

BOOK REVIEWS

SWEET SURRENDER: HOW CULTURAL MANDATES SHAPE CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE By
Dennis Hiebert, Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013, 280 pp. \$24.80.

As a fellow sociologist who has taught courses on the family in an evangelical Christian college setting for over a decade, I was pleased to finally see a book on marriage that challenges the Christian ideal, instead of the people trying to embody the Christian ideal, as a response to the struggling institution of marriage. While maintaining a high view of Scripture and an uncompromising heart for maintaining high standards, Professor Hiebert uses his sociological perspective to critique a Christian marriage subculture heavily influenced by a worldview of individualism that serves to blame the victims more than strengthen Christian community supports for increasingly isolated, privatized, and emotionally loaded marital bonds. Hiebert describes “the family as a fragile social unit at risk both from within and without” (p 54), and is sufficiently in-tune with the hard realities most people face in terms of community decline, financial pressures, and interpersonal strain to offer ‘good news’ about marriage by making Christian ideals more accessible for those desirous of living with the blessing of God in their personal lives. This book offers an important corrective to Christian teachings influenced by a culture that tends to overestimate the power of individual choices and underestimate the power of culture to shape those choices (p 62). This is not a book for couples in crisis, but it is a book for average Christians who want to please God with how they live their lives. It is Hiebert’s hope that, by rethinking assumptions people bring to marriage, average Christians can be freed to experience marriage as

a mysterious love story, and love does not yield gracefully to formula. Christian marriages should then be given the freedom to write their own love story, letting it play out as it will relative to their culture, because the biblical imperative is to love fully—no less, but no more. In sum, Christians would benefit from looser, more graceful and inclusive definitions of successful marriage. The current tighter cultural definitions are excessively restrictive, anxiety producing, and counterproductive for average Christians, the large majority of whom are tormented by the ideals that tyrannize them, and by the all-too common disjunction between image and experience. In the end, we do not help marriages by tightening the screws or raising the bar, just as we do not help by softening the bed and making it more inviting. (Hiebert 2013, p 222)

Hiebert explains, and critiques, the historical-cultural story of what many people have accepted as authoritative commands associated with Christian marriage. Hiebert un.masks ways in which Christians have accommodated to culture such as taking for granted that marital partners should select each other based on romantic attraction with the goal of developing an

intimate relationship and experiencing physical pleasure. Hiebert describes the social evolution of a burdensome combination of declining social supports and rising marital expectations as the increasingly isolated marital unit is relied upon as the primary source of personal need fulfillment for romance, intimacy and sex. Hiebert attempts to liberate Christians from the tyranny that arises when people 'take as biblical what is merely cultural' (p 5). Rather than write another self-help book, Hiebert challenges readers to question the cultural shaping of marital expectations that make the self-help books necessary in the first place. Rather than "render God-honouring marriages in which the couples are not best friends to be deficient, or problematic, if not failing" (p 27), and accuse those who would develop friendships beyond their spouse of engaging in 'emotional adultery,' Hiebert suggests that realistic appraisals of achievable marital ideals might leave fewer spouses disheartened, marriages less pressurized, and society a bit more stable (p 28). "Christians must come to grips with the fact," says Hiebert, "that neither the word nor the concept of intimacy is anywhere to be found in the biblical text with reference to marriage" (p 131). Moreover, while family is important, it is not all important, says Hiebert, and too many Christian subcultures idolize the family (p 70), distorting the biblical text that claims the Church, not the domestic household, as the primary vehicle of God's grace and salvation for a desperate world (p 74). That said, Hiebert is quick to clarify that "a God-ordered priority is no license to be irresponsible toward the family, as some driven ministers and missionaries are wont to do" (p 74). For the most part, Hiebert presents a scholarly and biblically balanced discussion that should prove useful in classrooms and adult study groups for the thoughtful consideration of more diverse and accessible models of Christian marriage. But as with all works, there are some identifiable weaknesses. I will address five. First, *Sweet Surrender* is inadequately attentive to diversity. For example, Hiebert claims that his book on heterosexual marriages is just as applicable to same-sex marriages in a rather dismissive footnote that completely glosses over additional issues distinctive to these types of marital bonds (p 5). Second, Hiebert does not acknowledge multiple definitions of the family. He clearly sides with the more traditional definition and describes the inclusion of friends and neighbours as 'fictive kin' and 'caregiving functionaries' (p 47), designations which would offend many of the students I have had in the classroom. Third, I found his discussion of the culture of eroticism to be gendered and somewhat out of touch with the realities many young people struggle with today. I disagree when he says that "the days of the exploitative, gendered exchange of money and sex, where he would 'pay out' financially and she would 'put out' sexually are fading" (p 38). If anything, the pressure to sexually 'put out' has increased and there are many women who find the 'hooking up' culture to be anything but an escape from relational pain (p 38). Fourth, his discussion of conflict (mandate 8), while rich in reframing conflict as an opportunity for interpersonal growth, was woefully inadequate on the topic of spousal abuse and interpersonal violence. Fifth, when it comes to the impact of divorce on children, Hiebert contributes to the marital tyranny he decries, unwittingly heaping burdens upon the shoulders of parents with failed marriages. Hiebert does

not differentiate between distress and disorder when he says the impact of divorce is “almost always almost completely negative for their children, except when the marriage is severely conflicted and family life is abusive” (p 177). While most children do experience distress from divorce, most children still function well despite this distress and do not experience “disorders” (Laumann-Billings & Emory 2000). For parents reading this book, please know that whatever statistics one reads concerning the impact of divorce on children, these are *group* measures that do *not* apply to all children (Corak 2001).

The strengths of *Sweet Surrender* far outweigh these identifiable weaknesses. I encourage Christian communities to utilize this book as an opportunity to identify fresh ways for encountering the grace and mercy of God in marriage.

Works Cited

Corak, M. (2001). Death and divorce: The long-term consequences of parental loss on adolescents. *Journal of Labor Economics* 19: 682-716.

Laumann-Billings, L., and Emery, R.E. (2000). Distress among young adults from divorced families. *Journal of Family Psychology* 14: 671-687.

S. Steiner

Booth University College