

## What about the children?

All the reports cited in this leaflet agree that stable happy parents protect children against mental, physical, and educational peer-related problems. Although abuse in families has been drawn to the public's attention, the evidence is clear that children do better socially and educationally where both parents are present and secure in the relationship.

An intact family acts as a brake on juvenile crime. Alan Tapper's research has demonstrated the remarkable correlation between the increase in family breakdown over the past three decades and the rise in juvenile crime.

## Negative images of marriage

In her submission to the House of Representatives inquiry into aspects of family services, Dr Moira Eastman suggests that the ambivalence to marriage in Australian society emanates from academia, the government, bureaucracy, social services, public policy, and the media. These fail to recognise the positive, demonstrable contribution of marriage to health, and the huge, but hidden, domestic economy that provides incalculable benefit to the education and well-being of the young.

Instead marriage is caricatured as repressive, violent, good for men but bad for women, and the main plank in the platform of the loony right.

Dr Eastman states that, although there is a growing body of scholarship critiquing these "myths about marriage", it is largely ignored in policy making.

## A Christian perspective

The authority of Jesus transcends cultural fashions. When questioned about marriage (Matthew 19.4ff), Jesus invokes the Creation account where God institutes marriage before humans sinned. God's plan was that it should be exclusive, complementary, and monogamous.

Its purpose was both for the procreation of children and the deepest level of fellowship open to human beings.

Marriage is used in the Scriptures as a picture of God's relationship with his people. Therefore, because it reflects God's character, it involves faithfulness, self-giving, promise-keeping, and an exclusive loyalty.



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## An old question

The question as to whether or not marriage is a good idea is not a new one. The ancient Greek and Roman philosophers used to exercise their intellectual muscle on debating whether or not a man should marry. Usually they came up with a resounding, "No!"

Marriage meant women, and anything involving women, according to those humanist great ones, was a sure path to disaster.

Nowadays their arguments would not hold water. The present objections to marriage are equally open to scepticism.

## Major social changes

No one doubts that a revolution has occurred in attitudes to marriage over the past 40 years. The advent of more reliable contraception and the publication of the Kinsey Report (now largely discredited) led to the sexual revolution of the 60s. The removal of the fear of pregnancy with the possibility of regular sexual activity outside of marriage has raised the question of the necessity of marriage as an institution.

Consequently Australians have become increasingly tolerant of the idea of cohabitation, children born out of wedlock, and easy divorce. About 60% of Australian couples live together before marriage. They may experience a number of such relationships before marrying. Most

people are marrying later and a substantial number choose not to marry at all.

40-45% of marriages will end in divorce. 20% of these divorces occur in the first ten years of marriage with a strong possibility of a second divorce. Single parenting is on the increase although 86% of Australian children still live in two parent families.

## Why bother?

Marriage frequently receives a bad press. Yet 80% of Australian young people want to marry at some stage and expect marriage to be lifelong. They cite monogamy and honesty in marriage as their main aspirations. More than 40% of young people express anxiety at the prospect of being single by their 40<sup>th</sup> birthday. So despite the dire prophecies, marriage is not yet on the way out.

And there are good reasons for this. In *Australian Couples in Millennium Three*, Dr W. Kim Halford concludes from his research that Australians rate a stable marriage as the major contributor to a sense of life-satisfaction, happiness, and well-being. Furthermore:

**A healthy, well-functioning, and stable relationship is associated with greater resilience to stressful events, better physical and mental health, and greater work productivity ... Divorce and relationship problems accrue substantial economic costs to the couple and the community. The strengthening of marriage and family relationships ... has the potential to enhance greatly the personal, social, and economic well-being of Australians.**



## The objections

- ***“Loving one another is enough. We don’t need a piece of paper to prove it.”***

This sounds so romantic and idealistic that to inject a note of reality seems crass and unfeeling. In the words of Dr Moira Eastman:

**What distinguishes marriage from cohabitation and other forms of living together is commitment, a public declaration of intention to form a permanent union.**

Research indicates that the best guarantee for the survival of a relationship is a deliberate, personal commitment by both parties to making it work. One of the great ironies of the attempt to avoid the legal entanglement of marriage has been the increasingly complex legislation needed to protect the rights of women and children in de facto relationships.

- ***“We just want to try living together to see if it works before we take the plunge.”***

This statement begs the question as to whether or not a relationship can survive without commitment. The refusal to pledge loyalty to another person can become an entrenched habit. Each relationship that a person walks away from makes the success of the next one more difficult. Anecdotal evidence suggests that young women in particular feel cheated and disillusioned in these trial relationships.

A common view is that living together before marriage will result in greater discernment in making a wise choice when marriage eventually takes place. However, *To Have and To Hold*, a House of Representatives report on strategies to strengthen marriage, cites a strong correlation between living together before marriage and an ensuing marriage breakdown.

- ***“Marriage is dangerous for women.”***

The perception that marriage is particularly unsafe for women and children has grown over recent years. It was fueled by television advertising in the late 80s that claimed one in three wives was likely to be subjected to physical violence. While not denying that many women experience violence and abuse in marriage, Dr Moira Eastman questions these figures based on an American survey.

Moreover they do not square with the evidence that married couples enjoy better health, lower drug and alcohol dependency, and lower suicide rates than the rest of the population. In fact, the correlation between good health and a happy marriage is higher than that which links smoking and ill health. Married couples also show greater resilience to stressful change.

In some of the more aggressive anti-marriage propaganda, marriage has been depicted as a license to abuse women. One would expect that in a cohabitation arrangement, the victim would have greater freedom to opt out of the relationship. However according to research by Strauss and Kersti Yello, violence is more likely to occur between cohabiting couples. Furthermore Halford indicates that physical aggression is a common factor in the breakdown of a relationship where young people are living together.

Ill health, mental stress, violence, and general dysfunction may accompany the breakdown of relationships but that does not mean that marriage in itself is dangerous. In fact, if marriage actually protects mental and physical well-being, as the evidence suggests, then undermining it will lead to greater violence, abuse, and distress in the community.

