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In 1997 the state of Louisiana passed legislation which substantially changed marriage and divorce laws within the state. Arizona and Arkansas have also passed similar broad reforms, and other states are in various stages of re-considering marriage laws. Today one might think the nature of these changes would be toward liberalization to include gay marriage but this book is about a grassroots effort to make marriage laws, more conservative, not more liberal. It is called “Covenant Marriage.”

In covenant marriage states, couples have a choice, to be declared at the time of getting the marriage license, if they want a regular marriage or a “covenant” one. The latter requires pre-marital counseling at the front end, and if the marriage founders at some point down the line, counseling at the back-end.

The purpose of this book is to assess the implementation and impact (if any) of covenant marriage laws within Louisiana. **Covenant Marriage** is a fascinating look at something which is well under the radar of most.

Why would states enact such laws? The answer is two-fold. Most compelling to state legislatures is that the social science research is clear: people who are married are healthier and happier than those who are not. Furthermore, children raised by an intact married couple are less likely to be in poverty, are more likely to feel good about themselves, are physically healthier, and less likely to participate in activities deleterious to themselves or their communities. In other words, children living in an intact marriage likely cost society less than those who experience divorce and single parenting.

Secondly, particularly those who are conservative when it comes to religion eschew the serial monogamy no-fault divorce laws foster, and instead see marriage itself as God’s best, God’s idea, plan for a man and woman.

So how is it going in Louisiana? Apparently, not so well.

The authors point out that the marketing of the “Covenant Marriage” option has been lumpy at best. Some pastors have told their congregations about it, but only half of the couples applying for marriage licenses have even heard about CM. By then it is (much) too late to take part in the required pre-marital counseling.

The authors additionally point out that further research clearly reveals it is not CM which correlates with better, longer lasting marriage, it is religiosity. The couples who choose CM are (overwhelmingly) more religious than those who do not. Couples high in religiosity see marriage as a covenant already, and that their marriage has a higher purpose.

“Religious individuals and couples...find comfort in this very public purpose for their marriage. They envision their marriage as a godly institution to help others, an organization focused beyond the couple. They perceive their marriage as enmeshed in real chains of responsibility to spouses, close communities, and needy strangers. Therefore, for many, divorce is simply not considered possible. (p.130)”

In the fascinating conclusion of **Covenant Marriage** the authors “grade” the CM movement in Louisiana. And the grades are:
For Couples: B-

The authors give the low grade because not many couples new of this option until marriage license time. I would disagree with blaming couples for this…it seems the State bears some responsibility for marketing the option.

For the State: B

It might be good public policy, but it was poorly implemented. (Seems like more of a C- to me!) As public policy it reminds me of the Education Act of 1988 in the UK. Sociologist in Wales had done a massive study of UK young people and found a high correlation between religiosity and prosocial behavior. Their message to Parliament was essentially “…we have two choices when it comes to youth in this country, we can either build more prisons, because that’s where most of our teenagers are headed, or, we can do all we can to support religious faith amongst youth.” Parliament, ever budget conscious, decided it was much cheaper to support religious faith that it was to build prisons and so, in 1988, declared that there would be an hour of religious instruction or religious experience in every public school every day. The Act was strengthened in 1994 to clarify it was not Wicca Worship, or Islamic Instruction, but Christian faith and Christian teaching/worship.

The Larger Culture A-.

A good “grade” is given in that the marriage movement in Louisiana has put the issue on the radar in other states, not to mention the “Healthy Marriage Initiative” (along with $150 million in funding) during the Bush administration.

The authors rightly observe that issues related to marriage are controversial. However they again emphasize the social science consensus: “…marriage produces better outcomes than other alternatives do; children typically do better in stable marriages than otherwise; and cohabitation does not rival marriage for either adults or children. (p.148)” The authors affirm the Covenant Marriage movement in Louisiana (and elsewhere) is a good thing, contributing positively toward a civil society.