

Obsolete or Just Misunderstood?

by Gene Edward Veith

A recent Pew Research Center study indicates Americans think marriage is obsolete. So, where does that leave Lutherans?

What with gay marriage, single parenthood, “just living together” and soaring divorce rates, it’s little wonder that 40 percent of Americans think that marriage is obsolete. Most Americans no longer think marriage is necessary for having sex (60 percent believe it’s morally acceptable to have sex before marriage). Or necessary for living together (55 percent). Or for having children (53 percent).

So, why get married at all? The Pew Research Center, the source of these statistics, notes further that marriage rates are going down. In 1960, 72 percent of American adults were married; today, not quite half are married. In 1960, 68 percent of young adults in their 20s were married; today, that percentage is only 26 percent.

These findings reflect not just the new ideas and swinging behavior of the culturally elite. They apply specifically to ordinary Americans. Actually, the Pew study finds that college graduates and people with higher incomes marry at a much higher rate (64 percent) than those with just a high school education (48 percent). So, where does that leave Christians?

One problem may be that few people have a good understanding of what marriage even is. Perhaps the most common assumption today is that what makes a marriage is love, understood as a romantic attraction. When two people love each other, they get married. It follows, though, that if the feeling fades—if one spouse decides “I don’t love you anymore”—then there is no longer any basis for the marriage.

The next step is divorce. As some pastors can testify, some couples who insist on writing their own wedding vows want to replace “As long as we both shall *live*” with “As long as we both shall *love*.”

Notice the assumptions in the gay marriage debates. If marriage is based on nothing more than a romantic attraction—as both sides often assume—it’s hard to see why two people of the same sex who have a romantic attraction to each other shouldn’t get married. Also in play is the unromantic view that marriage is just a legal contract that gives certain rights and privileges, such as tax advantages, access to shared property and hospital visitation rights.

If that’s what marriage is, it’s hard to see why two people of the same sex shouldn’t get in on these benefits. It’s also hard to see why the government, which supervises contract laws, shouldn’t be able to just change those any way it pleases.

Some Christians are just throwing their hands up in the air. “Let’s get the government out of the marriage business,” they say, being echoed also by secular libertarians. “The church can still perform weddings for Christians and promote biblical marriage. Let the non-believers do whatever they want.”

This solution has its problems, not the least of which is the difficulty of sustaining traditional marriage in a culture and a legal system that does not recognize it (like today, only much worse.) Besides, marriage is not just for Christians.

In the Lutheran understanding, marriage is not a sacrament—which would restrict it to just Christians—but it has been established by God in His very creation of human

beings (Gen. 2:18–25). Marriage is God’s provision for His earthly kingdom, how He governs and blesses all human societies, including people who do not know Him. Marriage is God starting a family.

Marriage and families belong to God’s civil order. The Reformation worked hard to wrest control of marriage from the Church—which imposed all kinds of restrictions and legalisms—and to give legal jurisdiction instead to the state, which is also an institution through which God works.

Marriage, in short, is a vocation. God calls men and women into their marriages, and He works through them to bless each other. They become “one flesh.” God is the one who joined them together, as Jesus Himself explains: “What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate” (Matt. 19:5–6).

Moreover, marriage is an image of Christ and the church. Just as our heavenly Father is the reality behind all earthly fatherhood, Christ and the church is the reality behind all earthly marriage. Wives are told to submit to their husbands as the church does to Christ, and husbands are told to “give themselves up” for their wives as Christ did for the church (Eph. 5:25–33).

The purpose of every vocation is loving and serving the neighbors whom that vocation brings into your life. This involves denying yourself for the good of another person. Sacrificing for others is what it means to follow Christ and to bear the cross in our vocations.

The office of marriage entails only one neighbor. The husband loves and serves his wife, and the wife loves and serves her husband. The unpopular command for the wife to “submit” and the forgotten command for the husband to “give himself up” for his wife are examples of the self-denial required in every vocation. The husband, emulating Christ, sacrifices himself for his wife, who, emulating the church, receives that sacrifice in submission to him.

Today’s culture gets marriage wrong, in large part, because of our obsession with the self. People assume that marriage is supposed to be about self-fulfillment. Christianity, in contrast, teaches self-denial. The irony is that in a Christian view of marriage, both spouses are fulfilled, not by each of them making self-centered demands, but through the selfless actions of the other.

So, will marriage cease to exist? Not a chance. What God has established stays.

Luther said that God compels people to get married. And indeed, marriage, as God defines it, is what people, despite their confusions, really crave. A recent study of the “hook-up” culture has found that even the sexually promiscuous are looking for that “one person.” Those with broken marriages tend to keep trying. Those who dispense with marriage, but have sex and children anyway, pay the price. Our culture does not make it easy for people to find the right person to marry—and not everyone is called to marry—but nevertheless marriages happen. According to a Barna study, four out of five adults do get married eventually.

Marriage can no more be obsolete than the body or children or the creation itself can become obsolete. The church can help, though, by teaching about the vocation of marriage and by cultivating marriages that can show the world what marriage is all about.