

No Honeymoon For Covenant Marriage

By **CHRISTINE B. WHELAN**

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When Louisiana passed its law a year ago offering couples the option of regular or "covenant" marriage, supporters and detractors alike predicted lovebirds would flock to covenant marriage, a high-test vow that mandates premarital counseling and makes divorce difficult. After all, given a choice between saying "I do, sorta," and "I do," who would choose the non-committal shrug?

Answer: almost everyone. A year later, only 1% of Louisiana newlyweds have chosen the deluxe vows.

Newlywed Ashley Rodrigue said she and her husband chose a covenant marriage, but none of their recently married friends have done the same: "Most couples just aren't sure they are ready."

Or perhaps it's just taking a while for covenant marriages to catch on. Says Melissa Soileau, whose noncovenant wedding took place on Saturday: "I've only heard about it on TV and none of my friends have done it." Anyway, she adds, "we know we will stay together."

Nor has covenant marriage caught on outside Louisiana. While 17 states have considered similar legislation this year, only Arizona passed it into law. In contrast, no-fault divorce caught on fast after being introduced in California in 1969. All 50 states soon passed

easy-out marriage laws, and the national divorce rate has increased 35% since.

Has commitment-phobia become hopelessly entrenched in our no-fault divorce society? Not necessarily. It could be that people are waiting for role models rather than the exhortations of self-appointed spokesmen for "family values." "Most couples don't know anyone else who is going covenant," says sociologist Katherine Brown Rosier of Louisiana State University. "There is no network pressure to make that choice."

But there is some evidence that attitudes are changing. An LSU study of 2,353 couples joined at the East Baton Rouge Parish found that the husbands in covenant marriages were more educated than men who chose noncovenant marriage. This, Ms. Rosier says, was not what she expected, nor does she think it was a fluke. "For many people, the concern going in was that we'd have uneducated, starry-eyed folks signing up for covenant marriages without knowing what they were getting into," she says.

Instead the message of commitment seems to be slowly percolating through the community, beginning with the most highly educated. Ms. Rosier notes that the more affluent parishes are the ones pushing covenant marriages the hardest.

At the Bethany World Prayer Center, a nondenominational church in Baker, a leafy, middle-class Baton Rouge suburb, the only marriage they perform is a covenant marriage. "If you can't make that level of commitment, we don't want to marry you," says Pastor Lane Payne.

Surprisingly, though, support for covenant marriage is not unanimous where you'd expect it to be: among conservative family-values advocates. "All marriages are covenants established by God and we don't have the right to create other categories," says

Carmen Pate, president of Washington-based Concerned Women for America. "It opens the door for other types of marriage--like homosexual and polygamous marriage--and makes marriage a matter of selection, not a holy union." Or, as her group's press release puts it: "While the Louisiana law is born from good intentions, it seems to leave room for Satan to get a foothold."

State Rep. Tony Perkins, who sponsored the law, isn't worried about such devilish, unintended consequences. "The homosexual movement has been on a march to gain public approval, and they've gained ground while the family has lost," he says. "The family needs to fight for itself."

Both sides overstate the case. Even if couched in sociology, Ms. Rosier's views reflect a good deal of wisdom. Covenant marriage may well catch on, but not because the family-values activists prescribe it. If no-fault divorce disappears, it will be only because people look around and see the alternative working better.

Groups like Concerned Women for America, distracted by fringe issues like gay marriage and polygamy, make the perfect the enemy of the good. The deeply rooted culture of no-fault divorce will not disappear overnight. But covenant marriage, if it catches on, is one small step toward the goal.

Ms. Whelan is working at the Journal's editorial page this summer.