

Whether or Not to Tie the Knot
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“Why bother about a little scrap of paper, when we’re as good as married as we are?” It’s an argument for partnerships most of us have heard many times, but this time it came from a young woman in Christian leadership in the church, so I decided to think it through more carefully. After all, there is evidence that the marriage ceremony as we know it is a fairly recent phenomenon in the scheme of things, and that up until a few centuries ago, a contract was drawn up, simply based on living arrangements very much as they are today.

Not only that, but according to the Whitehall population trend pundits, within the next 25 yrs a half of all men and a third of women will never have married and around twice the current number of people will be “living in sin”. So if marriage declines in the popularity stakes at that rate, does the church tut, tear its hair out, or bang the drum for a return to traditional values? Does a public ceremony, hugely costly as it now is - and I speak from financially-straitened experience, having just seen my first child wed - have any advantage over living “over the brush”? Would the thirty one years me and my man have managed to score so far on the marital survival scales have been any shorter if we had simply shacked up? In fact, since we had an Anglican service in a Free Church, and the “I solemnly declare that I know not” statements were inadvertently omitted, I gather we’ve not been legally married at all these years - and still enjoyed it.

Any doubts I might have had about the value of “the little scrap of paper”, as a public declaration of commitment were eradicated recently by events in the lives of two of my friends. Ros is a very senior manager, a Director on the Board of her company, a clever, altogether kind of lady, who organises high-flying government officials as if they were toy soldiers. She has two children with her long-term partner, a company Chief Executive and no Christian faith, and I’ve always thought she was very happy with her situation. But when her partner employed one of our colleagues, she said to him laughingly, “I’ll give you some tips on how to handle him.” Suddenly, the smile gave way to something more akin to longing, “but then, I suppose”, she said, “after having his children, if I knew how to handle him, I’d have a ring on my finger by now.”

Rena had been living with Joe on a boat for a number of years, and when they became Christians at an Alpha course at our church, he felt convicted, without a word from the Minister, that he had

to do “the honourable thing”. None of us anticipated the power of the presence of God at that wedding. To say the couple was pole-axed is an understatement. They wept so much it was touch and go whether they could get the vows out, and many of Rena’s workmates at our local Marks and Spencers were so bowled over by the whole experience that they have been coming to church ever since.

There is a solemnity in the public ceremony that endues this relationship with a special quality that belongs to none other, that is so much more than committing the couple to a lifetime of sharing their bad habits and dirty laundry. The word, “sacrament” comes to mind, and in fact the Hebrew for marriage is “kiddushim” a plural version of “holy”. In other words, the ritual signals to the community that no one has the right to intrude on what is henceforth a unique and sacred bond. It worries me that my colleagues in partnerships hardly ever wear a “keep of the grass” sign on their fingers. One of them was asked for a date by a man with whom she got into conversation about books at Victoria Station.

A public ceremony clarifies a couple’s intentions and expectations. Whatever else it may be, Christian marriage is about taking the calculated, prayerful risk of committing yourself to one other, publicly renouncing all the rest you might have had, for however long your life may be. This is a great paradox, for that apparent loss of freedom gives complete freedom. They exchange one kind of liberty for another. If a couple are never sure of their partner’s commitment, if they spend forever trying to keep him or her on board, they will not have as much energy left over for others. If however there is loyalty and trust, if our key relationship is utterly dependable, the two individuals are secure enough in each other’s love to give so much more away to the world. I think that’s probably the reason why many of us have a handkerchief stuck to our eyes throughout every wedding ceremony - there is something so touching about the wonder and enormity of the commitment being made. Ah yes, we remember it well and relive it again.

If the relationship is publicly safe, a couple are so much freer to provide each other with the intimacy of mind, body and soul that all humans long for, and that, try as they might, they don’t find in sex alone. “All that I am I give to you” - can there be any more glorious words of love? They can give themselves fully to each other, with no secrets and nothing to hide, not fearing the other might walk out when they reveal their all, and the truth might be unpalatable. That’s why postponing the sexual expression of that intimacy until after this moment seems entirely apt. It becomes a symbolic handing over of our entire selves without holding anything back.

As I understand it, the main allergy to tying the knot, is the notion that it domesticates and destroys real love. Romantic marriage, says the media, is an oxymoron. No one can possibly love the same partner for an entire lifetime without terminal boredom setting in, so better leave the door open for a quick exit before it's too late. But we fall in and out of romantic love many times in a life - how much easier for all concerned to create the environment where it can be with the same person. And when he or she drives us barmy, and we're in an out-of-love state, marriage it is that keeps us together until we fall in love again all over again.

And all the evidence is that the security created by marriage is so much better for the children. Every study confirms that cohabitees are more likely to split up, that it's much harder to sort out custody, and that it causes the children a great deal of distress. Of course there are happy families without marriage, but again, statistics show that the children of cohabitees also do less well than if their parents marry.

Marriage is in fact the foundation of community. One of the most difficult things about having sisters, brothers, nieces and nephews who cohabit, is deciding whether and when their partners are family. What do we call them? Do we send a birthday card? Is it safe yet to bring the family skeletons out of the cupboard? A wedding is the way two individuals formally throw together two families hitherto unknown to each other, for better or worse, whether they like it or not. They are now in-laws. Community expands as the sphere of responsibility widens when one family officially joins itself to another. They can be a source of conflict, but generally, they provide marriages with a source of support and integration into the wider world.

Last but not least, a public marriage ceremony says, "we're in this for the long haul whatever it takes. We plan to be together when her stretch marks and varicose veins make her body look like Crewe Station, and he can't see his knee caps for his belly, because what we love about each other is so much more than skin deep." And that quality of love, declared openly and before the world, makes a woman feel like a beauty queen and a man like a giant.