

Where Do We Go from Here?

BY CAMERON LEE

Do the changes in the institution of marriage bode well for the future? That remains in dispute. By encouraging us to put our current situation in its sociohistorical context, the three recent contributions to the marriage conversation reviewed here help us build a constructive Christian ethic of marriage.

Much has changed in the twenty-seven years since my wife and I made our vows to God and to each other. In the voluminous literature on the contemporary family, indeed this is the only constant: the acknowledgement that things have changed. Do these changes bode well for the future of marriage? That remains in dispute. Our values regarding the institutions of marriage and family often become deeply engrained sources of contention, and Christians are not exceptions to this trend. But mere debate tends to be polarizing, foreclosing possibilities for constructive dialogue. How Christians engage in moral reflection about marriage is therefore a pressing issue for our age.

Each of the three recent contributions to the marriage conversation reviewed here, in its own way, helps build a constructive Christian ethic of marriage. Each encourages thoughtful Christians to put our current situation in its sociohistorical context, enabling more self-critical reflection about our moral commitments as individuals, couples, and congregations.

In *Marriage and Modernization* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003, 280 pp., \$30.00), theologian and ethicist Don Browning points to the corrosive effects of the latter upon the former, a thesis that has been explored by many sociologists in recent decades. Following Max Weber, Browning defines

modernization as “the spread of technical rationality into the various domains of life” (p. 5). With modernization comes a variety of social pressures that alter the cultural landscape in which families interpret and enact their commitments: globalization, industrialization, and urbanization, to name the usual suspects. Summarizing the sociological evidence, Browning writes:

Modernization and globalization have led to the heightened economic insecurity of many families, the domination of domestic life by the cost-benefit logic of the market, less economic dependency of the husband and wife on each other, more divorce, and more non-marital births. Almost everywhere, they have been accompanied by less marriage, less parental time with children, the increased economic liability of children to their parents, increased poverty of single mothers and their children, and a growing absence of large numbers of fathers from the lives of their children. (p. 30)

Added to this is the postmodern uncertainty that comes from the awareness of other cultures and family patterns, making one’s own assumptions about marriage seem highly relative.

Such arguments in themselves, of course, are not new. The question that animates the book is how Christians should respond. Browning notes that while sociologists agree that marriage is being transformed or disrupted worldwide, they differ in their recommendations. Some believe modernization cannot be stopped, and therefore advocate the creation of social policies to buffer its effects. Others, like David Popenoe, argue for nothing less than “a new moral conversation that would lead to a cultural rebirth of marital commitment” (p. 20). But most seem to ignore the fundamental role that religious traditions can and should play in such a cultural rebirth. It is this gap that Browning’s book seeks to address.

In this regard, the subtitle of the book, *How Globalization Threatens Marriage and What to Do About It*, is somewhat misleading. The actual impact of modernization and globalization is assumed and briefly described, but is not the focus of the book. Nor does Browning intend to provide authoritative solutions and policy recommendations. Rather than tell his readers “what to do about it,” He is more concerned to help shape how they think. The book functions as a demonstration project in practical theology, applied to the problem of modernization’s reshaping of conjugality. He hopes to encourage a deeper level of practical moral thinking in order to stimulate the kind of cross-disciplinary dialogue needed to sustain a new “cultural work” regarding marriage. Although his particular interest is in what Christian theology might contribute to this conversation, Browning casts an ecumenical net, arguing that a global reconstruction of marriage will require the moral and imaginative resources of the world’s major religious traditions.

The book is an extension of Browning’s previous work in practical theology, in which he posits five interacting levels of “practical-moral thinking”: (1) a

metanarrative or “visional” level (in which religious meanings may be a particularly relevant resource), (2) an “obligational” level of moral principles, (3) a level of assumptions about “basic human needs” that constitute premoral goods, (4) a level which examines the larger ecology of “social and environmental constraints,” and finally (5) the practical implications that follow upon the other four levels (pp. 162, 228). For an example of this multi-level approach, see Browning’s article “Christian Marriage and Public Policy” in this issue.

Browning employs this model first implicitly and then explicitly throughout the book, examining a multidisciplinary array of contributions to a practical theology and ethics of marriage. The hope is that articulating our assumptions about marriage along these five dimensions will not only enrich moral discourse but enable productive dialogue, since disagreements at a policy level may reflect deeper differences in another dimension of practical thinking. Deepening how we think about marriage “should help us specify more accurately where the real conflicts can be found and help us discover more precisely how to address them” (p. 185). Given our ambiguous relationship with modernity, Browning’s volume helps point the way forward for the Church and concerned Christians to engage in more self-critical moral analysis.

A related volume that supports this practical vision is *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion, and Law in the Western Tradition* by legal historian John Witte, Jr. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997, 315 pp., \$29.95). The book is part of a series emanating from the Religion, Culture, and Family Project at the University of Chicago Divinity School, funded by the Lilly Endowment and directed by Don Browning. It is a scholarly exercise in the history of ideas, demonstrating the interdependence of Western theological and legal traditions and how they have understood the institution of marriage. Witte’s source material includes hundreds of documents and court records; endnotes and references account for nearly a third of the book’s pages. He has done family scholars the enormous favor of organizing these archival sources into a highly readable and coherent narrative.

Witte devotes one chapter to each of five religious and philosophical traditions. The Roman Catholic metanarrative viewed marriage as a *sacramental* union under the jurisdiction of the Church and canon law. Three Protestant perspectives later rejected Catholic sacramentalism. Martin Luther, on the basis of his two-kingdom theory, viewed marriage primarily as a *social* estate, a relationship between husband and wife in the present that should be governed by civil authorities. Calvin, like Luther, also noted the civil importance of marriage, but argued instead for a *covenantal* perspective that broadened the range of social stakeholders in the marriage union to include the couple’s parents, witnesses, the minister, the magistrate, and, of course, God – each party representing an aspect of the covenant. The Anglican *commonwealth* model extended the metanarrative scope even further. Beyond its social and covenantal aspects, marriage was divinely ordained to train individuals in the habits and beliefs that would make them good citizens and good Christians. As a microcosm of

the larger commonwealth, families would reflect in their own internal structure the hierarchies of church and state. The political upheavals of the seventeenth century, however, undercut this hierarchical understanding and led to more egalitarian formulations. John Locke's understanding of marriage as a voluntary *contract* between two individuals prefigured the perspective of Enlightenment thinkers, who based their understanding of marriage on the philosophical foundations of deism, individualism, and rationalism.

Seen in their historical contexts, the continuities and discontinuities among the perspectives become clear. Even when theologians and jurists directed fierce jeremiads against other traditions (e.g. the Reformers' attacks against the perceived errors and excesses of Catholic canon law), this was not a wholesale rejection. Certain religious values, naturalistic assumptions, and points of law carried over from one tradition to the next, albeit in an altered narrative framework (as in level one of Browning's practical theology).

The book's historical narrative is enlivened by case studies that demonstrate the interplay of religion, law, and politics. We are reminded, for example, that the Anglican reformation of marriage law was precipitated by England's break from Rome over the conjugal machinations of Henry VIII. Occurring at about the same time, in Germany, the case of Johann Apel gives a stunning (to modern Western sensibilities) portrait of the power of the church over against the state, in matters that are now considered to be personal and private.

Such cases bring our own moral assumptions about marriage into bolder relief. Each of the five perspectives within the general movement from sacramental to contractual under-

standings represents an attempt to integrate theological concerns with legal and practical ones that are still relevant today. How should marriages be formed and sustained? Under what conditions, if at all, should marriages be allowed to dissolve? Who decides? How we answer these and other related questions will depend on the kind of taken-

How should marriages be formed and sustained? Under what conditions, if at all, should marriages be allowed to dissolve? Who decides? How we answer such questions will depend on the kind of taken-for-granted ethical assumptions Witte identifies.

for-granted ethical assumptions Witte identifies. Although he spends precious little space on the practical implications of his intellectual history, his book does the important spade work on the major marriage paradigms of Western culture as seen through the lenses of Browning's first three levels of practical moral thinking, with careful attention to sociohistorical context (Browning's level four). Thus, the book exhibits the thick moral analysis needed to undergird the kind of critical cultural conversation that Browning envisions.

As valuable as both of these books may be for intelligent participation in contemporary debates about the family, however, it is doubtful that many Christians outside the professional ministry or the academy will be willing to work their way through either of them. In contrast, *Getting Marriage Right: Realistic Counsel for Saving and Strengthening Relationships* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2004, 272 pp., \$14.99) by ethicist David P. Gushee is written for a more general Christian audience. The “counsel” that the book offers, however, is not the kind found in self-help books for struggling couples. Indeed, as Gushee himself insists: “*There is no technical solution to marriage. There is no five-step secret plan that can ensure marital success*” (p. 108, italics in original). His concern, rather, is to revitalize the church’s understanding of marriage and divorce so that it may embody a kingdom-oriented, countercultural alternative to the deinstitutionalization of marriage itself.

The book originates in Gushee’s experience as a professor counseling his students, who one after another told him their stories of growing up in broken families. Not surprisingly, the well-being of children becomes a central moral touchstone for his reconsideration of Christian reflections on marriage and divorce. “Our divorce culture...remains sentimental about children even while we sacrifice their basic needs – and the basic requirements of justice – on the altar of our self-interest,” writes Gushee, “and if it is a justice issue, biblical people have no choice but to respond on behalf of injustice’s victims” (p. 80). Such injustices are poignantly illustrated through excerpts from interviews with children of divorce.

Gushee’s central metaphor for what Browning referred to as a “cultural work” is the rebuilding of the marriage “cathedral”:

Both cathedrals and social institutions take a long time to build and are not easily brought down. Marriage moved toward being deinstitutionalized under the impact of a series of exceptionally important cultural developments. Like a building damaged from all sides, marriage weakened dramatically under the cumulative impact of these cultural blows in ways that no one anticipated. (p. 25)

The first two chapters offer a brief historical overview of these developments, which include the sexual revolution of the 1960s, the rise of divorce and cohabitation, and the uncoupling of sex from procreation. This summary establishes the problematic weakening of the cathedral’s internal structure, against which Gushee proposes a constructive theological and ethical program.

The marriage cathedral will need to be rebuilt, he argues, on the basis of four “pillars.” First is the recognition of the purposes for which God created the institution of marriage. Gushee identifies four such creation purposes in the Genesis account: companionship, sexual union, the procreation and nurture of children, and support of the larger social order. These purposes apply to all married persons, Christian or not, and are supported by the contemporary emphasis on the teaching of relationship skills. The second pillar is an under-

standing of marriage as a covenant, which provides the narrative backdrop for sustained commitment and faithfulness within the family, even in the face of marital suffering. Third is a focus on how marriage might become “the context for the vigorous practice of kingdom living” (p. 177). The fourth pillar is closely related to the third: an ecclesiology in which the church’s mission in the world is understood to include a living witness to the first three pillars. It is here that Gushee offers some of the most valuable practical advice of the book. He outlines twelve strategies by which a local congregation might begin to incarnate such a vision, including an emphasis on character formation and sound congregational relationships, and the provision of biblical teaching and service ministries oriented toward the strengthening of marriages. A final chapter suggests some of the public policy implications of his work.

If we accept that Christians concerned about the contemporary state of marriage need to do the kind of practical-moral thinking that Browning suggests, then Gushee’s book represents one example of someone who has done just that. The themes of covenant and kingdom, for example, provide the deep narrative of his approach, while his emphasis on the creational purposes of marriage identifies the premoral goods common to all who marry. Throughout the volume, and especially in Gushee’s use of covenant language, one can hear the echoes of the historical traditions Witte surveys, brought once again to life for our day and age.

So where do we go from here? I confess that Gushee’s book is the one that resonates most closely with my own writing and teaching, arguing for the transformation of marriage and family life from the inside out by calling the church to reimagine its countercultural role as an embodiment of God’s kingdom. Merely bemoaning the current state of marriage is fruitless. Churches must take the lead in reexamining how their own cultural commitments shape moral vision, and they must take deliberate and concrete steps to cultivate the virtues and skills needed to sustain healthy marriage partnerships – particularly for the sake of the next generation.

But even more is needed, given the global scope of the problem. Browning is right to call for ecumenical dialogue. Marriage is a created good, and the resources needed to help strengthen it are not limited to the Christian faith alone. The virtues of humility and peacemaking will not only make us better marriage partners, but better ecumenical dialogue partners. In that sense, we must all become better practical theologians.



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