

THE ME-CENTERED FAMILY

by Chuck Colson; Friday, July 13, 2007

The lead in a recent Washington Post article paints a disturbing picture: “Children rank as the highest source of personal fulfillment for their parents but have dropped to one of the least-cited factors in a successful marriage, according to a national survey.”



What’s the matter with that sentence? Too much to unpack entirely in a few minutes, but let’s zero in on those two enticing words: “personal fulfillment.” The emphasis on that idea tells us a lot about what’s really wrong with marriage and family today.

As the article states, “The 88-page report ... underscores a widening gap between parenthood and marriage — at a time when living together out of wedlock has grown increasingly common and nearly one in four births is to an unmarried woman.”

The author quotes several people who say that they think of marriage and children separately, not as a package deal. By a wide margin, the respondents in this survey still want children. They even realize that children need a mother and a father. But increasingly fewer of them are practicing what they say they believe. Why? Because they also believe that marriage is all about “mutual happiness and fulfillment” and “personal satisfaction” instead of the “bearing and raising of children.”

Do you see what’s missing here? Nothing about putting someone else first. Just marriage as something that makes you feel good — which, as anyone who’s been married will testify, isn’t an idea that works for very long. It’s no wonder that more and more couples have trouble committing to marriage, and that many who do are having trouble making their marriages last.

This is so ironic. We live in an era where romance seems to be on its deathbed and sexual relationships have become casual, ordinary business. Yet here we have here a generation with such an impossibly romanticized view of marriage that they have to find the spouse who’s always wonderful and satisfying — or no spouse at all.

And it’s also no wonder that the idea trickles down to child-raising. People want children to satisfy their own needs, or not at all. You may remember that a while back I talked about two very different mothers: one of them risked her marriage and her health and spent a small fortune conceiving a child; the other was filing a “wrongful-birth” suit over a botched abortion — a child she didn’t want. At bottom, I said, they both had the same idea: that a child was a commodity and that their right to self-fulfillment was their chief goal.

At least one married father quoted in this article, David Joyce, got it right when he said, “I think what we’re running into ... is people saying, ‘[marriage] needs to be about me.’ And it doesn’t. It needs to be about ‘us’ or about ‘we.’ Anything that’s based on a ‘me’ scenario isn’t going to last very long.” Joyce is right.

So what kind of marriage lasts? A marriage in which the husband and the wife understand that marriage is about self-giving, not about self-satisfaction. That parenthood is a calling to self-sacrifice for the good of the child, not an avenue for self-fulfillment.

We need to start teaching our kids and young adults that me-centered families cannot survive. And instead of delivering happiness and self-fulfillment, the me-first attitude will bring, in the end, nothing but emptiness and a declining birthrate that will soon enough bring about the end of western civilization.