

FAMILY

The Uncoupling of America: Why?

By Dean Merrill

I stood in the foyer of a public place crowded with Christians. I was saying hello to friends and chatting about ordinary things, when my eye caught the face of a man I knew 20 feet away. He nodded at me a bit nervously, with a half-smile, and continued to guide the woman at his side toward the exit.

He and I were in the same kind of Christian work. We had every reason to stop and talk. But not today. The woman was not his wife.

What's going on? The question caromed against the walls of my mind as I watched the pair get into his car and drive away. A fear settled into my chest. The next week I described what I had seen to a mutual friend. "Was that a business associate of his," I asked, ". . . or is there a problem?"

The answer was the same as it had been in about eight other situations over the past year: Yes, there was a problem. Another supposedly strong Christian marriage was breaking up—people whom I knew and respected, part of my circle of friends, co-workers of mine in the Lord's service. How many more of these jolts would I have to endure?

So the statistics on divorce really are true after all. We hear the drum roll of numbers and percentages, ratios and projections, and we tend to hold them at arm's length. But when news of a breakup hammers its way into *our* lives—and then another and another—we are forced to admit there is indeed a plague in this country, a plague that is becoming an epidemic.

The scoreboard now shows that things got twice as bad during the 1970s. At the beginning of the decade, according to Vincent P. Barabba, director of the U.S. Bureau of the Census, there were 47 divorcees for every 1,000 "persons in intact marriages." By March, 1978, there were 90 divorcees for every 1,000. The staid *World Almanac and Book of Facts* currently refers to 1967-76 as "a remarkable period of consecutive

Divorce is the result of an attitude that has swept our society, including Christians.

annual increases in the [divorce] rate." The rate held steady during 1977, then resumed its climb.

During the first six months of 1979, there were 1,085,000 marriages and 570,000 divorcees. In other words, the judges were more than half as busy as the preachers.

And Christians have not been exempt. The George Gallup-*Christianity Today* poll released early this year showed that while 7 percent of America's adult population has been divorced, 5 percent of America's *evangelical* adult population has been divorced.

Something inside our bones tells us the figures really are accurate. We don't want to run around like Chicken Little, shouting that the sky is falling . . . but the sky really is falling. We hear the rumbling, we feel the tension in the air, and occasionally we get hit on the

head with a large chunk of it.

The question is why? Why are the statistics worse every year? Why are the curves all upward?

Is it because television and the movies have glorified divorce, presenting story after story that cast it in an acceptable light? Is it because far more women have taken jobs outside the home and have weakened their commitment to home-making as a result?

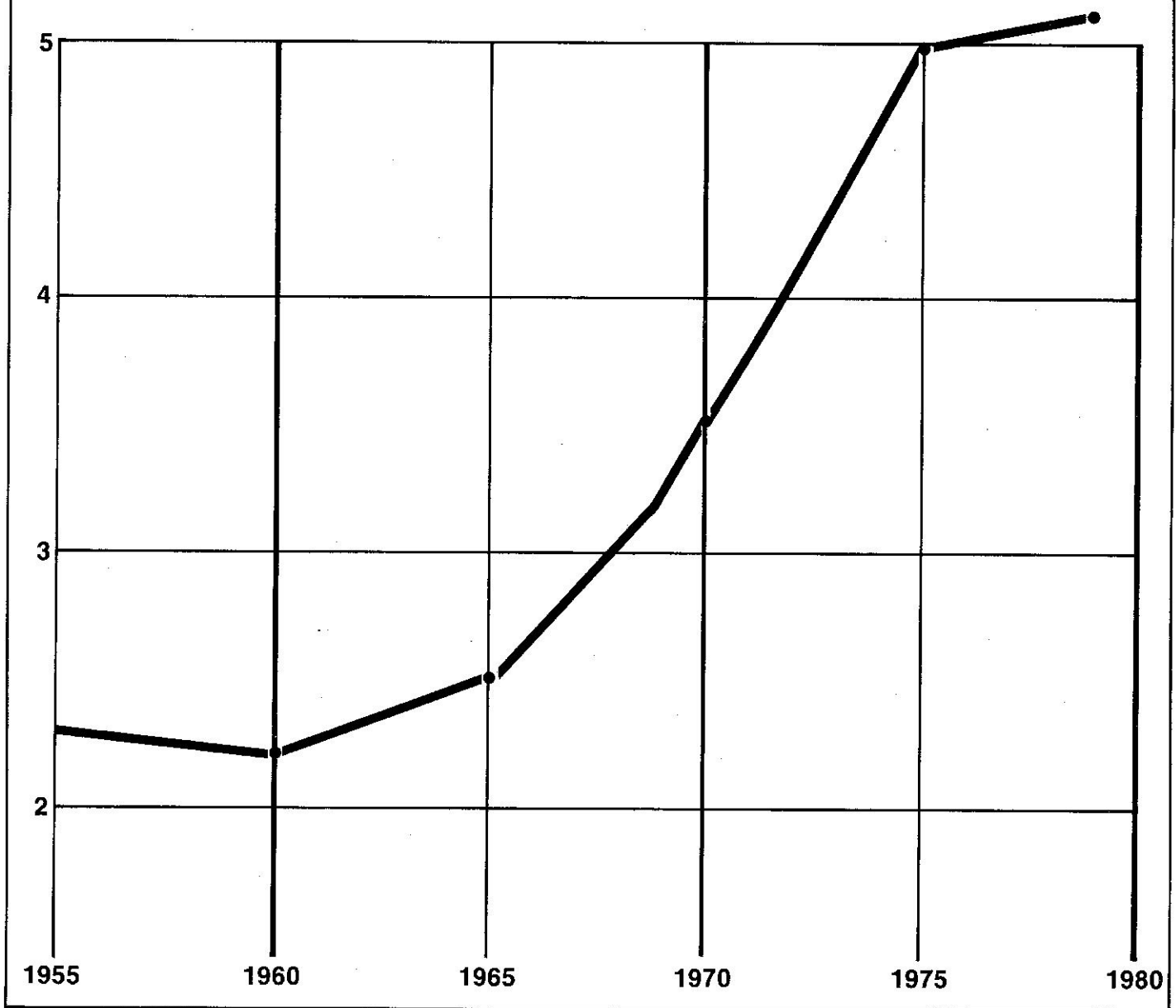
Is it because men have adopted the *Playboy* ethic and no longer try to keep their dalliances a secret? Is it because the radical 1960s convinced us that parenting is a high-risk business, that our kids may embarrass us in the end anyway, so why try?

Is it because the churches have gone soft on divorce, not condemning it so strongly as they once did, talking more about forgiveness and restoration than about prohibition? Is it due in part to the music of our times, not only rock but country and other forms as well that spend an inordinate amount of time dwelling on breaking up?

Is it already the reaping of the whirlwind from earlier divorcees? A University of Virginia psychologist, after studying 72 divorced families, says three out of four children of divorce will repeat the pattern.

Is it the result of relaxed laws, such as California's, which allow couples who have been married less than two years, have no children, no real estate, little personal property and few debts, to get a divorce without an attorney and without even going to court? (No

Divorce Rate United States: 1955-1978
Number Per 1,000 Population



wonder California led the nation in 1978 with 133,232 divorces; Texas was a distant second with 86,533, followed by Florida with 66,011.)

Is it simply a snowball effect—everybody's doing it?

Certainly each of the above factors has taken its toll, and other factors have as well. Yet beneath them all lies an ever deeper reason, one that has evidenced itself in our art, music, filmmaking, lawmaking, social custom and the like. I believe that the "uncoupling of America" since 1970 is a direct product of an attitude, a mindset that has swept into our society, not

only among the population at large but among Christians as well. It is a result of the Me Decade.

The 1970s were the decade we decided to start taking care of ourselves because, if we didn't, no one else would. Enough of worrying about people in Vietnam and Bangladesh, or Watts, or even next door, for that matter. We'd tried to be altruistic, to take on the burdens and cares of the world, and what had it gotten us? Nothing but trouble. It was time to focus in on *my* needs, *my* fulfillment, what *I* want, where *I'm* "at," my self-identity and self-actualization.

The decade gave us Robert J. Ringer, who did very well for himself writing two books, *Winning Through Intimidation* and *Looking Out for #1*. The second one stayed on *The New York Times* best-seller list for a full year. Its opening sentence defines the goal: "Looking out for Number One is the conscious, rational effort to spend as much time as possible doing those things which bring you the greatest amount of pleasure and less time on those which cause pain."

Pursuing such a goal, of course, means that you must dismiss "a creature who's been running

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around loose on Planet Earth over the millennia, steadily increasing in number. He is the Absolute Moralizer. His mission in life is to whip you and me into line. . . . He may appear as a politician on one occasion, next as a minister, and still later as your mother-in-law.

"Whatever his guise, he is relentless. He'll stalk you to your grave if you let him. . . . I suggest that the first thing you do is eliminate from consideration all unsolicited moral opinions of others. Morality—the quality of character—is a very personal and private matter. No other living person has the right to decide what is moral (right or wrong) for you."

The decade also launched a new magazine called *Self*, which promptly zoomed to a monthly circulation of 675,000. "Whether today's woman wants to improve her body or her mind," the ads announced, "she'll find it all in *Self* magazine."

At the close of the decade, a thoughtful historian named Christopher Lasch wrote *The Culture of Narcissism*, a sobering review of what had happened to us. "To live for the moment is the prevailing passion—to live for yourself, not for your predecessors or posterity. . . . The contemporary climate is therapeutic, not religious. People today hunger . . . for the feeling, the momentary illusion, of personal well-being, health, and psychic security."

And suddenly, the causes of the divorce epidemic start to come into focus. Marriage simply cannot survive in such a climate. Marriage, if it is anything, is *giving*. It is an experience of sharing one's life, resources, gifts, time and love with another. It is a commitment to seek the other's good, not just temporarily, but forever. There is a measure of receiving or getting in marriage, true, but that is merely the frosting. At its core, marriage is essen-

tially a commitment to give.

So when the times dictate that self is paramount, is it any wonder that marriages begin withering like house plants in the Sahara? The Me Decade has been a strangler. It has cut off the oxygen of marriage.

I recently asked a class of husbands and wives, "What did you expect to get when you married? As you walked to the altar, what did you expect to acquire?" We talked through the usual benefits: companionship, someone to talk to, someone to take care of cooking and the laundry, a sexual partner, protection from various dangers, a source of income. Then I asked, "When you married, what were you prepared to *give*?" Most of us had

Too often people marry with the idea of what they're going to get, not what they'll give.

not spent nearly so much time thinking about that in advance.

In counseling with those whose marriages are in trouble, I am continually impressed with how often I hear the pronouns *I, me, he, she*, and how seldom I hear *we* and *us*. "He is simply insensitive to my needs." . . . "She doesn't even understand what she's doing wrong." . . . "I cannot go on like this." These are Christian spouses who, without realizing it, have been caught up in the culture of narcissism. They expected to get certain things out of marriage, and at the moment they're not getting them, and so they are on the edge of bailing out.

Christopher Lasch correctly notes:

Our society . . . has made deep and lasting friendship, love affairs, and marriages increasingly difficult to achieve. As social life becomes more and more warlike and

barbaric, personal relations . . . take on the character of combat. Some of the new therapies dignify this combat as "assertiveness" and "fighting fair in love and marriage." Others celebrate impermanent arrangements under such formulas as "open marriage" and "open-ended commitments." Thus they intensify the disease they pretend to cure. . . .

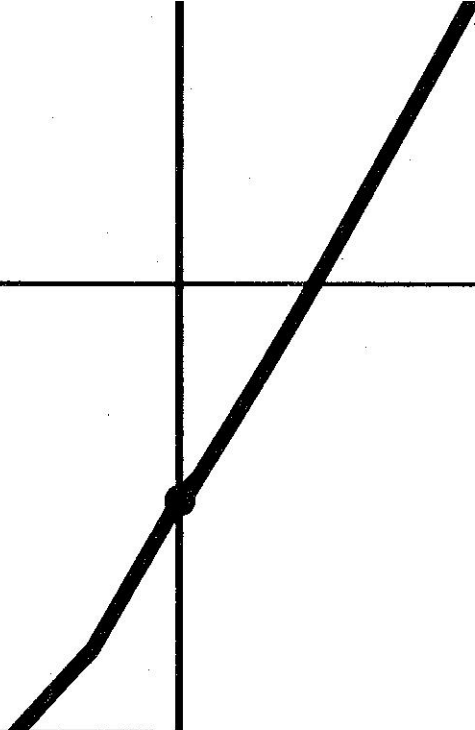
The ideology of personal growth, superficially optimistic, radiates a profound despair and resignation. It is the faith of those without faith.

There is another way. Jesus explained it most poignantly when two of his men engaged in a rather obvious bit of looking out for Number One. James and John put in their bid for preferential seating in the coming kingdom, which led Jesus to say, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:25-28, NIV).

His call to servanthood must have shocked his listeners, but they learned how serious he was about this radical concept on the night of the Last Supper. When he got out the washbasin and the towel to bathe their feet, they knew he was not joking. He proceeded one by one around the entire table—it must have taken half an hour—and then he asked, "Do you understand what I have done for you?"

Do we, 20 centuries later, understand it?

"You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am," he explained. "Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. . . . Once you know these things, you will be blessed if you



do them" (John 13:12-15, 17, NIV).

Christian marriages built on such a posture will endure. There is no hint of 50-50 here; there is no expectation that if I give a certain amount, I will get back a certain reward. There is only giving, patterned after the One who gave everything he had for us. It sounds preposterous to the modern mind, martyrish. Only when you try it do you realize the meaning of Jesus' promise, "You will be blessed. . . ."

I have often found myself facing a need or point of tension in my marriage and vascillating between two approaches: "What do I feel like doing?" vs. "What does she need?" In fact, it has proven helpful for me to step back, before doing or saying anything, and answer both of those questions. Let me give a rather ordinary example. My wife happens to be prone to long and difficult sieges of laryngitis. A sore throat of mine seldom lasts beyond 36 hours, while hers, for some unknown reason, can drag on for three weeks. We live through two or more of these each winter, it seems. The novelty has long since worn off.

As a new bout begins, *what do I feel like doing?* I feel like complaining, pitying myself, and saying things like, "Here we go again, huh?" "Why haven't you been taking care of yourself?" Or, "I sure

hope you keep your germs to yourself." I feel like withdrawing, turning my attention to more pleasant prospects.

On the other hand, *what does she need?* She needs to know that my love for her is not diminished by the condition of her throat, that she is still worthwhile and appreciated. She needs my prayers for her healing. She needs kindness, understanding. She may also need a trip to the store for Sucrets, or the fixing of a breakfast for myself and the kids so she can get some extra sleep in the morning. Whether such expressions of giving will shorten the illness or not, they reinforce and shore up our marriage. They validate our pledge to care for one another "in sickness and in health." They follow the New Testament injunction to "serve one another in love" (Galatians 5:13).

I realize all this sounds rather foolish in the Age of Self. According to Robert Ringer, "So-called self-sacrifice is just an irrationally selfish act. . . . The truth is that it won't make you feel good—certainly not in the long run, after bitterness over what you've 'sacrificed' has had a chance to fester within you. At its extreme, this bitterness eventually can develop into a serious case of absolute moralitis. . . . You may mean well, but don't try so hard to sacrifice for others. It's

unfair to them and a disaster for you."

A later section of his book is entitled, "Selfishness—the Root of All Good." No wonder there are nearly two million copies in print.

It is becoming ever clearer that we must have *Christian* reasons for staying married. For a long time—centuries, in fact—we enjoyed the support of a number of secular allies in the war to defend the family. Our Christian beliefs were bolstered by other things: tradition, family pressure, inertia, the difficulty women faced in earning a living if they ever divorced, legal sanctions, the absence of child-care facilities, and so on.

Most of those allies are gone now, or greatly neutralized. Divorce has become quite manageable, at least on the surface. If marriage is to survive in the '80s, it will have to be based upon the definitions God wrote in the first place, and practiced by people who have heard the call to self-giving. Only the invasion of the Holy Spirit into our hearts and wills will enable us to heed that call day by day, week by week, and year by year, until death do us part. ☞

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