

# Marriage and Divorce

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I teach a course to Doctor of Ministry students on how to do the research needed for their dissertation. This year I have been using as an example a Christian pastor whose congregation has a very high divorce rate. This has become a serious problem and the pastor wants to know why they divorce, and how to prevent such a high rate of divorce.

It's a great example to use, because it is clearly a problem for the pastor if so many of the marriages he or she conducted end in divorce - very unsatisfying! So, it would make sense for the pastor to try to understand why these marriages are so precarious and short-lived, and how to change this situation.

In class we to discuss the types of questions that can be asked of the congregants, how to administer questionnaires to get honest answers, and how to follow up with interviews to gain more detailed understanding of the situation.

Also, it is suggested that premarital counseling might be valuable in guiding couples regarding the meaning of marriage. The hope would be that if they discovered that they were not ready to marry, or not compatible enough to sustain a marriage, that they would change their plans and thus avoid the probability of a failed marriage ending in divorce.

For already married couples, marriage enrichment seminars might help them to invest further in their marriage, rather than rushing to divorce when things get a bit difficult. Challenges are normal, and such a program could help them to recommit to their marriage and work through their difficulties.

Although this topic is very useful for my course, it's also rather depressing! Why do people marry, if they think divorce is readily available when the "magic" of their relationship wears off?

In my example, we are talking about marriage in a church, with vows often taken from the Bible. So, how does divorce fit into the Christian view of marriage? Well, we have Jesus' response to a question about divorce in Matthew 19:

"Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has

joined together, let no one separate" (Matthew 19: 4-6).

And when pressed further on the matter, citing Moses' apparent approval of divorce, he explained:

"Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery" (Matthew 19: 8-9).

So, there you have it! The only acceptable reason for divorce, according to Jesus, is adultery.

However, that doesn't totally solve the problem of a high rate of divorce if the pastor's congregants include people who don't respect monogamy, or the exclusive sexual relationship in marriage. But, it points to an important component in premarital counseling and marriage enrichment seminars.

While thinking about how my example seemed so familiar to all my students despite such clear biblical guidance, I came across this quote from Sun Myung Moon's "As a Peace-Loving Global Citizen":

This is quite enlightening about the nature of the marriage relationship. If it is a "precious ceremony of commitment" divorce shouldn't really be one's first thought when facing a challenge or two. What is this commitment though, if it's not just a "simple coming together" of two people?

The Christian ceremony the pastor uses includes vows that talk about having children. Is this where the couple is carrying on "God's work of creation"? Reverend Moon's answer is yes:

Marriage is more than a simple coming together of a man and a woman. It is a precious ceremony of commitment to carry on God's work of creation (p. 202).

This sounds pretty important! First, the couple become one, have children, and experience true love. That sounds good!

But beyond that, "a new future is created"! Now I am really impressed. This does sound like expanding God's work of creation, which, at least according to the Bible, stopped when the first human couple (Adam and Eve) were created. Here we are talking about societies and nations. And they are all based on marriage! Actually, they are based on marriage and the resulting family (since the couple create new life in the form of children).

I've read elsewhere, for example in the book on "Family" by Margaret Mead and Ken Heyman, that the family has long been considered the cornerstone of society:

As far back as our knowledge takes us, human beings have lived in families. We know of no period where this was not so. We know of no people who have succeeded for long in dissolving the family or displacing it.... Again and again, in spite of proposals for change and actual experiments, human societies have reaffirmed their dependence on the family as the basic unit of human living - the family of father, mother and children (p. 77 - 78).

So, if the family is the basic unit of human society, not the individual, and the family is best described as a stable unit of parents and their children, surely divorce is a real problem. In other words, a high divorce rate threatens the future of human society. When I introduced this example to my class I didn't realize it was quite that significant!