

Does Marriage Matter?

Tuesday, January 15, 2008



The “[My Turn](#)” column in each week’s issue of *Newsweek* is always one of the most interesting features in the magazine, and it is often the first page I read. The January 14, 2008 edition featured a column that demands attention — and has attracted plenty.

In her article, “[Yes to Love, No to Marriage](#),” Bonnie Eslinger writes of choosing love but insists that she has absolutely no need of marriage. “I am a 42-year-old woman who has lived life mostly on my own terms,” she explains. “I have never sought a husband and have still experienced intense, affirming love. I have explored the world and myself and sought understanding, knowledge and a sense of how I can best contribute. Ten years ago I left a New York career to return to California and pursue a writer’s life.”

She also became a foster mom to a teenage girl . . . and then she met Jeff. As she recalls, “Meeting Jeff—an intelligent, creative, thoughtful man—became the icing on the rich cake of a life not wasted cruising singles bars and pining over lost loves.”

As the relationship moved forward, Jeff thought of marriage and then asked Bonnie to marry him. Here is how she tells the story:

Last year Jeff asked me to marry him, and I willingly gave my heart to the intent of his question. We are committed to spending our future together, pursuing our dreams and facing life’s challenges in partnership.

Yet I do not need a piece of paper from the state to strengthen my commitment to Jeff. I do not believe in a religion that says romantic, committed love is moral only if couples pledge joint allegiance to God.

Bonnie Eslinger willingly gave her heart to “the intent of his question,” she insists, but not to marriage. Her explanation is straightforward — she has no need of “a piece of paper from the state” and is not a believer in any religion that would demand that romance, sex, and “committed love” be restricted to marriage — a couple’s “joint allegiance to God.”

In one sense, the column is not shocking. Rates of heterosexual cohabitation are growing annually. Marriage has been subverted by easy divorce, pummeled in the mass culture and in entertainment, confused through debates over same-sex relationships, and sidelined by a generation that is extending adolescence past age thirty.

In another sense, Bonnie Eslinger’s column is surely noteworthy for its candor — and its evasions.

Her candor is bracing at points. Consider this section:

I don’t need a white dress to feel pretty, and I have no desire to pretend I’m virginal. I don’t need to have Jeff propose to me as if he’s chosen me. I don’t need a ring as a daily reminder to myself or others that I am loved. And I don’t need Jeff to say publicly that he loves me, because he says it privately, not just in words but in daily actions.

Few paragraphs offer such eloquent testimony to the absolute victory of personal autonomy as an ideal. The first-person pronoun appears no less than eleven times in that short paragraph.

Where is Jeff? Bonnie Eslinger argues that she responded positively to “the intent of his question” when he proposed marriage. But, if marriage was his question, how can his “intent” be so easily reduced to cohabitation?

Marriage is not primarily about what we as individuals think we want or need. It is about a central public commitment that the society needs, that couples need, that children need, and yes, that the spouses need. Marriage is a public institution, not merely a private commitment. It identifies the couple as a pair committed to lifelong marriage and thus to be respected in this commitment. The fact that our society has weakened marriage offers only further incentive to get it right and to strengthen this vital institution.

The traditions of the wedding ceremony are important as a part of solemnizing and recognizing this covenanted relationship — but the traditions are expendable. Marriage is not. There is a universe of difference between a private promise and a public pledge. Marriage is about a public vow made by the man to the woman and the woman to the man whereby they become now husband and wife.

Bonnie Eslinger’s column has sparked controversy on both sides of the cultural divide. Ironically, one interesting piece of testimony to the enduring power of marriage is the fact that, even in 2008, this column has met resistance as well as agreement. There are things we really cannot *not* know, and one of these truths is that marriage really does matter.

We discussed this issue on Monday’s edition of *The Albert Mohler Program* [listen [here](#)].

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