PERSPECTIVES ON MARRIAGE

A READER

THIRD EDITION

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CHAPTER 8

Cohabitation and Marriage as a Life-Process

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In Chapter 7, the first part of the NCCB Marriage and Family Committee report on cohabitation is presented. It documents empirical information about cohabitation and marriage. This chapter addresses pastoral issues and questions raised by the data. However, the framework, analysis, and proposed solution enter a different paradigm from the NCCB report.

This essay steps back from the immediate issue of cohabitation. First, it reframes the issue by setting it in a larger context of a stage theory of marriage. It proceeds to highlight some pertinent social science research. Conventional pastoral responses of the Christian churches to the topic are described. The essay concludes with distinguishing different forms of cohabitation and reevaluating the practice in light of the distinction.

In this previously unpublished essay, Kieran Scott highlights the emergence of a developmental meaning of marriage that has come to the fore in the latter half of the twentieth century. Marriage is interpreted as a process, a series of steps or stages. Enriched by the creative work of Adrian Thatcher, Scott advocates that marriage is sufficiently encompassing to cover premarital cohabitation. By their intention to marry, the couple has already embarked on the process. This step, in turn, can lead to sacramentalizing the marriage. But during this in-between time, their sexual activity can be loving, faithful, and morally responsible.

Questions for Discussion

1. The NCCB report defines cohabitation as "both having a sexual relationship and living together in the same residence." Is this definition adequate? What might be missing in it?
2. Christian marriage in the modern period has accommodated enormous changes. Indicate examples of remarkable flexibility in the areas of ceremony, sacramentality, spheres of love, divorce, equality of partners.
3. Do you find the current response of your church adequate to the widespread practice of cohabitation? Why? Does it distinguish between types of cohabitation? Should it, in its moral evaluation?
4. Should Scott and Thatcher's moral evaluation and pledging ritual be extended to gay and lesbian partners? To postmarried people?

Widespread cohabitation is a fairly recent phenomenon. It has become a major social phenomenon in the past 25 years. Its upsurge spans both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, and even most parts of the Western industrialized world. Churches seem perplexed, if not paralyzed in their response to the phenomenon. Pastoral ministers are still learning how to address the issue in marriage preparation. Many of them identify cohabitation as the most difficult issue they deal with in marriage preparation programs and pre-marriage counseling (NCCB, 2000).

This chapter takes a fresh look at cohabitation. It makes some critical distinctions as a way of seeking a moral re-consideration of the issue. First, a framework is set for our proposal by offering a stage theory of marriage. Second, current social science research is presented on the topic. Third, some traditional pastoral solutions by the churches are described. Finally, a moral reassessment of the issue is proposed in light of historical precedent and contemporary personal and pastoral needs.

A STAGE THEORY OF MARRIAGE

The celebration of a couple's marriage in church is generally the high point of their growing union. It is the point of no return. It solemnizes this union as the couples mutually administer the sacrament. The assumption, however, that marriage *begins* at this point is false. This assumption has gravely weakened our theology of marriage, and the efforts of the churches in commending marriage and ministering to couples in postmodern times. A wide and deep sense of our own Christian history tells us: the marriage nuptial in church is not the beginning of marriage. Contemporary psychological theory, legal proposals and faith development perspectives support this historical perspective.

Evelyn and James Whitehead, in *Marrying Well* (1981), write about the demise of marriage as a state and its survival as a journey. Marriage as a stable state is gone. Divorce functions in our consciousness as one of the outcomes of marriage. Married couples find fidelity a new and unexpected challenge. New resources are needed to navigate the unexpected turns, detours, and passages. These continuing shifts and challenges give marriage the appearance of journeying. It is not a location in life, a place where we live, but rather a relational pattern of movement, a way we travel through life. The Whiteheads capture well this rich developmental psychological perspective. They write: "Understood as an institution, marriage has been a state that one either did or did not inhabit. Legally, a person is either married or not married; there is no in-between. The Christian Church, influenced by this legal orientation toward marriage, came to view marriage as an either/or situation." They proceed to note: "Outside this well defined state no sexual sharing was permitted; once inside this institution, one could even demand one's sexual rights. There seemed no gradualness or development in this commitment; one was either in or out. The period of engagement and of marriage

preparation were anomalies; little effective attention and ministry could be given to these 'borderline' events" (1981, 98). The fundamental thesis of the Whiteheads is to oppose this legal framework and to propose marriage as relational process. In theological language, marriage is a personal covenant between individuals.

Some decades earlier Margaret Mead sensed the emergence of some crucial cultural changes that were impacting marriage. In particular, she named shifting attitudes toward sex and commitment. Sex, for most Americans, has become a natural activity, like eating and sleeping. "We have come to believe also," she wrote, "that asking physically mature young people to postpone sex until their middle twenties is neither fair nor feasible. . . . [Also] We believe in commitment, but we do not believe that commitments are irrevocable" (1970, 76–78). The succeeding years would bear out Mead's observations. She discerned an emerging gap between belief and experience, between precept and practice in relation to the style of marriage at the time. She asked: "How can we invest marriage forms with new meaning?" (76). Can we create new patterns that would (1) give young couples a better chance to come to know each other and (2) give children a better chance to grow up in an enduring family? In response to her own questions, Mead proposed marriage in two steps.

We need two forms of marriage, Mead wrote: an *individual marriage* and a *parental marriage.* One can develop into the other, though it need not. Each has its own possibilities and special forms of responsibility.

The first step in marriage would be the *individual marriage.* It might be called a "student marriage" or a "companionate marriage." It would be a licensed union, a serious commitment, entered into in public and validated and protected by law and, for some, by religion. The central obligation of the couple to each other would be an ethical, not an economic, one. Each partner would have a deep and continuing concern for the happiness and well-being of the other as long as they wished to stay together. Children and commitment to future parenting are not part of this marital form. In the individual marriage, the couple has a chance to know each other, grow into each other's life and develop meaningful relationships of choice. It could also open the way to a more complex marital form, namely, a parental marriage, or it may allow the couple to part without guilt or recrimination.

The *parental marriage* is the second step in Mead's analysis of marriage. It is explicitly directed toward the founding of a family. This second type of marriage always follows on an individual marriage—no matter what stage in life. It would have its own license, ceremony and responsibilities. It would be more difficult to contract. The couple needs to demonstrate their economic ability to support a child and marital skills to foster a quality marital relationship. This would be a marriage that looks to a lifetime relationship with links to the wider community.

While I have reservations with some of Mead's proposal, I affirm three aspects of it: (1) her concern that couples have a better chance to come to know each other, (2) her concern that children have a better chance to grow

up in an enduring family, and (3) her recognition that marriage is a development journey.

On the canonical and liturgical levels, there has also been a growing awareness of the depth and development of faith in relation to Christian marriage. The issue tends to surface when a baptized Catholic couple requests a nuptial for their church wedding. The couple is ready to enter into the covenant of marriage with each other. However, they may not possess a faith sufficiently alive to affirm that their relationship is a reflection of the love of Christ and the Church. In other words, they are unable to state that their marriage is an explicit participation in that covenant. The only choice facing the couple at this stage is: celebrate a sacrament in which they really do not believe or enter a marriage relationship not recognized by the Christian community.

James Schmeiser (1981) describes a marriage program initiated by the diocese of Autun, France, that permits these baptized Catholic couples a further option in order to respond to this situation. The Autun diocesan pastoral team believes it was important to develop a notion of Church as "catechumenal" or as a "place of welcome and freedom." This would offer each person a way of experiencing himself/herself as he/she is and provide a structure that offers a real choice. The diocese proposed diverse forms of reflection and celebration in accordance with different situations. It would recognize different choices and respond to these choices. No longer would there be only two possibilities: sacramental marriage in the church or civil marriage. The diocese of Autun proposed three forms of marriage.

The first form of marriage is *civil marriage.* The marriage takes place at city hall and is registered with the State. The Church recognizes the value of this commitment and its permanence. The married couples are welcomed publicly in Church. An implicit affirmation or openness to faith is required; in as much as they are one with family and friends, for whom faith is a living reality.

The second form of marriage is *welcomed civil marriage.* This may not be the most appropriate naming, but it follows the civil marriage. In this case, the baptized couple believes in God but is very distant from church practice and is not receptive to celebrating the sacrament of marriage. It has little or no meaning for them. Yet, they desire a religious ethos and a religious manner of expressing their commitment and personal beliefs before family and friends. The Church welcomes and opens itself to the couple, helps them to reflect upon their faith and discover the realities of their love, as it testifies to its own faith. The couple is asked to declare their intentions before the community. The celebration may take place with the full participation of the assembly in the ritual. The ritual has a rich religious dimension to it. But it is not the sacrament of marriage. The marriage, however, is registered in a special church register.

The third form of marriage is *sacramental marriage.* This is celebrated by a couple of deep faith. They wish to symbolize the covenant of Christ and the

Church. The Gospel will guide their married life. It will be a sacrament. The couple celebrates their sacramental love before the community. The community, in turn, commits itself to support them.

In these three forms of marriage, then, a civil marriage is seen as a true and important step; a welcome civil marriage provides a religious ceremony, which is recognized as non-sacramental; and the sacramental marriage is an explicit form of covenantal grace. As Schmeiser notes, "This approach recognizes possible growth within the marital relationship. There is a recognition of various stages of marriage" (33).

SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH AND COHABITATION

As indicated above, the emergence on various levels of a stage theory of marriage sets the framework for an ethical re-assessment of cohabitation. Before we turn to this re-examination, however, we need to get a clear and accurate handle on the scope of cohabitation. The social sciences offer us extensive empirical information on the phenomenon.

Cohabitation is pervasive and growing. In the US, between 1970 and 1980, Census Bureau data recorded a tripling in the number of cohabitating couples to over 1.5 million. Between 1980 and 1990, there was a further increase of 80%, to 2.9 million couples. In 1990, unofficially, there were actually between 3 and 8 million cohabitating couples. Similar figures and trends have been found in the UK (Thatcher, 2002).

Cohabitation is common both before marriage and after it. A little over half of all first marriages are preceded by cohabitation. The trend crosses all age groups and all first world countries. Some additional pertinent data is worth noting:

- Cohabitants are as likely to return to singleness as to enter marriage (Thatcher, 2002, 7).
- Slightly more than half of couples in first time cohabitation ever marry (NCCB, 2000).
- The median duration of cohabitation is 1–3 years. One third of couples cohabit for less than a year. 16% live with their partner for more than 5 years.
- Half of all cohabiting couples are young, unmarried or not yet married, and childless.
- Persons with lower levels of education and earning power cohabit more often and marry less often.
- Some people choose cohabitation as an alternative to marriage, not as a "trial" for it.
- Cohabitation is more likely to occur where religious belief is weak. However, there is no difference in frequency of cohabitation by religious denomination.

- Cohabiters may be more likely to divorce than people who marry directly from the single state. They divorce at a rate of 50% higher.
- Cohabiters with plans to marry report no significant difference in relationship quality to married people.
- The reasons for cohabitation vary: the growing secularization and individualization in first world countries; sexual, social and economic changes; peer pressure; fear of long-term commitment; desire to test the relationship; waiting to conclude higher education.

This cumulative data indicates one striking fact: cohabitation, as a contemporary phenomenon, is having a profound impact on marriage and family in postmodern times. Lost in the data, however, is adequate attention to different forms of cohabitation. Three types can be distinguished. First, there is temporary or casual cohabitation. This is entered with little thought or commitment. The second type is conscious preparation for marriage, a trial run as it were. The third type functions as a substitute for marriage (Thatcher, 1999). These distinctions will be vital in our ethical re-assessment of cohabitation and the needed pastoral responses of the churches. Let us turn first to the traditional responses of religious bodies to cohabitating couples.

TRADITIONAL PASTORAL SOLUTIONS

Cohabitation is disapproved in all the *official* documents of the Christian Churches and by many Christian theologians. The official belief is: people should not have sexual intercourse before they marry. This teaching, however, is widely disregarded by church members (practicing and non-practicing) and, as noted above, almost universally disregarded. In spite of this mismatch between traditional church teaching and the convictions and practices of its members, official church teaching cannot bring itself to sanction cohabitation before marriage. The unanimous teaching of the churches remains: sexual intercourse must be confined to marriage (Thatcher, 2002, 41).

The Roman Catholic Church condemns cohabitation. Such a relationship is seen as a false sign, contradicting the meaning of a sexual relationship. It violates the Church's teaching about sexual love and marriage. It is condemned under the rubric of "free union" and is considered a grave offense against the dignity of marriage. However, there is acknowledgement of the pastoral difficulty in dealing with this issue. Two extremes are to be avoided: (1) immediately confronting the couple and condemning their behavior and (2) ignoring the cohabitation aspect of their relationship. A middle road is suggested as the wisest strategy: integrate general correction with understanding and compassion; use it as a "teachable moment" in such a way as to smooth the path for them to regularize their situation. The assumption is that they are in a disordered state of sexuality, a state of sin (NCCB, 2000).

The Orthodox churches also strongly disapprove of cohabitation. Officially, they are reluctant to raise the question of sexual activity outside of mar-

riage. The response from the evangelical churches is generally the same, and a similar position is taken by the Lutheran, Presbyterian and Episcopalian Churches. They all affirm: sexual intercourse properly belongs exclusively within marriage. Some committee reports, however, from some of these churches seek some pastoral accommodation to living together. However, there is near unanimous consensus in all official teachings: living together before marriage is wrong.

This traditional position is based on a threefold argument:

1. It situates sexual intercourse within the context of the bond of marriage. Any non-marital sexual intercourse then is wrong. Cohabitation, in this situation, is a sign of lack of discipline and giving in to the spirit of the times.
2. Cohabitation is a threat to marriage and family. Marriage, as Christians understand it, is a communal event undertaken with the intention of unlimited commitment. Cohabitation, on the other hand, tends to be private, lacking communal sanction and unlimited commitment.
3. Thirdly, cohabitants tend to create less stable relationships when converted into marriage (Thatcher, 1999, 106).

For a constructive re-assessment of cohabitation, the concerns expressed in this traditional argument need to be heard, given additional consideration, and, at the same time, outweighed by a most persuasive counterargument. This is the task of the rest of this essay.

COHABITATION RECONSIDERED

Contemporary theology (and religious studies) has to perform a double act of listening. It must listen to the voices of its traditions and the voices surrounding those traditions. It must be able to make connections between the Christian tradition and ordinary life—if the gospel is to be capable of touching and transforming people. In light of the topic at hand, a Christian theology of marriage must take seriously both the Christian traditions of marriage and the difficult challenges facing marriage today. High on the list of these challenges is the phenomenon of cohabitation. Adrian Thatcher (1999, 2002) offers a serious, substantive and lucid vision of marriage. What is creative about his proposal is: it incorporates some forms of cohabitation. I am indebted to Thatcher in opening up this new (yet old) perspective in his groundbreaking work.

Key to Thatcher's proposal is his basic distinction between two types of cohabitation. There is a form of cohabitation within which the couple intends to marry. They are engaged and on their way to the altar. This is prenuptial cohabitation. There is also a form of cohabitation where the couple has no plans to marry. Here cohabitation is an alternative to marriage. It is non-

nuptial cohabitation. For Thatcher, there is a qualitative difference between the two forms. They are not equal, and there ought to be a corresponding difference in moral judgment about the two types of relationship. It seems unjust to bring those who intend to marry and those who do not under the same rubric, namely, fornication.

However, Thatcher offers a still stronger argument for treating engaged couples in a different category from those who merely live together. His argument is an historical one. We could also call it deeply conservative, i.e., preserving deep strands within the tradition. In Christian history, there are two traditions regarding the beginning of marriage. The traditional or conventional view is that a marriage begins with a wedding. An earlier Christian view, however, is that marriage begins with a pledging and binding of the couple to each other with a promise to marry. (The quaint sounding term betrothal captures the meaning of this view better than our own current term engagement.) This nuptial pledging of the couple was followed later by the marriage ceremony. Sexual experience regularly began after the couple's pledge to marry (i.e. betrothal) and before the wedding ceremony (i.e. the nuptial). This pre-modern distinction between spousal (pledging) and nuptial (wedding) has largely been forgotten today. Yet, it holds the key as to when marriage begins. Does marriage begin with the wedding or is the entry into marriage a staged process, with the wedding marking the "solemnization" of a life commitment . . . already well begun?

Thatcher (1999) offers us a meticulously documented history on the question. The widespread belief that a marriage begins with a wedding, he demonstrates, was not so much a religious or theological issue but a class matter. From the mid-eighteenth century onwards, in England and Wales, the middle and upper classes had the political clout to enforce the new marriage laws requiring the registration and ceremonial ritualization of marriage. Also new courtship procedures in the upper classes required prenuptial virginity of brides—for social rather than moral reasons. However, for most of Christian history marriage did not begin with the wedding. The entry into marriage has been by spousal pledge or/and betrothal ceremony. John Gillis proceeds to note, "Betrothal constituted the recognized rite of transition from friends to lovers, conferring on the couple the right to sexual as well as social intimacy" (1985, 47). Sex began at the moment of engagement. The marriage in church came later, often triggered by the pregnancy. Half of all brides in Britain and North America were pregnant at their weddings in the eighteenth century (Stone, 2001). So pre-marital sex is not simply a modern phenomenon. The only significant difference is: throughout most of Christian history it was mostly and truly pre-marital; i.e., it was part of the process of marrying. But with the current loss of the central importance of the spousal pledge (and betrothal rite), Adrian Thatcher claims, "Gone with it is the sense of entry into marriage as a process, liturgically marked and celebrated and sometimes revocable in cases of serious difficulty or incompatibility. Gone too is much of the social recognition of the in-between status of the couple" (2002, 46).

Thatcher's agenda is to recover this earlier (and biblical) understanding of the entry into marriage. It is essential, he believes, to the future of marriage in the new millennium. It also holds the possibility of transforming the perception of cohabitation with the intention to marry, from the domain of sin and fornication to the domain of marital beginnings of mutual growth and religious development. Crucial, of course, to this transformation is the distinction between forms of cohabitation. It is laissez-faire, promiscuous, nonnuptial cohabitation that is damaging to the couple (and to any children they may have). On the other hand, faithful, committed cohabitants with a clear intention of getting married are qualitatively different. They ought also to be considered, in Christian ethics, morally different.

Finally, Thatcher asks: how can the churches pastorally support this moral reassessment? He proposes the reintroduction of betrothal (the pledging of the couple), as well as the ritual betrothal, and of seeing betrothal as already part of the process of marriage. Thatcher argues: marriage itself is a process and a liturgically celebrated engagement could become a significant symbol of the beginning of that process. This, in many ways, is a pre-modern solution to our post-modern marriage crisis.

The operating assumption in Thatcher's approach, then, is that the meaning of marriage already belongs to premarital cohabiters. By their intention to marry they have already embarked on the process that leads to the solemnization of their marriage. Unlike most cohabitating couples, betrothal was "emphatically premised by the intention to marry." It was never an end in itself. It was open "to the probability of future marriage." It honored the sacredness of marriage.

In pre-modern times, betrothal could last up to two years. It served valuable functions. The couple had the opportunity to grow intimately together. The couple's families and the community came together to support the upcoming marriage. Couples discovered whether their union could produce children. Churches supported these unions. And they also supported breaking them under certain conditions.

Today, however, the formal process around marriage generally only takes one day, the wedding day. The reclaiming of the notion—and the ritual—of betrothal helps us to see marriage again not as a simple event, but as a "process." This, in turn, would enable couples to begin to explore the sacred dimensions of their bond before they solidify their union for life. It would support them in the process of linking the various stages of their relationship. And, of vital importance, it would help couples to weave their relationship into the larger social fabric of family, community and church. In this regard, Adrian Thatcher concludes: "If the entry into marriage were accepted as a process which involved, as steps within it, betrothal and ceremony, the anomalies presented to the church by cohabitees could be more easily handled. Furthermore, the actual availability of a betrothal liturgy or liturgies would help considerably in providing the missing language, which renders cohabitation socially problematic. It would also meet the concern that, while marriages are public, cohabitation is private [McGowan, 2001]. A betrothal

ceremony would provide precisely the public language and community dimension which are currently properties of weddings" (Thatcher, 1999, 131). In a word, it would be a public act, with public legitimation.

We can summarize some conclusions from this study:

First Christian morality should not assume that all premarital sex is wrong. It is not. Nor ought we to assume that the nuptial has always been normative. It has not.

Second, to distinguish between pre-nuptial and non-nuptial forms of cohabitation, we must open up the possibility of a moral re-assessment of the issue.

Third, there is no longer any provision for a two-staged entry into marriage, engagement and ritual solemnization. Some current practice of cohabitation could be read as a return to earlier pre-modern sensibilities rather than as a rejection of Christian marriage.

And, finally, reclaiming the notion and the ritual practice of betrothal may be of service to the Christian churches in the construction of a post-modern theology of entry into marriage.

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