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# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

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## The Marriage Education Movement: A Theological Analysis<sup>1</sup>

John Wall

In this essay I will analyze and critically assess a social phenomenon that has risen to prominence in the past decade in North America and Europe. This phenomenon is known broadly as “the marriage education movement.” Of course, marriage education *per se* has almost certainly existed in one form or another for as long as there have been marriages. Couples about to get married, or seeking to strengthen their marriages, have generally been able to find counsel, interest, and support from various parties around them: parents, extended family members, friends and elders in the community, and/or professionals like clergy, doctors, and lawyers. What is new about the emerging “marriage education movement” today is that it grows specifically out of the profession of marriage therapy. Its approach is to help couples improve their actual or prospective marriages by teaching them therapeutically-oriented communication skills.

My thesis is that while the marriage education movement provides valuable tools for couples to strengthen their marriages, it cannot be sustained effectively on a therapeutic basis alone. To help marriages in a meaningful and lasting way, marriage education needs to be expanded beyond the interpersonal dynamics of communication to include education in broader social and public dimensions of marriage as well. In this respect, marriage education today would benefit from a greater critical understanding and appreciation of the now largely forgotten marriage education perspectives of the Christian tradition. Specifically, I will argue that the Christian marriage traditions insist that marriages are not just interpersonal relationships but also public and social institutions. Any movement to educate couples in marriage will be self-defeating if it does not grasp this larger context through which marriages are sustained and given meaning.

While it is common to speak of marriage as an “institution” today, it is precisely this social and public dimension of the marital relationship that a therapeutic perspective cannot adequately grasp. The notion of marriage as an institution is often thought to encumber couples with stifling duties and obligations that get in the way of marital happiness or equality. But in fact the social and public dimensions of marriage to which this term points are crucial to whether a marital relationship will thrive or fail. In addition, I will argue, understanding the public and institutional nature of marriage is essential for resisting marital patriarchy and oppression.

The marriage education movement grew out of a therapeutic tradition that sought in part to free individuals from cultural and social burdens. But today marriages are faced with a new set of problems. Now that couples can enter and exit marriages with ease, they have to negotiate not only their relationship’s interpersonal dynamics, but also the deeper basis of their commitment to one another. In addition, the larger social frameworks upon which couples have historically been able to depend are decreasingly able to offer marriages their support. Our increasing economic mobility places couples further from their families of origin; shifts in work patterns and globalization often fragment the support for couples which can be found in their communities; and fewer and fewer children grow up with models from their own parents of what a lasting and healthy marriage might look like. Here again, couples may need help examining not just the interpersonal but also the social and cultural dimensions of their marriage.

The marriage education movement should be affirmed for giving couples valuable communication skills that help strengthen relationships. However, these skills alone, without attention to their wider social contexts, are potentially self-defeating. The suggestion that marriages only need skillful communicators risks accelerating the erosion of social, economic, and public supports upon which strong marriages depend. A truly effective marriage education movement should seek ways to help couples relate interpersonal skills to broader social and cultural practices that integrate their relationships into larger familial, economic, cultural, and public contexts of support. The Christian traditions, and in particular the many clergy already involved in the current marriage education movement, stand in a strong position to help this movement embrace this broader educative task.

As I will suggest in the conclusion, marriage education could integrate both interpersonal and institutional ways to strengthen marriages through the notion of marriage as a covenant. Educating couples in their marital covenant, rather than just their marital relationship, would enable couples to build strong marriages that do not just rely on their ability to negotiate their needs effectively with each other. This broader view of marriage education would also help couples learn how to integrate with each other’s families, handle economic interdependence, gain support and sus-

1 A version of this essay is also appearing in Adrian Thatcher, ed., *Christian Marriage, Edinburgh, Scotland* (T&T Clark) 2001. The author would like to thank Bonnie Miller-McLemore and Don Browning for comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

tenance from the community and the workplace, negotiate spiritual ideals for the marriage, and, perhaps most important of all, struggle with the possibilities (or actualities) of parenting. In what follows I will examine the specific meaning given to "covenant" marriage in the Protestant Reformation in the 1500's. However, the notion of covenant marriage education that I develop in the conclusion will expand this view considerably to integrate it with insights from the other Christian marriage traditions I will take up.

This essay does not make a *confessional* critique of marriage education therapy, in the sense of bringing a Christian witness to bear on secular (in this case therapeutic) culture. It is instead what the great twentieth century Protestant theologian Paul Tillich called an exercise in mutually critical *correlation* or conversation. My goal is to suggest ways in which major Christian marriage traditions could help *reform* the marriage education movement so as to better meet its own fundamentally laudable goal of strengthening contemporary marriages. The insights of the marriage therapy tradition are important and valuable and offer a solid basis for further conversation and development. They also offer necessary critiques of traditional Christian perspectives. But the marriage education movement should in addition be subject to critique from the point of view of the Christian marriage education traditions that have so deeply influenced how marriage is entered and supported in the West. Ultimately, I will support what has been called a "critical familism" approach to marriage.<sup>2</sup> Critical familism avoids the two extremes of affirming family and marriage only in their traditional forms, and denying that family and marriage should take any particular form at all. It is pro-family and pro-marriage, but only under the critical conditions of equality, non-patriarchy, and non-oppression.

To these ends, this essay first examines the present marriage education movement itself and the therapeutic ideals and values by which it is driven. Then it develops three sustained Christian analyses of these ideals from the perspectives of, respectively, Catholic subsidiarity theory, the Reformed Protestant covenant model, and the more recent possibilities emerging out of liberation theology. Each of these theological perspectives can be viewed as adding a new layer to what it means to educate and strengthen couples in the social and public challenges of their marriage. They are meant to have broad significance beyond just Christian communities for contemporary Western marriage culture as a whole. In the conclusion, this essay draws together the therapeutic and above theological perspectives into an integrated and new vision for how the marriage education movement itself may be reformed and made more effective today.

2 Don Browning/Bonnie Miller-McLemore/Pamela Couture/K. Bryolf Lyon/Robert Franklin, *From Culture Wars to Common Ground: Religion and the American Family Debate*, Louisville, KY (Westminster John Knox Press) 1997.

### The Marriage Education Movement and Its Ethic of Health

The marriage education movement itself has now grown into a diverse cultural phenomenon involving not only therapists but also clergy, rabbis, teachers in schools and colleges, business executives, and even leaders of government. These groups are united by their desire to strengthen marriages in whatever ways they can, preferably before and during their formation. They want to do something about the enormous personal and social costs which social scientists now believe result from weak and broken marriages. Broken marriages have now been shown to have, on average, serious and lasting negative consequences for couples in the form of decreased health, depression, shorter life expectancy, and for women in particular fewer economic resources.<sup>3</sup> In addition, divorces usually have long-term negative effects on the physical, emotional, and financial well-being of children as well.<sup>4</sup> And finally, broken marriages can negatively affect society at large by making couples and children on average less economically productive and more prone toward crime.<sup>5</sup>

The groups above united in the 1990's around strengthening marriage and formed a "movement" in the best sense of the term. They are a grassroots up-swell in multiple sectors and levels of society which have joined together around a common and pressing goal. There are clergy and rabbis who want to provide more meaningful guidance to couples they join together in holy matrimony. There are teachers in schools and colleges who want educational means to counter increasing confusion among youth about what a good marriage looks like. There are divorce lawyers who want to have an alternative to litigation when couples come to them on the brink of separation. There are business leaders who recognize the benefits of strong marriages to workplace productivity in their employees. And there are public policy makers and government leaders who see in marriage education a means for attacking trenchant social problems like youth crime, educational decline, and economic inefficiency.

Despite its diversity, however, the marriage education movement has its origins and finds its driving ideals squarely in the profession of marriage therapy. In the early 1990's, a group of marriage therapists began to grow increasingly frustrated at having to treat couples whose marriages were already too far gone for help. Out of this frustration grew the now international Coalition for Marriage, Family, and Couples Education

3 Maggie Gallagher/Linda Waite, *The Case for Marriage: Why Marriage People are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially*, New York (Doubleday) 2000.

4 Judith Wallerstein/Julia M. Lewis/Sandra Blakeslee, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce*, New York (Hyperion) 2000.

5 David Popenoe, *Disturbing the Nest: Family Change and Decline in Modern Societies*, New York (Aldine de Gruyter) 1988.

(CMFCE) directed by Diane Sollee,<sup>6</sup> as well as a rash of new books and research on the skills couples need to prevent their marriages from getting to the point of no return. These therapists and therapy researchers adopted the language of "education" (instead of "preparation") in order to emphasize their goal of teaching couples the skills and tools needed to build and maintain healthy and long-term marriages for themselves.

What has made the marriage education movement attractive to such a wide range of groups is the essentially therapeutic idea that strong marriages can be achieved by teaching couples *interpersonal communication skills*. Communication skills are therapeutically grounded techniques for handling marriage's inevitable problems and conflicts. Perhaps the most widely taught skill is the so-called "speaker-listener technique," which is famously described in the classic co-authored book, *Fighting for Your Marriage: Positive Steps for Preventing Divorce and Preserving a Lasting Love*.<sup>7</sup> The speaker-listener technique helps couples hear and understand each other's point of view when contentious marital issues arise. Couples are handed a single piece of square tile representing "the floor." They then practice discussing a sensitive issue in their relationship while allowing only one partner to "hold the floor" at any given point in time. The partner *without* the floor can only summarize and repeat back what the first partner says. Couples switch the floor back and forth until each partner is satisfied that she or he has been adequately heard and understood. While marriage educators do not expect couples subsequently to carry a piece of tile around with them at all times, they do expect them to internalize the basic skill of taking turns listening to one another with care and attentiveness and repeating back significant points.

The marriage education movement is not monolithic in the communication skills it teaches. An alternative and sometimes complementary technique is for couples to learn how to separate out "problem discussion" from "problem solution," so that the full dimensions of a conflict can be probed calmly without either partner prematurely closing the discussion off.<sup>8</sup> By contrast, the respected marriage researcher John Gottman argues that couples should be taught communication "rules" like "softened start-up," not placing blame, being concise in one's expression of problems, and beginning all statements with "I" rather than "you."<sup>9</sup>

6 See the CMFCE web site at [www.smartmarriages.com](http://www.smartmarriages.com) for a view of this organization's stunning breadth and power to effect social change.

7 Howard Markman/Scott Stanley/Susan Blumberg, *Fighting for Your Marriage: Positive Steps for Preventing Divorce and Preserving a Lasting Love*, San Francisco (Jossey-Bass Publishers) 1994, 63-72.

8 Markman, *Positive Steps for Preventing Divorce and Preserving a Lasting Love*, 82-88.  
9 John Gottman, *The Marriage Clinic: A Scientifically-Based Marital Therapy*, New York (W.W. Norton & Company) 1999, 224-226.

Still other marriage educators promote techniques in such things as a "fair fight for change"<sup>10</sup> or, as in the title of one popular book, "getting the love you want."<sup>11</sup>

These and other communication skills are meant to apply to almost any kind of situation that may come up in a marriage, and they can be taught not just by therapists but also by anyone else concerned about marriages. Many clergy, for example, now teach these skills in anywhere from three to eight short sessions for couples who want to get married in their church.<sup>12</sup> Lawyers have been trained to introduce these skills when couples start inquiring about marital dissolution. Indeed, the American Bar Association produced a widely used video for youth about what communication skills one should use to prevent one's marriage from ending in divorce (even lawyers, apparently, are growing tired of divorce).<sup>13</sup> Some business leaders are now introducing marriage communication skills into employee training. Public officials are also in on the act. Government leaders in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in the United States, for example, in 1997 started the first broad-scale "community marriage policy." Here the whole range of above marriage professionals are organized into a coordinated and well-advertised city-wide effort to make sure that communication skills are imparted in one way or another to as many marrying and struggling couples in the area as possible.

What truly holds this movement together is not, however, just a shared set of communicative techniques, but also a shared ethic of marital health. The therapeutic techniques above are developed around a common therapeutic goal of promoting the health benefits of marriage for individuals and society. This can be seen by looking at how the prominent researchers in the movement understand a "good marriage." In general, communication skills have as their goal a marriage in which both partners enjoy greater personal fulfillment, satisfaction, and well-being.<sup>14</sup> The language of "health" is a therapeutic metaphor which the marriage education movement has embraced as standing for a range of personal and private goods. As sociologist Linda Waite puts it, marriage "matters" because it tends to provide each partner with better sex, more

10 Lori Gordon, *Passage to Intimacy*, New York (Simon and Schuster) 1993. This book is the basis for the widely popular PAIRS program, information about which can be found on its web site at [www.pairs.com](http://www.pairs.com).

11 Harvley Hendrix, *Getting the Love You Want: A Guide for Couples*, New York (Pocket Books) 1993.

12 One prominent example in the United States is the "Great Start" program developed by Robert Cueni at Country Club Christian Church in Kansas City, Missouri.

13 The video, titled *Partners for Students*, was created by Lynne Gold-Bikin, then Director of the Family Law Division of the American Bar Association, and is now used widely in high schools and colleges nationwide. See the video's web site at [www.abanet.org/family/partners/home.html](http://www.abanet.org/family/partners/home.html).

14 Markman, *Fighting for Your Marriage* (n. 4).

emotional fulfillment, and even greater physical health and longevity than they would otherwise enjoy.<sup>15</sup>

While no one should object to improving the physical and psychological health of married persons, the question remains whether promoting health is marriage's only or chief purpose and meaning. The marriage education movement does not generally get to this larger question. On the whole marital fulfillment and health are viewed as highly related to the private wishes and needs of the individual partners involved. The book *Fighting for Your Marriage*, for example, concludes with the following summary: "We've tried to provide tools that you can use to build a relationship that brings long-term fulfillment, and to protect your relationship from naturally occurring storms. But, like anything, once you have the tools, it's up to you what you do with them. As the ad says, 'Just do it.'<sup>16</sup> Marriage's sole meaning and purpose, on this view, is to promote long-term personal satisfaction *for you as an individual*. Here the "health" of marriage is not related to the well-being of the larger family system or any kind of binding marital obligation. Generally absent from this view of "good" marriages are the responsibilities partners may take on for each other or for their children. Marital health is measured simply by whatever each partner wants out of the marriage for his or her own personal benefit.

By emphasizing therapeutic techniques and goals alone, marriage educators risk inadvertently playing into a cultural individualism that in the end tears marriages apart. One implication of learning communication techniques could be that a marriage is valuable only insofar as it continues to satisfy one's own needs and wants. At its worst, communication techniques run the risk of teaching couples to think of their marriage as a utilitarian bargain. I will listen attentively to your needs and wants only because my own needs and wants stand a good chance of thereby being satisfied as well. Is there any broader meaning and purpose to marriage than the simultaneous personal fulfillment of each of its members? Is personal "health" an adequate goal toward which marriages should be educated? Is there anything more to marriage than being good at communicating one another's needs effectively?

#### Catholic Subsidiarity Theory

In order to gain some purchase on these questions, let us hold up the therapeutic goals above to three of the major Christian traditions of marriage. These traditions have now more or less disappeared from public

consciousness. Christian understandings of marriage are generally thought to have been replaced by more humanistic and secular ones. Even most clergy treat marriage formation and support as largely a therapeutic task using psychological theory and secular counseling techniques. However, the way we understand marriages today has in fact been deeply influenced by Christian marriage traditions, going back to not only scripture but also great thinkers like Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, and John Calvin. Most of us believe that marriage has important social, public, and even sacred dimensions that we are nevertheless hard pressed to articulate or explain.

By critically re-interpreting some of these deep marriage traditions, we will be able to conduct marriage education in a broader, richer, and ultimately more effective way. My claim is that collectively the Christian marriage traditions – at least the three major ones I take up here – add up to the view that marriage is about more than the private relationship of its partners, important though this relationship is. Marriage education should be an education – as it has in marriage ministries for most of the Christian traditions – in both its private and public dimensions at once. These dimensions are separated only at great risk to marriages themselves. Marriages fulfill broader social goods, rely on wider public support, and structure social arrangements at a deeper level than a therapeutic paradigm is by itself able to capture.

Let us look first at Roman Catholic subsidiarity theory, one of the most powerful but least well known models of marriage in the Christian tradition. The term "subsidiarity" was first used in official Catholic teaching by Pope Pius XI in 1931 in the context of the international labor movement.<sup>17</sup> Its roots, however, lie in the classic, 13<sup>th</sup> century natural law theology of Thomas Aquinas. Subsidiarity is a Latin term that literally means "furnishing help." It refers broadly to the theory that larger and more powerful social institutions should "furnish help" to less powerful social institutions – like families – without, however, taking over the natural functions which more specialized social institutions are uniquely suited to perform.<sup>18</sup> It affirms that families, small businesses, labor organizations, congregations, voluntary societies, schools, and so on have specialized functions that they alone are able to perform well. But it also recognizes the need for governments, industry leaders, policy makers, and religious hierarchies to support and fund these specialized groups if they are to be able to survive and flourish in a competitive and power-driven society.

Subsidiarity theory is a modernized expression of Aquinas' powerful and influential natural law theology. It brings natural law theology into

17 Pope Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno* (Forty Years After [Rerum Novarum]) 1931. *Rerum Novarum* (1891) is Pope Leo XIII's influential encyclical on the condition of workers.

18 For a good definition of "subsidiarity," see National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All*, Washington, DC (U.S. Catholic Conference) 1986.

15 Linda Waite, *Does Marriage Matter?* in: *Demography* 32, no. 4, November 1995, 483-507.

16 Markman, *Fighting for Your Marriage* (n. 4), 315.

the context of today's pluralistic, globalized, and complex world. Subsidiarity theory affirms the need for a diversity of specialized but interdependent social institutions to fulfill the diversity of the natural human goods that are created by God. These goods are designed to fit together under God's plan for human life, but in this world they often conflict and need intentional support and protection. Subsidiarity theory recognizes that natural human goods may not be as uniform as Aquinas supposed. But it retains the idea that such goods exist and are best fulfilled through socially-supported, specialized human institutions.

Applied to marriage, subsidiarity theory affirms at once the uniqueness of the goods of marriage and the dependence of these goods for their fulfillment on social structures outside of marriage. Marriage on this view exists for the purpose of special human goods like the direction of sexual desire toward mutuality and love, the procreation and raising of children, and the uniting of families around common emotional, social, and economic ends.<sup>19</sup> Marriage on this view is also one of the seven Catholic "sacraments," in that, like baptism, it participates in the peculiarly *spiritual* good of the union of Christ and the Church.<sup>20</sup> These various goods of marriage may be realizable in non-marital ways as well, but subsidiarity theory asserts that they are best brought together and most richly fulfilled under the specialized institution of marriage as such.

At the same time, marriage on this view cannot achieve its specialized goods without the help and support furnished by larger sectors of society. Subsidiarity theory views the fulfillment of marriages' private goods as deeply intertwined with the fulfillment of larger kinds of social and sacred goods as well. Child rearing, for example, cannot be achieved successfully without supportive practices of parents' employees, financial and legal aid from governments, spiritual help from the church, and social contexts like extended families and communities. To ignore the importance of the help larger groups should furnish is to deprive marriages and families of the opportunity to succeed in their own specialized tasks.

There is a certain sense in which subsidiarity theory blends nicely with the marriage education movement's emphasis on the good of personal marital fulfillment. It is no accident that Catholics have been amongst the movement's most vigorous and active supporters. Both agree that marriage education should support the specific capacities of couples to fulfill marriage's unique functions. Both are teleologically oriented marriage ethics, meaning that both are concerned with the fulfillment of marriage partners' goods or ends. One might even suggest that subsidiarity theory

19 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 2, ii, London (R. & T. Washbourne) 1917, q. 26; idem, *Summa Theologica* 3, Supplement, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, New York (Benziger Brothers) 1948, q. 41; idem, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, trans. Dominican Fathers, London (Burns, Oates & Washbourne) 1928, 3, ii.

20 Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 3, Supplement, q. 42.

could learn from marriage education therapy to assume even less of a grand natural ordering to marriage and to accept a greater relativity of possible marital goods, for example around contraception and choosing not to have children.

However, the strength of subsidiarity theory with respect to marriage education is that it insists on viewing marital goods as not merely the pursuit of whatever private and individual aims each partner may happen to desire. The purposes of marriage are not merely private and up the individual partners, although to some extent this remains the case. Rather, marriage serves specific functions that no other institution in society is able to fulfill as easily or well. This means that the aims partners choose for their marriage are not merely private but also of public value and significance.

Concretely, subsidiarity theory suggests, first, that marriage education should not ignore the greater social goods with which marriage is implicitly caught up. Marriage draws individuals beyond themselves to participate in wider and publicly shared social ends. For example, marriage includes such things as building a bond together *between* the couple, the potential social good of raising children, each partner's participation in fulfilling certain goods of their spouse's extended family, the couple forming a single unit of economic consumption and productivity, and even the marriage becoming a basis for socially active purposes like adoption. Marriage education therapists might well protest that whatever larger social goods are furthered through marriage should be the personal choice of each individual partner. However, the fact is that these social goods lie at the core of what makes marriage different from other kinds of human relation. In an important sense marriage *should* be formed with the possibility of children in mind (even if couples individually do not choose or are not able to have children), with an understanding of what it means to become an economically and legally bound unit, and mindful of the fact that each partner is joining not just another person but also their larger familial and social community. Therapists unnecessarily and unhelpfully limit the scope of what it means to have a *fulfilling* marriage. They generally assume that "fulfillment" can only refer to private and personal goods like sex, fun, and intimacy. *Marital* fulfillment, however, according to subsidiarity theory, is by definition also social, intergenerational, and communal.

But also, second, subsidiarity theory suggests that however marital goods themselves are understood, they cannot adequately become fulfilled without the participation of larger sectors of society. The marriage education movement implicitly acknowledges this by exhorting couples to seek professionalized therapeutic marriage skills training. In addition, experiments in cities like Grand Rapids, Michigan seek to ensure such training through the support of governments and communities. Interestingly, the most widespread and successful effort to involve communities

in marriage education is the Catholic-based Community Marriage Policy organized by Michael MacManus.<sup>21</sup>

However, these community supports for marriages are still largely limited only to helping couples to help themselves. They are primarily oriented around teaching couples how to apply therapeutic skills to their own private relationship. While such help is all to the good, no marriage could in fact survive on the basis of communication skills alone. This is especially the case in an age like ours where marriages are increasingly isolated from their public contexts. Marriage educators are in a position to help couples explore the support and help that may be "furnished" not only by marriage educators themselves, but also by extended families, places of worship, workplaces, schools, neighborhoods, and communities. Most couples would benefit greatly from learning more about how to seek out these wider supports in society and make use of the help they potentially offer.

#### The Protestant Covenant Model

The subsidiarity model does not cover all the senses in which Christian marriage traditions view marriage as more than just a private relation. A different Christian perspective on the broader meaning of marriage comes out of the Protestant Reformation tradition originating in John Calvin. This Reformed approach understands marriage as essentially a social *covenant*. It shares with subsidiarity theory the view that marriage is a public institution inextricably related to larger elements in society. But this social dimension has less to do with society furnishing help for fulfilling public marital goods, and more with marriage's responsibilities and commitments as part of society's basic moral foundation. Marriage on this view is not just one specialized institution among many others. It is one of God's three ordained "orders of creation" alongside the state and the church. Together with these, marriage supports society as part of its basic underlying structure.<sup>22</sup>

Protestant Reformers like Calvin applied the Hebrew Bible's *vertical* "covenant" between humanity and God to a *horizontal* "covenant" between two human beings in marriage.<sup>23</sup> Covenant marriage is not viewed as a sacrament because it does not establish a sacred union with God. It

21 For a description of this program see Michael McManus, *Marriage Savers. Helping Your Friends and Family Avoid Divorce*, Grand Rapids, MI (Zondervan Publishing House) 1993, chapter 13.

22 John Calvin, *Comm. Eph. 5:22*, and *Comm. Mal. 2:14*, in: Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, Edinburgh (Oliver & Boyd) 42 vols., 1843-1859.

23 John Witte, Jr., *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion and Law in the Western Tradition*, Louisville, KY (Westminster John Knox Press) 1997, 95.

remains inextricably bound up with the fallen human order still in need of God's final redemption. Rather, covenant marriage is a human and social relationship in which God participates *indirectly* through His chosen agents on earth, namely the church, the state, the community, and the couple's wider families.<sup>24</sup> In marriage, the couple covenants under God to commit themselves not only to one another, but also to the wider social order in which their marriage participates.

In the Reformation, marriage in the West became for the first time a fully *public* and *legal* institution, requiring the explicit witnesses of the state, the family, the church, and the community. The marriage covenant not only suggested but also *required* that the couple share their joint properties under the laws of the state; publicly honor the concerns and interests of extended families; and strive to raise any children to be worthy and productive members of the community.<sup>25</sup> The marriage covenant for the Reformers shares some features with the kinds of "covenant marriages" now emerging in the laws in parts of the United States, especially around the idea of stricter laws for marriage's entry and exit. But the Reformation view was also intended, more profoundly, to secure the duties of marriage as essential to the very peace and preservation of society.

It is perhaps no accident that therapeutic approaches to marriage grew up in largely Protestant countries. A covenant view when taken too far can surely subject couples to enormous social burdens that are detrimental to individual health and well-being. What is more, the assertion of marriage as an "order of creation" opens it up to patriarchal interpretations. If marriage is a created institution, then the distinctly hierarchical understandings of marriage in much of the bible can be argued to have a certain divine sanction. Nevertheless, the covenant model remains useful because it also articulates an essential dimension of marriage which marriage educators do not adequately address. It demands that we recognize the couple's implicit and very real commitments and responsibilities toward one another, their potential children, and society at large.

Marriage educators do in fact speak of the value of marital "commitment." On close inspection, however, what they typically mean by marital commitment is that each partner should dedicate themselves to the task of making their marriage more personally fulfilling. Commonly, the marital commitment is compared to the stock market, where each partner makes an "investment" in the marriage so that they may receive a high "return" in personal satisfaction.<sup>26</sup> The marriage educators Markman, et al. famously distinguish "dedication" commitment from "constraint" commit-

24 See for example Calvin, *Comm. Lev. 19:29*; *Comm. Eph. 6:1-3*; *Comm. 1 Thess. 4:3*, in Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries* (n. 18).

25 Witte, *From Sacrament to Contract* (n. 19), 94-98.

26 Markman, *Fighting for Your Marriage* (n. 4), 191-97.



ment. Dedication commitment is to be affirmed, because it helps couples think of their relationship as long-term and important in their lives. Constraint commitment, however, is on the whole to be discouraged, because it keeps couples together on the basis of negative factors like economic interdependency, social expectations, and, most telling of all, "concern for children's welfare."<sup>27</sup>

The covenantal perspective on marriage helps us understand the commitment couples make toward each other and society as more than a long-term, utilitarian, market-like calculation. It views the marital commitment as one toward a vital and socially embedded public institution. Partners commit themselves to supporting each other in health *and* in sickness. They join not just an economic arrangement that might make them financially better off, but also a unified institution of economic consumption and production. They enter into not just a partnership in sexual exchange, but also a family structure linked to the partners' procreation by their parents as well as to their possible yet-to-be procreated children. And, most importantly of all, they commit themselves not just to a reciprocal exchange of love, but also to a social institution that can sustain the capacities to love if necessary without an obvious reward and to love and raise children.

This point goes beyond what Catholic subsidiarity theory suggests. It adds that marriage is a public institution in the sense of committing couples to important social responsibilities and obligations. Accepting the covenant of marriage means taking on a pivotal role in the functioning and well being of society. It is akin to the kinds of commitments that should be made by ministers to the church, lawyers and politicians to the state, or professionals of any kind to their field. While the Reformers, unlike Catholics, allowed for marital dissolution, they did so in part because marriage was such an important social responsibility. Just as clergy and lawyers often cannot successfully perform their vital social roles, so also married persons frequently fail and should be relieved of the burden of their duties. While Protestant views since the Reformation have relaxed what they mean by legitimate grounds for divorce, the basic idea can be retained that divorce is a serious business because it potentially disrupts more than just the partners themselves. Most obviously and importantly, the dissolution of marriage responsibilities can hurt children. But it also has broader social, economic, and familial consequences as well.

Marriage educators do a disservice to couples if they suggest that the only commitment couples are making to one another is to dedicate themselves to a mutually enriching relationship. While marriages obviously

27 Markman, *Fighting for Your Marriage* (n. 4), 170-78. The authors interestingly also include under "constraint commitment" what they call viewing the marriage as a "covenant," which exposes what their therapeutic model really believes itself to be against.

should be for the benefit of both partners, this benefit is inextricably linked to a range of vital social responsibilities. A couples' marriage education obscures these larger institutional commitments only at the cost of failing to help couples learn how to take on the social responsibilities which marriages implicitly entail. A marriage education that does not address these kinds of public commitment cannot hope to produce marriages that successfully handle their multiple and very real social responsibilities.

### A Liberationist Perspective

If subsidiarity theory points to marriage's larger social goods, and covenant theology to its larger public responsibilities, then liberation theology adds still a third layer to the broader nature of marriage and the broader tasks of marriage education. This third conversation between the therapeutic marriage movement and Christian marriage traditions will have to be even more exploratory than the first two. Liberation theology was developed only at the beginning of the twentieth century, and it has not to my knowledge produced a systematic conceptualization of marriage *per se*. It is worth taking up, however, because it suggests a public dimension to marriage in the third sense that marriages take place within larger political structures of inequality and oppression. This third perspective can be used to insist, from a theological point of view, that marriage education should move beyond interpersonal communication to include exploration also of a marriage's participation in political and cultural contexts of power.

Liberation theology originated in a Catholic movement in Latin America which sought freedom for the poor from oppressive social structures of inequality. Liberation theologians like Gustavo Gutiérrez and Juan Luis Segundo hold that all persons have a sacred and equal dignity as children of God. Poverty is an affront to the fact that God created all persons alike. Furthermore, economic and political inequalities are so ingrained in ordinary human life that they can be fought effectively only on the *religious* grounds of working to realize a just Kingdom of God.<sup>28</sup> Liberation theology differs from Catholic natural law and Protestant covenantal theologies by emphasizing the prophetic call to redeem society at the level of its very deepest political and economic structures. Marriage is not just a specialized or even foundational part of society, but an institution itself structured by larger social forces and trends.

28 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, Maryknoll, NY (Orbis/London, S.C.M. Press) 1973; Juan Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, Maryknoll, NY (Orbis) 1976. For an accessible introduction to liberation theology see Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, Maryknoll, NY (Orbis Books) 1987.



Liberation theology is now practiced widely by not only Catholic but also other Christians as well, and in many countries around the world. In addition, it has been applied not only to poverty but also to other forms of social oppression, including racism,<sup>29</sup> sexism,<sup>30</sup> and the plight of children.<sup>31</sup> These broader uses of liberation theology warrant its further application to marriage. Although some liberationists might be tempted to view marriage as inherently an oppressive institution, most people do in fact end up marrying, and it is worth looking into how marriage may help in resisting oppression as well. My view is that marital oppressions can be understood, using liberation theology, as not necessary to the marital institution itself. Rather, marital inequalities to some extent reflect the larger economic, political, and cultural oppressions that make up marriages' contexts. This opens up the possibility for viewing marriages as capable, like the original small-scale church and social groups out of which liberationism first arose, of themselves being centers of resistance and justice.

A liberation theology of marriage education, as I interpret it, would be concerned with helping partners resist social mores and structures that make marriage in one way or another oppressive. Such oppressions might include women being expected to take on primary responsibility for childcare and housework. They also include domestic abuse and manipulation, which are fed by an acceptance of women's lesser power in society. Children, too, often suffer the oppression of a lack of needed parental attention, due in developed countries in particular to a market-driven economy and culture of divorce. And many men are oppressed by losing their rights to care for children after divorce, or being forced to abdicate parenting to the demands of a wage economy. In each of these cases, marriage should be viewed as not just an interpersonal or even social or public institution. It is also an inherently *political* institution.

Liberation theology does not view these political issues as merely secular ones. It is not to be identified with Marxism. Much less is it to be confused with libertarianism, which places ultimate moral value in individual freedom. Liberation theology suggests, instead, that the only effective response to political oppressions is a religious one. Inequality and dominance are signs of our deeply fallen nature, and the appropriate response to the fall is working for justice under God. The human order should be radically overturned – as Jesus overturned the tables in the marketplace – to ever more closely approximate God's Kingdom. Our

29 For example, James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 20th anniversary edition, Maryknoll, NY (Orbis Books) 1990.

30 For example, Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk. Toward a Feminist Theology*, Boston (Beacon Press) 1983.

31 For example, Adrian Thatcher, *Marriage After Modernity. Christian Marriage in Post-Modern Times*, New York (New York University Press) 1999, chapter 5.

political task is the radical one of practicing equality for all as children of God's creation.

There is no doubt that in a certain sense a liberationist view would embrace the tasks and practices of improving marriage communication skills. The marriage education movement is in part built upon the premise of liberating couples from the unhealthy marriage practices of our culture of divorce. Therapeutic marriage education rightly works to free couples from the oppressions of a society which values money over marriage, work over intimacy, and autonomy over relationships.

However, a liberation theology perspective would insist also that marital oppression is not just an issue of interpersonal communication. It is also tied up with society's larger economic and cultural structures. Marital inequalities are not just relational but also political issues. For example, good communication skills could help a husband understand that his wife is angry because she does the bulk of the housework. However, it would take more than just the husband and wife communicating well to change the more profound social expectations and structures that support this problem. No matter how well the partners learn to communicate each other's concerns, women in our culture will still be blamed – by others and often by themselves – for messy homes. And men and women both, in our economy of long working hours outside the home, will still have little time to invest in home life in the first place.

Is it possible, however, to burden marriage education with this larger political task? Is fighting oppression not more properly the work of advocacy groups, church leaders, labor unions, and politicians? The liberationist perspective suggests that this is not necessarily the case. Liberation should in fact arise out of the grassroots structures at the lowest ends of society. Marriage today may be precisely one of these structures. And marriage educators stand in a uniquely powerful position to help individuals turn their marriages into arenas for political resistance.

A liberationist approach to marriage education would help couples learn how to both *identify* and *actively resist* the deeper social oppressions into which their marriages play. Such an approach to marriage education could not rest content with the assumption that marital problems are caused by the marriage relationship alone. It would also help partners learn how to examine their marriage in light of its larger cultural and political contexts. It would do this by teaching couples how to develop and maintain substantive ideals for their marriage, ideals related more closely to God's intended Kingdom. These ideals would not necessarily have to be explicitly Christian. They could include a vision of humanity's greater spiritual oneness, or the unity of all people in Krishna. But the important point is that marriage educators would help couples relate their desires for their marriage to their larger vision of proper human relationships as such. In this way educators would provide couples with tools to resist the ordinary course of the world into which marriages are inevitably

pulled, a course which today results in significant family inequalities and oppressions. Empowering couples in this way is not just a therapeutic but a moral and religious task as well.

Without this political dimension, the marriage education movement in fact itself risks playing into marital oppression. The current focus on skills aimed at marital fulfillment as the be all and end all of good marriages is itself based on the unexpressed and somewhat dubious cultural ideology of expressive individualism. Such a view of marriage education will only further oppression toward children, who need parents who are committed to more in their marriage than just their own personal fulfillment. It could also unwittingly play into oppression toward women, who in our culture on average have less economic and cultural power in a marriage and so more to lose from a utilitarian communicative exchange.<sup>32</sup> The most striking case of the failure of communication skills to make marriages strong is physical and sexual abuse, where communication can only be one part of what the couple should hope to achieve. But this is not an exception to what marriage education should be all about. It is merely the most obvious sign of the need for marriage educators to address oppressions in all their subtle and not-so-subtle forms. This political task of marriage education cannot be accomplished without helping couples connect their marriages to larger moral and religious ideals, and develop means for realizing these ideals in a fallen and unjust world.

#### Toward a Broader Vision of Marriage Education

In conclusion, I would like to suggest that one of the most pressing tasks before the marriage education movement as it stands today is to expand its understanding of what strengthening marriages really involves. Good communication skills are part of the picture. However, these are inextricably linked to strengthening marriages as social, public, and political institutions as well. Good marriages are more than merely private exchanges for the purpose of partners' individual health and satisfaction. They are also public institutions that should be prepared to bear the burden of important social and procreative goods, support complex and intergenerational familial commitments, find support from wider sectors of society, and resist playing into political and economic oppressions.

Clergy and religious leaders have a vital and important role to play in leading the way toward this more realistic, helpful, and expansive conception and practice of marriage education. In this they have profound

32. Some would argue that women in particular need the political protections of marriage as an institution in order to keep the fathers of their children committed and involved. See Browning, *From Culture Wars to Common Ground* (n. 2), chapter 6.

untapped resources in the Christian traditions which should be interpreted critically into the contemporary marriage situation. Christian approaches to marriage education do not have to remain limited merely to absorbing the latest therapeutic techniques, as they often do.<sup>33</sup> Nor do they have to take a merely confessional approach that rejects therapeutic perspectives altogether.<sup>34</sup> A truly constructive Christian approach to marriage education will incorporate the valuable practices of therapeutic marriage education but also lend its voice to reforming the marriage education movement itself. This is a vital and necessary task if my argument is correct that the dominant therapeutic approach to marriage education remains insufficient and even in some ways self-defeating.

As a partial contribution to this task, I believe it is useful to re-imagine marriage education as about strengthening not just a relationship but a *covenant*. This notion of the marital covenant should be expanded beyond the Reformed Protestant view I examined above. That view by itself is too easily used to support rigid or patriarchal approaches to marriage. Education in the marital covenant should take into account the important insights of Catholic subsidiarity theory and liberationism. It should also include a vision of therapeutic skill in communication. Overall, it should strengthen both the private and the public dimensions of marriage at once, as these relate to and support each other. Such a view would fit with the kind of critical familism described above. That is, it would support families and marriages as important social institutions, so long as they are also egalitarian and non-oppressive.

The notion of a marital covenant is useful because it suggests, as I wish to interpret it here, an inner and personal bond that is formed in relation to a wider public context. A covenant commits two people to an intimate trust that has meaning and value also for their larger social world. It indicates a central and primary relation of partners that takes place within a web of secondary but important relations to others. In addition, the

33. This approach is taken for example by the leading marriage educators Scott Stanley/Daniel Trathen/Savanna McCain/Milt Bryan in their influential book, *A Lasting Promise: A Christian Guide to Fighting for Your Marriage*, San Francisco (Jossey-Bass Publishers) 1998. This book argues that Christian and therapeutic perspectives on marriage are simply identical, because they are both manifestations of God's single "truth" (7). It proceeds to take the ideas, and in some cases the exact text, of the therapeutically-oriented book by Markman, *Fighting for Your Marriage* (n. 4), and sprinkles in biblical passages to match. Such an approach, while laudable in its efforts to draw links between therapeutic and Christian perspectives, deprives Christians of the chance to make a constructive contribution based on their own profound and diverse marriage education traditions.

34. This latter approach is evident, for example, in the reactions of some Christian churches and denominations to the "covenant marriage" laws being passed in the United States. These churches argue that the term "covenant" is being unduly co-opted by the legal community, a claim which ignores the fact that the Reformed model of covenant marriage was precisely meant to *relate* marriage's legal and religious dimensions.

notion of covenant can also imply a sacred union that demands care and vigilance from the couple as well as a real and vital commitment from their community.

Concretely, a covenant marriage education would first, as the Reformers who first described marriages as covenants might suggest, help couples better understand the responsibilities and roles they are taking on. This need not be done in a dogmatic or oppressive fashion. Instead, it should be recognized that the responsibilities which marriages bring are often difficult to negotiate and can lead to much friction and unhappiness. It can only help couples if they are given the opportunity to discuss frankly where each thinks their respective and mutual responsibilities should lie. Perhaps there are differences that need to be worked out in how much each partner is expecting to contribute to the marriage financially. Perhaps one partner would like the other to be more willing to share responsibility for aging parents. Perhaps a couple needs to have an explicit and concrete conversation about who will take on which obligations toward any children. In each of these ways, couples are helped to define and explore how their marital relationship will engage them in broader social roles and responsibilities – broader covenants – that commit them both to one another and to others.

But education in the marriage covenant should also help couples better understand their marriage's participation in larger social goods or aims. This dimension of marriage education is suggested by Catholic subsidiarity theory. Couples will need to be able to negotiate not only private goods like sex, intimacy, and friendship, but also social goods central to marriage in our culture today. For example, marriages are a source of a great deal of what sociologist James Coleman has called "social capital."<sup>35</sup> Marriages unite two persons into a social, economic, and institutional unit that then has the power to amass resources for greater social ends. These might include having more money and emotional resources to raise children, being better able to invest in homes and help stabilize communities, and providing a center of support for members of the extended family. These broader social goods to a marriage are not incidental or necessarily even voluntary.

Education in the marriage covenant should include helping couples understand and shape the social goods that define their marriage. Some couples may emphasize the marital good of bearing and raising children. Others may emphasize their marriage as a rejuvenating haven that supports productive participation in the workplace. Others still may be hoping that their marriage will link them to broader familial and social groups. Whatever the case may be, few if any marriages are entered into for purely private and individual aims alone. Marriage educators should

recognize that the covenant between two marriage partners also includes a desire and an opportunity to enter into a wide array of social ends and purposes. They should help couples understand these social goods better and forge a shared vision of how such goods will be handled and prioritized.

Finally, a broader covenant approach to marriage education should also help couples learn how better to resist the inevitable political pressures that contribute to marital oppression and inequality. "Covenant" should be understood in the expanded sense of a marital bond based on dignity and respect for each person's created humanity. A covenant is not just an agreement between two persons but also a symbol of their original bond with the divine. Marriage educators should help couples develop a relationship that recognizes and promotes both partners' equally sacred dignity. This means that couples should be encouraged to explore with each other their fears about becoming oppressed in the marriage. They should be assisted in forming a vision of how their marriage will express what it means to them to be human. And they should learn better how to find in their marriage the ideals and resources to resist the oppressions that will be brought upon them by the larger world.

In each of these ways, marriage education takes on more difficult and complex tasks. The marital covenant is harder to live out than a merely private marital relationship. Yet it may also be the case that the notion of covenant more accurately describes what the unique institution of marriage is – and should be – really all about. And perhaps it even offers a vision of what couples getting married or seeking to strengthen their marriages today are in fact really hoping for. In any case, the Christian traditions present marriage educators today with a unique and important challenge. This challenge – which is also an opportunity – is to reform the present therapeutic paradigm of marriage education so as to help couples in a more realistic and effective way to strengthen their deeper marital covenant.

### Zusammenfassung

Der Artikel beschäftigt sich mit dem Phänomen der seit einiger Zeit wachsenden Bedeutung von Eheberatung und Eheseminaren. Diese Entwicklung wird aus einer sich an den westlichen Traditionen des christlichen Eheverständnisses orientierenden Perspektive analysiert. Es wird geltend gemacht, daß Beratung und Bildungsarbeit, um Ehen zu stärken, über ihren therapeutischen Ansatz hinaus vor allem nach Wegen suchen muß, wie die kommunikativen Fähigkeiten von Paaren verbessert werden können. Unter Rückgriff auf die katholische Subsidiaritätstheorie, auf die protestantische Auffassung der Ehe als eines Bundes und auf Implikationen der Befreiungstheologie arbeitet der Artikel heraus, daß die Bildungs- und Beratungsangebote für Paare heutzutage nicht nur auf die privaten und zwischenmenschlichen Aspekte eingehen, sondern auch die gesellschaftsöffentlichen und sozialen Dimensionen von Partnerschaften im Blick haben müssen. Diese therapeutischen und christlichen Perspektiven verbindend, schließt der Artikel mit dem Entwurf einer neuen Vision von Eheberatung, die sich an einem kritisch revidierten Verständnis des Ehebundes orientiert.

35 James Coleman, *Social Capital and the Creation of Human Capital*, in: *American Journal of Sociology* 94, 1988, 95-120.