

[MJTM 15 (2013–2014)]

#### BOOK REVIEW

Dennis Hiebert. *Sweet Surrender: How Cultural Mandates Shape Christian Marriage*. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013. 267 pp. Pbk. ISBN-13: 978-1-60608-896-8.

For many people the question posed by Geoffrey Bromiley in the Introduction of *God and Marriage* is as valid today as when he asked it: “What, not another book on marriage?” Fortunately, *Sweet Surrender* is not just another book on marriage. Instead, it offers a much needed reflection on the state of Christian marriage in North America. Written from the perspective of a sociologist, this text examines the lived realities of marriage within North American culture and the ways these realities are manifested in Christian marriages and Christian literature. Thus, Hiebert’s primary task is to describe contemporary Christian marriage patterns rather than explore ways to make marriages healthier or describe a theological vision for marriage.

*Sweet Surrender* employs the structure and format of an academic exploration of the subject: i.e., identifying the questions to be explored, defining terms and methodology, literature review, presentation of the data, and discussing the implications of the data. Thus, Hiebert’s introduction, “Forms of Surrender,” orients the reader to the concept of surrender (definition), presents the research question (i.e., the task of the book is to question and challenge the manner in which Christians have surrendered their concept of marriage to culture), and orients the reader to the structure and argument of the book (methodology). The first chapter, “Reading Culture and the Bible,” provides a preliminary overview of the problem (literature review) as the author reflects on eight intersecting themes: influence of culture, gender, complementarianism and egalitarianism, cultural and transcultural aspects of marriage, ancient and contemporary mandates for

marriage, “What would Jesus do?,” and exploring the question of cultural adultery in Christian conceptualizations of marriage. This discussion serves both to focus the discussion and establish the hypothesis that contemporary Christian views of marriage are shaped more by culture than Scripture.

Having thus framed his discussion, Hiebert devotes the next ten chapters to reflecting on each of ten cultural mandates (i.e., sets of cultural beliefs, values and norms) that shape our understanding of mate selection, marriage and social connectedness, the ‘calling’ of marriage, need fulfillment, love, intimacy, sex, marital conflict, marital dissolution, and marital commitment. These chapters focus the discussion by reframing each mandate in the form of a question that guides the author’s sociological reflection on the mandate under discussion. The first three questions consider themes that explore the relationship between the marital unit and wider society; “Should marital partners select each other?” “Should marriage be a separate social unit?” and “Should marriage be our primary calling in life?” The next four questions explore themes that explore the purpose and processes of marriage; “Should our spouse be our primary source of personal need fulfillment?” “Should marital love be romantic?” “Should the goal of marriage be intimacy?” and “Should sex be primarily the pursuit of physical pleasure?” Hiebert’s final set of questions consider themes that explore the stability of marriage; “Should conflict in marriage be understood as relational weakness?” “Should marital dissolution be understood as personal failure?” and “Should marriage be a commitment to an institution?” In the final chapter, “Reclaiming Christian Marriage,” the discussion focuses on the implications of the themes discussed in previous chapters and argues that Christians need to embrace a view of marriage that is distinct and countercultural, as opposed to surrendering to culture or espousing cultural forms of a bygone era.

As a Christian counselor and pastoral theologian I found that the experience of reading *Sweet Surrender* was not unlike listening to my cousins describe my grandparents. The subject is readily recognizable, even when the narrative takes an unexpected or unfamiliar turn and the voice reflects a different perspective on

the subject. In this case, the fact that the author is a sociologist and not a theologian means that Hiebert's voice brings a fresh point of view to a familiar subject and, in the process, he raises vital questions for consideration by traditionalists and progressives alike. For example, Hiebert's engagement of the data illustrates that the church's surrender to culture in matters related to marriage and family has moved beyond equating the traditional family with nineteenth-century socioeconomic manifestations (cf. Rodney Clapp, *Families at the Crossroads* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993], 13) with the result that many late twentieth-century Christian conceptualizations of marriage reflect contemporary cultural norms, thus raising a key question that followed me throughout this book, "How might serious biblical and theological reflection result in a view of marriage that is neither a capitulation nor a reactionary response to culture?"

Viewed individually, each chapter presents material that is vital to Hiebert's argument. For example, the discussion of mate selection (Mandate 1) will be of interest to readers who are unfamiliar with sociological and cultural processes of couple formation. In terms of his presentation of the material, I found Hiebert's engagement of the historical, sociological and biblical/theological material in his discussions of connectedness (Mandate 2), calling (Mandate 3), need fulfillment (Mandate 4), and commitment (Mandate 10) provoked thoughtful reflection on the nature of marriage and how I, both as a counselor as well as a pastoral theologian, engage others to think about marriage.

As often happens when one hears a familiar story told from a another point of view, I was consciously aware of both the new material that Hiebert brings to the discussion as well as what seems to be missing, or at least told differently: i.e., *Sweet Surrender* employs the techniques of socio-cultural and theological analysis to reflect on contemporary marriage but it is not a theological treatise on marriage, nor does it define what Christian marriage should look like, nor is it an agenda for enriching marriages. This approach brings freshness to the discussion and serves to provoke informed and considered reflection.

For example, while the structure of the text permits the author to assemble and discuss a wide a body of data, readers who ap-

proach the text looking for extensive biblical or theological reflection on each of the mandates may be disappointed. This does not mean that biblical and theological reflection is absent but rather that Hiebert does not employ classic theological reflections on marriage such as those written by Augustine, Barth, etc. to support or develop his argument.

While some may consider these texts to be of value when developing a theology of marriage, their absence from *Sweet Surrender* allows the author to focus the discussion on how current cultural mandates shape contemporary Christian attitudes about marriage. In addition, it is worth noting that although these classic texts about Christian marriage may provide an important counterpoint to contemporary cultural influences, these texts are not immune to the influence of the cultural mandates that shaped marriage in the era in which they were written. Thus, it is uncertain whether the inclusion of these sources would have made any tangible difference to either his thesis or his conclusion. With this in mind, it is noted that theological reflection in some chapters is extensive (e.g., Mandate 2, Connectedness, 58–60; Mandate 7, Sex, 149–53; Mandate 10, Commitment, 196–206) while the extent of theological reflection in other chapters is brief (e.g., Mandate 1, Mate Selection, 43; Mandate 8, Conflict, 173).

Next, Hiebert's selection of non-theological source material primarily reflects on the non-therapeutic literature with only limited engagement with the field of secular and Christian marriage counseling. Indeed, while Hiebert acknowledges John Gottman's work on marital processes he does not directly reference other influential voices such as David Olson's work in marriage assessment and enrichment, or Susan Johnson's vital work in the area of couple attachment and intimacy (cf. Sue Johnson, *Hold Me Tight: Seven Conversations for a Lifetime of Love* [New York: Little, Brown & Co., 2008]; David H. Olson et al., *The Couple Checkup* [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008]). The omission of Sue Johnson's work is significant, as her work offers an important alternate voice to Gottman's and her approach is closely related to the thesis of *Safe Haven Marriage*, a Christian self-help book by Hart and Hart Morris. The omission of Olson's work is equally significant as many pastors employ his PRE-

PARE and ENRICH inventories in their work with couples. Similarly, it is noted that Hiebert does not engage with the contribution of important Christian counseling texts such as those written by Worthington (Everett L. Worthington, Jr., *Hope-Focused Marriage Counseling: A Guide to Brief Therapy* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999]) or Sells and Yarhouse (James N. Sells and Mark A. Yarhouse, *Counseling Couples in Conflict: A Relational Restoration Model* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2011]). The absence of these voices from the conversation prompted me to reflect on whether their inclusion would have made any difference to Hiebert's argument. In the end, however, I concluded that the inclusion of additional source material representing secular and Christian approaches to marital therapy would not have made a significant impact on Hiebert's thesis. (For a comprehensive review of the themes and emphases within Christian approaches to marital counselling and how these parallel developments within the broader marital counselling movement, see Kelvin F. Mutter, "Pastoral and Christian Marital Therapies," *Edification: The Transdisciplinary Journal of Christian Psychology* [forthcoming]).

Finally, while *Sweet Surrender* invites the Christian reader to reflect differently about the phenomenology of marriage, readers are likely to note other points of weakness or omission, four of which merit brief comment. To begin, *Sweet Surrender* neither engages cultural narratives about polygamy and same-sex marriage nor the influence of these on contemporary discussions about Christian marriage. Next, I found the discussion of conflict muddied the distinction between normal marital disagreements and the problems posed by abuses of power within marriage with the result that the problems of abuse and violence are not adequately addressed. Third, in his discussion of commitment, Hiebert devotes much space to covenant, contract, commitment to self, and commitment to the relationship or the institution of marriage. Missing from this discussion, however, is any reflection on an aspect of the question that is of interest to marital counsellors; namely, commitment to the bio-psycho-social-spiritual well-being of the person to whom one is married. Lastly, while *Sweet Surrender* explores key challenges associated with

body-centered, pleasure driven sex on relationships (e.g., an increased risk of promiscuity), what is missing from this discussion is a reflection on how this perspective impacts men's and women's view of themselves as persons.

Notwithstanding its shortcomings, *Sweet Surrender* makes a vital contribution to our understanding of how societal trends are consciously and unconsciously reflected in the day-to-day lived realities of Christian households as well as in the Christian self-help and marriage education literature. Readers interested in ministering to couples and families will find that *Sweet Surrender* creates informed awareness of many of the issues and raises vital questions about how we as Christians think about marriage. For this reason, *Sweet Surrender* should be a "must read" for anyone who is serious about ministering to couples or engaging in theological reflection about contemporary marriage patterns.

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