

## **MARRIAGE IN CRISIS**

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The Hayashi's marriage wasn't that bad. But it wasn't particularly good either. Sure they lived together and functioned. They each faithfully did their duties. They didn't even fight much. But in reality they had both hoped marriage would be so much more. In the past they had big dreams. But after so many disappointments, they had given up putting energy into their relationship. Talk was shallow, usually about money or kids or weather. They no longer talked from their hearts, never really connected. An unbreakable barrier to closeness loomed between them, they were stuck, and the occasional mention at church of an ideal marriage only made them feel guilty. But what could they do?

The Kudo's marriage was wretched. It was also a big secret. They spent huge amounts of energy on their fights and also on keeping it hidden, after all everyone knows a pastor and his wife are supposed to have it all together. Mrs. Kudo had a significant anger problem going all the way back to childhood, and Rev. Kudo ignoring her needs only made it turn to magma. Usually the episodes erupted right before Sunday worship, and Rev. Kudo would step to the pulpit drained of power. Rev. Kudo had wanted to get help, but where could a pastor safely bare his heart? Mrs. Kudo wanted nothing to do with getting help herself, but was sure her husband needed to get his act straightened out. And so it swirled round and round dragging them deeper. Meanwhile their misery was doing deep damage on their children, their church, and the neighborhood that might have been reached sat plump in the enemies clutches. What could possibly be done?

Many Christian leaders have not woken up yet. Many do business like they did a decade ago. And many don't realize that marriages in Japan are in real crisis. Every year a new record is set for divorce. In just the last ten years the divorce rate has practically doubled in this country. Last year 567,812 people ditched their marriages—that amounts to a divorce every two minutes, 777 a day to be exact.<sup>1</sup> Of Japanese marriages today nearly 40% will end in divorce.<sup>2</sup> Of course many years back anyone could have seen this coming. Freedom and individuality were increasing in Japan, and the country had one of the highest marital dissatisfaction scores in the industrialized world. Anyone could have seen it coming, but did they?

Divorce will continue its record setting—as people continue gaining more freedom. In

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<sup>1</sup> Spa! 9-7-04

<sup>2</sup> Time "Getting Out" 4-5-04

2001, Japan finally recognized the problem of spouse abuse and instituted laws to fight the problem—it was the last industrialized nation to do so, even decades behind its western counterparts. How relevant is the issue of spouse abuse? In 1999 the Cabinet Office did a study revealing that 1/5 wives experiences physical abuse, and one in twenty faces life-threatening violence.<sup>3</sup> At a marriage seminar I did recently a woman related to me that after 20 years of brutalization from her husband she was at the end of her rope. In the early days, while she nursed her newborn son, she was knocked through a glass door, showering her and the baby with the pointy shards. But that baby is now grown, in his late teens, and intent on killing his own father. Violence has come full circle in the family and it's no wonder this wife was getting out.

Divorce will continue its record setting—as today's young people are notorious for being lax in character, not cut out for marriage. Hyper-tech entertainment is resulting in young people becoming increasingly socially inept. (Japan leads the world with the *hikikomori* disorder.) And the careless reasons of many for marrying bring alarm. Today's *nantonaku kekkon* include reasons like; "it just ended up that way," "we didn't really have any other option" and "we were both about the right age for it." Contemporary young people seem clueless as to how to cultivate a relationship and lasting romance. Sexless married couples are now the norm—55% of readers of Josei Jishin and in their 30's admitted that they have no physical contact with their husbands.<sup>4</sup>

Some institutions are beginning to target the needs of marriages; some are merely psycho-therapeutic approaches, others are more bazaar. *Kanayama Jinja* in Kawasaki like many other shrines and festivals around Japan is proliferated with phallic symbols. Visitors pat and pray to these symbols which are supposed to promote "marital harmony." But when will the Church step in with the real answers?

Perhaps we fail to realize the magnitude of ramifications divorce and marital turmoil will have on society, and especially on children. Currently, of the 954,900 fatherless households, most mothers are barely able to make ends meet financially or emotionally.<sup>5</sup> Some months ago I counseled a couple to be married. Both were in their mid-twenties. Both had been divorced. Joining us for the counseling was the woman's two year old daughter. When I met them I immediately liked them. I could also detect

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<sup>3</sup> Japan Times "Battered Wives Battle Conspiracy of Silence" 2-27-02.

<sup>4</sup> Josei Jishin 12-17-02

<sup>5</sup> Japan Times "Single Moms Find Favor with Ministry" 10-31-03.

the pain they had suffered in the past. (I once heard a divorcee describing the experience of divorce as “flesh ripping.”) During the counseling I had them read from 1 Corinthians 13 (“The Love Chapter”) The three sat close, little girl sandwiched between, and for the first time in their lives they touched with their fingers the living Word of God. As they held the Bible together, I thought, how many couples need a chance like this?

This land has Bibles everywhere, most people have seen a Bible at some point. But few are able to connect those words to their lives, their hurts, their needs. Yet surely the Church has sensed the crisis of marriages, and is bringing God’s word specifically to meet this need. Surely the Church could see this need coming long ago and is well along in answering it. Surely the Church can see what lies ahead if the needs of marriages is neglected. Unfortunately the answer to all those statements is still—not yet. Not yet, but hopefully soon, for we should have been there a very long time ago.