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MARRIAGE – KEYSTONE OF A STRONG SOCIETY

A review of *Just Sex: Is it ever just sex?* by Guy Brandon

(published on 20 March 2009 by the Jubilee Centre, Cambridge)

This year's British Social Attitudes report reveals that just 38 per cent of young adults think marriage is the best kind of relationship (compared with 84 per cent of over-65s who think so) and only 22 per cent think married couples make better parents than unmarried ones. Faced with a barrage of messages from a sexually permissive environment and lacking a clear rationale for biblical teaching, many Christians appear to be equally unsure of the benefits of marriage.

Perhaps the biggest question this gives rise to is: Why are they not being presented with the evidence that would help them reach a better informed opinion? Responding to this need, a leading Christian social reform charity, the Jubilee Centre, is publishing what is already being described as 'a watershed book,' entitled *Just Sex: Is it ever just sex?*

Concluding four years of original research into sexual ethics and relationships, *Just Sex* recognises that many people are confused about sex. On the one hand, it is meant to be something special. On the other, it is casually dismissed as trivial – merely or 'just' sex. This book encourages us to consider whether the impact of our sexual relationships on others around us is fair, or just. Demonstrating the damage created by society's present approach to sex, the book offers a better, more just, way, which brings with it the promise of God's *shalom*.

Just Sex argues that, in contrast to our culture's sexual watchword of 'consenting adults in private,' it is the couple's *public* declaration of love and commitment in front of friends and family, who in turn promise to support them in their relationship, that gives marriage its intimacy and stability. This factor lies behind the many benefits enjoyed by married couples compared to those who cohabit, divorce or remain single.

In fact, relationships are so important to our personal well-being that studies indicate marriage can add up to five years to a person's life. For instance, an extensive eight-year study looking at over 67,000 adults concluded that, after taking into account age, state of health, and several other factors likely to influence the findings, people who had been divorced or separated were 27 per cent more likely to have died, those who had been widowed were almost 40 per cent more likely to have died, but those who had never been married were 58 percent more likely to have died than their peers who

were married and still living with their spouse. Thus, even among 20-40 year-olds, never having been married is a better predictor of poor health outcomes than either divorce or widowhood.

Other research shows that, on average, married people also earn more and have greater wealth, enjoy greater sexual satisfaction more often, and are less likely to suffer from mental health problems. Marriages break up less often and last much longer than cohabitations (and couples who cohabit before marriage are more likely to break up).

Children born into marriages are happier, more likely to do better at school, and to live above the poverty line. Marriage is also good for society. Stable relationships mean less poverty and fewer welfare payments, which means lower taxes. Fewer break-ups – the leading cause of bankruptcy – and better job performance means greater financial stability, fewer repossessions, and a stronger economy. Indeed, it has been estimated that the direct costs to the UK taxpayer of educational underachievement, crime, and benefits payments associated with family breakdown are around £37 billion per year – that is, around £1,200 per taxpayer, more than the entire defence budget, half the education budget or a third of the NHS budget!

Some try to argue that this is true because couples already in stable, committed relationships with a greater degree of financial security are more likely to marry in the first place. However, this is not the whole picture. The public promise of marriage plays an important role in bringing husband and wife closer together, rather than merely symbolising commitment, as many people assume.

Obviously, couples who marry before they are ready risk problems later on. But those who hold off tying the knot unnecessarily may be overlooking a vital aspect of marriage: instead of solely reflecting existing intimacy and stability, marriage typically reinforces them and leads to a deeper quality of relationship.

Over the last couple of generations, we have all allowed our identities to become increasingly narrowly defined by a self-centred obsession with our sexual relationships, to the cost of our wider networks of relationships.

Although sex *reinforces* intimate relationships, sex cannot *create* intimacy. In fact, it should come as no surprise that casual sex actually *undermines* a person's life chances of finding true intimacy. For, if we practice treating relationships as disposable and as though they have no impact on us or on those around us, then of course we are going to find it difficult to break that habit when we finally try to settle down in a long-term, stable relationship.

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