

Egalitarian Marriages Prove Happier Than Hierarchical Marriages

Dennis J. Preato

There is a serious problem with the institution of marriage in the USA. Statistically about half of all those who currently marry can be predicted to divorce within seven years. Approximately 60% of marriages experience stress and high levels of dissatisfaction in their first year of marriage.^[1] Unrealistic expectations, unhappiness, power struggles, depression, and spousal abuse are among the factors contributing to a high rate of divorce in Christian marriages. A 2001 national study conducted by Barna Research Group highlights this reality. Barna says that 33 percent of born again adult Christians have experienced a divorce. That statistic is comparable to non-born again adults. What more, over 90% of born again Christians who divorce do so after they accepted Christ.^[2] The chart below summarizes divorce rates among various Christian church Denominations.^[3]

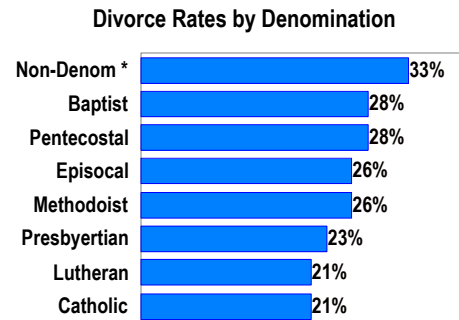
According to Barna, these results raise "questions regarding the effectiveness of how churches minister to families." It challenges "the idea that churches provide truly practical and life-changing support for marriage."^[4]

Dallas therapist Dr. Roy Austin agrees with Barna's findings. He states that fundamentalist or evangelical couples base their marriages on "very irrational and unrealistic principles," and he adds that problems occur when some men, as head of the household, become 'cruel dictators' who "expect their wives to become servants."^[5]

By religion, Jewish and born-again Christians have the highest divorce rates at 30% and 27% respectively, followed by other Christians at 24%.^[6] In contrast, atheists and agnostics have the lowest incidence of divorce at 21%. Why is this?

Spokesperson Ron Barrier for American Atheists offers some reasons why he thinks this is so. He says, "with Atheism, women and men are equally responsible for a healthy marriage. There is no room in Atheist ethics for the type of 'submissive' nonsense preached by Baptists and other Christian and/or Jewish groups. Atheists reject, and rightly so, the primitive patriarchal attitudes so prevalent in many religions with respect to marriage."^[7]

Why do so many marriages end in divorce and particularly Christian marriages? Why do marriages fall short of God's ideal for permanency as long as the male and female live? The type of marriage model that the couple choose to follow has a direct bearing on the health and longevity of that marriage. This paper presents empirical data in support of egalitarian marriages as happier, healthier and more permanent than traditional (i.e. hierarchical) marriages.



Source: Barna Research
*Non-Denom are Evangelical Churches

Defining Marriage Relationships

Egalitarian vs. Traditional (Hierarchical)

The New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology defines marriage as a copartnership of equality where "neither may lord it over the other."^[8] This represents an egalitarian view of marriage. Egalitarian marriages are described as mutual partnerships without forced roles, and characterized by a high degree of intimacy. In contrast, a hierarchical complementarian view of marriage has distinct roles with the husband on top in authority over the wife.

Complementarians, a newer term for those who espouse the traditional hierarchical view of marriage, claim their view "should find an echo in every human heart."^[9] The root problem in marriage, they say, "is the unwillingness of each to accept the role for which he or she was designed."^[10] If these statements were true, then marriages based on hierarchical relationships should be the happiest and most intimate of all marriages and should have the lowest divorce rate. But they don't! Evangelical Christians following traditional hierarchical teaching have the highest divorce rate of all.

Both views of marriage have been argued by scholars from a biblical perspective for years and this debate will probably continue into the future. However, the relevant and central issue for the church and the parties involved is recognizing which relationship results in a healthier, more intimate, long term, and permanent marriage. Professionals who work within the field of marriage and family therapy, sociologists, researchers, and demographers provide this necessary insight accompanied with decades of empirical data.

Review of Empirical Marriage Data

Drs. Alan Booth and Paul Amato, Penn State sociologists and demographers agree that egalitarian marriages are happier. They interviewed and followed the lives of two thousand men and women and some of their children over a 20 year period between 1980 and 2000. The subject individuals were personally contacted six times each year during the twenty year study. In the year 2000, at the conclusion of their twenty year study, the research team interviewed an entirely new random sample of 2,100 married couples. Dr. Amato explains the purpose of two studies, "So we can look at two different kinds of changes: how individual marriages change over time, and how the population of married couples has changed between 1980 and 2000." Dr. Amato makes this conclusion:

Equality is good for a marriage. It's good for both husbands and wives. If the wife goes from a patriarchal marriage to an egalitarian one, she'll be much happier, much less likely to look for a way out. And in the long run, the husbands are happier too.^[11]

Some complementarians argue that divorce is the result of working wives. Dr. Booth refutes this notion. Based on the results of this long study he says emphatically that "women working does not cause divorce."

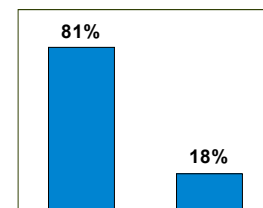
Dr. David H. Olson, Amy Olson-Sigg, M.A., MFT. & Peter J. Larson, Ph.D compiled a national survey based on 50,379 married couples using a comprehensive marital assessment tool called ENRICH. This survey, published in the year 2008, represents the largest and most comprehensive analyses of marital strengths and problem areas for married couples. Couples were asked to complete 30 background questions and 165 specific questions that focused on 20 significant marital issues. This survey identified the top ten strengths of happy marriages and the top ten problems for married couples. Using the top ten strengths, it was possible to discriminate between happy and unhappy marriages with 93% accuracy.

A prior national survey compiled by Dr. David H. Olson, was published the year 2000 based on 21,501 married couples. It also surveyed the top ten strengths and top ten stumbling blocks for married couples. The inability to share leadership equally (couple inflexibility) was the top stumbling block to a happy marriage.

Both the 2000 and 2008 surveys discovered how important equal role sharing contributed to the well being and happiness of egalitarian couples compared to traditional couples

Most of the couples (81%) where both spouses perceived the relationship as equalitarian (i.e. egalitarian) were happily married, while most of the couples (82%) where both spouses perceived their as relationship as traditional (i.e. hierarchical) were mainly unhappy.^[12]

Percentage of Happily Married Couples



Egalitarian Traditional

Source: Dr. David H. Olson

Only 18% of traditional marriages were reported as happy! Egalitarian couples were 4.5 times more likely to be happily married compared to traditional hierarchical couples.

Drs. David H. Olson and Shuji G. Asai of the University of Minnesota, published a survey on spouse abuse in 2003. This study examined spousal abuse dynamics using data from a national sample of 20,951 married couples that took the ENRICH couple inventory during 1998-1999. A clear association was found between the marital health of the couples and the level of abuse. For example, vitalized couples, that is, couples with the highest level of satisfaction, had the lowest incidence of abuse at 5%.

Traditional couples experienced spousal abuse in 21% of marriages, a rate more than four times higher than in vitalized marriages.^[13] This study confirms what has been known by many marriage and family therapy professionals: that higher marital abuse exists in traditional marriages in comparison to egalitarian marriages. One reason for this shocking abuse against women is that:

Men in hierarchical relationships tie their identity to the submission of their wives. When a wife is not submissive, or at least when he perceives her not to be, the husband has a need to 'show her who's the boss around here.'^[14]

The abusive husband thereby restores not only his place as head over his wife but also his damaged male identity. "His identify is linked with the amount of power he exercises over others."^[15]

Dr. Diana R. Garland, Professor and Chair of the School of Social Work and Director of the Center for Family and Community Ministries at Baylor University, discusses marriage relationships in her book, *Family Ministry: A Comprehensive Guide*. She points out that research conducted in the mid-twentieth century revealed how wives suffered in traditional marriages:

Wives, in traditional marriages, suffered significantly more depression and other mental disorders than men, working married women and unmarried women (Bernard 1982).

In traditional marriages, where the husband was dominant, 10.7% of wives had been beaten -- a rate of more than 300 percent higher than for egalitarian marriages (Straus, Gelles and Steinmetz 1980).

Violence is more likely to occur in homes where the husband has all the power and makes all the decisions than in home where spouses share decision making. Spouse abusers and their abused partners typically believe in and live out a traditional model of marriage. (L. Walker 1979).

Garland cites numerous research studies since the 1950s that have "consistently revealed that egalitarian couples have more satisfying marriages than traditional marriages (Bean, Curtis and Marcum 1977; Blood and Wolfe 1960; Centers, Raven and Rodrigues 1971; Locke and Karlsson 1952; Michel 1967)."^[16]

Drs. Pepper Schwartz and Philip Blumstein, University of Washington sociologists published the results of a decade long research study in 1983. Their extensive survey of 15,000 American couples revealed that "equality and shared power" significantly contributed to happiness and was the reason couples chose to stay married. Conversely,

the inequality experienced by women was a primary cause of unhappiness leading to the break up of marriages.^[17]

Dr. Howard Clinebell, Professor Emeritus of Pastoral Psychology and Counseling, Claremont School of Theology and author of *Basic Types of Pastoral Care & Counseling*, characterizes a healthy marriage as one evidenced by mutual care and support that allows for the growth and fulfillment of each person's God-given potentialities. Clinebell writes in 1984 that based on personal experience he and his wife, Dr. Charlotte Ellen, "can attest to the fact that an egalitarian marriage is potentially more fulfilling for the woman and the man."^[18] Conversely, Clinebell states,

Sexism is a central cause of diminished and destructive marriages.^[19]

Ashton Applewhite, author of *Cutting Loose: Why Women Who End Their Marriages Do So Well* addresses the personal and sociopolitical aspects of marriage. Citing a 1995 New Woman magazine poll of 4,000 women, she notes that women in egalitarian marriages are by far the

happiest. The senior editor of the New Woman Survey writes that shared power and responsibility "seems to be crucial to a woman's happiness in marriage."^[20]

Summary of Empirical Marriage Data

Extensive studies and research have been performed by marriage and family professionals, sociologists, and demographers. Over the last 50 years these studies reveal that significant numbers of egalitarian marriages are happy in comparison to hierarchical marriages. Recent national studies quantified these results revealing that 81% of egalitarian marriages are happy while only 18% of traditional hierarchical marriages can say the same. That represents a 4.5:1 ratio in favor of egalitarian marriages. Spousal abuse is significantly higher in traditional hierarchical marriages than in egalitarian marriages. The results of these research studies confirm the following:

First: they effectively discredit any hierarchicalists' claim that sharing authority destabilizes marriage.

Second: it suggests that hierarchy actually destabilizes and leads to the demise of marriages.

Third: it provides objective evidence that egalitarian marriages produce healthy, happy, intimate, stable marriage relationships with the least amount of spousal abuse.

Strong and healthy marriages are built on loving and equal relationships; they grow best and flourish within the context of an egalitarian marriage model. Pastors and church leaders who have fostered the hierarchical-complementarian view of marriage need to be willing to reexamine their position. The extensive empirical data validates the effectiveness of the egalitarian model for marriage.

Endnotes

[1] J. H. Olthuis, "Marriage," in *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics & Pastoral Theology*, eds. David J. Atkinson and David H. Field (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 545.

[2] Barna Group, "Born Again Adults Less Likely to Co-Habit, Just as Likely to Divorce," August 1, 2001. Accessed June 4, 2004. <https://www.barna.org/component/content/article/5-barna-update/45-barna-update-sp-657/56-born-again-adults-less-likely-to-co-habit-just-as-likely-to-divorce#>.

[3] Christine Wicker, *The Dallas Morning News*, "Dumbfounded by Divorce." *Adherents.com*. Accessed December 12, 2015. www.adherents.com/largecom/baptist_divorce.html. The Barna Group, "Denomination" [doc. no longer on-line]; originally accessed April 12, 2004.

[4] Religious Tolerance.org, "U.S. DIVORCE RATES: For various faith groups, age groups, & geographic areas." Accessed November 5, 2003. http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr_dira.htm;

[5] *The Dallas Morning News*, "Dumbfounded by Divorce"

[6] Religious Tolerance.org, "U.S. DIVORCE RATES"

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] J. H. Olthuis, "Marriage," 565-566.

[9] Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, "The Danvers Statement," in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, eds. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton: Crossway, 1991), 478.

- [10] Robertson, McQuilkin, Biblical Ethics, 2d ed. (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House, 1995), 270.
- [11] Nancy Marie Brown, "Happy Marriages: Studying the Cause and Effects Divorce," Penn State Research, (accessed November 7, 2003). <http://news.psu.edu/story/140669/2002/01/01/research/happy-marriages-studying-causes-and-effects-divorce>.
- [12] David H. Olson, Amy Olson-Sigg & Peter J. Larson, "National Survey of Married Couples - 2008." Accessed January 19, 2016. https://www.prepare-enrich.com/pe/pdf/research/2011/national_survey_of_married_couples_2008.pdf
- [13] Spouse Abuse & Marital Dynamics based on Enrich (2003). Accessed January 8, 2016. <https://www.prepare-enrich.com/pe/pdf/research/abuse.pdf>.
- [14] Garland, Family Ministry, 201.
- [15] Ibid., 201.
- [16] Ibid., 200-201.
- [17] Andrew D. Lester and Judith L. Lester. It Takes Two: The Joy of Intimate Marriage (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 120.
- [18] Howard Clinebell, Basic Types of Pastoral Care & Counseling: Resources for the Ministry of Healing & Growth (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 244-250.
- [19] Howard Clinebell, Growth Counseling for Marriage Enrichment, Pre-Marriage and the Early Years (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 24.
- [20] Ashton Applewhite, "Making Relationships Work Better." Divorce online.com. Accessed January 19, 2016. <http://divorceonline.com/whats-new/2007/5/6/making-relationships-work-better.html>