of these very things to feel not only diminished, but also *devalued*. At times the words and actions

of others can reinforce this false belief. I learned that the most significant gift I could give to Polly was to communicate to her by my own words and by my actions that she was the most valuable human being in my life. And she was.

I must not fail to mention at this point that not only did I sense the Lord transforming my love for Polly, but also deepening my love for Him. There were times when I felt confused and upset about what the Lord was allowing to happen in our life. I still feel the pain of some of these memories. But as the years went by, and we experienced more and more of God's shepherding care over our lives (even during the very trying times), my love for Him and sense of indebtedness to Him grew and grew. As a result, I sensed a growing passion in my heart to simply worship Him. Both private and corporate worship became the focus and highlight of my week. I remember reading as a young boy the verse that says, "We love (Him) because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19). It's true. The love I feel for Him and the worship I find flowing from my heart, is simply the natural response to His great love, expressed to us in so many ways. When my heart grows cold, and at times it does, one of the things I've learned to do is to bring to mind the many ways in which God has so graciously loved us these past twenty years. "Faith, hope and love; these three remain. But the *greatest of these is love*" (1 Corinthians 13:13).

I will tell you honestly that the greatest blessing of my life was caring for Polly. I miss it deeply. And though I would never want her to go through again what she did these twenty years, . . . if she had to, I would be first in line to go through it with her again.

Several years ago, I was reading through the Gospel of John. When I reached the end of the book my attention was drawn to a statement Jesus made to Peter in which he signified to him "by what kind of death he would *glorify God*" (21:19). I had always thought about "*living* to the glory of God." But I had never thought about our "dying to the glory of God." I knew at that

point that Polly's remaining years were likely few. And I began praying almost daily that whenever it came time for her to leave us, that her departure would bring glory to Him in some way. That was a hard prayer for me to offer. And I don't feel like I was ready for it to be answered until her very last hospital stay. But now that that day has come and gone, I believe God has answered that prayer. In my mind, He has answered it in part by magnifying through Polly all that He has done ***for*** us, and all He's doing ***in*** us. And will continue to do until we see Him in glory. *Soli Deo Gloria*.

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The Myth of Happily Ever After vs. A Biblical Worldview Perspective on Marriage

Sue Bohlin examines unrealistic expectations that can torpedo a marriage that should be based on biblical worldview principles. As she examines these expectations from a Christian perspective, one begins to understand how they run counter to the marriage principles contained in the Bible.

Happily Ever After

The wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana was one of the most-watched romantic real-life events of the twentieth century. Between the legitimate longings of our hearts, and the way the Disney empire has fed our romantic fantasies for fairy tales, we are captivated by storybook romance.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, who presided at the royal wedding, gave a marvelous sermon that day. In it he said, “Here is the stuff of which fairy tales are made, the prince and princess on their wedding day. But fairy tales usually end at this point with the simple phrase, ‘They lived happily ever after.’ This may be because fairy tales regard marriage as an anticlimax after the romance of courtship. This is not the Christian view. Our faith sees the wedding day not as a place of arrival but the place where the adventure begins.”{1}

The divorce rate in our culture is at an all-time high. Whatever happened to “happily ever after”? Why is it so hard to maintain the hopes and dreams that surround a beautiful wedding with all its promises of love and fidelity, sacrifice and service?

Marriage counselors Les and Leslie Parrott have an idea.

In their excellent book *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts,* they suggest four myths that have torpedoed many marriages because of unrealistic expectations and misconceptions about what marriage should be. In what follows, we’ll look at four marriage myths that are the most harmful and most common:

- We expect exactly the same things from marriage.
- Everything good in our marriage will get better.
- Everything bad in my life will disappear.
- My spouse will make me whole.

“For too long,” the Parrotts write, “marriage has been saddled with unrealistic expectation and misguided assumptions. Liberated from these four myths, couples can settle into the real world of marriage—with all its joys and sorrows, passion and pain.”{2}

Many people know that something is wrong but they don’t know what; and you can’t fix or change something if you don’t know what’s wrong in the first place. Many of our marriage problems are due to harmful expectations and beliefs that fly in the

face of “real reality.” One divorce lawyer told the Parrotts that the number-one reason people split up is that they “refuse to accept the fact that they are married to a *human being*.”{3} In this article we bust the myth of “happily ever after.”

Myth #1: “We Expect Exactly the Same Things From Marriage”

When people are in love, it’s easy to assume that the other person has the same values and expectations as we do. But every family has its own culture, so to speak, and we tend to expect life will continue the same way once we’re adults as it was while we were growing up. One way these differing expectations play out is in the unspoken rules of each family.

We are usually not aware of our unspoken rules and expectations until the other person violates them. I recently heard a great word of wisdom: “Expectations are the mother of resentments.” How true is that?! When our spouse doesn’t live up to our unspoken expectations, we can feel frustrated and irritated, and often we don’t even know why we’re upset because we don’t know what’s wrong. It’s helpful to think through “the rules” of one’s family so that unspoken rules and expectations are brought out into the light of examination. Here are some rules from various families:

- Don’t ask for help unless you’re desperate.
- Downplay your successes.
- Be invisible.
- Get someone else to do the hard or dirty work.
- Don’t get sick.
- Never get angry.
- Don’t talk about your body.
- Don’t go to bed without cleaning the kitchen.
- Don’t talk about your feelings.
- Never order dessert at a restaurant.

- Don’t ever upset Daddy.

Can you see how these unspoken rules can cause havoc if a spouse doesn’t know about them?

Another source of mismatched expectations is the unconscious roles that spouses fall into, the way an actor follows a script. We inherit expectations about how wives and husbands act by watching our parents and other adults, and we often play out those roles the same way unless we choose to change it. For example, one new husband surprised his wife at dinner by picking up his empty iced tea glass and tinkling the ice cubes. His father had always signaled this way to his mother that he was ready for more tea. The bride was not pleased to learn that her husband expected to play the role of pampered king whose every whim was gladly granted!

The myth that “we expect exactly the same things from marriage” is busted by identifying and talking about unspoken expectations and unconscious roles. The more openly couples discuss their differing expectations, the more likely they are to create a vision of marriage that they can agree on.

Myth #2: “Everything Good in Our Relationship Will Get Better”

Most people, when they fall in love, really believe their love will last forever because it’s so intense and intoxicating. It’s hard not to believe that everything good about the relationship will just continue to get better and better as time goes on. But reality “is that not *everything* gets better. Many things improve in relationships, but some things become more difficult. Every successful marriage requires necessary losses, and in choosing to marry, you inevitably go through a mourning process.”{4}

For some, marriage means giving up childhood. It means giving up the safety and security of being your parents’ child, and

becoming a full-fledged adult. God makes this statement in Genesis 2:24 when He says, " For this reason a man *will leave his father and mother* and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh." Marriage means the end of childhood, and that can feel like a loss to be mourned.

Marriage also "means giving up a carefree lifestyle and coming to terms with new limits. It means unexpected inconveniences."{5} Marriage means always passing one's plans and choices through the filter of "us." Since "the two become one," many of our even mundane life choices impact someone else. That can feel like a loss to be faced, as well.

The Parrotts write, "By far the most dramatic loss experienced in a new marriage is the idealized image you have of your partner. This was the toughest myth we encountered in our marriage. Each of us had an airbrushed mental picture of who the other was. But eventually, married life asked us to look reality square in the face and reckon with the fact that we did not marry the person we thought we did."{6}

It is an illusion that the intense romantic thrill of the beginning of a relationship will last forever. "Debunking the myth of eternal romance will do more than just about anything to help . . . build a lifelong happy marriage."{7} When we get past the myth of continual bliss with a perfect partner, we can embrace the reality that we married another flawed and fallen human being. This is good news, because God only gives grace for reality, nor for illusion or temporary enchantment. And this is good news because intimacy is only available with a real person, not with an idealized image.

Myth #3: "Everything Bad in My Life Will Disappear"

Remember the story of Cinderella? A poor, mistreated stepchild who is forced to serve her wicked stepfamily is magically turned into a beautiful princess. She is rescued by her Prince

Charming and they live . . . all together now . . . “happily ever after.” And don’t we all long for a Prince Charming or a beautiful princess to make us happy and wipe away every tear from our eyes?

The myth of a “happily ever after” life is a legitimate longing of our hearts. We ache to return to Eden where everything bad in our lives *will* disappear. God promises that He will eventually make all things right again, but it doesn’t happen in marriage between two fallen human beings living in a fallen world.

Marriage is a glorious institution invented by God, but it “does not erase personal pain or eliminate loneliness. Why? Because people get married primarily to further their own well-being, not to take care of their partners’ needs. The bad traits and feelings you carried around before you were married remain with you as you leave the wedding chapel. A marriage certificate is not a magical glass slipper.”{8}

The Parrotts write, “Getting married cannot instantly cure all our ills, but marriage *can* become a powerful healing agent over time. If you are patient, marriage can help you overcome even some of the toughest of tribulations.”{9} Perhaps the biggest reason for this is the amazing *power* of love. I believe God’s love is the strongest healing agent in the universe. In marriage, He can love us through our spouses; He can be “Jesus with skin on” to each of us.

A healthy marriage can become a place to wrap up unfinished business from childhood and deal with unresolved hurts. God showed me this truth personally. I had experienced a great deal of rejection in relationships before I met my husband. He told me that we were married ten years before he could say the words, “I need to talk to you about something” and I wouldn’t automatically wince and pull back in fear. Over time, Ray’s faithful love and acceptance of me healed the rejection wounds.

It’s a myth that everything bad in our lives will disappear when we say “I do,” but God’s grace is bigger than the myth. We still live in a fallen world with a fallen spouse, but God can bring much grace through mutual love.

Myth #4: “My Spouse Will Make Me Whole”

One of the greatest lines in all of movie history belongs to Tom Cruise in *Jerry Maguire* where he tells his wife, “You complete me.” It is romantic and feels emotionally satisfying—but in reality, it’s just not true.

Couples who swallow the myth that their spouse will make them whole are in danger of going to one of two extremes. One is an unhealthy dependence on the other that the Parrotts term an *enmeshed* relationship. They unconsciously make their partner completely responsible for their well-being. They are like ticks that constantly attempt to suck life and love and meaning from their spouse. It is a form of idolatry, because they are looking to their partner to provide emotional “living water” that only God can give.

The other extreme is a *disengaged* relationship of what the Parrotts call “rugged self-reliance.” These spouses are so isolated and independent from each other that they function more like neighbors or business associates than a God-created union of two souls. The first kind of couple is looking for wholeness from their partner; the second kind of couple is looking for wholeness from within. It is also a form of idolatry, because they are looking to themselves instead of God to provide meaning for life.

Neither enmeshed nor disengaged relationships are healthy, and neither will allow the people in them to experience wholeness. A sense of wholeness is found in an *interdependent* relationship where two people with self-respect and dignity make a commitment to nurture their own spiritual and emotional growth as well as their partner’s.

Enmeshed relationships are like the capital letter A. They lean on each other so much that if one moves, the whole structure falls down. Their security is in another person instead of in God. Disengaged relationships are like the letter H. Partners stand virtually alone. If one lets go, the other hardly feels a thing. Interdependent relationships are like the letter M. They could stand on their own, but they choose to stay connected to the other out of their fullness, not out of their emptiness. If one lets go, the other feels a loss but can recover.

Every marriage is between two broken and fallen people who cannot make each other whole. We are called to love and respect each other, serve and celebrate each other—but only God can make us whole.

"Happily ever after" may be for fairy tales, but that doesn't mean there is no such thing as a happy, rich, fulfilling marriage. But it's only possible for those who live in reality, not in the fantasy of make-believe myths. May God give us grace to trust Him to walk in truth and not illusion.

Notes

1. Les and Leslie Parrott. *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts.* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 26.
2. Ibid., 16.
3. Ibid., 23.
4. Ibid., 21.
5. Ibid., 22.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 24.
9. Ibid., 25.

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