
Is Marriage More Chancy These Days?

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I am always wary of the Good Old Days Syndrome—the assumption that everything used to be wonderful and clean and virtuous and upright, but now we're all going to the dogs. Grandpa and Grandma did it right ("it" being anything from earning a living to raising kids to serving God), but their modern offspring are a disaster rolling toward the gulch.

Most generations have said the same thing. The 19th century praised the 18th while worrying about themselves, and so on back down the line. A Babylonian clay tablet dating from 2000 B.C. complains that things are not the same anymore: the young no longer respect their elders, public truthfulness has eroded, old values are seeping away. . . .

Certain facts about the present, however, are hard to sweep under the historical rug. Certain attitude shifts and technological changes have definitely transpired, with the result that marriage today is *not* the same as it was in 1960 or 1945. It's hard to deny that a number of the old allies have fled—the traditions and forces that used to prop up marriage as an institution. Our generation is in greater need of distinctly Christian reasons to stay married and work at it than others in the recent past.

Here's what's different about today:

1. *The consensus about marriage has faded.* Not everybody agrees anymore that normal adult behavior is to get married and stick together for the duration. Pollster Daniel Yankelovich in his book *New Rules* even goes so far as to say, "In sharp contrast with the past, it

has become normal to think of marriage as not being permanent. When an NBC/Associated Press poll asked Americans in 1978 whether they thought 'most couples getting married today expect to remain married for the rest of their lives,' a 60 percent majority said no. As Sheila M. Rothman writes in *Woman's Proper Place*: "In the 1950s as in the 1920s, diamonds were 'forever.' In the 1970s diamonds were for 'now.'"

The days are gone when a frustrated husband or wife would hesitate to file for divorce because "that's never been done in our family." It *has* been done in virtually every family in the nation, and subsequent breakups seem to come a little easier.

A *New Yorker* cartoon once showed a wedding scene in which the minister says, "Do you, Jane, and you, Jonathan, jointly vow to split the royalties, paperback rights, book-club proceeds, and movie options with each other in the event that the marriage dissolves and results in a work of fiction or nonfiction based on this union?" That's the way it is in the late 20th century.

2. *Premarital sex (aided by modern contraception) starts off a lot of marriages with "baggage."* Yes, there's always been premarital sex—but not nearly as much of it as today. Only in our century have young lovers been given the means to find seclusion (the automobile, plus a society that has stopped paying attention or asking nosy questions) and the means for the

woman to prevent pregnancy ("the pill"). The risks, both culturally and personally, seem to have been greatly reduced.

Accordingly, people have adjusted their beliefs to match what feels good. The percentage of Americans branding premarital sex "morally wrong" plunged from 83 percent to 37 percent *in only 12 years*. This means millions of brides and grooms are coming into marriage with memories of partners past. Comparisons are inevitable. It's tougher to build a rock-solid commitment under such conditions.

3. *Current media (TV, movies, and modern novels) have, for whatever reasons, decided to major on irregular relationships and minor on the standard ones.* In 1982 *TV Guide* ran a brave article called, "Looking for a Happy Marriage on TV? Forget It." The author searched almost in vain among the legions of shows featuring single, divorced, and unfaithfully married people for an honest-to-goodness happy husband and wife. Well, there *was* "Little House on the Prairie," but that was all.

Things have gotten a little better since then, but the fact remains that popular writers still have trouble finding an exciting story line in the territory called Good Marriage. They instinctively run to the troubled side. Meanwhile, Hollywood and New York actors not only play the parts realistically on screen, they go back to their penthouses and estates to continue the same roles in real life.

With millions of Americans watching all this in the afternoons, evenings, and on weekends, is it any wonder that marital discontent is on the rise?

4. *Meanwhile, husband-wife communication is ebbing away.* Every hour spent watching TV is an hour lost to the possibility of talking together. Evenings are no longer available to work out

problems, hear about each other's day, plan together for the future. The box with the canned laughter and alluring characters takes precedence.

"The danger of TV," says noted Cornell University psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner, "lies not so much in the behavior it produces as in the behavior it prevents." That is true for children who watch; it is also true for married couples.

5. *Quick gratification is in; sacrifice is out.* Our consumer-oriented society, bent on the business of selling things and experiences, has done a pretty thorough job of convincing us that if we're not happy at the moment, we should *do something about it*. Don't just sit there. Get a Pepsi or a Bud Light. Call your travel agent. Head for the mall. You deserve better than this.

The same mentality is being applied to marriage. Does it feel good? Are you happy? Is your spouse enhancing your self-fulfillment? If not, then find somebody who will. Don't just put up with a bad situation. Add up the pluses and minuses, and if you'd be ahead to move on to other things, why not? It would be hard to find views less biblical than these—but these are the views our culture promotes.

All of these cultural questions and suggestions have rebuttals that are good, biblical, and reliable. God has infinitely superior reasons for us to commit ourselves to our marriage, whether others do so or not. But we have to listen to Him, not the boisterous voices of the times. We can no longer expect to have a good marriage if we simply drift with the current.