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Facing the Facts about the Decline of Marriage

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The National Marriage Project offers the best and most objective look at the real statistical data on marriage, and its new report, *The State of Our Unions 2003* is packed with explosive facts and insights. The researchers behind the project describe themselves as nonpartisan and nonsectarian, but they are hardly unconcerned. Their research stand at the intersection of the personal and the political. [see the project's web site and report]

The most shocking section of the report details the trend that separates parenthood from marriage. "Marriage used to be the principal pathway into parenthood," the report notes, "but that is changing. About a third of all children and more than two-thirds of African-American children are born out of wedlock. In addition, there has also been an 850 percent increase in the number of cohabitating couple who live with children." When was the last time you saw a statistic like that? An increase of 850 percent over just four decades represents a tidal wave of social change.

The National Marriage Project has been tracing the rise of cohabitation among young Americans. Men and women are simply living together without formalizing their relationship in marriage, and now many are not sure that they ever intend to marry. Marriage is now treated as an accessory with legal entanglements—not as the cornerstone of civilization itself.

Researchers have noted that this represents a shift in the balance of power between men and women. Women, in the older culture centered on marriage, told men that they must marry in order to gain access to sexual relationships. This is imply no longer the case for vast sectors of the American public. The undeniable fact is that marriage is the legal and institutional bond that requires and reinforces male commitment. If men can gain access to sex without the responsibility of marriage, experience shows that they will do so. We can only wonder why the women in these relationships buy into this lopsided bargain. But buy into it, they have. Surveys of college age young women show that they sincerely want to be married, to have children, and to stay married to their husbands through life. Regrettably, they undermine those hopes by failing to require men to marry in the first place.

Much of this is now well known to anyone even mildly interested in the health of marriage in our society. The new—and most shocking—developments have to do with the separation of marriage and parenthood.

Marriage, argues the report, "is first and foremost an institution designed to unite men and women in the shared tasks of childrearing." Furthermore: "The possibility or presence of children is the reason why the state and society treat marriage differently from other intimate partnerships. But in American society today, this institutional role is eroding."

This erosion comes first with the fact that many women now intend to have children whether or not they ever marry. The stigma involved with out-of-wedlock births has practically disappeared in much of American society. Children are seen as trophies to individual achievement and as opportunities for self-expression. The father is optional.

For young Americans of both sexes, "Getting married and becoming a parent seem to be entirely separate life pursuits,

with different requirements for each. . . . Marriage used to come before parenthood in the sequence of life events. Today, however, the sequence is reversed. . . .”

Clearly, many young adults consider sex, childrearing, and marriage to be three different questions and they may intend to experiment with the first two before making a commitment through marriage—if they ever get there at all. The result is obvious—many biological fathers have no relationships with their children, exercise no responsibility in the tasks of childrearing, and have no connection to the demands and fulfillments of fatherhood.

No less than one third of all minor children now live apart from their biological fathers—a statistic that usually indicates a social trauma like massive military action, famine, or a similar catastrophe. But this catastrophe was self-inflicted as Americans bought into a lifestyle and worldview of personal autonomy and individual self-fulfillment. If the isolated self is the most important unit of meaning, marriage is seen as an accessory at best, and as feminist Betty Friedan’s “domestic captivity” at worst.

The data indicate that “40 percent of all children today are expected to spend some time in a cohabitating couple household during their growing up years.” This is no longer an isolated phenomenon. Living as a child with a cohabitating couple is trending toward the norm.

The fallout is undeniable. Boys raised without fathers are more likely to be involved in crime, more likely to show developmental disabilities, more likely to resist all authority, and more likely to be sexually promiscuous. Anyone surprised? Parenthood without the commitment of marriage means that the parental role [especially the father’s role] is always tentative and possibly temporary. How can children grow up with confidence and trust when their biological parents have no confidence in marriage and no trust in their mutual responsibilities for childrearing?

Secular Americans may share concern regarding these statistics and patterns, but Christians must respond with more than concern. Our own compromises have opened the door for many of these developments. Our lack of concern for the integrity of marriage, and our own accommodation to the new ideals of personal autonomy and self-fulfillment is observed by the world beyond the church.

The recovery of a marriage culture in secular America is a long shot. Given the long-term trends and the lack of a public consensus, nothing dramatic is likely to happen. When President Bush talks about his concern for the state of marriage in the nation, the cultural elite snickers.

The real question is whether the church will recover a marriage culture in our own sphere. This will require a recovery of resolve and conviction, and the re-assertion of a biblical concept of the church as the body of Christ, with individual members living in fellowship, discipline, and mutual accountability under the authority of God’s Word. This means that, for Christian couples, our marriages are not our own private affairs, but crucial arenas for living out faithfulness to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Just imagine how Christian credibility would be demonstrated when, against the trend of marriage decline in the secular culture, researchers would report that one group stands as an obvious exception—the followers of Jesus Christ. That would be a report sure to get the nation’s attention.

