

# The Durability of Marriage

Some informal thoughts

Ralph D. Winter, Saturday, February 6, 1988

God planned out many wonderful things. Writing to the Thessalonians the apostle Paul sought for words to describe his deep concern and care for them and found himself saying that he cared "as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her child."

He was not necessarily describing the care of a Christian mother. He did not need to narrow it down to that. Just as God has given all people - Christian or not - wondrous eyes with which to see, wonderful hearts to pump life giving blood into their extremities, wondrous finger tips with which to feel and ears to hear and so on, so has He given mothers "built in" care for their children.

The same is true for marriage. It is a powerful, wonderful relationship, no less God designed and provided for, in a hundred subtle and beautiful ways.

The reason to make comparisons between marriage and the tender love of a mother has for a child is to dispel the notion that there is something fragile or flimsy about marriage, and that unless two people are "just right" for each other it simply won't work out.

When a new baby is born do we wonder if it will ever "work out"? Do we see people, even those who adopt, coming back to trade their baby in on the grounds of incompatibility? Do we hear parents saying of a small child, "I'm not sure that Sara is the right one for us?" Or, do you hear of new parents wanting to give up their child for adoption because it has been crying at night?

No. Why? Because God designed it as a powerful relationship. Marriage involves very naturally a powerful attraction and caring. It exists wherever human beings are found, Christian or pagan. You don't have to be a Christian to sense the power of what God designed.

In fact, it is part of God's natural revelation of Himself to us, that these rich and powerful, gratifying relationships exist. Just as "the heavens declare the glory of God, and the earth show us His handiwork," so we see in many other aspects of His Creation the thoughtful love and care of His creative intent. Truly God does all things well.

On the other hand this does not mean there is no trouble and sorrow. A tiny baby is not all cooing and delight, but unless sin has even more savagely entered in to damage or retard God's intended creation, a baby, a child, a young person, a brother, a wife, a husband, a parent . . . is much, much more than trouble!

Yet it is true that in America a lot of things go wrong, surprisingly wrong in view of the level of education and Christian commitment. Why? Living outside of America is a help in understanding what is or is not happening here.

For one thing it is truly amazing the extent to which our American way of life shields young people from contact with the older and younger. In most traditional societies, the care of the young and contact with the older members of society is frequent, almost constant. It is remarkable how in "primitive" societies children are naturally drawn into both

understanding and caring for other members of the family younger and older.

In America our school system throws us together with others of our own age to the extent that often we "can't stand" kids who are even one grade younger. We wouldn't be caught dead talking to someone who is younger..

In America we banish the old to retirement centers where children are not even allowed to visit - so that they will not "bother" the older folks. What incredible obtuseness has engulfed us! Recently a new design for retirement centers intentionally plans for families with younger children to be interspersed throughout! A complete switch. How unbelievably stupid we have been to suppose that older and younger did not go together!

Well, the same is true about marriage. Many young people fear that it will not work, that they won't marry the right person, as if there is a "right person" except in the general sense of God's leading. Our young people fear the "load" and complexities of child care, not sensing the "lift" of that rich and normal relationship.

It should be said, of course, that in America child care is in fact a greater burden than in most other societies. The reasons are curious. For one thing, we grow up with early schooling that relieves us and at the same time fails to train us in child care. We miss out on both the load and the lift of child care in our early years, and indeed, in college we are almost totally removed from the scene. We plunge into marriage and adulthood extremely unprepared

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for child care.

Also, our social system walls off young parents from their parents and siblings far, far more than in a traditional society where child care is a task that is spread out into the hands of a dozen caring people not just the burdened mother, who may have two or three children in diapers at the same time, and if all alone at home, really does carry an unnatural load. Our society teaches us to be independent rather than dependable and so it is that we reap what we have sown in terms of societal goals. We have in many ways chosen the hardest way to go.

Probably the greatest fear and obstacle to marriage at a normal age, or at any age, is the dreaded loss of independence, the fear of becoming tied down. Young people growing up in America quite naturally sense a profound need for belonging, and desperately seek "relationships" of all kinds, so long as those relationships are not permanent. But this is self-defeating. Impermanent relationships won't help in the long haul.

The most significant long-term relationship is that with our parents. In most cases by the time young people are ready for marriage the parental relationship has long since fallen into disuse. American society teaches the parents that it is their duty and privilege to "wash their hands" of the most important decisions their children make, and children are taught, correspondingly, that they have to "decide things for themselves, stand on their own feet, grow up" etc. This is deeply ingrained very early. All of this

converges to destroy our confidence in wholehearted self-giving in a marriage. We would like to "try out" things, dip in our big toe, so to speak. Keep everything tentative just as long as possible, not realizing that as the years of hesitation stretch out we are curtailing, even maiming, future long-term relationships in marriage, which need to get started far earlier than is common today in America.

My father married at 25, my older brother at 26, I got married at 27, and my younger brother married at 29. The later we get married, the more firmed up and inflexible we are, the most time we "lose" in getting acquainted. And, quite significantly, the greater the inherent, irretrievable gap there will be between our age and our children's ages.

Curiously, in our society delayed marriage is not even recognized as a serious problem. All the things you read seem to focus on the problems surrounding teen-age marriages. Most marriages in the world are teen age marriages, and are surrounded and supported by society so as to be health and durable. But in America we have structured things in such a way that it is sadly true that to marry as a teenager simply will not work in most cases.

This is strange. It clearly goes against the biological clock. Postponing marriage from 17 to 27 casts boys especially into an entire decade of artificial and problematic sexual restraint or misguided license. But our school system is so structured as to exclude remunerative and productive activity (often even by law) so that young people really don't

have the financial resources to marry in their teens, are deemed unemployable as the result of our extended schooling period, are cut off from the financial and emotional care of their parents, and quite logically cannot swing a marriage at the age when most Americans married during most of American history.

A medieval Jewish philosopher observed that "a man who is not married by the time he is 21 will be a sinner for the rest of his life" - due, presumably, to the extraordinary delay of sexual expression, or the social, emotional, and spiritual consequences of unnatural sexual expression.

It is no secret that childbirth gets more difficult the older the mother is at the time of the first birth. Even undue delay between children hardens up the body and makes readjustment to childbirth more difficult.

Thus for both male and female, delayed marriage is both necessary and unfortunate in American society today, except in some of the rural communities that still exist here and there.

Besides the financial limitations, and the prolonged maturation which characterizes the growing up process in our society, there are other forces that lead to delayed families. When school is finally past and substantial employment is finally possible, the significant income of two separately employed persons is hard to give up in order to "start a family." [to be continued]