The sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation was a watershed in the history of the Western theology and law of marriage – a moment and movement that gathered several streams of classical and Catholic legal ideas and institutions, remixed them and revised them in accordance with the new Protestant norms and forms of the day. The Lutheran, Calvinist, and Anglican branches of the Reformation gave birth to three Protestant models of marriage. Like Catholics, Protestants retained the naturalist perspective of marriage as an association created for procreation and mutual protection. They also retained the contractual perspective of marriage as a voluntary association formed by the mutual consent of the couple. Unlike Catholics, however, Protestants rejected the subordination of marriage to celibacy and the celebration of marriage as a sacrament. The Lutheran tradition, from 1517 forward, developed a social model of marriage, grounded in Martin Luther's doctrine of the heavenly and earthly kingdoms. Marriage, Luther and his colleagues taught, was a social estate of the earthly kingdom of creation, not a sacred estate of the heavenly kingdom of
redemption. Marriage, John Calvin and his followers taught, was not a sacramental institution of the church, but a covenantal association of the entire community. The Anglican tradition, of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, brought forth a commonwealth model of marriage. This model embraced the sacramental, social, and covenantal models inherited from the Continent but went beyond them. Marriage was at once a gracious symbol of the divine, a social unit of the earthly kingdom, and a solemn covenant with one's spouse. Evangelical Christianity understands marriage and the family in light of biblical understanding and Christian experience. Christian marriage and family life is regarded as a sacred and creative calling by all Christians. It is a basic biblical teaching. Marital union in Christ appeals to divine grace for support and fulfillment of a natural union of a man and a woman.
Marriage and family are key structures in most societies. While the two institutions have historically been closely linked in Canadian culture, their connection is becoming more complex. The relationship between marriage and family is an interesting topic of study to sociologists. What is marriage? Different people define it in different ways. Social conservatives tend to define the family in terms of structure with each family member filling a certain role (like father, mother, or child). Sociologists, on the other hand, tend to define family more in terms of the manner in which members relate to one another than on a strict configuration of status roles. Many Protestants consider marriage to be a sacred institution or “holy ordinance” of God. Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians consider marriage a holy sacrament or sacred mystery. Jesus used the image of marriage and the family to teach the basics about the Kingdom of God. He inaugurated his ministry by blessing the wedding feast at Cana. In the Sermon on the Mount he set forth a new commandment concerning marriage, teaching that lustful looking constitutes adultery. Christian marriage and family life is regarded as a sacred and creative calling by all Christians. It is a basic biblical teaching. Whereas the Orthodox teaching and practice of marriage is understood in sacramental terms, emphasizing the ecclesial, salvific, and eschatological dimensions of the married life, most Protestants find other expressions and concepts to describe the marital union. Although unwilling to formulate marriage and family life in precisely sacramental terms, Protestants generally stress that this union is a profound spiritual commitment and covenantal relationship. Protestant Christians see the family as a social institution entered into by a private contract that may be blessed by the church.