

Why Marriage Needs Strong Community to Survive

What is marriage for? As [cohabitation](#) and [singleness](#) are on the rise, we increasingly struggle to answer that question. In 2010, 39 percent of Americans [said](#) they believed marriage was becoming obsolete. Those who do marry [often cite](#) “love” and “companionship” as their primary reasons for doing so—but why go through all the work to plan an expensive wedding when cohabitation no longer bears the social stigma that it used to?

This is a question Andrew Cherlin is determined to answer in a [recent article for *The Atlantic*](#). He looks specifically at the spike in same-sex marriages that followed the 2015 Supreme Court case *Obergefell v. Hodges*, and wonders why so many homosexual couples (many of whom had been living together for years) saw marriage as integral to their future happiness.

He suspects that the answer is less practical than it is symbolic. “For many people, regardless of sexual orientation, a wedding is no longer the first step into adulthood that it once was, but, often, the last,” he writes. “It is a celebration of all that two people have already done, unlike a traditional wedding, which was a celebration of what a couple would do in the future.”

In many ways, this feels like a mirror of countless Disney movie plots I absorbed as a kid. Marriage is the end of the story: as wedding bells chime, we are told that the married couple lives “happily ever after”—without ever understanding what happiness in this “ever after” might entail.

What’s more, marriage as a celebration of two people and their accomplishments is far more isolated and individualistic than marriages past. It is, in many ways, the culmination of our

collective emphasis on the nuclear family, an emphasis that has grown since the Industrial Revolution and that completely transformed the way we think about marriage and its meaning in society. Marriage used to be a much more practical, communal event. Emotion had little to do with it—in most ancient cultures, the couple themselves had little (if anything) to do with it.

In Christian societies, marriage became something more than mere contract: it was a covenant, wedded deeply to faith, virtue, and community. It was about more than two people and their caring for each other. The liturgical marriage vows (still occasionally used today) emphasize that the participants are “gathered here in the sight of God and in the presence of these witnesses.” Marriage was something to be witnessed—not merely for sake of celebration, but because of its deeper meaning and purpose. That purpose was (and is) deeply communal: Christian households were meant to be part of a larger church community, one that the apostle Paul called a “body.” The church body was required to tend and care for the health and wholeness of all its members, to live in constant fellowship and care.

Although Aristotle suggested that the household (*oikos*) was the core and beginning of community, he never said the household was *sufficient* for human community or happiness. Instead, he argued that individuals cannot perform their proper functions outside of a larger community. Households were not to exist in isolation, but rather to band together in service, community, and virtue. Married couples and their children need the polis—just as much as the polis needs them.

Thus, the relationship of a married couple to their larger community (be it familial, spiritual, or neighborly) is reciprocal: without larger context and support, nuclear households do not have the support they need to flourish. But without the integration and involvement of smaller households, communities do not have the “hands and feet” they need to care

for their own.

Today's marriages are still, in many ways, contractual. Marriage guarantees certain legal rights and benefits. It involves the same need for witnesses, commitment, and legality. But modern marriage is also, often, a contract that comes with easy, well-delineated exit signs. Prenups have little to do with guaranteeing that a marriage lasts—quite the opposite. Today's marriages are usually set up *not* to last.

Part of this contractual temporality stems from our larger lack of purpose within marriage—divorced as it is from spiritual virtue or communal meaning, marriages start (and end) with the same focus: on personal wellbeing and emotional happiness. We see this reflected in the weddings our society creates: they are less about community than they are about fun, entertainment, and intense personalization. Wedding magazines show us glamorous destination weddings and fancy elopements, instruct us on how to shorten “boring” ceremonies or write our own vows. As we truncate or completely cut out the communal and covenantal aspects of the wedding ceremony, we increasingly divorce marriage from its foundations of support.

While marriage's decline may be tied to the withering of the spiritual roots underneath our culture, it's important to recognize that Christian marriages are failing, too. This is because we have neglected the practical, communal aspects necessary to marriage's success. We have harmfully emphasized the nuclear family—the “perfect” suburban household—and forgotten the importance of supportive, nurturing communities. We've been surprised and disappointed to see the divorce rate among Christians rise, even as our churches have grown into fragmented behemoths or frail and desolate islands. As we've embraced the individualism of our society, we have neglected the roots and support structures that make marriages last. We have forgotten what marriage is for: not just love, commitment, and devotion, but larger service and wholeness

within a caring community. And without being able to tell Christians how marriage can last, or giving them the support they need to *make* it last, we've done little more than put millstones around the necks of young, naïve couples. Our message is an only slightly spiritualized version of our culture's individualistic "happily ever after" wedding ceremony.

It takes a village to make (and keep) a marriage. Thus does it makes sense that our isolated and fragmented society would increasingly make marriage itself seem obsolete and unnecessary. Without community—be it familial, church-oriented, or neighborhood-focused—marriages will continue to struggle. More and more young people will see their contractual nature and obligations as unnecessary.

Since this problem is cyclical and self-enforcing—community needs committed households, and committed households need community—it can seem rather daunting and impossible to fix. But perhaps a greater focus on neighborliness and communal revival really can preserve the context and foundation necessary for marriage to survive. By helping Americans remember what marriage is for—by surrounding them with communities that can support them through good times and bad—we may, in fact, help them have a real "happily ever after."

—

This [article](#) has been republished with permission from The American Conservative.

[Image Credit: [Max Pixel](#)]