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Engagement and Marriage

A Review Article

By DAVID S. SCHULLER

EUROPEANS have long charged that Americans are the “most married,” the “youngest married,” and the “most divorced” of any people in the civilized world. What concerns us most is that the charge is true. We do have one of the highest proportions of population married. Our marriage rate is fifty per cent higher than that of a country such as France or Switzerland. It is double that of Mexico or Ireland! We are so eager to marry that we marry at an earlier age with every passing decade. Just within the last ten years the age at which men marry has dropped from 24.4 to 22 years. During the same period the average age for women marrying has decreased from 21.5 to slightly under 20 years.

The divorce picture is familiar to most: In the last century the divorce rate has increased fivefold. Approximately one divorce is granted for every wedding which takes place in a given year. One minister who entered the parish ministry after a period of teaching in a synodical school sighed: “If I would have known for one minute how many marital problems I would be dealing with, I would have remained in teaching.”

In recognition of the increase of problems clustered about engagement, marriage, and divorce, the 1947 convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod asked the Family Life Committee of the Board for Parish Education to study the entire problem *de novo*. Through funds provided by the Committee on Scholarly Research a research director was engaged and the part-time services of over 20 specialists procured. The scope of the field was extensive, and the methodology was exhaustive. Marriage, divorce, sex, betrothal, remarriage, family relationships, birth control and planned parenthood—all were to be intensively studied on the basis of Scripture. In arriving at answers “the patristics, the Lutheran Confessions, Luther’s writings, and Lutheran Church practice” were to be examined as well as the newer insights provided by law, sociology, psychology, and medicine.

Rev. Paul G. Hansen of Denver was selected as the research director. In 1952 he conducted a sociological survey of the attitudes and practices of Lutherans in the areas of family life already described. Questionnaires were submitted to a total of 5,000 families drawn from three Lutheran synods. Meanwhile the 20 research assistants were at work conducting their investigations into Scripture, the Confessions, church practice, and the writings of related disciplines. At that time one large volume was planned. When the material was finally gathered, it was apparent that agreement on some questions regarding family authority, divorce and remarriage, and the like had not been achieved. Discussion of sections of the initial report by 18 regional pastoral conferences only revealed the need to eliminate possible misunderstandings. Thus the decision was made to publish the report in six individual volumes. During the intervening years the material has been repeatedly reworked and materially amplified. The goal became to produce for this generation a definitive work on Lutheran marriage and family life.

With the publication of the first volume in the series, *Engagement and Marriage* (St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia Publishing House, xiv and 193 pages. \$3.00), it appears that this hope might be fulfilled. In a day in which books on the family are coming from publishers at an unprecedented rate, this book stands as a milestone in research and writing on the family. For this our thanks are due the authors. In addition to Hansen, the authorship of the first volume includes Oscar E. Feucht, Director of the Family Life Education program of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod; Fred Kramer of Concordia Seminary, Springfield, Ill.; and Erwin L. Lueker of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.

Present plans call for publication of one volume per year over the next five years. Next spring *Sex Attitudes* should be available. It will be followed by *Birth Control and Planned Parenthood*, *Family Authority and Responsibility*, *Mate Selection*, and finally *Divorce and Remarriage*.

Now what of this first volume on engagement? Apparently no church body has had quite as many problems with engagement as The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Is engagement tantamount to marriage? If so, what are the implications of this state-

ment for the couple, for the church, and for the surrounding community? Is this equation Biblical or conditioned by early Teutonic culture? The volume refers to the records of a pastoral conference held in September 1876, which wrestled with the case of a broken engagement. The writings of Luther and the early Lutheran dogmaticians leave little doubt that the problem was troublesome even in the 16th century.

The research committee defined 12 questions as those which were most vital and significant in this area. The questions are posed in the first chapter. The main body of the book cites the answers given by various periods of history, other church bodies, and finally contemporary theological and social thought. In the final chapter conclusions are drawn on the basis of these questions. A brief restatement of them will provide the thesis of this study:

1. Is modern engagement essentially the same as the Hebrew betrothal of the Old Testament? Decidedly no. "In 20th-century America engagement is considered a period prior to marriage during which most couples, having given promises of marriage to each other, declare publicly or privately that they intend to marry" (p. 152). Hebrew betrothal was a matter of custom. "It was a part neither of the Moral Law nor of the Jewish ceremonial law. . . . This indicates that the pattern we find was not intended for all nations and all times." (P. 153)

2. Is modern engagement the same as 19th-century European betrothal? No. Historically some of the Teutonic races attached more importance to the act of betrothal than to the subsequent wedding. The authors conclude that "the Christian betrothal contracts of Germany of the early 19th century had much more in common with Hebrew betrothal than with the current American engagement pattern" (p. 155). In current custom the emphasis in engagement is on the pledge mutually given that the couple will marry in the future; it thus becomes a period for preparation and testing.

3. Is the view "Consent given in engagement constitutes marriage" actually established in Scripture? No, the "consent" theory is not taught in Scripture but can be traced back to Roman law. The fullest expression of this theory can be found in Thomas

Aquinas. Now, while the free consent of bride and groom is important, it is necessary to remember that we are not dealing with an essentially Biblical concept. Actually Scripture never presents a precise definition of marriage beyond the words of Genesis 2 (later repeated by our Lord) that "a man leave his father and his mother and shall cleave unto his wife; and they shall be one flesh."

4. What is marriage according to Scripture? Marriage is part of the bedrock of all society, that is, it is part of the order of creation given by God for the welfare of all human life. "God intended it to be a lifelong, indissoluble union of the most intimate fellowship of body and life" (p. 157). But God has prescribed no specific procedure for entering this estate.

5. What is marriage according to American law and custom? It is necessary that we recognize the consequence of stating that marriage belongs to the orders of creation. For it follows that marriage customs and laws are not under the sole jurisdiction of the church. The state provides these regulations for the welfare of people. "American law has never regarded engagement as binding as marriage. Breach-of-promise suits are now being questioned by an increasing number of states." (P. 159)

6. Are modern engagement and marriage to be equated? No. Today there are usually three stages which precede marriage: a. the period of dating; b. courtship; c. engagement. "Engagement and marriage differ in name, in definition, in point of time, in matter of form, in purpose, in effect, and in mode of dissolution" (p. 162). The volume makes clear that all of the relationships involved in dating, courtship, and engagement are not to be entered into lightly—but reverently and in the fear of God.

7. What role may society play in establishing marriage law and custom? Society has the right to regulate marriage as it seems best for the moral welfare of a people. Thus marriage was entered into during the period of the Old Testament in accord with prevailing social customs. While society or the state set the customs and laws, "Christians conform insofar as Christian principles are not denied or violated." (P. 163)

8. Shall the church establish marriage canon law? No. At

various times in her history the church has attempted to correct corruption and abuses with canon laws. The result has always been most unsatisfactory spiritually. While Lutheran theologians have formally rejected the implications of canon law, they have fallen into the same trap with the *Kirchenordnungen* and opinions of theological faculties. The need is for an evangelical view of marriage that envisions a family living in the sight of God and drawing on His power.

9. What factors are different in a distinctively Christian engagement? The difference does not lie in the essence of engagement as much "as in the spirit in which Christians make their proposal, acceptance, and announcement" (p.164). Their promise is regarded with sincerity because it is made in the presence of God and with an abiding concern for the life of the other. Love is enriched as it grows from *eros* through *philia* to the heights of *agape*. The whole engagement relationship is to be entered into with Christian motives and with a conscientious concern for the mutual welfare of all persons involved. This attitude toward dating, courtship, and engagement relationships places a high level of responsibility on young people.

10. When is marriage distinctively Christian? "In essence there is nothing specifically Christian about marriage" (p.165). This follows from the fact that marriage is grounded in the natural order. However, marriage remains a holy estate. It becomes distinctively Christian when people enter marriage seeking God's purposes, asking how God will use them in their life together. It becomes distinctively Christian as they view each other as individuals for whom Christ died, when they exhibit a self-giving love for the other, and when there is common faith.

11. Does engagement include conjugal privileges? Because of the possibilities of harm and because of the sanctity of marriage "let the church be united and clear in a decisive *no* on conjugal privileges during the engagement period" (p.167). With the "tantamount" theory of engagement, this created a problem. When the consent of engagement is recognized as distinct from the consent of marriage, the question dissolves. Engagement is a "*pre-condition*" of marriage, but not marriage itself; it is a "promise to marry," "a step *toward* marriage."

12. Should those who break an engagement be disciplined? No, a broken engagement should not be treated as a divorce. While this was the logical consequence of the betrothal theory, many never followed through to this logical conclusion. If it becomes apparent that the contemplated marriage would lead to unhappiness and a possible divorce, it seems better to experience the pain of a broken engagement than to face the greater dangers of dissolving a marriage. The authors grant that cases may arise where "such a flagrant abuse of engagement" takes place that disciplinary action may become necessary. The goal, however, is to work pastorally with love rather than with law.

Some who read these conclusions will fear that the church is capitulating to the world and giving up the values it has seen in engagement. This is not true. The desire is not to abandon the meaning of engagement. It is, however, an attempt to give a Scriptural — rather than simply a cultural — answer to a problem of great concern. A rapid check noted approximately 300 sections of Scripture which had been examined in arriving at an answer. *Engagement and Marriage* is honest in its forthright Biblical distinction between Old Testament betrothal and modern engagement. It is pastoral in dealing with human sin and weakness, rather than harsh in insisting on entrance into a marriage which is not desired. It is evangelical in dealing with the problem in the spirit of the Gospel with a centering on forgiveness and love rather than a legalistic insistence on Hebrew, Roman, or Teutonic law or custom. Near the end of the book the authors once again interpret their stand: "This is not to say that engagement, rightly conceived by both parties, is not a serious and solemn promise. It should not be entered upon without conscientious deliberation; nor should it be broken for any and every cause, or by a mere changing emotion. A sense of honor and truthfulness are involved." (P. 167)

How will this first volume be received? Reviewers who received advance copies were highly enthusiastic. Some from outside the Lutheran Church are rather patient in wondering why the question of engagement ever assumed such strange proportions within some Lutheran synods. Others within our church express the hope that the book will be required reading in our theological seminaries and teachers colleges. Some express the regret that this book was

not written a hundred years ago. As a colleague commented: "It is incalculable how much confusion, heartache, domestic tragedies, and congregational troubles could have been avoided had this material been available to the church." Even the secular reader must pause before the massive research—theological, historical, and sociological—which went into the study and the unified, carefully documented answers which emerged.

But there remains a pedagogical concern. In some sections of the country pastors have taught the betrothal theory as Scripturally founded. Others have been evasive and have given no clear answer to their people. What will happen now? First, it is apparent that the book is addressed primarily to pastors and leaders within the church. While the style is lucid and the organization of the book impeccable, it is hardly a book that a young person would read in place of viewing television. Its chapters go into great historical and theological detail. It provides the documentation needed to support its viewpoint. As a result, the impact of the book will be felt among the clergy rather than among lay people.

Finally, it gives every parent and pastor a new opportunity to interpret engagement and marriage to a rising generation which will face increased pressure exerted upon marriage by the world. It opens the way to interpret a higher conception of engagement than many knew in the past. It leads into a deeper understanding of marriage itself.

The faculty opinion referred to ended with the admonition to pastors to remain faithful to their task of "reminding Christians of their high status as children of God and of the duties connected with such privileged position, especially the duty of Christian love, the supreme principle that guides them in their whole life."

St. Louis, Mo.