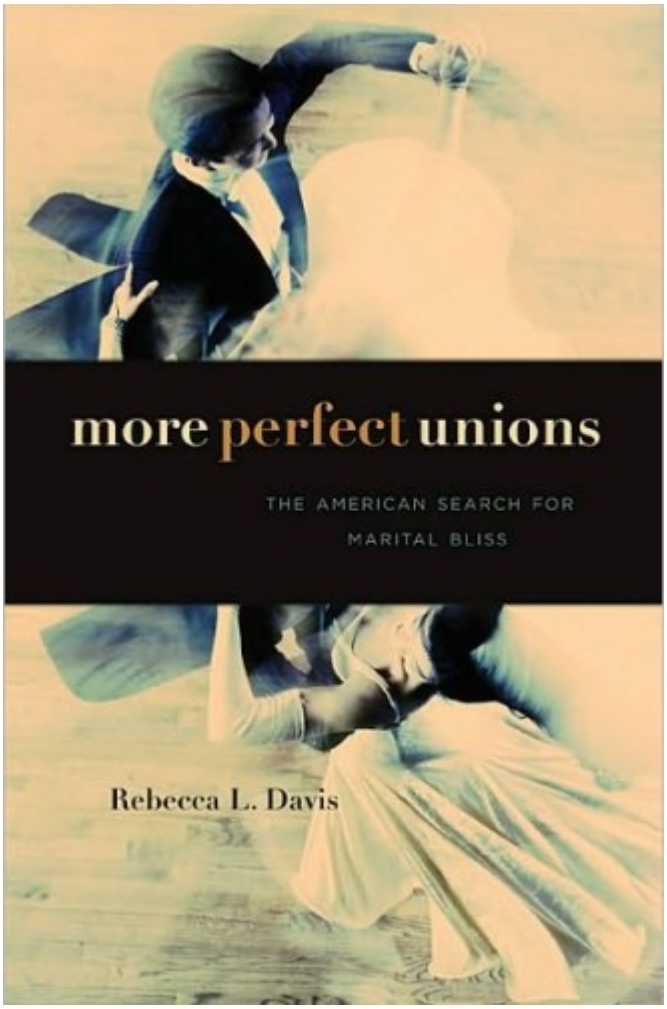
A review of More Perfect Unions

reviewed by William H. Willimon in the October 5, 2010 issue

In Review



More Perfect Unions

By Rebecca L. Davis
Harvard University Press

Some years ago, as the pastor of an inner-city, blue-collar congregation, I noted that whenever a couple in our congregation was reputed to be having marital trouble, the

most frequent question was, "Have they had counseling?"

If the answer was yes, then the usual response was, "Well, then maybe they ought to get a divorce." The implication? Counseling is the last, best hope for preserving a struggling marriage. I announced: "Our church is opposed to divorce—unless you've had counseling. Then it's OK."

Eighty years ago marital counseling was a brand new profession. Marital counselors and their clients have taught Americans to believe that marital bliss is an attainable and worthy goal that all can reach—if we avail ourselves of the services of a member of the now 24,000-member American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy or one of the many thousands more licensed marriage, family, sex and divorce therapists. Today millions of married couples and 40 percent of all engaged couples receive counseling.

Religious leaders and institutions have been major players in this story; mainline Christians immediately seized upon the nascent marital counseling movement as a means of maintaining some relevance to a changing culture. Though America's faith in God may be slipping, we remain firm in our conviction that blissful marriages are an essential component of a prosperous and stable society. Clergy still perform about 85 percent of all weddings, and the majority of those clergy require couples to have premarital counseling.

How we acquired our exuberant faith in premarital counseling, as well as our conviction that marriage is an intrinsic part of American civic and religious life, is the story that is told in this fascinating book by cultural historian Rebecca Davis. A persistent theme that runs throughout Davis's account is the way marriage counseling has been responsive to and symbiotic with shifting cultural expectations for marriage. As early as 1889 the U.S. had the highest divorce rate in the world. Psychology was enlisted by religious leaders to prevent divorce and, for Catholics, to prevent use of contraceptives. Concern for strengthening marriage became a religious undertaking.

American marriage advocates have, since the late 19th century, touted matrimony for its contributions to the larger society. Margaret Sanger's ugly eugenics, good old American racism, anticommunism, the Kinsey reports, concerns about the alleged breakdown of the black family, fears engendered by skyrocketing divorce rates, the women's movement, the movement against the women's movement, the quest for

personal fulfillment, the ideology of sexual self-expression and, more recently, right-wing politics have each in its day stepped up and provided the marital counseling movement with an ideological rationale for its work. As Davis shows, a movement that set out to repair marriage ended up transforming it.

Davis shows that though marriage and family therapists tried to appear to be scientists, and though they scurried about seeking scientific-like validation of their work, Americans' search for marital bliss was heavily indebted (sometimes enslaved) to whatever society at that moment believed to be the goods that it required of marriage. Attempts were made, beginning in the 1950s, to quantify compatibility and to predict marital happiness with questionnaires and psychological inventories. These efforts live on in today's online dating services, with their claims to offer tools for the perfect match.

Protestant mainline valorization of marriage as a means of filling church pews reached its zenith just as social movements in the 1960s and 1970s were calling traditional sexual relationships into question. Betty Friedan excoriated the bourgeoning American marital-advice industry for fostering the belief that "love and marriage will take care of anything." As the divorce rate in America went through the roof, Marriage Encounter was invented as part of the communication skills craze (in less than three decades, over 2 million couples were triangulated through the Encounters into husband, wife and God). Marabel Morgan's laughably simplistic *The Total Woman* (1973) gave a last hurrah among evangelicals for traditional marriage. It wasn't until the late 1970s that the marriage counseling movement, of the right or the left, began to recognize the violence in many marriages and to say anything against it.

By the end of the 1980s, even as the marital ineptitude of notable politicians was frequently being exposed by the media, at least the illusion of a happy marriage was made a requirement for politicians of the right and the left. (Don't you find it a delicious irony that adulterous Republican governor Mark Sanford of South Carolina signed into law a measure that gives a $50 tax credit to any couple who completes 12 hours of premarital counseling?) A happy marriage had become an essential component of a happy nation's socioeconomic future, even though a lower percentage of Americans are married today than at any time in our history.

While contemporary advocates of "family values" put down the 1960s and 1970s for their alleged decadent hedonism, Davis amply illustrates how the family-values

crowd bought into the notion that the point of marriage is personal fulfillment and individual gratification. The tension between pushing marriage as personally rewarding and valuing marriage for its larger social utility provides Davis with a constant theme. While there is scant empirical evidence that marital counseling fulfills popular expectations, the marital counseling movement has been spectacularly successful in instilling in Americans the belief that marital bliss is a good that is worth pursuing. Today, advocates of same-sex marriage say that it is inconceivable that a couple could attain any degree of real bliss outside the bounds of marriage. As Davis says, in spite of a soaring divorce rate and a decline in the number of those participating in marriage, in just a few decades Americans have remade marriage into a redemptive activity, imagining not only "that they could try to save marriage, but also that marriage might save them."

Although Davis extensively documents how Christian churches have been active participants in the search for marital bliss, one is struck by the lack of theological content in the story that Davis tells. Marital bliss, as we currently define it in this culture, may be a good thing to seek. And various therapeutic techniques may contribute to the attainment of that bliss. But that we have enthusiastically sought marital bliss through therapy in the context of our faith communities may have less to say about our religious faith and more to say about our subservience to cultural pressures that have little theological justification within the traditions of those communities. Perhaps this incongruity between marital-bliss ideology and the Christian faith is the reason Davis can tell this story without any reference to children even though the church once maintained that children were the whole point of marriage.

Davis shows how by the early 1960s religious leaders had linked religious faith with faith in marriage as "a singular principle of moral living," but she doesn't give much evidence for how this was achieved as a theological project. I suspect that this is due not to any omission on Davis's part but to the difficulty of grounding our culture's shifting ideas about matrimonial bliss in any biblical or theological tradition. Jesus provides poor justification for our faith in and our search for blissful marriage; therefore one can present a history of attempts to repair marriage in the last century without making any reference to the One who said that somehow we'll have to find bliss in heaven without the bliss of marriage.