

# *To Marry or to Cohabit?*

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My all-time-favorite undergraduate paper examined what critics called Chaucer's "marriage group debate."... The Wife of Bath, who has outlived several husbands, comments and argues in the interludes between the pilgrim's tales that marriage depends upon the mutual respect, equality, and freely chosen commitment between marriage partners. Other travelers see her emphasis upon interpersonal relationships as a formula for social chaos and a violation of the natural order: duty, not love, holds a marriage together. Various stories are told to illustrate the different points of view, and in particular the claim that either wives or husbands are necessarily dominant in (and often unfaithful to) a marriage.

In fact the marriage debate is a lot older than Chaucer, and its key issues seem not to have changed one iota from his time to ours, or for that matter since classical antiquity. In *Women and the Common Life: Love, Marriage, and Feminism* (Norton, 1997), Christopher Lasch offers a brief but astute socio-literary history of the classic tension between the free personal equality implicit in romantic love, on the one hand, and on the other, those constraints, expectations, and obligations necessary for a marriage to endure for a lifetime and to provide for the financial security, adequate nurture, appropriate socialization, and due legal inheritance of children. When those constraints deteriorate, as Gertrude Himmelfarb argues in *The Demoralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values* (Knopf, 1995) and again in *One Nation, Two Cultures* (Knopf, 1999), both divorce rates and illegitimacy skyrocket: children are the worse for it, and so thereby is the society as a whole.

Two very recent books within the marriage debate are particularly rich in potential for parish ministry and for general conversation about marriage within the church. First on that list is Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People are Happier, Healthier and Better Off Financially* (Doubleday, 2000). The subtitle is long but it gets the book's main idea down to half a sound bite, which seems to be the current trend in subtitles. Marriage is actively good for you; it's not just an outmoded, useless, confining, abusive, bourgeois, patriarchal institution. The creative achievement of the book is its array of evidence: no matter how you look, where you look, what you ask, or how carefully you control for confounding variables, married people are better off than people who are not married. People who live together "without benefit of clergy" do not reap the same rewards. All of the data on which the book is based comes from nationally representative samples and from studies published in major, reputable academic journals: this is world-class social science in highly readable form. That's not surprising: Waite is a sociologist at the University of Chicago. Gallagher is a journalist and I presume it may be thanks to her that Waite's statistical data are explained with such engaging pizzazz. Their argument is straightforward, cleanly organized, and eminently readable.

Waite and Gallagher are appropriately cautious about assigning causalities: when they speculate about reasons why, they make it very clear that they are speculating. But over and over again they suggest that this wide array of down-to-earth, practical goods follow reasonably from sustained commitment and mutual support, and that such compassionate commitment is in turn supported by how marriage is a publicly acknowledged social form. It should come as no surprise that reviews have been very few and at best quite skeptical: how can commitment be good for us? What about the ideal of rugged individualism, and the popular portrait of divorce as an act of courageous, costly, self-redemptive self-realization? Yet another genuinely important book is falling quickly from the cultural horizon.

... *The Case for Marriage* could be very engaging for high school students or young singles, especially if paired with all the data demonstrating that the more often one cohabits the less likely one is to marry successfully. On that point, see another title from the University of Chicago and environs: Robert T. Michael et al., *Sex In America: A Definitive Survey* (Little, Brown and Company, 1994). That's the readable, general-audience version of their massive academic tome, *The Social Organization of Sexuality* (University of Chicago Press, 1994). They also document that married people have the best and most frequent sex, and furthermore that we are overwhelmingly faithful to marriage vows. It's amazing stuff.