

GETTING A GRIP

on Youth Culture
Adolescence
Homosexuality
Marriage



FOUR ESSAYS
by **Mardi Keyes**

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Getting A Grip on
Youth Culture, Adolescence, Homosexuality, Marriage
by Mardi Keyes

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Contents

Part 1 01

Youth Culture and Growing Up

Part 2 33

Who Invented Adolescence

Part 3 79

Homosexuality Speaking Truth In Love

Part 4 100

Marriage Is There A Place Between Cynicism & Idolatry

Youth Culture And Growing Up

It is impossible to think about “growing up” in modern America without considering the role of the “youth culture” which every young person—even those who do not attend public school—is confronted by and must deal with. It is impossible to be so isolated that we are untouched by the surrounding culture. Nor should we wish to be—as we are called to be salt and light in a very confused and broken world. Popular culture deserves neither uncritical acceptance nor knee jerk rejection, but thoughtful critique.

There is not one monolithic youth culture that defines all young people. Popular youth culture embraces a diversity of sub-cultures or “tribes” such as skaters, druggies, snobs, band geeks, Satanists, Jesus freaks, techno-goths, computer dweebs, blacks, Latinos, and white trash. Groups distinguish themselves by dress, style, music, body modification practices, race, ethnicity, and language.¹ Most adults can’t tell the difference, which is why in the aftermath of Columbine, many unfairly associated all high school students who wear black with violence, drugs and even Satanism.

My generation has erected obstacles in front of the next generations—making the process of growing up much more difficult than it need be. We have bequeathed them a huge national debt, an uncertain economic future, a global environmental catastrophe, a corrupt political system, leaders whose lack of integrity invites cynicism, messed up families, and too often, churches that are out of touch with their lives. And we have left them to their peers and the media to figure everything out.

In his book *The Rise & Fall of the American Teenager*, Thomas Hines makes the uncomfortable observation that the baby boomers, “seem to have moved, without skipping a beat, from blaming our parents for the ills of society to blaming our children. We want them to embody virtues we only rarely practice. We want them to eschew habits we’ve never managed to break. Their transgressions aren’t their own. They send us the unwelcome, rarely voiced message that we, the adults, have failed.”²

If we care about our children, their friends, and the whole shape of the next generation, it is essential for us to try to understand the world they are growing up in, and to dialogue with them about it. We must know them as individuals and friends whom we care about, listen to, learn from and respect.

Attitudes Toward Young People

Adults tend to idolize, envy, exploit, condescend to, fear and blame youth today. Evidence that youth is idolized and envied can be seen everywhere. Riley Weston, the writer on the Warner Brothers series *Felicity* was fired when it was learned that she was 32, not 19 years old.³ WB teen programs are extremely popular among 25 to 54-year-olds.⁴ An article in *Seventeen* magazine on mothers and daughters begins: “She gave birth to you, changed your diapers, taught you how to use scissors—so what’s up with her suddenly flirting with your boyfriend and borrowing your clothes?”⁵ Ever younger women are having cosmetic surgery to hide evidence of

aging. A 21-year-old college student says, "I'm going to say I'm 21 until I'm 30...What's the advantage of being older? Your health declines, your husband leaves you for another woman and you can't find a job."⁶

But youth are also exploited. A baby boomer writes: "My generation turned adolescence into a commodity that could be sold worldwide by 45-year-old executives at Nike or Warner Bros. To that extent we control youth."⁷

The word teenager was first used in a marketing context⁸ in 1941. Teenagers were defined by their shared experience (high school), being young, open to new things and most important, easy to sell to. Time writes, "The youth market is highly attractive to advertisers because young people spend a lot of money, are impressionable and are forming habits that may last a lifetime."⁹

Hines gives a vivid example of large-scale commercial exploitation. He writes, "Creators of youth fashion, such as Nike, go so far as to send scouts to the ghetto to take pictures of what young people are wearing on the streets and writing on the walls. Nike seeks to reflect the latest sensibilities, both in its products and its advertising. The company feeds the imagery right back to those who created it, offering them something they cannot afford as a way of affirming themselves."¹⁰ In contrast to the 1960's rebellion which was against the materialism and consumerism of the adult world, today's youth

culture and its forms of rebellion have been co-opted by the adult commercial establishment.

An article in the *Tribune* reflects on the co-opting of rebellion: “Video games like Doom, a favorite of the two (Columbine killers) and Wolfenstein #3D are reviewed in daily papers and glossy popular magazines. Tattoos, pierced tongues and extreme sports sell soda. Rebellious teens don’t look any different from what’s being featured on MTV and ESPN (sports network) or even on sitcoms. It gets harder to break the boundaries, to distinguish oneself, to rebel from the mainstream, when alternative culture has become the dominant one.”¹¹

This situation gives Christian young people a tremendous opportunity to be an authentic, attractive “counterculture.” (What this could look like, and how it could be done, is the kind of inter-generational discussion that should be going on in our churches.)

I have asked high school and college students if they like being called adolescents or teenagers. Invariably, the answer is no. They say the labels are condescending, imply immaturity and stereotype all people in their teens as unreliable, unpredictable, and unable to handle responsibility. They feel that being classified as adolescents or teenagers gives adults justification for not taking them and their ideas seriously. They resent statements like “you’re just going through a stage...when you’re older, you’ll see things our way.”

I completely sympathize with these reactions. A New York Times article described “the American teenager” as a new “Frankensteinian creature...a bored, restless young person with the emotions of a child in the body of an adult.”¹² Commonly, the words “adolescents” or “teenagers” refer to a class of people who are uninterested in, and incapable of handling much of anything in life except for sex, social life and shopping.

A friend of mine taught a class in “teen issues” and at the end of the class, she asked for the students’ evaluation. One young man complained: “This was meant to be a class in ‘teen issues,’ but all we talked about was sex! I am struggling with a whole lot of other things—like school, politics, friendship, money, religion, and work... I have to make decisions in all these areas. Aren’t they ‘teen issues?’ I was hoping to get some help thinking about them.”

While adults pay less attention to individual young people, their fear and disapproval of “teenagers” as a class has increased. A proliferation of contradictory laws communicates adult fear and disapproval. Nighttime youth curfews have been revived in many cities, even though most juvenile crimes are minor, and 83% of them are committed outside of curfew hours (mostly right after school gets out).¹³ Yet many states are requiring youth as young as eleven to be prosecuted as adults for a growing variety of crimes.¹⁴

In the aftermath of school shootings, schools have understandably tightened security. But all kids, not just the dangerous ones, are hurt

by a growing atmosphere of mistrust. Many express the feeling that no one really cares for them as individuals. Coaches and some teachers are often mentioned as the only exceptions.

In *The Rise & Fall of the American Teenager*, Hines summarizes our culture's contradictory beliefs about young people today: "They should be free to become themselves. They need many years of training and study. They know more about the future than adults do. They know hardly anything at all. They ought to know the value of a dollar. They should be protected from the world of work. They are frail, vulnerable creatures. They are children. They are sex fiends. They are the death of culture. They are the hope of us all."

He calls this a "teenage mystique: a seductive but damaging way of understanding young people. This mystique encourages adults to see teenagers (and young people to see themselves) not as individuals but as potential problems. Such a pessimistic view of the young can easily lead adults to feel that they are powerless to help young people make better lives for themselves. Thus, the teenage mystique can serve as an excuse for elders to neglect the coming generation and, ultimately, to see their worst fears realized."¹⁵

The Invention of Adolescence

The truth is, young people have not always been viewed the way they are today. Compared with young people in 1900 and before, young people today spend much more time in school than working. They are essentially consumers rather than producers.

In the past, a wide age range of people worked, played, learned, and worshiped together. But young people today tend to interact with adults only in professional, formal, or controlled contexts. These profound changes in the social and economic relationship between youth and adults began in the 19th century, when industrialization removed work from the home.

At the same time, new ideas were formed about human development. Spearheaded by the psychologist G. Stanley Hall in 1904, a host of “experts” popularized a concept of adolescence that saw sexual maturation as the most significant, defining thing that happens to young people. For the first time “adolescence” was defined as a period of terrible storm and stress, of “inner turmoil” that rendered young people vulnerable, awkward and even incapacitated.

These social scientists believed that in order for the transition to adulthood to happen successfully, “adolescents” needed to be institutionally segregated with peers and protected from adult responsibilities and concerns. Sexual maturation was believed to be so all encompassing and draining that young people couldn’t deal with anything else. To help them maneuver this stressful period, a whole array of adult-sponsored youth organizations and institutions were established, the age-graded high school being the most important.

Historians speak of the “invention” rather than the “discovery” of adolescence, because the new views were not based on actual observation of youth behavior, but on new psychological theories. Prior to the late 19th century, the changes in size, sexual maturity and intellectual capability associated with the teen years were viewed as milestones of progress toward competent adulthood, rather than a cause for crisis and alarm.

In fact, young men and women were handling a great deal more responsibility without suffering the dire consequences psychologists predicted. They were pioneers, entrepreneurs, soldiers, cowboys, miners, sailors, schoolteachers and physicians. Only a few were full-time students, living at home, devoting years to preparing for the future.¹⁶

Since the 1950's, adults have provided young people with money and leisure, and created a huge electronic entertainment industry that is committed to sustaining and expanding the “youth culture.” It is obviously in the best interest of this multi-billion dollar industry to keep as many people in a state of so-called “adolescence” for as long as possible, i.e., segregated from the adult world and assaulted with the message that sex, popularity, fashion and consumption are the only things that matter.

Age Segregation

Adults are much less likely to idolize and envy, exploit, fear, blame and condescend to “adolescents” as a group, if they have genuine

friendships with individual young people. In the book *A Tribe Apart: A Journey into the Heart of American Adolescence*, Patricia Hersch writes:

Every morning, all over the country the pattern is the same, the gathering up of young people, the leaving of adults to separate worlds, not to be brought together again until evening...Around 3:00 in the afternoon...the middle and high school buses return...most kids come home to an empty house.

Nobody is paying much attention to individual adolescents, but everyone is hysterical about the aggregate...half of all America's adolescents are at some risk for serious problems. Theories abound on how to manage them, fix them, and improve them, as if they were products off an assembly line...but the piecemeal attempts to mend, motivate, or rescue them obscure the larger reality: We don't know them.

A clear picture of adolescents, of even our own children, eludes us—not necessarily because they are rebelling, or avoiding or evading us. It is because we aren't there. Not just parents, but any adults...adolescents are growing up with no adults around, a deficit of attention, and no discussion about whether it matters at all. The dramatic separation from the adult world creates a milieu for growing up that adults categorically cannot understand because their absence causes it.

A separate youth culture could not exist at all if it were not for this “dramatic separation of young people from the adult world.” As Hersch writes, “More than a group of peers, (this tribe) becomes in isolation a society “with its own values, ethics, rules, world view, rites of passage, worries, joys and momentum. It becomes teacher, adviser, entertainer, challenger, nurturer, inspirer, and sometimes destroyer.”¹⁷

Strands of Youth Culture

The following outline of the characteristics of youth culture is far from complete, and skewed toward the negative, however I don't believe youth culture is all bad. There is an enormous amount of creativity in films, music, and fashion, and young people have a great deal to teach their elders about friendship: about loyalty and faithfulness to friends, about the time commitment needed to build friendships. Many provide for each other what they are not getting from adults by sticking together through thick and thin, and helping each other through crises, often in costly ways.

Consumerism

Young people work primarily in the service industry, at what Douglas Coupland calls “McJobs” (menial, futureless, considered a “good job” by those who have never held one). But few teenagers contribute anything to the needs of the family, or even to their own educations. Teenage consumers spend about \$100 billion a year, just on things for themselves¹⁸. Two thirds of this comes from their own earnings and the rest from their parents. Busy, guilt-ridden

parents willingly give their teenagers what they want, which is easier than giving them time.

A high school junior in my son's class wrote in their school paper: "there is a cross-generational bond which unites us as the youth of America. Reluctantly, I admit that our bond is our mutual belief in the ethic of mass consumption. We love our malls. We trust our stuff. And so, together, we are lost."¹⁹ Of course, not everyone realizes their "lostness" as he put it. Like adults, most are distracted from thinking very deeply about the effects of the consumer culture.

Sex-saturation

Teen movies, television, magazines, and some music, are obsessed with sex. They assault us with the message that this is the main thing teenagers are interested in. But the picture they give is what the New York Times Magazine calls a "fantasy version of youth, complete with witty comebacks and enormous sexual confidence."²⁰

Attitudes toward sex have changed quite dramatically since the 1960's, when sexual liberation was associated with rebellion against the emptiness, triviality and moralism of the 1950's. There was a quasi-religious, reverent attitude attached to it.

Now a common attitude is nonchalance—"it's just sex, what's the big deal?" One 17 year-old told me that she and most of her girl friends don't like sex very much, but it's a whole lot easier than

talking. There's been a similar change in attitude toward drugs. In the 1960's, students took drugs to expand their consciousness. Starting in the 1970's, they reported taking drugs primarily to dull their pain and relieve their boredom.²¹

For most kids, this kind of nonchalance covers a lot of anxiety and pain. With the loss of a widely shared cultural consensus about sexual behavior and morality, and with all kinds of contradictory messages from the culture, media, teachers, parents, and peers, it should not be surprising that sex is now a huge source of anxiety for many girls and boys.

One of the scariest attitude changes is a growing sense that adolescent boys are entitled to sex. A Rhode Island Rape Center study of 1700 6th and 9th graders found 65% of boys and 57% of girls believed it acceptable for a male to force a female to have sex if they've been dating for 6 months.²²

Christians who teach that God wants girls and women to be generally "submissive" (particularly to men) seriously misrepresent the Bible's teaching, and do not prepare them for those times when they must be firmly and stubbornly unsubmitive.

Alienation from Education and Learning

In teen movies and television—school is virtually always viewed as negative. Teachers and school administrators are losers—boring, ridiculous or malevolent. Thankfully, there are wonderful exceptions,

but for many young people, school does not provide a positive learning or social environment.

Hines challenges the contemporary monolithic pattern of education, which forces “all young people to spend their teens simply waiting for adulthood.” Many would do better dropping in and out of work and school. For those whose abilities and interests suit them for long years of education, work opportunities should be coordinated with schooling. These suggestions come out of his insight that it is “difficult for teenagers to imagine themselves living useful lives. They are offered few immediate and meaningful ways to test their new-found powers, to feel needed, to be essential members of a community.”²³ Looking at the social history of youth should encourage us to think creatively about new possibilities for our time and the future.

Violence

I'll just make one observation here. Jackson Katz and Sut Jhally have argued and documented the fact that violence in our culture is an overwhelmingly male phenomenon. They write: “The fact that violence—whether of the spectacular kind represented in the school shootings or the more routine murder, assault, and rape—is an overwhelmingly male phenomenon should indicate to us that gender is a vital factor, perhaps the vital factor.”²⁴

In a powerful educational film called *Tough Guise: Media Images & the Crisis in Masculinity*, Katz and Jhally persuasively document the

equation of violence with manhood and masculinity in our culture. They argue that since the shooters at Columbine were victimized by the dominant system of masculinity at their school, they took their revenge with weapons—the great equalizers.

Katz and Jhally challenge us with the “crying need for a national conversation about what it means to be a man, since cultural definitions of manhood and masculinity are ever-shifting and are particularly volatile in the contemporary era.”²⁵

Growing Fascination with Spirituality

There is a hunger for the transcendent unseen world to give us power, guidance, meaning and mystery, and to assure us that we are more than just bodies. Wicca is growing faster among teenage girls than any other group. It is very much in reaction against “traditional” religion, especially Christianity—which they see as anti-woman, environmentally irresponsible, and spiritually dead.²⁶

These are challenges we must take seriously, if the Church is to meet the spiritual needs of young people with true religion, the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Loss of Identity

Those who construct the youth culture are not motivated by the desire to see young people grow morally, spiritually, intellectually or psychologically. The entertainment and fashion industries are fueled by immense economic interests. They need the youth culture for

their very existence and have everything to gain by keeping young people in “adolescent/teenage” mode, isolated from the adult world, and looking to the media to know what to care about, what to buy and how to live.

“Adolescence” has been understood as a unique time, when young people find and solidify a sense of personal identity in relation to, but separate from their parents. Now, the very idea and hope of finding a coherent identity or “self” is being undermined by postmodern academics, but also by changing mores and popular culture.

For example, the fragmentation of life—family breakdown and mobility, the idolatry of “diversity,” a dizzying array of “lifestyle choices,” a world without boundaries created by technology and the media—all these things undermine the idea and experience of a coherent self.

Human beings are no longer considered glorious images of God. We are not even considered persons in the enlightenment sense—the height of evolution, and capable of building a better human society. Pop culture reinforces the postmodern idea that we are only bodies, with diverse and changing desires.

Clothes and fashion no longer express the self, because there is no self. Instead, they construct the self. For example: picture a conversation between a mother and daughter about a dress. The

Mother says, “This dress just isn’t me.” The daughter replies, “But Mom, just think—with that dress, you could be somebody.”

A new poll by Nickelodeon and Time, reports that among 12 to 14 year olds, the 3 most important factors in “fitting in” with peers at school, are (in this order) clothes, popularity, and being good looking.²⁷ Again, it’s all about externals and image.

And, not surprisingly, national polls show a diminishing commitment to internal character virtues like honesty—which are essential for a strong sense of personal identity. In one survey of 236,000 young people, 25% to 40% of teens saw nothing wrong with cheating on exams, stealing from employers, or keeping money that wasn’t theirs. Two other surveys revealed that 65% to 75% of high school students admitted to cheating.

Significantly, the rationale for cheating is a response to the adult pressure to “succeed” at all costs. In that atmosphere, getting good grades is more important than being honest.²⁸ Again adults have a lot to answer for. Michael Josephson (in *Ethical Values, Attitudes, and Behaviors in American Schools*) rightly points out that the ethics of this generation are but an “amplified echo of the worst moral messages of their elders.”²⁹

Postmodern academics and certain business interests may celebrate the loss of identity, but young people are flooding the offices of counselors—depressed and suicidal. They are escaping

life's pressures and the pain of meaninglessness through alcohol, drugs, promiscuity, eating disorders, cutting, a whole array of addictions and other self-destructive behavior.

Absent Parents

Study after study shows that by and large, parents are very little help to their children in coping with the pressures of youth culture. Many kids start the day having breakfast alone or with younger siblings they are responsible for and then come home to an empty house after school. It is no accident that kids get into the most serious trouble between 3 and 6 pm, when they are alone at home (not late at night, when youth curfews kick in!).

When parents get home, they are too stressed, exhausted and distracted by their own problems to give their kids much attention. Also, they tend to believe that their children (especially teenagers) would rather be left alone.

With the wisdom of social history, Thomas Hines observes, "What contemporary Americans are attempting—providing a prolonged, protected period of childhood and youthful preparation for our offspring while both parents work outside the household—is novel. In the past, when both parents worked, their children did so as well. On farms, work and family life were essentially inseparable. And when schooling became the job of the young, it was usually supported by a nonworking mother maintaining a household that explicitly supported educational values... Our attempt to maintain an

elaborate domestic life—with nobody home—is an experiment that seems doomed to fail...”³⁰

If parents spend virtually no time with their children, then they cannot really know them or the world they inhabit, and can be very little help to them. Patricia Hersch writes: “The bottom line: we can lecture kids to our heart’s content but if they don’t care what we think, or there is no relationship between us that matters to them, or they think we are ignorant of the reality of their lives, they will not listen.”³¹

Parents Lack Moral Framework

The parent generation produced the consumer culture and invented the sexual revolution, and many are more captive to them than their kids are. In a 1994 article entitled “Youth Outlook,” a teenage girl asked, “If adults use sex to sell toiletries, why shouldn’t kids use it to sell themselves?”³²

Many parents either avoid the subject of teen sexuality or communicate double messages—discouraging early sexual activity (for health, not moral reasons), while handing out condoms. Others give sermons, but don’t really listen to their kids. Young people mainly learn about dating, sex and relationships from friends, television and movies—though they say they would rather learn from parents.³³ A developmental psychologist on staff at a large Boston evangelical church told me that many Christian parents bring their children to him and say “you tell them about sex.”

Many adults are afraid and intimidated by their teenage children, believing their kids aren't interested in talking with them. They tend to leave the room (or the house) when their sons and daughters bring friends home. In tragic irony, young people interpret their parents' withdrawal as a lack of interest in them.

The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development found: "Young adolescents do not want to be left to their own devices. In national surveys and focus groups, America's youth have given voice to serious longing. They want more regular contact with adults who care about and respect them."³⁴

A 17-year-old told me that he felt he was expected to rebel against his parents. But he didn't want to rebel. What he longed for more than anything in the world was a friendship with his dad (a respected Christian leader). The fact that he had to do all the initiating made him feel ashamed.

Christian parents, in their concern, often turn to the church, putting their hope in a youth pastor who will deal with their children. But too many church youth groups just duplicate the culture's condescension toward young people. Rather than creatively involving them in real responsibilities, serious thought and service, the youth pastor's job is limited to showing kids that they can have fun without sex, alcohol and drugs—communicating that

entertainment and shopping are the only things young people are interested in and can handle.

An 18 year-old girl told me with disgust about “The Teen Bible” full of condescending stories about acne and peer pressure. She knew she was fully capable of reading the “real” Bible. Thankfully, there are youth groups that are much more constructive than what I’ve described.

On the positive side, surveys of young people indicate that those who have “involved, principled parents” are much more likely to share their parents’ values, and reject the destructive elements of the youth culture.³⁵ As Hines writes: “there is evidence that if parents do take a lively, though not defensive, interest in their children’s lives, their teens are less likely to commit crimes, use drugs, or become pregnant prematurely. For example, teenagers who have dinner with their families most nights are far less likely to get into trouble than those who do not.”³⁶

These findings should not be startling, but it seems that today we need the social sciences to tell us what should be obvious!

A Biblical Perspective

The Bible refers to infants, children, young men and women, adults, and the elderly. Each stage of life has its distinguishing experiences, and its particular glory (strengths) and vulnerabilities. But the Bible assumes an enormous amount of natural, casual interaction

between all ages. And the Biblical writers frequently command the different generations to imitate the strengths and avoid the weaknesses of each other. In other words, we are all to be models for each other, in positive and negative ways.

We live in a culture where most of life is lived with peers. Age segregation is so much a part of the fabric of life, even in the church, that we take it for granted and think it's normal. In fact, it is a very recent historical phenomenon, and what began as age segregation, has for many, become age alienation.

When all ages rubbed shoulders together throughout the day, it was assumed that the young would quite naturally and unselfconsciously grow up into maturity through observing and relating to adults in many casual settings. Now we obsess about the importance of "role models" for our children and formalize mentoring programs because modeling no longer happens naturally in the course of day-to-day living.

Youth Defined

In Old Testament Hebrew, the youth is described as one who "shakes off," or shakes him or herself free.

Proverbs 20:29 says, "The glory of youths is their strength..." Clearly, the Bible does not share our culture's view that young people are intrinsically weak, unstable, and incapacitated by raging hormones and the temptations of the shopping mall.

Paul assumes that young people are capable of turning from the destructive desires of youth and pursuing “justice, integrity, love and peace together with all who worship the Lord in singleness of mind” (2 Tim 2:22).

John wrote that the young people had conquered the evil one, were strong and full of the Word of God. (1 John 2:14). They were having a significant impact in the cosmic battle in the unseen world. This is heroism of the highest order.

The Apostle Paul exhorted Timothy to “let no one despise your youth” (1 Tim 4:11). The church needed Timothy’s gifts, wisdom and leadership, and he was not to feel intimidated by those who despised his youth.

The Apostle Peter announced the birth of the New Testament Church with Joel’s prophecy: The Holy Spirit was poured out, male and female slaves prophesied, the young saw visions and the old dreamed dreams. Young and old needed each other. We still do.

Vulnerability of youth

The vulnerability of youth is the combination of new freedom and power with a lack of experience in using it. In the process of “shaking free” young adults are exposed to many new voices, appeals, and invitations—both good and evil—and each must

choose who to listen to, which path to take, and which community to belong to.

In the Biblical framework, parents are to raise children with this crucial time in mind. By their nurturing, teaching, friendship, discipline, and by the example and story of their lives, parents and all adults should be making wisdom, goodness and integrity beautiful and attractive to the young, showing evil to be unappealing. True safety and security is found not in total withdrawal from the world (including the youth culture), nor in lists of rules and regulations, permissions and prohibitions. True safety can only come from loving wisdom and goodness, which Proverbs equates with love and fear of the Lord.

Whether he realizes it or not, Thomas Hines expresses well the wisdom of Proverbs. He argues that young people “should be treated as beginners—inexperienced people who aren’t fundamentally different from adults, but who, because they are dealing with so many new things in their lives, usually need more help, more attention, and more patience than those who have more experience.” (At the very time when we give them less...)

“In other words, we need to get rid of G.S. Hall’s discredited notion of the adolescent as incompetent, troubled, half-mad, and dangerous, along with the stereotype of ‘raging hormones’ that gives that old prejudice a pseudoscientific veneer...”

“Youth should be a time for learning that one’s decisions have consequences — although not necessarily irreversible ones. Young people should be encouraged to experiment...They should have the opportunity to try something new and unlikely—and fail at it—without being branded a failure for life...” The Book of Proverbs is very clear about this. Failure is an inevitable part of being human in a broken world. Learning how to fail without being destroyed is a crucial part of what wisdom is about. In the Bible, grace is what makes this possible—God’s grace towards us, and our grace towards each other.

Young Heroes

God’s view of young people couldn’t be farther from the idolatry, envy, exploitation, fear, blame and condescension of our culture. We learn from the Bible and subsequent history that young men and women are capable of making enormous contributions to the Kingdom of God and human society.

The boy David’s faith put the whole Israelite army to shame. God called the Prophet Jeremiah when he was young. He described himself as “only a boy.”

The young men Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were called to be leaders in the pagan court of the King of Babylon. It took incredible wisdom for them to know where to draw moral and religious lines, and courage to disobey the King’s decrees, knowing

death was the punishment, and not knowing ahead of time that God would deliver them.

Mary was probably 14 or 15 when the angel Gabriel asked her to bear the Son of God. In spite of her perplexity and fear, she said “yes” to God. Mary acted with heroic obedience and faith, not knowing whether her fiancé would believe her unlikely story, and knowing that stoning was the punishment for adultery.

In the early 1800’s, a huge spiritual awakening and missionary movement grew out of the prayer meetings of New England college students from Williams, Middlebury, Bowdoin and Amherst.

The book, *Lest Innocent Blood be Shed* tells the story of the French village, le Chambon, which under the leadership of its Protestant pastor, successfully hid thousands of Jewish children from the Nazis. The high school Bible study group was the communication center of the whole operation. Teenage boys and girls carried messages by bicycle to and from the farmers who hid the children. Not one child was lost.

Many consider the Birmingham Children’s March, organized by Martin Luther King Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to have been the turning point in the 1960’s civil rights struggle. Knowing the dangers, thousands of black school children marched, and were arrested, hosed and attacked by dogs. The “great deeds” of young children bear witness to the power of early

formative moral influences, and to the truth of King's conviction that "spiritual age is not chronological age."³⁷

Cassie Bernall is the Christian teenager in Columbine who responded "Yes" when the gunman asked if she believed in God. Her mother Misty refers to the "unlikely martyrdom" of her daughter, because "she was just a teen," who could be selfish and stubborn. Her mother has wisely resisted the hype that wants to turn Cassie into a "saint." But the surprise so many have shown at her courage reveals condescension toward the young. Why are we surprised when a teenager acts heroically? Jesus gave children as models of greatness in the Kingdom of Heaven.

These are all heroes we know about, but heroism is not dependent on fame. God knows the heroic choices young people make, day-by-day, though no one else may be aware. And one day, what is hidden will be revealed.

I cannot end without giving thanks to God for his grace, mercy and forgiveness. Some folks, of all ages, have thrown themselves into the destructive elements of popular culture with gusto. Some sons and daughters aren't ready to come home until: their pockets are empty; they are hungry; and, they have nowhere else to go. But like the Father in the story of the Prodigal Son, God is watching, and runs down the driveway to embrace any son or daughter who "comes to themselves," and returns home. With no guilt-tripping, or recriminations about the squandered money, the Father throws a

party, and will not let his child “quit the family.” He reinstates us as sons and daughters ready to grow into adult responsibility.

Endnotes:

¹ The Rise & Fall of the American Teenager by Thomas Hines (New York: Avon Books; 1999) p. 277.

² Ibid., p. 3

³ “The Expiration-Date Culture,” Time, 9 Nov 1998, p. 112.

⁴ “The Youth Brigade,” Time, 26 October 1998, p. 89.

⁵ “Mommy Dearest,” Seventeen, May 1998, p. 148.

⁶ “Happy What? You Wish! Every year the Lies get Bolder and Liars get Younger,” The New York Times, Sunday Styles, Section 9, 19 March 2000, p. 1.

⁷ “Growing Up Old,” U.S. News and World Report, 7 April 1997, p. 68.

⁸ Hines, p. 9.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Hines, p. 280. See also p. 284.

¹¹ "Each Modern Generation of Teen-agers Pushes the Parameters of Rebellion Further" by Karen Heller, *The Tribune*, 24 April 24 1999, p. 2.

¹² "After the War, the Time of the Teen-Ager," *The New York Times*, Sunday, 7 May 1995, Section E, p. 4.

¹³ Hines, p. 21.

¹⁴ Hines, p. 283.

¹⁵ Hines, p. 11.

¹⁶ Hines, p. 300.

¹⁷ *A Tribe Apart* by Patricia Hersch (New York: Fawcett Columbine; 1998).

¹⁸ Girls alone spend \$60 billion annually, see: "The Secret Life of Teenage Girls" by Jancee Dunn in *Rolling Stone*, 11 November 1999, p. 108.

¹⁹ "Generation Wh-Y Needs More Than Toys and 'Be Nice' Ethic" by Chris Tennant, *The Nobleman*, 11 May 1994, p. 2.

²⁰ 5 September 1999, Section 6, p. 44.

²¹ Hines, p. 270.

²² "Where'd You Learn That?" 3rd page of article.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ "Society: The National Conversation in the Wake of Littleton is Missing the Mark" by Jackson Katz and Sut Jhally, *The Boston Sunday Globe*, FOCUS, 2 May 1999, p. E5-6.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ "Wicca Casts Spell on Teen-Age Girls," *Insight*, 25 October 1999.

²⁷ "The Kids Are Alright," *Time*, 5 July 1999, p. 57.

²⁸ *A Tribe Apart* by Patricia Hersch (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1998). pp. 100-101.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 101.

³⁰ Hines, pp. 285-286.

³¹ Hersch, p. 365.

³² Hines, p. 271.

³³ "Where'd You Learn That?" Time Magazine, 15 June 1998.

³⁴ Hersch, p.364.

³⁵ Hines, p. 227.

³⁶ Hines, p. 282.

³⁷ "Heartland of Darkness" by Jean Bethke Elshtain, *The New Republic*, 17 Jan. 2000, p. 35.

Who Invented Adolescence

My husband and I are the parents of three sons, Chris, Tim and Ben, who are 24, 23 and 17, respectively. Perhaps some of you, whose children are in their teens (or older), have had the same experience we have: ever since our oldest son entered his “teens,” people with younger children have asked us with a particular tone of anticipatory dread in their voices, “What’s it like to have an adolescent?” or “How are you surviving adolescence?” (Meaning, of course, “How are you surviving being the parents of one or more teenagers?”)

Behind these questions—and tone of voice—is a whole set of assumptions about the teenage years. That they are particularly trying years, full of storm and stress for young people, which usually expresses itself in alienation, conflict, and sometimes outright rebellion against parents and the adult world in general. [1]

I remember posing the same questions to an older couple whose children were entering their teens, while ours were still under eleven. I will never forget the mother’s reply. She said, “Oh, I don’t believe in adolescence! Our children have always been our friends, they are still our friends, and I have no reason to believe that they are about to stop being our friends because they are entering their teens.” At the time, this reply surprised me enough that I’ve never forgotten it!

Since that time, having studied some social history, as well as having experienced teenage children first-hand, I have come to

realize that what our culture calls and associates with “adolescence” is not a universal phenomenon. In fact, it is a very recent historical phenomenon. *Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* defines adolescence as “The state or process of growing up from childhood to manhood; youth, or the period of life between puberty and maturity.” The word comes from the Latin to grow up.

Biological maturation is clearly universal. It happens in every culture (although young people in the West reach sexual maturity earlier now than they used to). But biological maturation does not mean the same thing in every society. In 1904, the psychologist G. Stanley Hall first popularized a concept of adolescence that saw sexual maturation as the most significant thing going on in a young person. From that time on, in Joseph Kett’s words: “A biological process of maturation became the basis of the social definition of an entire age group,”¹ and the justification for segregating young people in their own institutions, away from “casual contact” with adults and the adult world. From the middle of this century on, this definition of adolescence has been reinforced by a huge, electronic entertainment industry that is committed to sustaining and expanding the self-conscious “youth culture” it has helped to create. It is obviously in the best interest of this multi-billion dollar industry to keep as many people in a state of “adolescence” for as long as possible.

A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF GROWING UP

My husband, Dick, has developed some material on the human life cycle from a biblical perspective, which I’d like to use here. God

made humankind, male and female, in His image, and blessed us with the responsibility of exercising stewardship and dominion over His creation, while trusting or depending in Him. The two dynamics of trust (dependency) and dominion (creativity, mastery, competency, initiative) are intrinsic to what it means to be human beings—image bearers of God. They are both human needs and responsibilities.

The Fall (human sin) has distorted both these dynamics so that trust too easily becomes overdependence, and dominion becomes domination.

The whole human life cycle can be understood in terms of the shifting dynamics of dependency and dominion. Each of us enters life in a state of total dependency. Human growth involves growth in dominion—acquiring mastery, competency, and independence. And it begins right away.

That is what is going on as an infant explores and interacts with his or her world, with fingers, mouth, and vocal chords. In young children, there is no distinction between work and play—both are activities that involve growth in mastery or dominion over their environment. If a child is always told “no” or punished for exploring, the child learns that curiosity and initiative are dangerous, and/or wrong. This can seriously hamper a child’s creativity and willingness to take risks, which are essential for growth in dominion, as image bearers of God. Remember the parable of the talents, those who

trusted the master enough to risk investing their talents were rewarded, as opposed to the one whose mistrust of the master led him to “play it safe” and bury his talents. That was a retreat both from trusting God and from dominion over the world.

Clearly, it's the parents responsibility to provide safe areas for young children to explore, and as children grow older, to give increasing freedom and responsibility, encouraging initiative, creativity and risk-taking in an environment of God's love and grace. When children fail (as we all do sometimes), they can learn that “failure is not the end of the world!” As Proverbs 24:16 says: “for though the righteous [humble] fall seven times, they will rise again, but the wicked [proud] are overthrown by a calamity.” There is probably no more important lesson to learn in life, and blessed are those who learn it early, in the safety of a loving home.

In his book *Sketches of Jewish Social Life*,² Alfred Edersheim lists a number of different Hebrew expressions, all amazingly pictorial, which designate various developmental stages in child-life. Notice how they communicate growth in “dominion” from total dependency, through stages of semi-dependency, to independence: “newly born” (m. jeled or f. jaldah); “suckling” (jonek); “the one who still sucks but also asks for bread” (olel, Lam 4:4); “weaned one” (gamul, usually at the end of two years); the child who still clings to the mother, but also ventures forth, “ranging itself by her” (taph); becoming firm and strong (m. elem or f. almah, Isa. 7:14); youth, “one who shakes off” or shakes him or herself free (naar). Please notice that “shaking

free” is part of God’s developmental plan for our children. Parents must be “with the program,” in favor of their children’s growth in independence. If we are holding on too tight for our children to “shake free,” at this developmental stage, they may need to “break free,” obviously much more painful for everyone, and not necessary. Finally, “ripened one,” or “a young warrior” (bachur).

While no absolute age is specifically equated with any of these stages, it does seem that in ancient Israel age twenty marked some kind of passage into adult responsibility. Not until they were twenty were young men counted in the census and expected to serve in the army. Putting together Numbers 14:29 and Deuteronomy 1:39, we also learn that only those who were over twenty were held morally accountable for their sin of grumbling and unbelief during the Exodus. The under-twenty-year-olds were called “the little ones, your children who do not yet know good from bad.” Only Joshua, Caleb, and the other “under-twenties” were allowed to enter the Promised Land.

Clearly, one of the most important responsibilities of parents and Christian adults in general is to nurture children in the process of moral discernment (by our teaching and example). Only God knows when each one can be justly held accountable for “knowing good from bad,” a crucial part of their growth in dominion.

PERIODS OF INCREASED STRESS IN LIFE

Particularly stressful times in life tend to be times when the balance between dependency and dominion shift. The so-called “terrible twos,” when a child feels torn between a new sense of power and competency to affect his or her world, and a desire to retreat back into mommy and daddy’s arms, to be a helpless baby. It’s intriguing that the ancient Israelites marked weaning (about 2 years) with a feast, a kind of “rite of passage” celebrating a new stage of growth in independence. What wisdom! A toddler could look forward to a party, to help them cope with the cost of growth, the loss of the mother’s breast! A party to affirm the process of growing up.

Old age has special stresses, as does any time in life when illness, or physical or mental disability shifts the balance from independence and autonomy to greater dependency on others. But the Bible also says a great deal about the wisdom and fruitfulness of age that comes from years of following and trusting the Lord, wisdom that younger people need to respect and hear.

And of course, so-called “adolescence,” defined as a period of transition from childhood dependency to adult responsibility, including personal accountability before God; competency to work; to take leadership in the church; to enter into adult relationships; and for most people, readiness to commit oneself to marriage, and to the awesome task of nurturing the next generation. Many traditional cultures mark this stage of life with some kind of “rite of passage” (in

the Church with confirmation or first communion; in the culture, with driving, drinking, and voting).

SEEING ADOLESCENCE BIBLICALLY

Sexual maturation is only one part of the larger *trust/dominion dynamic* involved in growing up, admittedly an intense and significant one. Understanding the stresses of adolescence in this framework—of the shifting balance of dependency and independence—is much more biblical and therefore true and helpful, than accepting our culture’s biological reductionism that virtually defines adolescence in terms of sexual maturation and the social life that flows from it.

But sexual maturation is clearly an area where the dynamics of trust and dominion are focused intensely. It involves the dominion of “self-control” over one’s imagination and body in a new arena of temptation, and trust in God for his help. For many, it involves dominion over a partner’s body. Procreation is one of the most God-like exercises of dominion that exists! The Hebrew for sexual intercourse is the same word as to know and implies the honest, intimate revealing of a man and woman to each other, the ability to be naked before each other without shame, in a relationship of life-long commitment, trust and mutual dependability. Because of God’s high purpose for sexual intimacy, when trust or dominion goes wrong, it should not be surprising that so much alienation, pain, self-hatred, and hatred of others can result.

Our culture's reduction of adolescence to issues surrounding sexual maturation and social life has done a terrible disservice to our young people. And insofar as young people, their parents, educators, and churches have bought into this reduced definition, we have made the task of growing into maturity much more difficult than it needs to be. A friend of ours (a recent college graduate) taught a class in "teen issues" at a summer camp for affluent high school students last summer. At the end of the class, she asked for their evaluation. One courageous boy complained: "This was meant to be a class in 'teen issues,' but all we talked about was sex! I am struggling with a lot of other issues—intellectual, political, economic, religious, vocational—that I'm going to have to make decisions about in the next few years. Aren't they teen issues? I was hoping to get some help with those!" He was right! The teenage years are unique in that kids are old enough to be thinking seriously about many adult issues, but without the weight of adult responsibility that will come soon enough. Yet so often this special time is squandered, which prolongs and exacerbates the process of growing up.

TWO BIBLICAL CASE STUDIES

Before leaving the theology of growing up, I want to look at two biblical case studies: David and Goliath, and the Prodigal son. Think of these two stories in terms of growth in dominion or independence.

The David and Goliath story (1 Samuel 17) is what Dick calls the adolescent's dream. David was the youngest of eight sons. His three oldest brothers were in Saul's army, but David was too young

to fight. He went back and forth from home (where he looked after sheep), and the front lines, bringing his brothers supplies and bringing back news to his father. While on the battlefield, David overheard Goliath's taunts and threats, and asked some of the soldiers about him. His brothers were outraged and accused him of just wanting to gawk at the battle. They told him (in so many words), "Go home and mow the lawn, where you belong!" David said, "What have I done now? I only asked a question!" He was obviously used to not being taken seriously by his older brothers. And Saul said, "You're only a kid," when he offered to fight Goliath.

But David was genuinely moved to righteous anger that this godless Philistine had dared "to defy the Lord of Hosts." And David trusted the Lord to enable him to kill the giant using the skills he had developed protecting his sheep from wild animals. He sincerely wanted "all the earth to know that there is a God in Israel...who does not save by sword or spear but by His own power." You know the story. David killed the giant with his slingshot, saving the nation from slavery and becoming an international hero. By his clear vision of faith, he saw through the adult rationalizations and doubts that had maintained the status quo for so long and had brought dishonor to God's name.

David fulfilled the ultimate adolescent dream. He achieved a level of adult heroism that was acknowledged by the entire nation, including those who'd been so condescending to him earlier. In fact, that's a pretty universal human dream! Adults and older siblings may not

take young people seriously, but Scripture makes clear that God takes them very seriously. Jesus even held up children—their faith, imagination, and praise—as models for adults to emulate. And Paul wrote to Timothy “Let no one despise your youth.”

History gives us other examples of young people who have accomplished important things in God’s Kingdom. In the early 1800’s a huge spiritual awakening and missionary movement grew out of the prayer meetings of college students from Williams, Middlebury, Bowdoin and Amherst.

The Prodigal Son (Luke 15) is the adolescent nightmare! He too was the younger brother. He swaggered into the adult world, feeling very flush with his share of the family inheritance in his pocket. It is interesting that the father agreed to let him have it. At a certain point (perhaps when the young are ready to “shake free”), parents need to let their children make significant choices, and live with the consequences. The inclination to try to protect them from bad choices is not only impossible, but can also be counter-productive to growth.

Apparently, the young man was not ready to “come to himself,” repent and return home, until his pockets were empty, having “squandered his property in dissolute living.” At that point, not only was he starving, but also he had to face the fact of his own failure and incompetency to handle adult freedom and independence—the adolescent’s nightmare!

On his way home, no doubt feeling shame and self-disgust, he rehearsed his speech: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.” Seeing him coming, the father was filled with compassion, and ran down the road to hug and kiss him. Notice the difference in the father’s response to his son’s two requests. To his son’s request for forgiveness, he gave a wholehearted “yes”—he forgave him absolutely, with no recriminations, “I told you so,” or “Yes, but you’ll have to pay back the money you blew.” The son’s second request—to be a hired servant—expressed a desire to retreat from the responsibilities of being an adult son to his father. To that request, the father gave a resounding “NO!” He wouldn’t hear of it; he received him back as his precious son, with all the dominion, freedom, and responsibility (including the risk of future failure) that was involved in adult sonship. The father dressed him with honor, killed the fatted calf, and threw a huge party to celebrate, “for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!”³

The Bible teaches that while different stages in the human life cycle may have their own particular stresses and strains, the same basic principles apply throughout our lives, whether we are men or women, young, old, or in between. “Adolescents” are not in some completely different category. No wonder they often complain and quite rightly resent it when they are treated like “aliens.”

Titus exhorted the young men to show self-control, something all believers are commanded to exercise. Lady Wisdom in Proverbs specifically warned young men to avoid sexual sin, no doubt in recognition of the new temptations associated with puberty, but this advice applies to all people, and is part of her much wider invitation to young and old to seek wisdom and avoid folly. And the Apostle John, after addressing children and fathers says: “I write to you, young people, because you are strong and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.” Far from any condescension here, John recognizes that the young have been consciously engaged in the spiritual battle that all believers are engaged in, and have experienced real victory.

SOCIAL HISTORY & YOUTH: THE STORY OF A REVOLUTION

Before considering what we as Christians and churches can do to be more helpful to young people today, I’d like to take a brief excursion into the past to consider some of the changes in social history that led to what many historians have called “the invention of adolescence,” and the phenomenon of the modern “youth culture.” I doubt that there is any culture that has been entirely free of some conflict or turmoil associated with growing up. Nevertheless, social historians are virtually unanimous in their appraisal that for most people, the transition from youth to adulthood used to be a lot smoother than it is today.

In the introduction to *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America 1790 to the Present*, Joseph Kett writes, “Those who measure the

success of revolutions by their completeness will judge the revolution which has overtaken American young people in recent decades to be one of the most successful. Compared to their predecessors in 1800 or 1900, young people in the 1970's spend much more time in school, much less at work. They are essentially consumers rather than producers. Their contacts with adults are likely to occur in highly controlled environments such as the classroom, and the adults encountered are usually conveyors of specialized services such as education and guidance." In other words, the adults they know are mostly in professional contexts, or, as he writes later, young people are "segregated from casual contact with adults" (p. 6.). "For the most part, young people [today] spend their time in the company of other young people. This pattern of age segregation frequently prevails even when the young people hold jobs. Only in television commercials are the employees of short-order food chains likely to be over 21; in the real world, they are usually teenagers. To observe that youth today are primarily consumers rather than producers is not to deny their economic importance. Indirectly, young people sustain a wide range of service occupations: teachers, guidance counselors, adolescent psychologists, market research analysts, printers, clothiers, disc jockeys, even policemen and judges. But the economic and social relationship between youth and adults has clearly changed. Further, the change has been abrupt as well as profound. Its roots can be traced back to the late 19th century, when industrialization began to displace young workers, but only since 1945 have vast numbers of

American youth experienced the mixture of leisure, affluence, and education that now distinguishes their social position.”⁴

THE CHANGED RELATIONSHIP OF YOUNG PEOPLE TO WORK

In the past, before industrialization removed work from the home, the family was the central unit of economic production and “human services.” Men, women and children all worked and served together from home. Much has been written about how this reality applied to men and women—there was simply not the split many people assume by the so-called traditional adages “man is the breadwinner” and “woman’s place is in the home.”

What many of us may not realize is that children also shared in the necessary economic work of the family. Starting at about age five or six, children began helping with household chores like spinning, candle making, food production, caring for animals and younger siblings, gardening, etc. They worked alongside a broad age-range of household members, which often included extended family, servants, apprentices and orphans, gradually taking on greater work responsibility as they grew older. Many children were sent out to work for other families, sometimes relatives, where they would do domestic or farm work or learn a craft.

In the past, children were absolutely essential to the economic survival of the family—to be childless, or to lose too many children in infancy was, among other things, an economic disaster. While some children were no doubt overworked, all children grew up knowing

that their work was real and needed. Given all these factors, John Demos points out that “the transition from childhood to adulthood was relatively smooth, as [the child’s] introduction to adult roles began early, and children knew that their work experience, apprenticeship and training as young people would clearly be relevant to their adult lives. Therefore, as children and teenagers, they did not feel alienated from the adult world of work. They were part of it as productive, contributing members of the household.”⁵

The industrial revolution changed all this for most people (except, perhaps, for a shrinking minority in farming communities).⁶ There was a transition time of great upheaval and suffering. Poor children worked in factories under appalling conditions, many of them supplying as much as 30-40% of their families income (especially in immigrant families). Child labor battles raged from 1870 until the late 1930’s. By 1937, the combination of legislation prohibiting child labor and compulsory education laws, and the victory of a new “sentimental” definition of childhood sealed the coffin on the older pre-industrial “useful” child, the child who worked.

Today, far from being economic assets, young people are, by and large, expensive consumers. Viviana Zelizer has analyzed this shift in a fascinating book called *Pricing the Priceless Child*. Increasingly, the “economically useless child” (Zelizer’s term) is considered to be an “expensive luxury” and more and more people are deciding that children are a luxury they can quite happily forego. Don’t think for a moment that these attitudes don’t contribute to a sense of useless-

ness and self-hatred on the part of young people today. Zelizer writes: “The total cost of raising a child...was estimated in 1980 to average between \$100,000 and \$140,000. In return for such expenses, a child is expected to provide love, smiles, and emotional satisfaction, but no money or labor.”⁷

There is also the sentimentalization—or what Zelizer calls the sacralization (p. 11)—of children. Between 1870 and 1930, in the midst of the child labor controversy, children were sentimentalized, and in the process Zelizer states: “The economic and sentimental value of children were... declared to be radically incompatible” (p. 11). “A child’s contribution to the family economy was redefined as the mercenary exploitation of parents” (p. 71), even though, in the case of many working class families, children’s earnings were absolutely essential to the families’ needs.⁸

This new attitude toward children necessitated a new way of justifying the household chores, which many children were still expected to help with. It was fine for children to help with light housework, as long as everyone realized that they were doing chores for their own good (educational and character building), not as a needed contribution to the household division of labor—that would be exploitation! Zelizer states “house chores were therefore not intended to be ‘real’ work, but lessons in helpfulness, order and unselfishness. Parents were warned to ‘take great care not to overburden the child with responsibility.’ Above all, warned Parents Magazine (in 1934) one should ‘never give...children cause to

suspect us of making use of them to save ourselves work” (Zelizer p. 99).

Some fascinating studies have shown similar attitudes today.

“Asked by researchers, ‘Why do you ask your children to work?’, three quarters of the parents in a study of 790 families from Nebraska explained children’s domestic chores as character building. Only 22 parents responded ‘I need the help’” (Zelizer pp. 3-4). Is it any wonder that many young people resent such chores, invented for their benefit, and not really necessary contributions to the family division of labor? Put yourself in their shoes. We resent it if an employer creates unnecessary, token work for us. We have better things to do with our time! Pseudo or token work does not lead to growth in character. It alienates us from those who expect us to do it, and trivializes, or mocks our God-given need and responsibility to exercise real dominion in His world.

There are, obviously, exceptions. Many children of single parents and poor people work to help pay for groceries and rent. And there has recently been an enormous rise in the illegal exploitation of child labor (especially among urban immigrants). There are also middle class young people who work to contribute toward their educations. But these are exceptions. Most of the money earned by middle class teenagers today is spent on entertainment and the paraphernalia of the youth culture.⁹

AGE SEGREGATION (IN GENERAL)

By and large, children today spend most of their time in age-segregated groups, in child-centered institutions, away from the “real” adult world. As Viviana Zelizer puts it, children live in a “domesticated, non-productive world of lessons, games, and token money.”¹⁰ In this world, most of the relationships they have with adults are professional relationships; i.e., they no longer rub shoulders with a variety of ages in a natural, casual way. The age segregation in schools, churches and other institutions which most people take for granted today is actually a very recent phenomenon. I’ve already mentioned that in the past a wide range of ages worked together. The workday was long, but included interruptions for chatting, resting or playing games. In general, leisure activities were family and community events, including all ages. They were active and participatory, not passive like watching television or movies.

Consider the Bible’s teaching (also acknowledged by the social sciences today) on the importance of the older generation modeling life and values before the young. This happened naturally and unselfconsciously in many casual contexts, in a way that it does not any more.

AGE SEGREGATION AND THE INVENTION OF ADOLESCENCE

Quoting Kett: “If adolescence is defined as the period after puberty during which a young person is institutionally segregated from casual contacts with a broad range of adults, then it can scarcely be said to have existed at all” until the 20th century (p. 36). Around the

turn of the century a number of things came together which led to what Kett and others call “the invention of adolescence.” I have already mentioned some of the changes in social structure, namely industrialization and the removal of work from the home, child labor laws which kept youth from full time wage earning work, and compulsory education. Simultaneously, (quoting Kett): “Between 1890 and 1920 a host of psychologists, urban reformers, educators, youth workers, and parent counselors gave shape to the concept of adolescence, leading to the massive reclassification of young people as adolescents.”¹¹

Kett writes, “Prior to the middle of the 19th century, contemporaries associated puberty with rising power and energy (necessary to carry an adult work load) rather than with the onset of an awkward and vulnerable stage of life.”¹² But at the turn of the century, the psychologist G. Stanley Hall articulated, and others developed, a new definition of adolescence. Puberty, or sexual maturation, was singled out as the most important, defining thing that happens to young people. And for the first time it was defined as a period of terrible storm and stress, of “inner turmoil” that rendered the young person vulnerable, awkward and even incapacitated. These experts believed that in order for the transition to adulthood to happen successfully, the young (now reclassified as adolescents) needed to be institutionally segregated and protected from the adult world, with all its intellectual, political, religious and work concerns and conflicts. Sexual maturation was believed to be so all encompassing and

draining that young people couldn't handle dealing with anything else.

To help them maneuver this stressful period, a whole array of adult-sponsored youth organizations and institutions were established, like the scouting movement, the age-graded high school, and organized sports. Significantly, the main purpose of these organizations, even the high school, was socialization. Kett writes that the educational manual, *The Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education* (put out by the National Education Association) was actually hostile to intellectual endeavor. Things like "citizenship" and the "worthy use of leisure" were ranked as more important educational goals than intellectual development (p. 235). Notice that "socialization" was defined as relating only to peers, a highly artificial definition and goal, since real life includes people of all ages and conditions! No wonder so many adults and teenagers feel awkward in each other's company.

Historians talk of the "invention" rather than the "discovery" of adolescence because the new views were not based on actual observation of youth behavior, but on new psychological theories. In fact, prior to the mid-19th century, young people had been handling a great deal more freedom, independence and responsibility (dominion), without suffering the dire consequences during puberty that the psychologists predicted.

Here's a summary of the changes, before and after the invention of adolescence.

THE PROCESS OF GROWING UP

Before: It was assumed that the young would quite naturally and unselfconsciously grow into maturity “merely through the observation of adult models in casual situations” (Kett p. 237), i.e., talking, eating and working together, playing together, studying and worshipping together, etc.

After: There was “a tendency to assume that the process of growing up presented a succession of problems for parents to solve before the child could fully develop its personality... the youth became virtually a passive spectator at his or her own socialization.”¹³

School

Before: School experience (whether in district schools, private academies or colleges) was seasonal and frequently interrupted with a variety of work experiences. For example, boys were expected to be home in the summer to help with the harvest. Classes also included a whole range of ages mixed up together.

After: School became full-time, and classes were age-graded, so for the first time the young were isolated in a world of peers. And this time period has been increasingly extended.

Leisure

Before: Young people exercised much more freedom and initiative in organizing their leisure time (like Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn). Youth clubs had been youth sponsored and youth run. They also included a broad age range of young people.

After: Leisure activities were age-graded, and sponsored, organized and overseen by adults. Now, teenagers are left to the “youth culture.”

In the years since adolescence was first defined and constructed, a great deal has changed. But the primary institution of adolescence, the high school, is still with us. And it has expanded downward in years to include the junior high school and upward in years to include college. From the perspective of the 1990's it seems incomprehensible (at least to me!) that well-meaning adults deliberately defined adolescents by sex and social life, isolated them with peers, and protected them from real responsibility. But if that weren't enough, since the 1950's adults have provided the young with money and leisure, and exposed them to an entertainment industry that wants to keep them in this state for as long as possible. *Is it any wonder that many of them start behaving the way adults have defined for them?*

The authors of *Dancing in the Dark* explore what they call the symbiotic relationship between the electronic media and youth. Their thesis is that “the media (now a multi-billion dollar industry) need the youth market, as it is called, for their own economic

survival. Youth, in turn, need the media for guidance and nurture...And particularly as homes, churches, schools, and the like have become ineffective nurturing institutions, the media have moved in to fill the gap, in the process widening the gap between youth and traditional nurture.”¹⁴

As an example, one of the authors, Calvin College Professor Bill Romanowski in a taped lecture on youth culture describes a class of 14-year-olds he spoke to one day. He asked the girls, “What would you do if a really cool 16-year-old guy with a car invited you out on a date—for dinner, a movie, and...‘you know’...?” The girls giggled. None of them had ever been on a date with a 16-year-old. Bill asked, “How would you know what to do? What to wear? What to order on the menu? What to do after the movie when he put his arm around you in the car?” More giggles. “Who would you ask—your friends? your parents? a teacher or youth pastor?” Virtually every girl said she would ask her peers, none of whom had ever been on a date with a 16-year-old. (Bill’s comment: “the blind leading the blind.”) And how did their peers figure out what to do? From teen movies. Several guys in the class said that they first tried to kiss a girl in imitation of what they’d seen in movies. (A rude awakening when some of the girls reacted differently from the girls in the movies!) The electronic entertainment industry is providing what Romanowski calls the “maps” (or guidance) kids need to learn how to get around and survive in the youth culture.

YOUTH AS CONSUMERS

Lots of high school students have jobs when they are not in school. But for most of them work has become almost exclusively an opportunity for immediate gratification, to buy the equipment necessary for membership in the youth culture.¹⁵ For most of these boys and girls, their basic living expenses are carried by parents; so all of their earnings can be used to indulge what one researcher calls “premature affluence.”

“In a Washington study (in 1989), Norward Brooks found teenagers spent their money on, in descending order: clothes, entertainment, car expenses and school supplies. In last place is family support; just 16 percent gave anything to Mom or Dad.”¹⁶ And less than 11% of high school seniors save all or most of their earnings for college or other long-range purposes. “All told, 13 to 19 year olds spent \$56 billion on themselves during 1989.”¹⁷

Tony Campolo argues, rightly, I think, that “Our consumer-oriented young people...don’t buy the things they do simply because they desire the gratification of physical appetites. On the contrary, our teenage consumers buy what they do because of the deep spiritual hunger of their hearts and souls. They buy certain goods because they long for the love that those who possess these things are supposed to enjoy. They want clothes because the media manipulate them into thinking that their sexual identities will be firmly established and that they will be validated as human beings if they wear the right clothes...they have become alienated from what they

really need. Instead, they have chosen to become persons who have to buy the things they really don't need."¹⁸ In Biblical terminology, Campolo is describing the captivity of idolatry.

Many teachers share the exasperation of a Seattle teacher who complained that a lot of kids "become hooked on the job and the money. They see their education almost as something inconsequential, as something that takes up their time."¹⁹ Unfortunately, many of the alarmed adult generation are really in no position to challenge these teenagers' values, because adult American society is working from within the same idol systems of materialism and consumerism. The difference is, they are arguing that if the young would only delay gratification long enough to complete their education, they'd be able to buy BMW's instead of used Datsun's.

In his book *The Birth and Death of Meaning*, the existentialist philosopher Ernest Becker argues that modern materialism—the loss of belief in God and the unseen world—has brought about "The crisis of middle-and upper-class youth in the social and economic structure of the Western world." It is a "crisis of belief in the vitality of the hero-systems that are offered by contemporary materialist society. The young no longer feel heroic in doing as their elders did, and that's that."²⁰ The accumulation and manipulation of material gadgets simply does not fulfill the human need for heroism. Becker, a non-Christian, chastises the Christian Church for having been co-opted by materialism, and in the process, throwing away its heritage, which, he admits, wistfully, used to provide young and old

with a unique basis for the dignity and heroism of all human endeavor including work and study. For, as he points out, for those who believe in a Creator and the unseen world, anyone who serves God “can achieve even in the smallest daily tasks that sense of cosmic heroism that is the highest ambition of man” (p. 124).

Through identifying with the youth culture, young people can say “a pox on the adult world and its stupid values,” but the rebellion is only superficial, since both young and old are ultimately committed to the idols of mammon, or materialism. What’s needed is a much deeper rebellion that can only come from allegiance to a truly alternative “counter culture.” This is exactly what the Christian faith provides—and that’s the reason Becker, a non-Christian, castigates those Christians and Churches that have capitulated to materialism.

LOSS OF BELIEF IN THE JUDEO CHRISTIAN STORY

Neil Postman, also a non-Christian and an astute critic of modern culture like Becker, is keenly aware of the price young people are paying because of the loss of belief in the Judeo-Christian worldview. In an article called “Learning by Story” he writes, “Human beings require stories to give meaning to the facts of their existence... If our stories are coherent and plausible and have continuity, they will help us to understand why we are here and what we need to pay attention to and what we may ignore... This is why children everywhere ask, as soon as they have the command of language to do so, ‘Where did I come from?’ and shortly after, ‘What will happen when I die?’ They require a story to give meaning to

their existence. Without air, our cells die. Without a story, our selves die... Without stories as organizing frameworks we are swamped by the volume of our own experience, adrift in a sea of facts..." A story provides "a kind of theory about how the world works—and how it needs to work if we are to survive."

Applying these ideas to education and learning in general, Postman writes: "the young need a story to help them sort through the collection of disconnected, fragmented diploma requirements that is called a curriculum at most universities... The [very] purposes we conceive for learning [anything] are tied to our larger conception of the world... Does one learn for the greater glory of God? To bring honor to one's family or tribe? For the fulfillment of a nation's destiny? To hasten the triumph of the proletariat? Few today find such purposes meaningful, because few believe anymore in the larger stories from which these purposes derive. Even fewer, I think, believe in the story of technological progress, which tells of a paradise to be gained through bigger and better machines. And the yuppie's tale, the story that tells us that life's most meaningful activity is to buy things, is an impoverished one indeed, which leads, in the end, to cynicism and hopelessness. Even the great modern story known as inductive science is not now as gripping as it once seemed. To the question 'Where did we come from?' science answers, 'It was an accident.' To the question 'How will it all end?' science's handmaiden, technology, answers, 'Probably by an accident.' And more and more of our young are finding that the accidental life is scarcely worth living..."

Regarding moral teaching, Postman argues it is not enough to advise young people to “JUST SAY NO” to drugs. “Who will help them find out what they need to say yes to? How can they be helped to read, and write a coherent story for our times...?”²¹

Of course, those of us who believe the Bible have the Story of all Stories! God’s meta-narrative of Creation-Fall-Redemption and future Glory, in terms of which our individual stories make sense and have eternal significance. Because of this Story, we have something glorious to say “YES” to. God’s Story is like a huge cable stretching from before creation to a never-ending future. Our individual stories are like strands in that cable that either contribute to its strength, or stick out like broken pieces of wire that shred the hands. Our challenge is to live lives of such integrity, plausibility and beauty, that our children will want to say “Yes” to God and to His Story for each of them!

WHAT WE CAN DO

In moments of exasperation with our teenagers and their friends, and the adolescent youth culture in general, we need to resist the temptation of blaming the kids. It is the adult generation that has put such incredible stumbling blocks in the way of young people’s growth into maturity.

REMOVE STUMBLING BLOCKS

One set of stumbling blocks comes from the fact that it was adults who first defined teenagers by sex and social life. And it is adults now who are telling them that it's inevitable that they'll behave that way. It's adults who are handing out condoms to them, so they can be "sexually active," hopefully without killing themselves and each other. I wonder how many adults realize how much more difficult our generation makes it, for the many young people who want to remain chaste until marriage.

Let me read several short passages from *Dancing in the Dark*:

*Adolescence is implicitly defined by adult-run media, churches, and schools. And adults in their perplexity with youth turn to these kinds of institutions for assistance—ironically, the very institutions that place youth in their own subculture where they have little to do but expend energy on looking good and entertaining themselves.*²²

*Instead of creatively involving youth in adult tasks and responsibilities, parents often find it much easier and less time-consuming to turn their children loose in adolescent culture" (p. 5). "Parents often exercise authority, telling their kids what they can and can't do, without developing friendships with them. Adolescents frequently 'complain that parents have no time to spend with them, no interest in what interests them, or no desire to 'talk' to them... This was confirmed by refusals (or reluctant agreement) of so many parents to watch the favorite TV shows of their children.*²³

Many a father decides for the first time to take his teenage son fishing only after the son has gotten into trouble with the law.

*Ample social research shows that youth deeply desire to share their lives—ideas, feelings, hopes—with elders, including their parents. They interpret a lack of parental interest in their interests as an indication that parents do not really care.*²⁴

Let me give you an example. Our son Tim's high school friends were amazed that we wanted to talk with them about their ideas, interests and values, when Tim brought them home. I asked, "What's so unusual about that?" and was told that most other parents would leave when their teenage children brought friends home. I believe this response comes in part from adult insecurity. Parents feel that "kids aren't interested in us." The adult world envies the strength and beauty of youth, no longer believing that it has anything, like wisdom or truth that the young either need or want.

These are examples of one set of stumbling blocks the adult generation has put in the way of teenagers growing up. Too many of us have opted out of the creative and time-consuming responsibility of befriending and nurturing the next generation, something that must start early, when our children are young. It is unrealistic for a parent to expect a friendship of honesty, love and trust with a 16-year-old son or daughter, if the parent hasn't invested a lot of time and energy in that relationship from the beginning. But if parents

and other caring Christian adults are not there to provide wholesome nurture, guidance, friendship and support, the Youth Culture is there to provide unwholesome alternatives.

But there is another set of stumbling blocks well-meaning adults can erect that make growth into maturity difficult. Often, out of a desire to protect our children from the World, including the Youth Culture, Christians withdraw from the world into their own tribal Christian sub-culture, with its own dialect, rules and regulations about things like dress, hair length or sex roles, that are not in the Bible.

In fact, this option is no more godly than blending in to the secular world. It is really another kind of worldliness, because it is finding security in our own sub-culture, rather than in the Lord Himself who calls us to the difficult task of being salt and light, “in the world but not of the world.” Our children need a vision of what this call means for them, now and into the future. It is also naive to think that as long as they are in Christian schools or even being home-schooled, they will automatically be protected from the youth culture. The “world” is everywhere, and we need to help our children understand and evaluate it. Again, this means spending time with them, watching movies, listening to music, reading books, magazine articles and newspapers together, and talking about them. (This is a joy, not a chore!)

There is obviously a place for protection, particularly when children are young. I think it is important to monitor television and videos

very carefully. Not only because of the content, but also perhaps even more because of the passivity of this kind of entertainment. When they are watching television they are not doing all kinds of creative and active things. In our experience, if your children develop active interests (in art, music, reading, the natural world, sports, etc.) when they are young, they will find television boring when they get older.

THINGS TO BE DONE

Positively, the Christian Church and community has tremendous potential both in the area of ideas (beliefs) and social structures to help the young want to say “Yes” to God and to grow up as Christ’s disciples.

Ideas. In the area of ideas, both Postman and Becker are wistful about what the biblical worldview used to provide for our culture. We can rejoice that the biblical story is true. We have a story to believe that makes sense of life and provides a basis for human value, meaning, learning and work, for morality and cosmic heroism that is accessible to all people, young and old.

Read the first chapters of Deuteronomy to see how Moses prepared the Israelites for entering the Promised Land, where they would be surrounded by people with alien beliefs and lifestyles. Over and over again Moses reminded them to “tell your children the story...of how God brought you up out of the land of Egypt, delivered you from slavery, and gave you this good land, and good, life-affirming laws.”

Furthermore, the calendar was marked by long feasts and festivals (parties) for the whole community (all ages!), to remind them of this story. Imagine how the children would have looked forward to living in tents for a week to remember the Exodus. (What can we do similarly, perhaps with the Christian calendar?)

Moses also anticipated the children's questions: "Why are we so different from our neighbors? They're allowed to work on the Sabbath. Why can't we? They practice sacred prostitution. Why don't we? Why do they eat things we're not allowed to eat?" Moses told the parents to take their children's questions seriously, and never give authoritarian answers like "Because God says so," or even worse "because I say so," or empty moralisms like "Just say no." They were to take the time to tell their children the story of redemption by a loving God. Without that, the moral laws would seem arbitrary and make no sense.

Moses also specifically warned against adding to God's law or subtracting from it (Dt. 4:2). Both are equally serious ways of distorting God's truth. If we subtract, we lose our Christian distinctiveness and blend in to the world. If we add laws, we inevitable turn our culture's (or sub-culture's) idiosyncrasies (about dress, hair length, music, etc.) into legalistic absolutes. We lose our grip on the freedom of the Gospel, and very often lose our children who cannot imagine themselves "walking in our old-fashioned ways." As Francis Schaeffer used to say, the Holy Spirit is never "old fashioned."

Social structures. In the area of social structures, we can (and must) provide alternatives to some of the destructive patterns in our culture.

Work. As much as possible, give children responsibility for real work, in the home, in the Church, in the community. Expose your children to your work, so they know what you do; and involve them in it, as much as possible. Bringing up children in L'Abri has had some real advantages—of the pre-industrial type! There is a lot of low-tech work (cooking, raking leaves, or wood splitting, stacking and hauling, for example), which our children have been able to help with, alongside a broad age range of students and workers.

Families in the church or community can give paid jobs to other people's children. Our boys were able to work for a friend who runs a small restaurant upholstery business. They learned about running a small business, and we expected them to put one-half of their earnings toward school expenses. The rest was their own.

Encourage and help young people to start small businesses of their own—like lawn work or house painting. Our boys started a house painting business to help with school and college costs.

In 1985 two English friends of ours wrote a book called *4,000,000 Reasons to Care: How Your Church Can Help the Unemployed*. [25] It is filled with practical and challenging ideas about how Christians

with capital can (and should) help the unemployed by actually creating jobs, by helping people start businesses, etc.

Age Segregation. Perhaps most important, families, Churches and schools need to provide alternatives to our culture's ubiquitous pattern of age segregation. Reactivate the extended family where possible; old and young need each other. Abolish junior high schools! That age group needs contact with older and younger students.

All too often, the church just mimics the culture. Everyone is divided up into same age or experience groups: youth group, young marrieds, college and career, mature marrieds, single parents, divorced, seniors, etc. I am not saying we should abolish all peer groupings, i.e., "Fire the youth pastor and disband the youth group!" I am not saying that. But we must provide alternatives to the pattern, as Kett puts it, of "institutionally segregating young people from casual contacts with a broad range of adults."

The Church provides the ideal kind of community to bring together a whole range of ages to engage in real activities, in casual (non-professional) contexts, i.e., to do:

Work projects: locally or further afield, house or church repairs or decorating, leaf raking, etc.

Service projects: helping local single mothers; Habitat for Humanity (a local church sent young and older to Florida to repair hurricane damage); feeding homeless people; volunteering at a crisis pregnancy center or foster home; organizing fund raising events for worthy causes; visiting prisons or nursing homes.

Political activities: helping good local candidates with their campaigns; in environmental issues (responsible stewardship over God's creation); getting involved with the pro-life movement; and fighting pornography and violence against women and children.

Planning special worship services: evangelistic events, using drama, street theater; discussions on important issues.

Artistic endeavors: organizing art shows, and encouraging artistic gifts in a variety of contexts. We have informal musical soirees, including all ages and abilities.

Having fun together: making music together; playing games together; watching a teen movie and discussing it.

All ages need each other. At the birth of the church, the Holy Spirit was poured out on all flesh, breaking down divisions between men and women, slaves and free, Jew and Gentile, old and young. The old would dream dreams, and the young see visions. Young and old still need the inspiration of each other's dreams and visions. Christian adults should be thinking of ways to encourage and

express our appreciation for our young people, many of them are quietly and sometimes not so quietly honoring God in their lives, against powerful pressures.

Modeling is of central importance. The Bible is clear about the importance of modeling. In fact, as many have pointed out, faith, values and attitudes are caught by observation probably more than they are taught. Jesus said “imitate me”, and Paul said “imitate me as I imitate Christ.” Jesus told adults to imitate the faith, humility, and imagination of children. And throughout Scripture, older believers (not only parents) are exhorted not only to verbally teach, but to model lives of beauty, integrity, joy and godliness for children to imitate. All research shows that where there is a discrepancy between what we say and what we do our children will invariably imitate what we do rather than what we say.

Church leaders (like Titus) are to be models of good works, integrity, gravity and sound speech. They are to practice hospitality, as all believers are commanded to do—to be “lovers of strangers”—willing to share their homes and material possessions with a diversity of people. This is a powerful way to break down age segregation in the home.

Notice particularly that church leaders are not to be “lovers of money.” In a materialistic consumer culture like ours, it is especially important that we hear this, and live it with integrity. As I mentioned

earlier, youth consumerism just mimics adult consumerism. The Christian Church and community need to model an alternative!

Given our culture's preoccupation with sex, it's crucial that Christian adults teach and live out (model) the goodness and beauty of God's purpose for sex in marriage. Our marriages must be attractive and life affirming for men, women, and children. The young also need a positive vision of chaste singleness. Sex and marriage are not necessary for a rich, productive and fulfilling life (see I Cor 7).

Given all this, which is just the tip of the iceberg of Biblical teaching, the authors of *Dancing in the Dark* ask "How are youth going to mature except by contact with adults?" (p.9).

Rethink youth group activities. Many church youth groups specialize almost exclusively in entertainment and consumer activities: bowling, pizza, movies, and at Christmas, "Shop til you drop." This practice just reinforces our culture's reductionist definition of adolescence. All they can handle is fun, entertainment, and social life. This is incredibly condescending, and is little help in preparing them for adult life.

Tony Campolo advises that Church youth groups should purposely avoid the kind of social events that accentuate physical attractiveness—dances, etc.—that involve pairing up. Teenagers have to cope with these things everywhere else, and they are the cause of a lot of pain for many of them. Campolo asks, shouldn't we

spare them these pressures in the Christian community? Instead, why not have square dances or country dancing that includes mixed ages, and involves changing partners. It's great exercise and fun. We used to do it in our Church in London; everyone enjoyed it. Obviously, children who have grown up with these kinds of events will be less likely to think they're "weird" and "uncool" than those who are first introduced to the idea as teenagers.

Young people can and should be handling work, service, serious teaching and discussion. For example, in a church in London the teenagers outline the sermons, and meet the preacher afterwards for discussion. This has dramatically improved the preaching! In another church, anonymous questions on paper are handed to the elders for discussion. The young people know that anything and everything is fair game to ask.

CONCLUSION

These are just a few suggestions for ways we as Christian individuals, families and churches can help our young people in the process of growing up. Some of the stresses associated with adolescence today are the product of secular ideas, and some come from changed social structures. Thinking back to my older friend who said she didn't believe in adolescence, I now understand that there are good biblical and historical reasons for her attitude! But obviously, the better we understand our culture's pressures, the better we will be able to provide attractive, life-affirming alternatives so our children will not only remain our friends through their teens

and 20's but even more important, will want to say YES to God, with their whole lives! Many parents and their children go through hard times during these years. Thankfully, God's love and grace toward our children (and us) is much greater than ours. He is able to bring hope and healing, and restore broken relationships. And like the father of the Prodigal Son, He is ready to embrace us and throw a party, the moment any of us comes to ourselves and returns home.

ENDNOTES:

¹ Joseph F. Kett, *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America 1790 to the Present* (New York: Basic Books; 1977) p. 215.

² Alfred Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life in the days of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; 1987) pp. 103-105.

³ The Apostle Peter learned a similar lesson in his painful conversation with Jesus after the resurrection. Jesus faced Peter with his three-fold denial, and Peter was clearly humbled and repentant. Like the Prodigal, he was not allowed to use his failure to disqualify himself from Christ's call to lead and care for the church. Jesus recommissioned him: "feed my lambs," "tend my sheep," "feed my sheep."

⁴ Kett, *Rites of Passage*, pp. 3-4.

⁵ John Demos, *Past, Present and Personal: The Family and the Life Course in American History* (New York: Oxford; 1986) p. 97.

⁶ By the late 1980's, only 4.5% of young people lived in agrarian settings, compared with almost 70% in 1890. See Tony Campolo, *Growing up in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989).

⁷ Viviana A. Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (New York: Basic Books; 1985) p. 3.

⁸ For example, in the 1880's and 1890's in America, Irish children earned 38% to 46% of their families' incomes. Native born working class children earned between 28% and 32% of their families' incomes. See Zelizer, p. 58.

⁹ See Bruno Bettelheim, *Surviving*, "Alienation and Autonomy" (New York: Random House; 1979) p. 341. Bettelheim contrasts the work experience of children growing up in Israeli Kibbutzim with middle class American children: "In the daily life of the Kibbutz, there is little alienation between child and adult because the worlds of the children and the adults have much more in common than with us...he sees and understands adult work, and at his own level participates in the same kind of work (farming, raising animals, etc.)... This enhances beyond measure the child's feeling of being an integral part of his society, or making an important contribution to it. In turn, this creates a feeling of competence, security and well-being... While the American child's powerful desire to be useful is

mainly frustrated, this need is fully satisfied for the Kibbutz child whose work is appreciated by the entire community because it contributes to its immediate present well-being.”

¹⁰ Zelizer, p. 11.

¹¹ Kett, p. 5-6.

¹² Ibid., p. 17.

¹³ Ibid., p. 230.

¹⁴ *Dancing in the Dark: Youth, Popular Culture, and the Electronic Media* by the Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; 1991) pp. 11-12.

¹⁵ *Newsweek* issue on “The Family” (Winter-Spring 1990) p. 57, and “The New Teens” (Summer-Fall 1990).

¹⁶ *The Seattle Times*, April 30, 1990. See also *Dancing in the Dark*, p. 79.

¹⁷ *Newsweek*, “The New Teens,” p. 29.

¹⁸ Campolo, p. 27.

¹⁹ *Seattle Times*, 1990.

²⁰ Ernest Becker, *The Birth and Death of Meaning* (New York: Free Press, 1971) p. 126.

²¹ “Learning by Story” by Neil Postman, *Atlantic* (December 1989) pp. 122-124.

²² *Dancing in the Dark*, p. 2.

²³ Ibid., p. 62. Quote from Joan D. Tierney, “Parents, Adolescents and Television: Culture, Learning, Influence: A Report to the Public,” summary of findings of a report prepared for the Canadian Radio-television Commission, May 1978.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 73. Tierney, Part III, p. 5.

²⁵ Peter Elsom and David Porter, MARC Europe, A Ministry of World Vision, Church Action with the Unemployed.

Speaking Truth In Love

Thinking Christianly About Homosexuality

There are few issues that have generated more political heat and extreme rhetoric; more anger and hatred; confusion and pain, than the issue of homosexuality. Christianity has come under fire for its traditional teaching that homosexual behavior is intrinsically immoral. For those who believe that a person's homosexual orientation is biologically determined, as much as race and sex are, the traditional Christian teaching seems cruel and intolerant—akin to racism or sexism. It appears to many that the God of the Bible condemns people for expressing the innate identity He gave them.

There are many—Christians and non-Christians—who feel alienated from all camps. They cannot celebrate their homosexual feelings and wholeheartedly embrace a homosexual lifestyle because they are convinced (for any number of reasons) that their homoerotic feelings are the result of something having gone wrong. I have friends in this situation, and my heart goes out to them.

Those who identify with the gay rights movement talk a lot about respecting diversity, but they do not always respect the diversity among those with homosexual feelings. They need to allow space for those who interpret those feelings as the result of something having gone wrong...including those who seek help to change.

Richard Hays, a New Testament scholar, wrote about his best friend from college, who spent a week with his family shortly before dying of AIDS. Hays writes: "(Gary) was angry at the self-affirming gay Christian groups, because he regarded his own situation as more

complex and tragic than their stance could acknowledge. He also worried that the gay subculture encouraged homosexual believers to ‘draw their identity from their sexuality’ and thus to shift the ground of their identity subtly and idolatrously away from God.

“For more than 20 years, Gary had grappled with his homosexuality, experiencing it as a compulsion and an affliction. Now, as he faced death, he wanted to talk it all through again from the beginning, because he knew my love for him and trusted me to speak without dissembling...In particular, Gary wanted to discuss the biblical passages that deal with homosexual acts...

“He had read hopefully through the standard bibliography of the burgeoning movement advocating the acceptance of homosexuality in the church...In the end, he came away disappointed, believing that these authors, despite their good intentions, had imposed a wishful interpretation on the biblical passages... Gary, as a homosexual Christian, believed that their writings did justice neither to the biblical texts nor to the depressing reality of the gay subculture that he had moved in and out of for 20 years.”¹

Hays writes that both he and Gary were frustrated that “the public discussion of this matter has been dominated by insistently ideological voices: on one side, gay rights activists demanding the church’s unqualified acceptance of homosexuality; on the other, unqualified homophobic condemnation of homosexual Christians.” Hays wrote this article, after Gary’s death, in the hope that it would

“foster compassionate and carefully reasoned theological reflection within the community of faith.” I have quoted Hays because both here and in his studies on the Bible’s teaching about homosexuality, he expresses so well the spirit with which I have attempted to reflect on this terribly sensitive issue.

Let me start by pointing out that there are enough differences between male homosexuals (gay men) and lesbians that they should not automatically be lumped together, even though the two groups are often political allies. For example: few men are aware of choosing to be gay. Many women are not either, but a significant number of women “convert” to lesbianism, sometimes after years of marriage and raising children. For radical feminists, lesbianism can be a political choice, motivated more by feminist ideology than by an exclusive sexual attraction to women. For them, lesbianism is the strongest possible statement of contempt for men (or of their irrelevance). While many women become lesbians after experiencing abuse by men, there are also compelling ideas that draw feminists to embrace lesbianism. Obviously, to communicate with these women, we need to understand their thinking. We must also be prepared to face the uncomfortable fact that many of them grew up in families and churches where they experienced Christianity as bad news for women.

The Debate Among Christians

A growing number of scholars now claim that the Bible passages traditionally used to censure all homosexual behavior have been

misunderstood and cannot legitimately be applied to the contemporary moral debate about homosexuality. These revisionist scholars include Catholics and Protestants, including some from an Evangelical background, like Letha Scanzoni and Virginia Mollenkott who together wrote *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?*

What unites these people is the conviction that Scripture nowhere teaches that homosexual behavior is intrinsically, and therefore always, wrong. They admit that the few biblical texts referring to homosexual acts all express disapproval, but it is argued that in each case there is something in the context that makes that particular expression of homosexuality immoral. For example: attempted gang rape or inhospitality in Sodom (Genesis 19), idolatry and ritual defilement in the Old Testament Holiness Code (Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13), lustful promiscuity in Romans (1:24-27), and pederasty (the sexual relationship of adult men with boys) in Corinth (1 Cor 6:9-11) and Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:9-10). They argue that what is censored in the Bible is not homosexuality itself, but only abusive, exploitive, uncommitted, or in other ways destructive expressions of it.

The question under debate is: *Does the Bible teach that homosexual behavior is intrinsically wrong no matter what the context and personal motivation?*—OR (as with heterosexuality)—*Does its rightness or wrongness depend on the specific context and motivation of the people involved?* I don't have the space to analyze each of the Biblical references to homosexuality, so I will focus on

Romans 1 because this passage clearly addresses the intrinsic moral status of homosexuality.

Romans 1:24-27: “Therefore, God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

“Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.”

Paul's reference to homosexual behavior in Romans 1 appears in the context of his sweeping theological analysis of the fallen condition of humanity. The widespread practice of homosexuality in the pagan world is cited as evidence that human beings are in rebellion against the Creator.² Their exchange of natural sexual relations for unnatural reflects their exchange of the true God for idols. Paul is not arguing in a case-by-case way that every individual homosexual has consciously and willfully rejected God, rather he is making a sweeping diagnosis of the fallen human condition, and some of its tragic consequences.

The most influential revisionist scholar is the late Catholic Yale historian, John Boswell, author of *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* and *Same Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe*. According to Boswell, Romans 1 isn't talking about homosexuals at all. He writes, "There is no clear condemnation of homosexual acts in the verses in question." Instead, Paul is condemning individual heterosexuals who go against ("exchange") their own "natural" heterosexual inclinations to engage in homoerotic behavior.³ Boswell contends that to Paul, "nature" did not mean a universal moral order, but "the personal nature of the (individual) pagans in question."

There are two problems with this view. First of all, men who commit homosexual acts because they are "consumed with passion" or "inflamed with lust" for other men, are by any normal definition homosexual, not heterosexual. Paul is condemning homosexual acts committed by men with an erotic attraction to other men. He is describing men who are homosexual—psychologically and behaviorally. Secondly, Boswell's argument depends on ignoring or rejecting the most likely meaning of the Greek phrase *para physin* (unnatural) in favor of his own idiosyncratic meaning. *Para physin* was a common "stock phrase" or literary convention used by Graeco-Roman (Stoic) Moralists and Hellenistic Jews [4] and had the accepted meaning of against or contrary to nature, frequently used to designate homosexual acts as immoral, in contrast to heterosexual acts, which were natural or according to nature. To Paul and his audience, nature did refer to a "universal moral order."

Furthermore, Jewish writers, like Paul's contemporary, Josephus, specifically associated the natural with God's Creation and Law.

Robin Scroggs, in *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, argues that Paul's clear denunciation of homosexual acts in Romans 1 refers only to pederasty, the predominant model of homosexuality in Paul's culture. Pederasty was an intrinsically exploitive, temporary, and unequal relationship between an adult male and a pre-adolescent boy (often a slave).⁵ Scroggs argues that the contemporary gay Christian model of mutual, consenting, monogamous adult homosexual partnerships is so different that the N.T. teaching simply cannot be applied to it.

It is probably true that pederasty was in the forefront of Paul's mind, but he explicitly condemns the homoerotic element (male with male) not the pederastic element (man with boy) of the sexual practice. And the fact that Paul explicitly included female same-sex behavior in his condemnation indicates that he had more in mind than pederasty. This is the only biblical reference to lesbianism, and the Graeco-Roman texts rarely refer to it. The fact that Paul departed so dramatically from the literary conventions by including lesbianism baffles Scroggs because of his insistence that Paul "could only have had pederasty (an exclusively male phenomenon) in mind." [6] But if Paul is condemning all homosexuality as contrary to the universal created nature of things, then the inclusion of lesbianism is not at all surprising. It is perfectly fitting.

I believe Scroggs, Boswell, and others miss the obvious in this passage: Paul uses homosexuality, in and of itself, as an illustration of the moral confusion and unrighteousness that comes from refusing to acknowledge the Creator who, as Jesus said, “made them male and female at the beginning, and said, ‘For this reason a man shall...be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’”(Mt. 19.4-5). Marriage between a man and a woman, two complementary equals, was established at creation as the only legitimate context for sexual intimacy.

In Romans I, Paul establishes the intrinsic immorality of homosexual behavior, irrespective of social context, personal motivation or anything else. This means that when Paul condemns pederasty (in 1 Cor 6:9-11) he not only condemns the exploitation involved in that practice, (which he surely hated), but also the homoeroticism itself. Paul’s teachings must therefore be taken seriously by Christians and applied (with love, care and sensitivity) in every culture to whatever model of homosexuality emerges.

Implications of the Bible’s Teaching

Homosexual behavior is wrong. But it is not the worst sin. It is not even singled out as the worst sexual sin. And it does not set people apart as sub-human or some kind of moral freaks. In dealing with this issue, two mandatory Christian attitudes are essential: humility and love.

First humility. It is scandalous when heterosexual Christians rant and rave about homosexual sin as a detestable abomination to God, while excusing themselves of other sins the Bible calls abominations—like lying, pride, stirring up dissension (or gossip), dishonest business practices and injustice in the law courts.⁷ These things are also detestable to God. Furthermore, human nature is such that, given the circumstances, any of us could be tempted to commit sins, sexual or otherwise, that we now consider ourselves incapable of.

In Romans 1, Paul sets up what Richard Hays calls a “homiletical sting operation. The passage builds to a crescendo of condemnation ‘against those wicked pagans...’ But then, in Romans 2:1, the sting strikes: ‘Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself....’ All people—Jews and Greeks, Christians and non-Christians, heterosexuals and homosexuals stand in radical need of God’s mercy.”⁸

The second mandatory Christian attitude is love: Jesus says we must love our neighbor as ourselves, including our homosexual neighbor. James wrote that we cannot praise God and with the same tongue curse men and women who are made in God’s likeness. Gay bashing and jokes are sinful and reveal unreality and hypocrisy in our praise of God.

We're commanded to show hospitality, literally to "love the stranger." God's word does not say: welcome people into your homes, lives and churches, except of course homosexuals. Paul even rebuked the Corinthian Christians for refusing to associate with sexually immoral non-Christians (1 Cor. 5:9). He said we would have to leave the world to avoid them, and that is not an option for Christians! We must be salt and light in the world, with non-Christian friends. If we try to walk the delicate line of loving practicing homosexuals without condoning their sexual practice, we will be accused of homophobia by those who demand acceptance and even celebration of homosexuality. Listen to the words of Black feminist bell hooks: "In the past year, I talked with a black woman Baptist minister, who though concerned about feminist issues, expressed very negative attitudes about homosexuality, because, she explained, the Bible teaches that it is wrong. Yet in her daily life she is tremendously supportive and caring of gay friends. When I asked her to explain this contradiction, she argued that it was not a contradiction, that the Bible also teaches her to identify with those who are exploited or oppressed." [9] This woman is a good example to us, yet bell hooks goes on to accuse her of "homophobic attitudes" that "encourage persecution of gay people" in the black churches.

Homosexual Orientation in a Biblical Perspective

We must understand homosexuality in light of the brokenness and abnormality of living in a fallen world. All of the Bible's references to homosexuality specify homosexual behavior or acts; there is no Hebrew or Greek word for a "homosexual person" as such. It cannot

be denied that some people can only remember, as far back as they can recall, being attracted to the same sex. They are not aware of ever having had a choice in the matter. This raises a terribly troubling question. Isn't God cruel and unfair to prohibit homosexual behavior for those with a homosexual orientation they did not choose?

We must never minimize the suffering experienced by those with persistent homosexual desires, who struggle to be celibate. At the same time, ever since the fall, every one of us has been born with an orientation, or predisposition, to sin which we have not consciously or freely chosen. Yet God holds us morally accountable for our acts. Paul puts it very strongly. "We are slaves of sin" (Romans 6:17)—so much so that we need redemption, a word that means emancipation from slavery. We have the "first fruits" of redemption, but our struggle against sin will not be over until the final redemption of our bodies (Romans 8:23). Even if some people are biologically predisposed to homosexuality—that is not the same thing as causation—it does not determine behavior.

We are, in fact, in deep trouble if we believe that a biological predisposition for certain behavior (aggression for example) frees us from moral responsibility for our actions. Pre-Menstrual Syndrome affects some women dramatically. That does not excuse them morally if they abuse their children when suffering from PMS. The fact that the Bible speaks of homosexual behavior but not homosexual persons should encourage us all. God does not define us by, or stigmatize us for our particular temptations (sinful

dispositions or orientations), whatever they are! To define any person by their sexual orientation is to radically reduce a splendid Image bearer of God.

Thankfully, God sees everything, and understands the combination of factors—biology, environment, and choice—that influence our behavior. And He offers forgiveness and help to anyone who genuinely asks Him. In 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, Paul says that some of the Christians in Corinth had been practicing homosexuals, but, by God's grace, were no longer. The same is true for many today. There are no "quick fixes," and Christians must beware of promising total healing for any problem in this still fallen world. Nevertheless, it is a fact that a great variety of therapeutic approaches have helped many homosexuals change both in orientation and practice.

Many find help in one of the ex-gay ministries, but it is also crucial for Christians struggling against homosexual temptation to have the love and support of a local church or Christian community, and particularly, close, affectionate, non-erotic friendships with heterosexual people of the same sex (healthy opposite sex friendships are also important).

Homosexuality, an Urgent Apologetics Issue

My husband and I speak on secular college campuses quite frequently, and our three sons have attended secular liberal arts colleges in New England. There is no question that in the non-Christian academic and media world today, homosexuality is the

single issue that Christians feel most intimidated by, and are most scorned for. Where tolerance is believed to be the highest virtue, Christians who believe homosexual practice is wrong are perceived to be on the lowest moral ground.

In terms of public opinion, the higher the prevalence of homosexuality, the more it appears to be just one among other sexual lifestyles—as morally neutral as being left-handed. The media, which tends to be strongly committed to “normalizing” homosexuality, makes the most of this, which is probably why we still hear the claim that 1 out of 10 people are homosexuals, even though that figure has been completely discredited. The figures for exclusive homosexuality are more like 1 to 3% for white males and half of that for females. But in fact, the prevalence of homosexuality has no logical bearing on the question of its morality. One can never argue from an “is” to an “ought.” For example, pride, greed and lust are extremely common in our culture, but that does not make them morally neutral or morally right. According to Genesis 19:4-5, the percentage of homosexual men in Sodom was far higher than in America today: “all the men, from every part of the city of Sodom—both young and old” demanded to have sex with Lot’s guests. If we allow the Apostle Paul’s argument in Romans 1 to interpret the story of Sodom, then a high incidence of homosexual behavior does the opposite of normalizing it. It is evidence that a culture is in a state of significant confusion, distortion, and rebellion against God’s created order.

The Christian faith is unthinkable for many people today because of its teaching that for homosexuals, there is no morally legitimate way to express their sexuality, whereas for heterosexuals, there is at least the possibility of enjoying sex within marriage. This is true, but Francis Schaeffer wrote in 1968: “If a person who has homophile tendencies, or even has practiced homosexuality, is helped in a deep way, then they may marry. On the other hand, there are a certain number of cases who are real homophiles. In this case they must face the dilemma of a life without sexual fulfillment. We may cry with them concerning this, but we must not let the self-pity get too deep, because the unmarried girl who has strong sexual desires, and no one asks her to marry has the same problem. In both cases this is surely a part of the abnormality of the fallen world. And in both cases what is needed is people’s understanding while the church, in compassion and understanding, helps the individual in every way possible.”¹⁰

The same can be said of single men, widows and widowers, divorced and those who are sexually incapable. Teaching that distorts the Bible by making an idol of marriage (including sexual fulfillment within marriage) is not only false teaching, but is extremely unhelpful to all single people—some of whom may never marry. There is no denying that some Christians are “homophobic,” in the way that term is defined by the gay movement. But the Bible’s prohibition against homosexual practice is not “homophobic.” It does not single out homosexual behavior for censure, nor does it condone hatred toward any person. In fact, the moral line the Bible

draws is not between heterosexual behavior (good) and homosexual behavior (bad). All sexual activity that is not consensual, and in the context of heterosexual, monogamous marriage is immoral, and falls short of God's norms.

This teaching is particularly difficult to swallow in an individualistic culture like ours, which has made sexual freedom into an idol. Our whole culture screams at us that to be human, to avoid neurosis, etc., everybody must be sexually active. Too many Christians have their own version of that lie by treating sex within marriage in an idolatrous way. At the same time, ironically, we are increasingly seeing the tragic and destructive fall-out of the idolatry of sex: a soaring divorce rate, unwanted pregnancies; abortions; single mothers and fatherless children; a whole array of STD's (at epidemic levels on many college campuses today), sexual addictions; and of course, AIDS—which due to such high levels of promiscuity among gay men, has taken a particular toll in that population. All this is what comes from so-called “freedom!”

Christians need to challenge our culture's idolatry of sexual freedom. In the first century, when pagans were converted to Christ, it was in the area of sexual morality that their lives tended to change most quickly and dramatically. And the pagans marveled at the Christians' sexual freedom, defined as freedom from being driven by their passions, heterosexual and homosexual. It was a freedom that empowered them to live as chaste when single, and monogamously when married. This kind of freedom benefits the whole community—

men, women and children—and protects the vulnerable, those who are hurt the most by individual sexual freedom run wild.

Commending the Bible's Sex Ethic

One of the reasons a strong gay rights movement has emerged is that over the last decades, heterosexual marriage has lost its attractiveness and moral authority—both of which are needed to make the normativity of marriage persuasive and plausible. Many homosexual men and lesbian women quite reasonably point their fingers at the breakdown and ugliness of so many marriages today, and the abuse of women and children, which many of them have experienced first hand, in the so-called traditional family. It is not surprising that many are commending alternative “family forms.” Bill Bennett has astutely pointed out that conservatives are in a panic about the issue of homosexual marriage while virtually ignoring the issue of divorce, which has been far more widespread and devastating to our culture. The breakdown of heterosexual marriage has come in large part from the idolatry of individual freedom and unwillingness to live within God's marriage norms. Homosexual marriage is just another step further down that same road.

This poses a huge challenge to us who believe that faithful, monogamous, heterosexual marriage is the Creator's norm, and is good for us. We, of all people, must be demonstrating that. This must mean much more than living with prohibitions. Our marriages and family lives must positively demonstrate the goodness of God's

sexual and family norms; they must be beautiful, attractive and life affirming for men, women and children. They must also be welcoming to others—including homosexuals—and a source of rich blessing in society. Celibate singleness must also be seen as a good, positive and productive call, as it was in the lives of Jesus, Paul, and other disciples, both men and women (Mt 19:12, 1 Cor 7, Mary, Martha and Lazarus, etc.). If these things are not living realities, we cannot expect our verbal apologetics for Biblical faith and sexual morality to be persuasive.

These are sensitive and complicated issues. Christians need to think them through in a sane and careful way and provide an alternative to the polarized rhetoric from extremists on all sides. This is one of the most important apologetics issues the Christian Church is facing today, and it is not likely to go away soon.

I have only touched on a few of the challenges surrounding this terribly difficult issue. We need God's grace to walk the tightrope, following His word with humility in all that it teaches, loving those who disagree with us, and reaching out in compassion to those men and women who are suffering the sad and tragic consequences of living outside the created sexual boundaries that God gave us for our good.

SOURCES

¹ Richard B. Hays, *Awaiting the Redemption of Our Bodies, Sojourners*, (July 20, 1991), pp.17-21.

² Richard Hays, "Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to John Boswell's Exegesis of Romans 1," *Journal of Religious Ethics* (Nov 14, 1986) p.189.

³ John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the 14th Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Phoenix Edition, 1981) p. 109.

⁴ Richard Hays, "Relations Natural and Unnatural..." p. 192-194. Josephus (whose life overlapped with the apostle Paul) wrote, 'The law (Lev. 18 and 20) recognizes no sexual connections except for the natural (kata physin) union of man and wife...But it abhors the intercourse of males with males.'

⁵ Even in those rare homosexual relationships (for example, between same age young men) that "stretched" the normal pederastic model, inequality was still built in. One always took the passive role, for the pleasure of the other who took the active role.

⁶ He concedes that the "negative judgment made on both female as well as male homosexuality...could be considered a general indictment" (p. 121); and that Paul's "general language" for men (males with males, as Leviticus stated it, with no age difference indicated) could be too. But he continues to insist that Paul "could only have had pederasty in mind" (p. 122).

⁷ Pr. 17:15 “acquitting the guilty and condemning the innocent” [8] Richard Hays, “Awaiting the Redemption of our Bodies,” *Sojourners*, (July 20, 1991) p. 19.

⁹ Bell Hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1989) pp. 122-123.

¹⁰ Excerpted from *Letters of Francis A. Schaeffer*, Lane T. Dennis, ed., (Westchester, IL, Crossway Books, 1985).

**Marriage:
Is There
A Place
Between
Cynicism
& Idolatry?**

Marriage is universal. As Christians, we know why. Genesis tells us that God created it at the very beginning of his creation of humanity. God's creation of the first man and woman is inseparable from his creation of marriage and the first societal institution—the family. Genesis tells us that marriage was created because God thought, “it was not good that the man should be alone.”¹ So God made a woman, to be a corresponding, suitable partner for the man. When Adam saw her, he was delighted, and burst forth with a spontaneous doxology. “Wow! Bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh! Finally, here is someone like me, one of my own kind!” Proverbs tells us “whoever finds a wife, finds a good thing.”

Then why is it that everywhere we look, we see evidence of the misery marriage can produce? Tolstoy described it as “hell.”² Even in the Bible there is plenty of evidence of marital misery, unfaithfulness, manipulation, deceit, cruelty, abuse and sorrow. If there ever was a marriage “made in heaven” or “made by God,” it was the marriage of Adam and Eve. Yet even before the birth of their first child (i.e., during the “honeymoon” period), Adam was blaming God for giving him this troublesome woman.

What gives? Marriage is a good gift of God. And like all of God's gifts, it can function as an idol, or God substitute. Marriage can also function as a means of serving other idols like the State, or the reproduction of children, or socio-economic success, political advancement, romantic love, sexual fulfillment or individual

happiness. When marriage does function as an idol or as a means of achieving other idolatrous goals, it can only fail and bring disappointment, even cynicism. As the Psalmist wrote, “Those who choose another god multiply their sorrows.”³ But when marriage is allowed to be what God created it to be, and to serve the purposes God created it for, it can be an enormous blessing to the married couple, their children, to everyone who interacts with them and to society as a whole.

This is true, even in a fallen world. Since every marriage is a union of 2 sinners, no marriage can be perfect. Denis De Rougemont asked, “Inasmuch as when taken one by one, most human beings of both sexes are either rogues or neurotics, why should they turn into angels the moment they are paired?”⁴ He is right! But the beauty of marriage as designed by God is that it was made to cope with rogues and neurotics living in an unpredictable and tragically fallen world. It was made to gradually transform and sanctify rogues and neurotics, but only if and as they make daily choices to keep their marital promises.

Despite widespread cynicism about marriage in the United States today; despite the dramatic rise in divorce, cohabitation and unwed parenthood, most Americans rank “a happy and lasting marriage” as extremely important on their list of life goals. In their book, *The Case for Marriage*, Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher write, “Americans are still the marrying kind. But our ideas about what marriage means have changed in subtle ways that undermine our ability—as

individuals or as a society—to achieve the goals of wedlock, creating a lasting love between a man and a woman, and a firm bond of mutual support between a mother and a father. When it comes to marriage, Americans have both high hopes and debilitating fears. As two scholars put it after an exhaustive study of the attitudes of today's college students, "They are desperate to have only one marriage, and they want it to be happy. They don't know whether this is possible anymore."⁵

There are subtle and not so subtle ways in which our culture's ideas about marriage have changed, and those changes have undermined the very thing we say we want.

HISTORICAL HIGHLIGHTS OF LOVE AND MARRIAGE IN WESTERN CULTURE

The Ancient Greco-Roman World

The Ancient Greco-Roman World was the cultural, political and legal background to the New Testament, and early Christian understandings of marriage. In that world, the purpose of marriage was procreation. In Classical Greece, a father would betroth his daughter to a bridegroom with the words: "I pledge (my daughter) for the purpose of producing legitimate children."⁶

The Orator Apollodorus expressed the pervasive Greek male ideal: the Athenian man could have three women: his wife for producing heirs and watching over his property, his concubine for daily

attention to his body (meaning sexual relations), and hetaeras (educated, high class courtesans) for pleasure (intellectual and sexual).⁷

Under Roman law, marriage (and procreation) served the State. The Emperor Augustus became concerned that upper class Roman citizen families were dying out. Between 18 B.C. and 9 A.D., he enacted marriage legislation to encourage legitimate marriage and fertility in the upper classes. The Law penalized celibates and childless couples and gave positive incentives for couples to have a minimum of three or four children (depending on their class). The Augustan Marriage legislation was ineffective, as the public reacted strongly against it and found ways around it.

Since the official purpose of marriage was procreation, men were encouraged to divorce their wives for infertility, so they could remarry and bear citizen children for Rome.⁸

Slaves were not citizens, so their procreation was irrelevant to the state and they could not be legally married. This had serious consequences for the Christian Church. Within the Greco-Roman upper classes, far more women than men were converted to Christianity, so the only available Christian men for them to marry were slaves. Second and third century pagan attacks on the Christians refer to the problem of Christian women being forced to marry pagans or to cohabit with Christian slaves in a kind of common-law marriage. Roman civil law prohibited this, and it was

acknowledged by the Church only by Bishop Callistus, who had himself been a slave before becoming bishop of Rome in the early third century.⁹

It is interesting that Priscilla is an upper class Roman name, and Aquila is a common slave name. It is likely that he was a freedman, and that this New Testament couple formed an inter-class marriage!

Under Roman Law, during the N.T. period, the *paterfamilias* (the oldest male in a Roman family) had the power to make and break his children's marriages. This was usually done to improve the economic or political status of the family. Over time, however, the couple's consent gained legal and social weight, and it became more difficult for a father to force his children to marry or divorce against their will. While no one expected them to be "in love" at marriage, mutual affection was seen as desirable and it was expected that love would grow after marriage.

In the Greco-Roman world, it was believed that the gods and goddesses of love, like Eros and Aphrodite, would afflict people with romantic passion, which they had no control over. For example, in Euripedes' play *Hippolytus*,¹⁰ Aphrodite punished Hippolytus for his sin of chastity by causing his stepmother to fall in love with him. Tragedy ensued, including murder and death.

Understanding this Greek view of love helps explain the common pagan response to Christian sexual morality. Many Pagans

marveled at the Christian's sexual freedom—freedom from being driven by uncontrollable romantic and sexual passion and freedom to be chaste while single and monogamous when married.

The Middle Ages (1100 to 1500)

During this time period was the birth of romantic love. The story of Heloise and Abelard, one scholar writes, “still has the shock value of a romance-cum-horror story” but it is true. Denis de Rougemont describes Abelard and Heloise as “the earliest passionate lovers whose story has reached us” through an abundance of courtly poems and letters.”¹¹

Abelard met Heloise in 1118, when he was 37 years old, and a well-known master of theology. She was 15. They fell in love and she was willingly seduced. During their passionate love affair, Heloise became pregnant. Her uncle insisted that Abelard marry her, and he agreed, but wanted the marriage to be secret, since according to canon law, he would not be allowed to continue teaching philosophy and theology if it was known that he was married. But after their son was born, Heloise objected to marrying, because of the commonly held belief that family life was incompatible with the life of a scholar. As Abelard later put it, “What person, absorbed by religious or philosophic meditations, could endure the crying of newborn babies, the songs of their nurses to quiet them, the noisy crowd of servants? What disgust in having to bear the continual filth of little children!” Heloise preferred to be called Abelard's “friend, sister and lover” rather than ruin his career by becoming his wife.

However, they did marry secretly to honor her uncle's wishes, but lived separately. Soon after, her uncle, Fulbert, began to beat Heloise, and Abelard abducted her and placed her in an abbey for safety. Fulbert took revenge. With the help of a friend, he overpowered Abelard in his sleep and castrated him. Abelard believed this was God's judgment for his sexual sin, so he withdrew to a cloister as a celibate cleric and ordered that Heloise become a nun, permanently. Both of them donned the habit the same day. She was 17 and he was 39. They were legally married, and there were no outside obstacles preventing them from living together as man and wife. Yet Heloise and Abelard never saw each other again. Abelard lived another 24 years as a monk, writer, teacher and founder of the abbey of Paraclet, in which, ironically, Heloise would rise to the rank of abbess. Heloise wrote Abelard two impassioned, erotic love letters, reproaching him for abandoning her. Abelard never replied. He died in 1144, and she died twenty years later and was buried beside her husband.¹²

How can we explain this bizarre story of tortured love? There's at least one influence that sheds some light on this couple's story: the role of early medieval Catholicism and its embracing of Greek dualism.

During the early middle ages, the Catholic Church gradually took over the jurisdiction of marriage. Catholic teaching carried on the tradition of the most ascetic of the fourth century Church Fathers,

who had been strongly influenced by Greek dualism, which denigrated the body in contrast to the spirit. They taught that there was a radical disjunction between “spiritual” vocations, like teaching theology and “secular” vocations, including marriage and family life. They also taught that the only purpose of sexual relations was procreation, and that enjoyment of sex was sinful. Lives of the saints, sung or recited, extolled those who had taken vows of chastity. For example, *The Life of Saint Alexius* (circa 1050) told the story of a man’s ascension to sainthood which began when he abandoned his wife on their wedding night and fled to live in poverty.¹³

Pope Leo IX condemned clerical marriage in 1049. But in the early Middle Ages, a significant number of priests lived with concubines, and some were married, even though marriage disqualified men from rising in the church hierarchy.

The Church’s teaching helps explain why Heloise and Abelard could not reconcile the mundaneness of marriage and family life with the work of a cleric and scholar. It also explains Abelard’s self-punishing masochism in refusing to live with the wife he loved (not to mention his cruelty to her). Sexual passion, even in marriage, was considered sinful. It is strangely fitting that Abelard and Heloise’s lives coincided with what scholars call the birth of romantic love. Denis de Rougemont even dates what he calls “the rebirth of eros” to 1118, the year Abelard and Heloise met for the first time, and the century in which love was first recognized as a passion worth

cultivating.

Romantic love and attraction have existed in all times and places. What else could the writer of Proverbs be referring to when he marvels at the “way of a man with a maid (young woman)?”¹⁴ He says it is a mystery “too wonderful” for him, something that he “does not understand.” Romantic love is universal, but cultural conditioning plays an enormous part in its meaning and expression. A very particular form of romantic love began in Europe in the twelfth century French aristocratic courts and has profoundly impacted Western culture ever since. It was named “courtly love,” and was made fashionable and spread by the songs and poems of the troubadours.

From its birth, this kind of romantic love was emphatically not considered a basis for marriage. As the twelfth century writer Andreas Capellanus wrote in *The Art of Courtly Love*, “Everybody knows that love can have no place between husband and wife.”¹⁵

Twelfth century European culture dictated that love could only occur between an unmarried man and another man’s wife. Its model was the perfect knight and the inaccessible idealized lady, usually the wife of a king (i.e., Lancelot and Queen Guinevere, the wife of King Arthur,). It should either go sexually unconsummated or adulterous.

Richard De Fournival, physician to the King of France in the thirteenth century described love as a “folly of the mind, an

unquenchable fire, a hunger without surfeit, an agreeable illness, a sweet delight, a pleasing madness.”¹⁶

In his book *Love in the Western World*, Denis de Rougemont writes that love defined by this tradition “feeds on obstacles, short excitations, and partings.” It is “unstable” and “though it may overcome many obstacles, it almost always fails at one. That is the obstacle constituted by time.”¹⁷ This is why it is incompatible with marriage, an institution set up to be lasting, no matter what time brings along, including all the regular unromantic chores like taking out the garbage and changing diapers, or dealing with a failed septic system that has backed up into your basement (this has happened to us four times in fifteen years!), and the challenges of aging, economic losses, accidents, serious illnesses and death.

De Rougemont argues that romantic love, as defined by this tradition, is also incompatible with happiness. It is more in love with love, with passion and with being in love, than with the beloved. It is intrinsically unfulfillable, because its fire is only kept burning by obstacles, and it often ends in death, as in the myth of Tristan and Iseult, Romeo and Juliet, Anna Karenina, Madame Bovary, Elvira Madigan, or Dr. Zhivago.

Romantic love, or eros, so defined, differs dramatically from Christian love, agape, which is active love of your neighbor as yourself. Marriages do not survive without large daily doses of agape love. If de Rougemont is correct, the cultivation of romantic

love began in Europe as a reaction against Christianity, and in particular to its doctrine of marriage, which had become an object of contempt. These ideas came from people, who though nominally Christian, were still pagan in their spirits.¹⁸

The Reformation Period

What was the impact of the Protestant Reformers on love and marriage? They are our spiritual forbears, whose allegiance to Scripture before Church and Tradition transformed marriage and family life in ways we now take for granted.

Few people have influenced the institution of marriage more than Martin Luther.¹⁹ In letters and tracts, he directly challenged the Catholic Church's insistence on the celibacy of priests. He rejected the Greek dualism that idealized virginity. He argued from Scripture that those not gifted with chastity should marry. Otherwise, they would either be tormented by desire or commit sexual sin; and marriage was a purer state than either of those alternatives. He recommended marriage to everyone, both priest and layman, and taught that mutual love between husband and wife was a God-given mandate, and couples should study to be pleasing to each other.

In 1525, at age 42, Luther decided to practice what he preached, and he married 26-year-old Katherina von Bora, a runaway nun from the Cistercian convent. Here's the story: Convinced by the ideas of the Reformation, Katherina and eleven sister nuns decided to renounce their vows. Luther arranged for them to escape, hidden in

a wagon among herring barrels. After a dangerous journey, through German countryside divided by fierce religious factions, they were delivered to the Augustinian monastery at Wittenberg, where Luther was a monk and professor of biblical theology. A Wittenberg student wrote to a friend, “a few days ago a wagonload of vestal virgins came to town, more eager for wedlock than for life. God grant them husbands before they fare worse!”²⁰

Luther felt responsible to find husbands or suitable positions for the nuns. In the end, all were provided for but Katherina. Because of her poverty, the man she loved was pressured by his family to marry someone else, leaving her with a broken heart. Luther then chose a Dr. Glatz for Katherina, but she refused to accept him on any terms. She humbly sent word to Luther that she would be willing to marry his friend Dr. Amsdorf or Luther himself. Luther had no intention of marrying because he expected at any moment to be burned at the stake as a heretic. But after some thought, he decided that marriage would give a status to Katherina and a testimony to his faith. He summed up his reasons for marrying with three points: “to please his father (who wanted progeny), to spite the pope and the Devil, and to seal his witness before martyrdom.”²¹

Martin and Katherina’s marriage did not begin as a “love match” but they came to love each other deeply. Luther wrote “I am not infatuated, but I cherish my wife,” and “I would not exchange Katie for France or for Venice, because God has given her to me, and other women have worse faults.” Luther wrote that a Christian is

bound to love his neighbor as himself. His wife is his nearest neighbor; therefore she should be his dearest friend. He wrote, "The first love is drunken. When the intoxication wears off, then comes the real marriage love...Union of flesh does nothing (by itself). There must also be union of manners and mind. Katie, you have a husband that loves you."²²

The Luthers had six children (two of whom died) and they ran a large extended household including six or seven orphaned nephews and nieces, the four children of one of Luther's widowed friends, Katherina's aunt, tutors for the children, servants, Luther's student boarders, other guests and a stream of Protestant refugees.

Martin and Katherina's attitude toward their children and domestic life could not have differed more from the attitude of Heloise and Abelard. There was nothing "unspiritual" about raising children that made it incompatible with teaching theology. Luther believed that due to the exacting nature of family life, it was a far better training ground for character (daily patience, charity, fortitude and humility) than a monastery ever could be. And he thoroughly enjoyed his home. He wrote of his first baby, "Hans is cutting his teeth and beginning to make a joyous nuisance of himself. These are the joys of marriage of which the pope is not worthy." Martin hung out diapers, to the neighbors' amusement. He replied, "Let them laugh. God and the angels smile in heaven." At one point, Martin cried out to one of his children: "Child what have you done that I should love you so? What with your befouling the corners and bawling through

the whole house? I would not exchange you for all the kingdoms of Europe.”²³ When their fourteen-year-old daughter, Magdalena died in Martin’s arms, he and Katherina were overcome with grief.

Here’s one other story from the Reformation period. Widbrandis Rosenblatt (1504-1564) outlived four husbands (three of them reformers), giving birth, in total to eleven children and raising more children from her husbands’ previous marriages.

While grieving over the death of her third husband, who died of the plague, Widbrandis was summoned to the deathbed of another reformer’s wife, Elisabeth Butzer, who was also stricken with the plague. The dying woman pleaded with Widbrandis to marry her soon-to-be-widowed husband. Marilyn Yalom writes, “This deathbed appeal from one woman to another says something about the kind of people they must have been: a wife concerned for the future well-being of her husband, a widow whose reputation for goodness and hard work had preceded her. Widbrandis married Butzer the following year.”²⁴ Butzer wrote of his appreciation for his second wife, while still grieving over the death of Elizabeth.

This story is not unusual. For most of history, marriage has been a practical necessity. Until industrialization, economic work has centered in the home and children were needed to share the work. When a husband or wife died (which happened frequently), the living spouse had to find a new spouse as soon as possible, to share the work and parenting.

The Sixteenth & Seventeenth Centuries

By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, thanks to the spread of literacy and the printing press, and to poets and playwrights, especially Shakespeare, romantic love was a familiar theme in Europe. But the advice literature, medical treatises and sermons of the time overwhelmingly rejected both romantic love and lust as appropriate reasons to marry.

“Falling in love” was considered a “mild form of insanity, in which judgment and prudence were thrown to the winds.” [25] To protect the young from impulsively marrying on the basis of love, most European countries made marriage under the age of 21 illegal and invalid unless done with the consent of parents or guardians. (In England this became law in 1753.)²⁶

The Puritans²⁷ were children of the Reformation in England and America. Despite their reputation, they were anything but squeamish about sex.

Samuel Willard, the author of the most complete textbook of Puritan divinity in the late seventeenth century, frequently expressed horror at “the Popish conceit²⁸ of the Excellency of Virginity.” The New England clergy, the most Puritanical of the Puritans, believed that sexual intercourse was a human necessity and marriage the only proper context for it. They taught that sexual love is good in itself, not only for procreation, and they discouraged abstinence. William

Whateley's conduct book, written in 1623, encouraged "mutual dalliances²⁹ for pleasure's sake" in bed, with wives having the same rights to initiate sex and experience sexual satisfaction as their husbands! The poet John Donne (1571-1631) wrote that lovemaking was about uninhibited mutual pleasure, a union of body and soul.

Being totally realistic about the power of sexual temptation, especially in the young, the Puritans encouraged early marriage. It was the parents' duty to find suitable husbands and wives for their children. "Suitability" must include spiritual compatibility, mutual attraction and affection. William Perkins wisely warned, "He or she who marries where they affect not, will affect where they marry not!" In other words, you'd better marry someone you're attracted to, otherwise, you will surely be attracted to someone you're not married to. While economic concerns were normal in matchmaking, Puritan ministers forbade parents to arrange marriages purely for economic gain or against the will of their children.

There was only one limitation the Puritans placed on marital affection and sexual relations: they must not interfere with religion. The chief purpose of humanity is to glorify God, and all "earthly delights" and pleasures must serve that end, not compete with it. John Cotton wrote, "Husband and wife must not become so transported with affection that they look at no higher end than marriage itself."³⁰ In other words, marital love is not to be treated as an idol.

The Protestant Reformation introduced two important characteristics of marriage that were continued by the Puritans.

First, the Reformation challenged the dualism between “sacred and secular” and “spirit and body” that placed theological study, the church, monasticism and celibacy above marriage, family, sexuality and childbearing. It restored the biblical vision that all of life is spiritual, except for sin; and in the process, dramatically raised the status of marriage and the wife, and helped create a new model of family relations, which is still with us. Also, love (including sexual attraction) now belonged within marriage, rather than in romanticized adulterous affairs.

Second, the Reformers and Puritans also shared a vision of marriage which serves a higher purpose—the glory of God and his Kingdom. This helps us understand the “unromantic” deathbed-arranged marriage described earlier.

These Reformation couples understood themselves as companions and partners in nurturing their children’s moral development and in creating a Christian community. Encouraged to read the Bible in Luther’s vernacular translation, they began a tradition of mixed-gender Bible study that is still with us. The wives shared their husband’s zeal for the Reformation and the many dangers and hardships that resulted from the religious strife.³¹

And their generous practice of Christian hospitality was formidable,

welcoming orphans, extended family, traveling teachers, and religious refugees into their homes, often for long periods of time. These families took literally Jesus' teaching that as we welcome the needy and the stranger in his name, we welcome Jesus Himself.

The Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries

By the late eighteenth century, it was almost universally assumed that young people would decide for themselves whom to marry, though parental consent was still important.

Mutual attraction was increasingly valued. During the late eighteenth century in New England, rural parents often encouraged young courting couples to sleep together, fully clothed, within the safety of the family home, to test their attraction! This practice was called "bundling," and ministers often preached against it. During the heyday of "bundling," (the 1780s), there was, not surprisingly, a surge in premarital pregnancies in New England. Nearly 30% of brides were pregnant on their wedding day.³² In the 1830s, more than 20% of brides were pregnant.³³

Romantic love and the romantic novel grew together after 1780. Initially novels were considered harmful, particularly for women, because they implicitly taught women to act on their feelings, and encouraged an "extravagant and false view of life."³⁴ But gradually, romantic love became a respectable motive for marriage among the propertied classes. By the 1850s, the vision of romantic love elaborated in books and magazines became the only acceptable

basis for marriage, more important than family connection, financial prospects or religious affiliation.

Jane Austin wrote her novels in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. All of her heroines insist on marrying for love and not economic security. They hold out against formidable family and social pressures, and—lucky for them—end up getting love and money! Austin's novels invariably end with a wedding (or two). The way her characters develop give the readers confidence that these will be good marriages, but we are left to imagine how love sustains the couples in the daily, unromantic challenges of family life. Her stories encourage a romanticized picture of marriage for her heroines.

While young people enjoyed their increased freedom to marry for love, this new ideal brought problems of its own. Successful courtship now depended on “falling in love” which could not always be arranged. A young minister told a friend in 1797, “I now must wait to be impelled by some (irresistible) impulse.”³⁵ Young people struggled to recognize what the feeling of love is so they might not mistake it for other feelings. Ellen Rothman writes, “Efforts to measure love involved a series of negative calculations: it must be “more compelling than friendship, more lasting than passion, more serious than romance.”³⁶

The marriage of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert was a famous love match, which did not start out that way. I highly recommend a

BBC production (on DVD) of their story.

WHERE WE ARE TODAY

While some extremist groups attack marriage directly, Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher describe the contemporary war on marriage as not so much a “frontal assault from outside enemies but a sideways tug-of-war inside each of us between competing values: between rights and needs, between individualism and community, between fear and hope, between freedom and love. On the one hand, we cherish marriage as the repository of our deepest hopes and wishes to forge stable families, to find lasting love. On the other hand, we fear being ‘tied down’ or ‘trapped’ and jealously guard our right to redefine ourselves and our lives, with or without our partners’ consent.”³⁷

Feelings of Cynicism

There is widespread cynicism about marriage as a lifelong commitment. In the United States today, only 56% of all adults are married, compared with 75% thirty years ago. Laura Kipnis, author of *Against Love, A Polemic*, writes, “For a significant percentage of the population, marriage just doesn’t turn out to be as gratifying as it promises. In other words, the institution itself isn’t living up to its vows.”³⁸

For many, Christian marriage is particularly intolerable and unrealistic because it restricts sexual intimacy to monogamous, lifelong, heterosexual marriage. From all quarters, we pick up the

message, directly and indirectly, that healthy people have active sex lives (whether they are married or not).³⁹ The fact that sex is now readily available without marriage is one significant reason for fewer and later marriages.

In earlier centuries, it was not uncommon for brides to be pregnant on their wedding day. But those couples did not generally have sexual intercourse until they were engaged. As the twentieth century progressed, it became increasingly common for couples that were dating or going steady to be sexually intimate (at some level).

But on secular college campuses today, not only is sex disconnected from marriage (present or future plans), but from dating and romance. One student writes, “College is about casual sex, hooking up and one-night stands, often when drunk.” It’s sex unburdened with meaning. Not surprisingly, STD’s are at epidemic levels on secular college campuses today.

I wish I could say that attitudes and behavior are totally different among Christians. But many professing Christians seem to experience very little dissonance between their faith and casual sex. One sixteen year old told me that she had sex because it was easier than talking. Some are sexually promiscuous, while dreaming of a future Christian marriage to a wonderful godly spouse. There seems to be no connection in their minds between the lives they are living now and the futures they envision for themselves. No question about whether the godly spouse of their dreams would want to

marry someone who is living as they are now and no questions about the impact of their present choices on their future moral character and their ability to be faithful to a spouse.

Our culture still saturates us with an updated version of the medieval ideology of romantic love. Marriage and family are too banal for romance. Grand romantic passion can only happen in adulterous affairs.

For example, in *The Bridges of Madison County*, after a three-day affair, Robert, a divorced National Geographic photographer, tells Francesca, the wife of an Iowa farmer, “My whole life has brought me here to you...Do you think love like this happens to everyone? We’re hardly two separate people. We’re fused. This kind of certainty comes but once in a lifetime...is it right giving it up? Don’t throw us away...Come away with me.”

In this genre of romance stories, the grand passion is fleeting, unfulfillable and ultimately a fantasy. If Francesca went off with Robert, what are the chances that he wouldn’t neglect her like he did his first wife, through his obsession with photography and travel? The everyday routines of life would inevitably change their relationship, and their romance would be tarnished with their guilt and the pain inflicted on Francesca’s husband and children. While knowing these things in our heads, these kinds of stories can still breed discontent with our marriages, and tempt us to throw away a good but imperfect marriage (there are no perfect ones!) to chase a

fantasy. The book, *The Bridges of Madison County*, by the way, was incredibly popular—a runaway best seller for many months.

In America today, divorce is so commonplace, that it is possible to speak of “A Divorce Culture” as Barbara Defoe Whitehead does in her book by that title. According to one estimate, half of all marriages made in the mid-1970s will end in divorce. And for marriages made more recently, some demographers project that as many as 64 percent will end in divorce.⁴⁰

Whitehead writes: “With each passing year, the culture of divorce becomes more deeply entrenched. American children are routinely schooled in divorce. Mr. Rogers (taught) toddlers about divorce. An entire children’s literature is devoted to divorce.” While well motivated, these books, movies and T.V. shows “carry an unmistakable message about the impermanence and unreliability of family bonds. Like romantic love, the children’s storybooks say, family love comes and goes. Daddies disappear. Mommies find new boyfriends. Mommies’ boyfriends leave. Grandparents go away. Even pets must be left behind.”⁴¹ Not surprisingly, many children of divorce are extremely cynical about marriage as a relationship of permanent commitment.⁴²

Tragically, divorce is sometimes necessary, and the lesser of evils, but far less frequently than is often assumed. While many Americans prefer to believe that children are infinitely resilient and divorce does no long-term damage to them, all the evidence points

the other way. Longitudinal studies tracking the impact of divorce on children over a twenty-five-year period have shown on-going negative consequences, including greater difficulty in forming permanent marital commitments themselves.⁴³ It turns out that children are not always better off when the parents are happily divorced rather than unhappily married.

There are many movies and T.V. shows that are cynical about the possibility of healthy male/female relationships or marriage, frequently depicting men and women as mutual predators. Lee Siegel, writing for the *New Republic*⁴⁴ describes the popular T.V. series *Sex in the City* as “an assault on heterosexual romantic hope.” The four single thirty-something women who are looking for love and happiness in the city are constantly trashed by the creepy men they have sex with, and the women themselves alienate the only decent guys in the show by their own creepy behavior. I recently learned that (at least in California!) professed Christian women have *Sex in the City* parties, where they get together to drink martinis, watch reruns, and air their grievances about men.

Marriage is Still Popular

Despite rampant cynicism, marriage is still very popular, and for good reason. Contrary to commonly held anti-marriage myths, research consistently shows that married people live longer, are healthier, wealthier, happier, and have more satisfying sex lives than single people.⁴⁵

There is a decline in the proportion of Americans marrying, and especially, marrying successfully, yet marriage remains an extremely important goal to most Americans. Ninety-three percent of Americans rate “having a happy marriage” as either one of the most important or very important objectives.⁴⁶ Yet, they fear this may be impossible to achieve.

Several years ago, I audited a class on Feminist Theory at Clarke University. A number of women in the class expressed a longing for a reliable, faithful husband who would enable them to raise children at home. But their mothers had stayed home with children and their dads had walked out, leaving them poor and with no job skills. They realized that they had to be financially independent, whether they married or not. Similar fears motivate many people to begin marriage with pre-nuptial contracts as insurance, just in case the marriage fails.

Even when the word “marriage” is not spoken, there is a longing for what marriage represents—a permanent relationship of love and commitment. Think of the popularity of romantic comedies (especially among single women). All romantic comedies are about finding Mr. (or Ms.) Right, or finding your soul mate. The implication is that this is the person you will spend your life with.

But intrinsic to these movies, is the assumption that a certain chemistry—reciprocal romantic love—is the ONLY basis for a lasting relationship. For example, here’s a letter sent to Dear Abby’s advice

column in 1998:

DEAR ABBY:

I have been engaged to a wonderful man for more than two years and cannot seem to set a wedding date. He loves me and my 9-year-old daughter. He does all of the laundry, the dishes and the cleaning, and he accepts my daughter as his own. He works two jobs so we don't go without anything.

Sounds perfect, right?

The problem is, I don't think I love him. I say that I do, but I don't feel it. He is all a woman could ask for in a husband, but is that enough to replace love? Or have I read too many romance novels?

He wants to get married as soon as possible. I am 29, have never been married and I feel my daughter needs a father. I am also afraid I won't find a man who will ever love me as much as he does. Can I find a man whom I love, who accepts my daughter as his own—or should I marry a man I don't love but who would be a wonderful husband and father?

FOR BETTER OR WORSE

Abby's response:

DEAR FOR BETTER:

If you marry this man, knowing in your heart that you do not love him, you will be doing yourself and him a great disservice. Marriage is supposed to last forever. And forever is a long time to live with yourself, feeling that you sold out because you were afraid you wouldn't find a man

you can love. Let him go.⁴⁷

Think about the assumptions behind this correspondence. With the exception of a wedding ceremony, all of the elements which anthropologists recognize as universal to marriage and family are already present in this relationship: They are living together, raising a daughter together, working together for the family's well-being, and (presumably) having a sexual relationship. On top of that, the man's feelings and actions prove that he loves the woman and her daughter very much. The only thing missing is a feeling of romantic love on the part of the woman. (She wonders herself whether her doubts comes from too many romance novels!) Yet to Abby, since the woman's romantic feelings do not match the man's, all those universal elements of marriage/family that already exist should be thrown away.

Though she promised to marry him over two years ago, this woman has no obligations to the man who has sacrificed so much for her and her daughter; nor does she have any duty to her daughter, who has come to know him "like a father."

This is the ethic of expressive individualism at work. When your highest obligation is to yourself, it becomes your moral obligation to leave a marriage or (or virtual marriage), when you experience any personal dissatisfaction with it. It is your moral obligation to break promises and solemn vows.

Finding Your Partner Today

There is widespread anxiety today about how to find a spouse. Dick and I have heard the same complaint, over and over again by single thirty-something friends. The men say, “There are no good women left” while the women complain, “there are no good men left.”⁴⁸

Since Americans are marrying later, they are less likely to meet their spouses in school or college. The pattern at Christian colleges is different, and more students are engaged by graduation. This is not necessarily good; for example, when Christians interpret romantic and/or sexual attraction as the Holy Spirit’s clear guidance. Divorce statistics for Christian college graduates are not that different from divorce statistics for the general population.

Single men and women spend most of their time at work, but fears of sexual harassment suits have made dating co-workers risky. Some companies even forbid it. The bar scene is horribly depressing. If you do not meet people at church (or L’Abri) or some kind of voluntary club, where can you meet potential spouses?

It should not be surprising that matchmaking has become a huge on-line business, catering to the generation that already surfs the web for everything else. There are websites for every group, including busy professionals, Christians, and those who want to hook up just for sex.

In the first half of 2003, Americans spent \$214.3 million on

personals and dating sites. Forty million Americans visited at least one online dating site in the month of August 2003.⁴⁹

The web opens up a vast pool of potential mates, unlimited by contexts of time, history or space. Clearly there are negatives to this. There is the shopping metaphor: with your profile and photo, you sell yourself—or different versions of yourself—to different websites.

The absence of any real life context makes it much easier for people to deceive, use, cheat on and dump each other and then disappear into thin air, without a trace.

There is also the temptation to never commit to a good relationship, because of over-choice. If I just put one more new, improved profile on a few more websites, and give it another six months, I may find the perfect man or woman of my dreams! You can now check and find out whether the person you are seriously dating really has removed his or her profiles from dating sites.

But I don't think on-line dating is all negative. I heard an Indian woman on public radio who said she wouldn't mind an arranged marriage, but the traditional Hindu marriage broker was too expensive and knew too few men who fit her and her parents' specifications for a husband. She considered on-line Indian courtship as a kind of arranged marriage, enabling her to show her parents a dozen profiles of men who fit both her and their

requirements for a husband.

The web is the route for those who want to be pro-active and there are many happy stories of couples that have found each other on-line.

Others, however, are resisting what the *N.Y. Times* calls the “Dating Industrial Complex,” the barrage of websites, matchmaking services and books.⁵⁰ The obsessive search for a partner requires a lot of time and energy and more are deciding to “let romance happen by chance not commerce.”⁵¹

Trusting to chance, fate or serendipity is reinforced by huge numbers of romantic comedies, which tell stories of a secularized Providence bringing people together.⁵² Often their trust in serendipity leads them to break existing engagements and to other questionable behavior (as in the John Cusack movie *Serendipity*). I spoke with a woman recently who told me that her sister (a Christian) breaks up with her boyfriend every time she watches a romantic comedy. Now there may be good reasons for her to break up with him, but that is a very poor one! One Christian seminary professor and counselor say that romantic comedies often function for women as pornography does for men—as addictions to fantasies.

There is certainly a need for Christians to come up with healthy alternatives to our culture’s dating chaos. Some Christian families

are adopting one or another so-called courtship model.⁵³ Historically, arranged marriages have been successful, and in some cultures, they still are today. But cultural context is enormously important, and where marriages have been arranged, the practice has been common and supported by the entire culture. Also, young people ordinarily have had veto power (except among the upper classes and royalty). It is particularly important in a culture like ours, which puts such a high premium on romantic attraction, to remember the wise admonition of the Puritan preacher: “Those who marry where they affect not, will affect where they marry not.” Mutual attraction should never be the only consideration, but it is an important one.

MARRIAGE IN THE BIBLE

Beware of Idols

God’s greatest gifts are those things we are most likely to treat as God substitutes, or idols. Throughout history, marriage and family have served as some of the most powerful idols.

In the parable of the great dinner (Luke 14:15-24), a dinner guest exclaimed to Jesus, “Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!” Jesus responded with a surprising story about the different excuses people will make to avoid “eating bread in the kingdom of God.” The first couldn’t come to the banquet because he had to inspect his new field; the second had to try out his new oxen; and the third just got married. The master was furious and sent the servant out to bring in the poor, blind, lame and anyone else who

would come. Jesus ended with the words, “For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.”

Think about this. The invited guests turned down an invitation to feast with God the Father and Son at their Kingdom banquet! They turned down salvation! The three excuses given represent three universal idol systems, which in every age have served as God substitutes. They are property or wealth, work and marriage/family.

Some of Jesus’ most disturbing statements are direct challenges to the idolatry of marriage and family. [54] For example, “unless you hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even life itself, you cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26-27).

Jesus relativized marriage and blood family, making them subservient to the Kingdom of God. To Jesus, the “first family” is the family of God’s adopted children, which we enter by being born again. The biological family is the “second family.” [55]

When his family came looking for him, Jesus asked, “Who are my mother and my brothers? Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:31-35, Mt. 12:46-50, Luke 8:19-21).

Paul consistently used family language to describe the Church. He too saw the biological family as secondary to the Church, the “first family.”

For Romans and Jews, marriage and childbearing were mandatory duties. Probably the most radical challenge to the idolatry of marriage was Jesus and Paul's teaching that singleness was a high call for the sake of the Kingdom of God (Mt 19:12). Paul wrote that marriage brings distress and anxieties, especially at times of crisis. He recommended the single life because unmarried men and women have a vocational freedom to serve Christ with "unhindered, undivided devotion" that is impossible for married people (1 Cor 7:28-38). The immediate context of Paul's advice was probably the imminent destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 A.D.

I recently reread the amazing story of Gladys Aylward, a London parlormaid who went to China in 1930. Her missionary work in war-ravaged China made her a legend in her own lifetime. [56] During her time in China, Gladys fell in love with a Nationalist Chinese officer, Colonel Linnan. "Few love affairs can have flourished in circumstances stranger than that of Gladys and Linnan. They met at odd moments in the mountains, in shattered villages, in bombed towns. They talked at odd moments between battles and births and baptisms. They exchanged scraps of news, had a meal together, and talked of the future they would build in the new China. His concern, his gentleness, his tenderness toward her never wavered. They discussed marriage; he was eager that they should marry at once, live together as man and wife as best they could, war or no war. It was Gladys who said, 'No.' The war had to be won first. Marriage, their personal happiness, must wait." [57]

By this time, Gladys was an adoptive mother to five Chinese orphans and several adults and she was spying on the Japanese invaders. They found out and put a price on her head. A fugitive, ill, and without money or food, she led 100 homeless children in an epic journey across the wild Chinese mountains to safety. Soon after, she collapsed in delirium and was not expected to live. Colonel Linnan found her, as she was recovering, and implored her to marry him. But now, “Instead of that inner exultation, the rounded delight of knowing that she loved and was loved in return, there was this nagging anxiety to do the right thing by her God, her children, and the man she loved...There was so much work to be done for the Lord, and she, the small woman, the small disciple, had her part to play in that work.”

(Weeping, she) “said good-bye to him at the station outside Sian, and walked back through the narrow streets with an overwhelming ache of loneliness in her heart, aware that she would never know completely if she had acted wisely or not—only that through all her waking days she would remember Linnan as the one man she had loved. The war swept him away and she never saw him again.”⁵⁸

How do you react to this story? If Gladys Aylward’s painful decision to refuse marriage to the man she loved seems totally unthinkable to you, I would suggest that marriage may be an idol in your life. Her situation was an exact illustration of Paul’s teaching in 1 Cor 7 and of Jesus’ call to take up the cross and follow him. Personal

happiness is not our highest calling. The Kingdom of God is.

Marriage can be an idol in itself, but it can also serve other idols, like the State, as in ancient Rome. It can serve materialistic idols of upward mobility, the love of money, the American dream. [59] The recent Cohen brother's film, *Intolerable Cruelty* is a very funny and canny depiction of those who use marriage and divorce as a means of getting richer (repeatedly marrying and divorcing "up"). [60]

Marriage can also serve the idol of motherhood and procreation. Jesus challenged this idol when a woman cried out to him, "Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!" Without denigrating motherhood, Jesus expanded her view of womanhood, saying, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!" The blessing of discipleship is accessible to anyone—man or woman, young or old, married or single, parent or not. Jesus rejected the common view that a woman without children was by definition "barren," "cursed" and outside of God's blessing (Luke 11:27-28).

Marriage can serve the idol of individual personal happiness, as in the Dear Abby letter.

If you have a list of qualifications for the spouse you want to marry, check that list carefully for idols. Does your mate have to be a beauty queen (or king)? I have met a surprising number of Christians (mostly men) who have a list of physical qualifications,

like “she must be at least 5’8” tall, blond, have a good figure,” etc. Perhaps Christian women have similar lists, but are less honest about admitting it, I don’t know.

Remember the words of Proverbs 31:30: “Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman (or man) who fears the Lord is to be praised.” Even the most gorgeous grow old, wrinkle, change shape, and are vulnerable to defacing accidents and illnesses. If a particular definition of beauty is too important to you, you will be attracted to other people, especially as your spouse ages.

It is good to be romantically and sexually attracted to your spouse. But if a fantasy version of romance and sexual fulfillment are number one on your list of specifications, you will start looking outside your marriage for more exciting romance and hotter sex.

All idols kill love and therefore undermine or destroy marriage. When we treat marriage as an idol, we put impossible demands on our spouses to fill the place of God for us. When the state, work, money, power, happiness, children or sex are idols, anyone who gets in the way of those goals is crushed.

What is Marriage?

Some Pharisees tried to test Jesus by drawing him into a contemporary Jewish debate about divorce. They asked him, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?”⁶¹

Rather than choosing sides in the debate, Jesus referred them to the central issue, the created nature and purpose of marriage.

“Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

What do we learn here about the nature and purpose of marriage? It is a heterosexual union between a man and a woman. It means leaving the parent/child relationship and establishing a new social unit. While Scripture commands us to respect and care for birth family members, the center of commitment, submission, loyalty, and decision-making is now with the new couple.

Marriage is “cleaving,” or “adhering to” your partner, exhibiting the strong commitment to the new relationship. The Hebrew word means “loyal affection.”

“Becoming one flesh” is the purpose and goal of the leaving-cleaving complex. Jesus says they are no longer two, but one, having been joined together by God.

The sexual union is an expression of the whole person union of marriage. It accomplishes many good purposes; for example, procreation, unity and pleasure.⁶² And the Bible never ranks these purposes or justifies marital sex by them.

Paul commanded married couples not to deprive each other of their conjugal rights. He assumed the woman's sexual desires and needs as much as the man's, as well as their equal rights to initiate sexual intimacy and experience sexual pleasure (1 Cor 7).

Similarly, the writer of Proverbs exhorted husbands to "rejoice in the wife of your youth" for the rest of your lives (i.e., as she ages!). May her breasts satisfy you at all times; may you be intoxicated always by her love" (Prov 5:15-23).

Recently, two large national sex surveys concluded that married couples experience the most satisfying sex, physically and emotionally, than any other group. Another national poll found that married men and women (many of them church goers) with "traditional" ideas about the meaning of sex as a sacred union, exclusive to marriage, and a sign and symbol of their conjugal commitment, experience the best sex of all!⁶³ Given our culture's myths about "hot sex," these statistics may seem surprising. But if we believe God made sex for marriage, we shouldn't be surprised.

The problem with non-marital sexual intercourse is that it performs a life-uniting act without a life-uniting intent, and thereby violates its intrinsic meaning. What God hates about it is not the sex act itself, but the walking away afterward, the exploitation and abandonment of the person you have been "one flesh" with. It is also sin against our own bodies, which are united with Christ and temples of the

Holy Spirit.

We also learn from Jesus' teaching that marriage is a covenant, a solemn oath or pledge of a man and woman to each other unreservedly. Marriage was created to be a life-long union. But because of the brokenness of a fallen world, the New Testament allows divorce in cases of radical covenant breaking, like adultery or desertion, where in effect, one partner has already abandoned the marriage. But this is a far cry from divorce for reasons of "incompatibility" or because one is "no longer in love."

In Malachi 2:14, the Lord presents himself as witness against the husband who breaks faith with his wife, the wife of his youth, "though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant." Malachi calls divorce for reasons of incompatibility hatred or dislike "violence," a treacherous breach of the marriage covenant.⁶⁴

Weddings and Public Vows

David Blankenhorn writes, "To understand why the United States has the highest divorce rate in the world, go to some weddings and listen to what the brides and grooms say. In particular, listen to the vows...(because) it is the content and the integrity of the dedicating promise itself—what we say and mean when we say 'I do'—that shapes the nature and destiny of the marriage."⁶⁵

If a man and woman promise to stay together "as long as love lasts," their only hope is that the feelings of love they have on their

wedding day will endure, and they will be some of the lucky ones who beat the divorce statistics.

The power in the traditional Christian marriage vows is that they force a man and woman, at the beginning of their marriage, to anticipate the worst-case scenarios for their future together. In the presence of God, family and friends, they vow to each other: “In the Name of God, I take you to be my wedded husband/wife, to have and hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer; with all my worldly goods I do thee endow; in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, and forsaking all others, keep myself only to you, until we are parted by death. This is my solemn vow.”

With such grim vows, why are weddings usually times of joy and celebration, dressing up and flowers, feasting, drinking and dancing? Because a man and a woman are making such an amazing, unqualified promise of love and fidelity, with their eyes open, having faced the grim possibilities of what may go wrong in the future. There is no romanticism here. My husband Dick calls these vows a “pre-emptive strike against cynicism.” “Am I really willing to love and support him/her in chronic disease, accident, bankruptcy, betrayal, disappointment, suffering and loss, all the while knowing that we will both change in unpredictable ways? Am I willing to face my own sin, vanity, jealousy, selfishness in the confidence of God’s forgiveness, but also in my own willingness to apologize, forgive and be forgiven by my spouse? The realism and

humility that makes a relationship to God possible starts a couple in the direction of honest love for each other.” [66] This is the only sure way to experience marriage as “good news.”

The traditional marriage vows, made soberly and in the fear of God, provide a solid foundation for facing the inevitable uncertainties of life, with a partner who is committed to standing with you to the end. It is fitting to make these vows in a public ceremony, because marriage is not just a private decision, but also a public act, with profound legal and social meaning. This is something worth celebrating with friends and family who are committed to supporting your marriage into the future.

Is Laura Kipnis right that the institution of marriage itself “isn’t living up to its vows?” I don’t think so. We have either redefined the vows (and marriage) so that there is very little to live up to, or we have made solemn marriage vows and broken them ourselves.

The Courtship Model

Is there a particular model of “courtship” in the Bible? No! As in history, there is great variety of ways biblical couples met and married, and a similar variety of motives.

Isaac and Rebekah’s marriage was arranged by Abraham, who sent his servant to kin, in order to find a wife for Isaac among believers. It is a story of God’s providence and answered prayer, which included the girl’s choice. She willingly agreed to leave her family and marry

a man she had never laid eyes on. Their meeting is one of the more romantic stories in the Bible: the servant told Isaac all that had happened, “then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah’s tent. He took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother’s death”(Gen. 24:66-67).

Moses met his wife Zipporah at a well, just as Abraham’s servant met Rebekah at a well. The men met the women at work, not in some romantic setting. They were in the midst of their daily chores, drawing water for the family’s needs. Caleb offered his daughter as a prize to whatever man defeated an enemy city.

Joseph was given Pharaoh’s daughter in marriage. Surely there were political motives in that match.

Bloodline and inheritance was very important in ancient Israel. Levirate marriage was established in the law as a way to assure the continued name and inheritance of a husband who died before having a son. It was the duty of the dead husband’s brother or next-of-kin to marry the widow. Their firstborn would carry on the name of the deceased brother, so that his name would not be blotted out of Israel.

The book of Ruth tells the story of a woman in this situation, who, under the guidance of her mother-in-law, approached her dead husband’s relative, an older man named Boaz. She lay down next to him in the night, and asked him to perform the duty of the next-of-kin

and marry her. He agreed and praised her for putting family loyalty before her desire for a younger husband, whether poor (presumably for love) or rich (presumably for money). Ruth and Boaz married and had a son named Obed, who became the father of Jesse, the father of David, the forefather of Jesus.

In Proverbs 31:1 the King's mother gives her son advice about the kind of woman he should choose to marry. So this was not to be an arranged match.

The Song of Songs is an extraordinary love poem, most of it voiced by an anonymous black woman. She is in love, and is assertive and uninhibited about sexual desire, as is her lover. There is reference to a wedding, but it is difficult to discern a clear story line. Bruce Walke believes there is a love triangle with a King and a shepherd in love with the same woman, whose heart is with the shepherd. I don't know. What is clear is a lot of erotic language and sexual initiation on the part of the woman as well as the man she loves, and there is a wedding, so this is mutual married love.

I Cor. 7 is clear that from God's point of view, men and women are equally free to choose marriage or singleness. (First century Roman and Jewish parents would not have agreed.) Paul says if a widow decides to remarry, "she is free to marry anyone she wishes" (and there were many young widows in the early church). Paul's only stipulation was that believers marry believers. He also exhorted the Thessalonians to "learn how to take a spouse for yourself honorably,

rather than to wrong or exploit a sister or brother lustfully.”⁶⁷ Marital choice again seems to be assumed.

A Different View

The alternative to a cynical rejection of marriage on the one hand and an idolatrous inflation of marriage on the other is not achieving some golden mean of “medium sized hope” in the middle. It is building our marriages on a different foundation altogether—on the biblical worldview, and the Christian Story.

In our confusing culture, it is a temptation to romanticize the past, and think that finding a mate used to be easy. I don’t think it’s ever been easy. I’ve only given a few highlights, but the history of courtship reveals different kinds of struggles for men and for women in every culture and era. There is no one sanctified model of courtship, no foolproof paradigm that will guarantee a successful, happy marriage. Whether to marry, when to marry, who to marry, how to find him or her...are all part of the life of faith, of trusting God to hold our hands, and walk with us into a future that we are blind to but He is not. The priorities of the Christian life in general, apply here. “Seek first His Kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well”(Mt. 6:33).

As J.R.R. Tolkien wisely said, “Nearly all marriages, even happy ones, are mistakes, in the sense that almost certainly (in a more perfect world, or even with a little more care in this very imperfect one) both partners might be found more suitable mates. But the real soul-mate is the one you are actually married to.”

FURTHER REFLECTION

To those who are addicted to romantic comedies, and are incapable of breaking the habit cold turkey, start by being selective about the ones you watch.

My Big Fat Greek Wedding and *Monsoon Wedding* are antidotes to the extreme individualism of most romantic comedies. They show marriage as embedded in large, extended families, with many stakeholders.

Monsoon Wedding tells the story of an arranged Indian marriage. The couple marries very soon after meeting for the first time. This movie deals realistically with the sense of anger and betrayal the fiancé feels when his soon-to-be-bride tells him, the day before the wedding, that she has been having an affair with a married former boyfriend. But it also shows the power of grace, as he forgives her, and thanks her for her honesty they put past sins behind them and commit themselves to a faithful marriage.

High Fidelity has a lot of bad language and some sexually explicit scenes, but it is a very brilliant and funny story of a thirty-something man whose only accomplishment in life has been to “keep his options open” because of his terror of commitment. In the course of the story, he starts to recognize the self-deceptive pattern in all his romantic crushes and their inability to deliver happiness. He

gradually moves toward wanting what he calls the “steady low-watt-glow” of marriage.

Movies that depict real marriages, like *A Beautiful Mind*. Read biographies of single and married people who have served God fruitfully, like *Shadow Lands*.

And spend time with married couples and families whom you respect and can learn from.

ENDNOTES

¹ Genesis 2:18

² Denis de Rougemont, *Love in the Western World* (Princeton New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 300 back to article

³ Psalm 16:4

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid, p. 3

⁶ Marilyn Yalom, *The History of the Wife* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), p. xiii, p. 22

⁷ Yalom, p. 22. Pseudo-Demosthenes expressed the pervasive

Classical Greek male ideal (in the 4th century B.C.E.): “We have mistresses for our enjoyment, concubines to serve our person, and wives for the bearing of legitimate offspring.” See Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), pp. 2-3

⁸ Pomeroy, p. 159

⁹ Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad, 1987) p. 262

¹⁰ Euripides, *Hippolytus*

¹¹ de Rougemont, p. 74, 110

¹² Yalom, pp.60-65. In the movie *Being John Malcovich*, the puppeteer portrays the story of Abelard and Heloise.

¹³ Yalom, p. 58

¹⁴ Proverbs 30:18

¹⁵ “The Emergence of the Modern American Family,” Carl Degler, p. 70

¹⁶ Yalom, p. 68

¹⁷ de Rougemont, p. 292

¹⁸ Ibid, pp. 73-74

¹⁹ Yalom, pp. 98-105

²⁰ Yalom, pp. 101-102

²¹ Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (A Mentor Book, Abington Press, 1955), pp. 223-225

²² Ibid, p. 236

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Yalom, p. 102

²⁵ Stone in Wing to Wing

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Ibid, pp. 108-145

²⁸ “too high or favorable opinion of”

²⁹ playful flirtation

³⁰ Edmund S. Morgan, "The Puritans and Sex" in *The American Family in Social Historical Perspective*, p. 312

³¹ Yalom

³² "Martyrs to Venus" in *The New Republic*, October 28, 2002, p. 36
a review of the book *Sexual Revolution in Early America* by Richard Godbeer

³³ Ellen K. Rothman, *Hands and Hearts: A History of Courtship in America* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 45-46

³⁴ Rothman, p. 31 b

³⁵ Ibid, p. 31

³⁶ Ibid, p. 36

³⁷ Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially* (New York: Broadway Books, 2000) p. 2

³⁸ Laura Kipnis, "The State of the Unions: Should This Marriage Be Saved?" in the *New York Times* OP-ED (Review of the Week), Sunday, January 25, 2004, p. 15

³⁹ See *Time* magazine on the health benefits of an active sex-life, January 19, 2004

⁴⁰ Barbara Defoe Whitehead, *The Divorce Culture: Rethinking Our Commitments to Marriage and Family* (New York: Vintage Books of Random House, 1998), p. 44

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 11

⁴² Whitehead, pp. 188, 128

⁴³ Judith S. Wallerstein, Julia M. Lewis, Sandra Blakeslee, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A 25-Year Landmark Study* (New York: Hyperion, 2001).

⁴⁴ "Who is Carrie Bradshaw really dating? Relationshipism" by Lee Siegel in *New Republic*, November 18, 2002, p. 30-33

⁴⁵ Waite and Gallagher

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 3

⁴⁷ Yalom, p. xi

⁴⁸ Barbara Defoe Whitehead, *Why There Are No Good Men Left: The Romantic Plight of the New Single Woman* (New York: Broadway Books, 2003)

⁴⁹ For instance, Match.com, Nerve.com, Dream-Mates, The Right Stuff, eHarmony and eCrush, TurboDate, HurryDate, 8minute Dating and It's Just Lunch

⁵⁰ Books like *Surrendered Single*, *Find a Husband After 35 Using What I learned at Harvard Business School*, and *Make Every Girl Want You*

⁵¹ *New York Times*, Sunday Styles, Section 9, November 30, 2003, pp. 1, 12

⁵² For instance, *Love Actually*, *Sleepless in Seattle*, *You've got Mail*, *Happencance Serendipity*, *Notting Hill*, *Ever After*, *It Could Happen to You*.

⁵³ For one model, see Mars Hill Audio (Ken Meyers), "Wandering Toward the Alter" tape 3, end of side 1

⁵⁴ Luke 9:59-62, Mt. 8:21, Mt. 10:34, Mark 10:28-31, Luke 18:28

⁵⁵ Rodney Clapp, *Families at the Crossroads* (Downers Grove, Ill: Intervarsity Press, 1993), chapter 4

⁵⁶ Alan Burgess, *The Small Woman* (New York: Dutton & Co., 1957)

⁵⁷ Ibid, pp. 189-190

⁵⁸ Ibid, pp. 251-252

⁵⁹ The early 20th century novelist Edith Wharton shrewdly chronicled and critiqued the practice of marriage and divorce as vehicles of social ambition and economic advancement. (See *The Custom of the Country* and *The Glimpses of the Moon*). In these novels, marriage and divorce are the “domestic equivalent of acquisitive capitalism, motivated by the same principles of self-interest, power and competitive advantage. See *The Divorce Culture*, p. 24

⁶⁰ On this theme, see Edith Wharton’s novels, referenced in *The Divorce Culture*

⁶¹ D.A. Carson, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Matthew 13-18 (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1995), p. 411

⁶² C.T., Philip Yancy article pointing out that humans are wired to be able to have sex far more frequently than is necessary for reproduction, and far more than any other species in the animal kingdom.

⁶³ Waite and Gallagher, chapter 6

⁶⁴ David Clyde Jones, *Biblical Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI:

Baker Books, 1994), p. 191

⁶⁵ David Blankenhorn, "I Do" in *Wing to Wing, Oar to Oar: Readings on Courting and Marrying*, p. 77 back

⁶⁶ Dick Keyes, manuscript of book on Cynicism, chapter 19

⁶⁷ 1 Thess. 4:3-6

Who Invented Adolescence?

I have come to realize that what our culture calls and associates with "adolescence" is not a universal phenomenon. In fact, it is a very recent historical phenomenon.

Youth Culture and Growing Up

It is impossible to think about "growing up" in modern America without considering the role of the "youth culture."

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There are few issues that have generated more political heat and extreme rhetoric; more anger and hatred; confusion and pain, than the issue of homosexuality.

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Marriage is a good gift of God. And like all of God's gifts, it can function as an idol, or God substitute. Marriage can also function as a means of serving other idols.

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