

Christian Marriage in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

A Six-Week Study

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Preface

The 220th General Assembly (2012) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) received thirteen overtures on the question of same-gender marriage:

- four sought to amend the definition of marriage in the *Book of Order* (W-4.9000) in order to provide for marriage between two people of the same gender;
- six called for authoritative interpretations of the church's constitution to allow for pastoral discretion in presiding at such services; and
- three sought to reaffirm the PC(USA)'s current definition of marriage.

After two days of committee meetings, hours of intense debate in plenary, and elaborate parliamentary procedure, commissioners found themselves without clear consensus. On one matter, however, there seemed to be a general agreement—commissioners shared a desire to help councils of the PC(USA) struggle faithfully with this important question in order to discern the will of God for the church.

In that spirit, the General Assembly instructed the Office of Theology and Worship to prepare a study on Christian marriage in the PC(USA) and to distribute it to all presbyteries and congregations. With this action, the General Assembly called for the PC(USA) to engage in a “season of serious study and discernment” around the meaning of Christian marriage. Presbyteries are asked to report the fruits of this discussion to the Office of the General Assembly at least three months before the 221st General Assembly (2014); the Office of The General Assembly will contact mid-council stated clerks with information on reporting.

The Office of Theology and Worship offers this resource to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) with the admonition to the Hebrews—

“Marriage must be honored in every respect” (Hebrews 13:4);

the hope of the Ephesians—

“Christ is our peace. He made both Jews and Gentiles into one group. With his body, he broke down the barrier of hatred that divided us” (Ephesians 2:14);

and the commandment of Jesus—

“Just as I have loved you, so you also must love each other. This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples” (John 13:34–35).

By the grace of God, may it be so.

The Office of Theology and Worship



Introduction

This is a study of what the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) *has said* on Christian marriage. The issue before the PC(USA) is whether to say something new about marriage, specifically concerning same-gender couples. This study is to equip the PC(USA) for this discussion by giving it a firm foundation in the church's tradition on marriage.

The intent of this study is threefold:

- to supply primary documents for discussion in an easily accessible format, principally Scripture, the *Book of Confessions*, the *Book of Order*, and the *Book of Common Worship's* marriage liturgy (Note: The quotations from the *Book of Confessions* used in this study have not been altered to conform to contemporary language usage.);
- to offer tools for interpreting those documents within the larger context of the church's theological tradition (see the materials mentioned in the bibliography on p. 19); and
- to provide a healthy process for discussing difficult questions in Christian community.

These three aims give shape to the content of each session in the study.

This study is organized around the “Statement on the Gift of Marriage” read in many weddings in Presbyterian churches (*Book of Common Worship*, 842, 858, 884). These familiar words provide a framework to show the breadth of the Reformed Christian understanding of marriage. (See “Appendix 3: Perspectives on Marriage in Historical Context” to read more about how marriage has been understood in Christian history.)

As the commentary on the marriage liturgy explains:

These words, spoken by the minister, serve three purposes. First, they remind the congregation of why they have gathered. Second, they provide a summary of what the church understands about marriage biblically and theologically by announcing the promises and actions of God in regard to marriage. And third, they provide ethical instruction regarding the responsibilities of marriage, not only for the bride and groom but also for the whole congregation.¹

We hope that presbyteries, congregations, and sessions that engage in this study will arrive at:

- a common language for speaking about these matters;
- a clearer view of God's good will for us in marriage;
- a deeper understanding of our tradition and context;
- a better sense of one another's views; and
- a better way forward for the sake of Christ's church.

1. Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Christian Marriage: Supplemental Liturgical Resource 3* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1986), 90.

In order to have conversations about marriage that are prayerful, deep, and fruitful, we encourage you to commit to these practices as you talk together:

Heed these words from Scripture: “by speaking the truth with love, let’s grow in every way into Christ . . .” (Ephesians 4:15).

Be present: bring your ideas, beliefs, and convictions with you, and be ready and willing to contribute them to the shared conversation.

Listen well: be attentive, respectful, and patient; ask for clarification when you don’t understand. Be open to how the Spirit may speak through the other members of your group.

Speak well: speak with confidence, yet with awareness that others may see things differently; make space for their voices too.

Build the conversation: make connections with previous sessions and with what others have said, so that the conversation grows and deepens as you go.

Practice friendliness: show warmth and kindness to others, and be ready to receive their friendship.

Don’t force it: don’t try to push an agenda or reach a predetermined outcome, such as “consensus” or “having good feelings.”

Sometimes good conversations clarify the nature and extent of our disagreements. Good conversation is always a struggle with our own issues and the issues of others. This is not likely your last conversation on Christian marriage. Live in confidence that God will use these words and these times—even when they are difficult—for the building up of the body of Christ.

Preparing to Lead Each Session

Read the study session and select questions and activities that you will use. What other questions, issues, or themes occur to you from your reflection?

Each session includes a hymn. Provide copies of your congregation’s hymnal. If you do not have a piano or keyboard and someone to play, consider asking someone to record the music on a tape or CD so that the group can sing the hymn.

Consider doing the following as people gather at the beginning of the session:

- Provide name tags and pens.
- Provide simple refreshments; ask a volunteer to bring refreshments next week.
- During the first session, agree on simple “ground rules” and logistics: e.g., time to begin and end the session, location for meetings, welcoming all points of view, confidentiality, speaking with respect, listening for understanding, etc. Encourage participants to bring their study books and Bibles.
- Review format for the sessions: Opening Worship, Conversation, and Conclusion.

Further Resources

Each session includes a suggested section of the committee and minority reports of the Civil Unions and Marriage Issues committee. Leaders will find these reports helpful in preparing for the study and may want to encourage group members to read the corresponding sections before each session.



A Brief History of Presbyterian Stances on Homosexuality and Marriage

When discussing same-gender marriage, the question of how the church should regard homosexuality is inescapable. Below you will find a brief history of how the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has addressed homosexuality and what it has said on same-gender marriage.

1976: The Call for Clarification

The PC(USA)'s predecessor bodies began to deal with homosexuality in the 1970s, mostly around the question of who could be ordained to office in the church. In the mid-1970s a congregation in Long Island was presented with a dilemma: Could the church nominate for office a member who seemed gifted and qualified for leadership in the congregation and who was openly gay? Was he eligible for ordination? In 1970 the UPCUSA (the former “northern” church) had declared that homosexual behavior was an “antisocial and personally destructive” form of conduct, raising the question of whether the congregation was allowed to ordain him.¹

So this congregation asked, through its presbytery, for the General Assembly to appoint a special committee to study and recommend definitive guidance on the ordination of an individual who both was judged to be qualified and was “an avowed homosexual.” This was one of six overtures that year on homosexuality, most of which desired reaffirmation that homosexual behavior is sin.

1978: A Clarification Is Made: “Definitive Guidance”

In 1978 the report from the special committee was brought to the General Assembly. The final report included a recommendation that self-acknowledged, practicing homosexuals could be ordained to church office. However, a minority report was presented that distinguished between homosexual orientation and homosexual practice. That minority report argued that homosexual orientation was no barrier to ordination, but that persons who openly practice homosexual behavior should not be ordained. The Assembly adopted the minority report by an overwhelming vote with the proviso that persons ordained prior to this action would not be removed from office. The Presbyterian Church in the United States (the former “southern” church) adopted a very similar statement in 1979. The history is complicated by the fact that the northern and southern denominations would not reunite until 1983; but, in essence, the official policy for both denominations and then for the PC(USA) was:

We conclude that homosexuality is not God's wish for humanity. . . . Even where the homosexual orientation has not been consciously sought or chosen, it is neither a gift from God nor a state [nor/or] a condition like race; it is a result of our living in a fallen world . . . [thus] unrepentant homosexual practice does not accord with the requirements for ordination.²

1. *Sexuality and the Human Community*, United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (UPCUSA), 182nd General Assembly (1970).

2. *The Church and Homosexuality*, UPCUSA, 190th General Assembly (1978).

In the same statement, the Assembly said, “There is room in the church for all who give honest affirmation to the vows required for membership in the church. Homosexual persons who sincerely affirm ‘Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior’ and ‘I intend to be his disciple, to obey his word, and to show his love’ should not be excluded from membership.” The Assembly also insisted that “persons who manifest homosexual behavior must be treated with the profound respect and pastoral tenderness due all people of God. There can be no place within the Christian faith for the response to homosexual persons of mingled contempt, hatred, and fear that is called homophobia.” The Assembly also declared that “there is no legal, social, or moral justification for denying homosexual persons access to the basic requirements of human social existence.”³ This support for the dignity and the civil rights of homosexual persons has been repeatedly reaffirmed by General Assemblies since 1978.

1987 and 1991: Further Study, A Report, Rejected: *Keeping Body and Soul Together*

In 1987, to address the larger context of sexuality issues, the PC(USA) General Assembly returned to issues of sexual ethics, voting to form a special task force on sexuality. Its report came to the 1991 General Assembly in Baltimore: *Keeping Body and Soul Together: Sexuality, Spirituality, and Social Justice*. This report struck a very different tone than the church’s established understanding of sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular:

Young people, regardless of their sexual orientation, need to understand the institutional power of heterosexism and the injustice that it perpetuates. As the church is called to speak a truthful word about sexuality, it does so in the name of God’s call to justice, a call that invites gay and lesbian adolescents to explore the goodness of their sexuality within the community of God’s people.⁴

The General Assembly rejected the report decisively, 534–31, and asked that congregations undertake serious study of the issues raised in the report and the minority report from the General Assembly committee.

1996–97: New Language for the *Book of Order*: Form of Government, G-6.0106b

The next few assemblies were marked by many overtures dealing with homosexuality, some seeking to amend the *Book of Order* to specifically name unrepentant homosexual behavior as a barrier to ordination, and others seeking to overturn the church’s stand against the ordination of gays and lesbians.

In 1996–97, a constitutional amendment was passed by the General Assembly and ratified by the presbyteries.

Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church. Among these standards is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man

3. Ibid.

4. *Keeping Body and Soul Together*, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 203rd General Assembly (1991).

and a woman (W-4.9001), or chastity in singleness. Persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained and/or installed as deacons, elders, or ministers of the Word and Sacrament.⁵

2010–11: Removing the Authoritative Interpretation, Altering the Form of Government: Neutrality

From 1997 until 2008, the statement on homosexuality from 1978–79 and the statement on “fidelity” and “chastity” from 1996 constituted the official stance of the PC(USA) on homosexuality. In 2008 the General Assembly removed the authority of the statement on homosexuality. The 2010 General Assembly sent to the presbyteries an amendment to the *Book of Order* (ratified by the presbyteries in 2011) that declared:

Standards for ordained service reflect the church’s desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life (F-1.02). The council responsible for ordination and/or installation (G.2.0402; G-2.0607; G-3.0306) shall examine each candidate’s calling, gifts, preparation, and suitability for the responsibilities of ordered ministry. The examination shall include, but not be limited to, a determination of the candidate’s ability and commitment to fulfill all requirements as expressed in the constitutional questions for ordination and installation (W-4.4003). Councils shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates.⁶

The net result of these thirty-five years of conversation and actions around homosexuality is that the PC(USA) now has no language in its polity regarding the sinfulness or faithfulness of sexual relationship between persons of the same gender. This is significantly different than the approach taken by other denominations that have cleared the way for those in same-gender relationships to be ordained. The Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America have both made affirmative statements on the place of gay and lesbian persons in the life of the church, grounding the permission to ordain on the basis of these positive statements. Our denomination, by contrast, chose the path of removing formal barriers to ordination without adopting a new constitutional position on same-gender relationships. In regard to ordination, the PC(USA) has now chosen the path of mutual forbearance, declining to impose one position in a matter where conscientious Presbyterians disagree. Therefore, as the PC(USA) now considers same-gender marriage, we do so in the absence of any polity guidance concerning our understanding of God’s will for the committed relationships of persons who are gay or lesbian. There are a number of references to marriage in Part I of the constitution, the *Book of Confessions*, many of which are included in this study.⁷

5. Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Book of Order (2009–2011)*, Part II of *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)* (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 2009), G-6.0106b.

6. Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Book of Order (2011–2013)*, Part II of *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)* (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 2011), G-2.0104b.

7. For a reflection on the relationship between our polity and our confessions, see www.presbyterianmission.org/media/uploads/theologyandworship/docs/constituting_us_confessions_and_polity.pdf

The General Assembly on Same-Gender Marriage

Another result of the above history is that the most recent General Assembly statement on marriage is from 1980 (included as an appendix to this study). The 218th General Assembly (2008) asked that a special committee be formed to study and give policy recommendations concerning civil unions and marriage, including the place of covenanted same-gender partnerships in the Christian community (*Minutes*, 2008, Part I, p. 259). That special committee reported to the 219th General Assembly (2010). The Assembly voted to “commend the committee’s report and the minority report from the committee to sessions and presbyteries, and urge them to engage in study of the issues presented in the report.” Neither the committee report nor the minority report was adopted as a General Assembly position. Both reports include history of laws and policy debates, the theology and practice of marriage in the Reformed and broader Christian traditions, and social science research to inform our present context. Those two reports will be cited throughout the study. Study leaders are especially urged to read through the reports as they prepare to lead.



Session 1: The Gift of Marriage

Main Idea

Marriage in the Reformed tradition is a covenant relationship, witnessed by the community of faith, in which God is an active part.

Background Texts

Scripture:

Genesis 1:1–31 In this first story of creation in Genesis, the origin of male and female is described. This passage has been used by the church to understand marriage as part of the created order and a gift to human beings.

John 2:1–12 The only description of a wedding in the Scriptures, this text has often been used in the church's tradition to say that Jesus honored marriage. The water pots were very large, an allusion to the prophecy of Amos: "The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when the one who plows will overtake the one who gathers, when the one who crushes grapes will overtake the one who sows the seed. The mountains will drip wine, and all the hills will flow with it."

Statement on the Gift of Marriage:

We gather in the presence of God to give thanks for the gift of marriage, to witness the joining together of [name] and [name], to surround them with our prayers, and to ask God's blessing upon them, so that they may be strengthened for their life together and nurtured in their love for God.

Book of Common Worship, 842

Commentary on the liturgy for Christian Marriage:

"*We gather . . .*" The opening paragraph reminds the congregation that they are not passive spectators at the wedding. Theirs is to be an active role. They are to worship God, giving thanks for the gift of marriage. They are to pray for the couple and to express the support of the community of faith by witnessing the couple's vows.

Companion to the Book of Common Worship, 572

Westminster Confession of Faith:

Christian marriage is an institution ordained of God, blessed by our Lord Jesus Christ, established and sanctified for the happiness and welfare of mankind, into which spiritual and physical union one man and one woman enter, cherishing a mutual esteem and love, bearing with each other's infirmities and weaknesses, comforting each other in trouble, providing in honesty and industry for each other and for their household, praying for each other, and living together the length of their days as heirs of the grace of life.

Book of Confessions, 6.131

Directory for Worship:

(Note: Words or phrases in **bold** pertain to main ideas in this session.)

Marriage is a gift God has given to all humankind for the well-being of the entire human family. Marriage is a civil contract between a woman and a man. For Christians **marriage is a covenant** through which a man and a woman are called to live out together before God their lives of discipleship. In a service of Christian marriage a lifelong commitment is made by a woman and a man to each other, **publicly witnessed and acknowledged by the community of faith.**

Book of Order, W-4.9001

Additional Resources:

For more information about recent debates on marriage in the PC(USA), see Civil Union and Christian Marriage report, pages 3 (committee report), 20–21 (minority report).

Opening Worship

Prayer:

This prayer may be spoken in unison or by the leader, or the leader may offer another prayer.

Loving God, as Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding feast in Cana, change our sorrow into joy, our weakness into strength, and our fear into hope. Help us to purify our thoughts, measure out our words, and drink deeply of your wisdom. Above all, surprise us with the abundance of your grace, the joy of your Spirit, and the fullness of life that is ours through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Reflective Reading:

- Read Genesis 1:1–31 aloud.
- Invite all to listen for a word or phrase as the passage is read again and reflect on that word or phrase in silence.
- Invite all who wish to share the word or phrase that spoke most deeply to them.

Prayer:

Loving God, hear our prayers today as we seek to follow you more faithfully:

(spoken prayers may be offered)

Hear us now as we pray together, saying, “Our Father . . .”

Conversation

- Review the background texts (p. 1). Share observations, reflections, and insights on the reading.
- Invite each member of the group briefly to share a story, a moment, a relationship, or an event that helped them identify the meaning of Christian marriage. After all who want to have shared, reflect on common themes or characteristics from these stories.
- How does the creation of human beings fit into the story of creation in Genesis 1?
- Name ways in which marriage is a gift to you and to the human community.
- Read John 2:1–12. The miracle in this passage takes place at a wedding Jesus attended. Often marriage liturgies will include “Jesus honored marriage by his presence.” Ask: *How does this story inform your understanding of marriage in the biblical tradition?*

- This study has focused on the church's conviction that marriage is a covenant relationship, witnessed by the community of faith, in which God is an active part. *How does the sexual identity of those who marry inform the understanding of marriage as covenant relationship, witnessed by the community of faith, in which God is an active part?*

Conclusion

Prayer:

Holy God,
as you have gathered us together
as one body in Christ,
now send us out together
to show and tell good news,
so that all the world may know
the gift of your saving love;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Hymn:

"Though I May Speak" (*Presbyterian Hymnal*, 335)



Session 2: God Created Us

Main Idea

In the Reformed tradition, marriage is understood as a part of God's created order.

Background Texts

Scripture:

Genesis 2:18–25 God's provision for human companionship and community as part of creation is central to this second story of creation.

Mark 10:1–9 Jesus teaches on marriage in response to a question on divorce by referring back to the story of creation in Genesis 2.

Statement on the Gift of Marriage:

God created us male and female, and gave us marriage so that husband and wife may help and comfort each other, living faithfully together in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, throughout all their days.

Book of Common Worship, 842

Commentary on the liturgy for Christian Marriage:

"God created us male and female . . ." Biblically, marriage has its origins in God's creation of human beings as male and female, to provide for them steadfast companionship and mutual support (Gen. 2:18–25; Mark 10:7–8).

Supplemental Liturgical Resource 3: Christian Marriage, 90

Confession of 1967:

God has created the peoples of the earth to be one universal family. In his reconciling love, he overcomes the barriers between brothers and breaks down every form of discrimination based on racial or ethnic difference, real or imaginary. The church is called to bring all men to receive and uphold one another as persons in all relationships of life: in employment, housing, education, leisure, marriage, family, church, and the exercise of political rights.

Book of Confessions, 9.44

Directory for Worship:

(Note: Words or phrases in **bold** pertain to main ideas in this session.)

Marriage is a gift God has given to all humankind for the well-being of the entire human family. Marriage is a civil contract between a woman and a man. For Christians marriage is a covenant through which a man and a woman are called to live out together before God their lives

of discipleship. In a service of Christian marriage a lifelong commitment is made by a woman and a man to each other, publicly witnessed and acknowledged by the community of faith.

Book of Order, W-4.9001

Additional Resources:

For a survey of biblical texts related to marriage, see Civil Union and Christian Marriage report, pages 3–4 (committee report), 26–28 (minority report). For a summary of historical developments in the institution of marriage, see pages 5–8 (committee report), 28–31 (minority report).

Opening Worship

Prayer:

This prayer may be spoken in unison or by the leader, or the leader may offer another prayer.

Loving God, as Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding feast in Cana, change our sorrow into joy, our weakness into strength, and our fear into hope. Help us to purify our thoughts, measure out our words, and drink deeply of your wisdom. Above all, surprise us with the abundance of your grace, the joy of your Spirit, and the fullness of life that is ours through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Reflective Reading:

- Read Genesis 2:18–25 aloud.
- Invite all to listen for a word or phrase as the passage is read again and reflect on that word or phrase in silence.
- Invite all who wish to share the word or phrase that spoke most deeply to them.

Prayer:

Loving God, hear our prayers today as we seek to follow you more faithfully:

(spoken prayers may be offered)

Hear us now as we pray together, saying, “Our Father . . .”

Conversation

- Review the background texts (p. 4). Share observations, reflections, and insights on the reading. How would you describe or interpret the creation of man and woman in this passage?
- The story of the creation of the woman informs our understanding of God’s gift of marriage. Ask: *Why is the story so memorable? What were some of your reflections on that story? Why is companionship central to this story? What does it tell us about God?*
- Read Mark 10:1–9. Ask: *What does it mean to you that Jesus rehearses words from Genesis as a way to describe marriage? What are the implications of Jesus’ statement “and the two will be one flesh”? Why does Jesus say “humans must not pull apart what God has put together”?*
- This study has focused on the church’s conviction that marriage is part of God’s created order. How does the sexual identity of those who marry inform the understanding of marriage as part of God’s created order?

Conclusion

Prayer:

Holy God,
as you have created us for community
and relationship with you,
keep us in covenant with you
and with one another,
so that we may be your faithful people,
redeemed by your love;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Hymn:

“For the Beauty of the Earth” (*Presbyterian Hymnal*, 473)



Session 3: The Expression of Love

Main Idea

In the Reformed tradition, marriage is understood to be an expression of love.

Background Texts

Scripture:

Song of Songs 8:6–7 A biblical celebration of physical intimacy. The church has had difficulty knowing quite what to do with the Song of Songs, with its celebration of physical intimacy. Often it has been treated allegorically. Although the imagery of this passage can be foreign to the modern reader, the sense of passion still comes through.

1 Corinthians 7:3–7 This passage speaks quite openly about sexual intimacy in marriage within the context of a discussion of singleness and marriage.

or

1 Corinthians 13:1–13 Love in marriage is expressed in many different ways beyond physical intimacy. This passage reminds us that other types of expressions of love when paired with physical intimacy contribute to a healthy Christian marriage.

Statement on the Gift of Marriage:

God gave us marriage for the full expression of the love between a man and a woman. In marriage a woman and a man belong to each other, and with affection and tenderness freely give themselves to each other.

Book of Common Worship, 842

Commentary on the liturgy for Christian Marriage:

“God gave us marriage for the full expression of the love between a man and a woman . . .” This is the first of three statements that begin with the refrain, “God gave us . . .” Marriage, which from a sociological perspective is a product of human society, is also understood theologically to be a good and gracious gift of God. A wedding is the only service of worship in the life of the church where sexuality and sexual union are major themes, and the phrase “the full expression of the love between a man and a woman” acknowledges that fact. In the lifelong covenant of marriage, the sexual relationship between a man and a woman finds its richest physical, emotional, and spiritual expression. “They are no longer two but one flesh” (Mark 10:8). The statement “In marriage a woman and a man belong to each other” further points to the depth of the marriage covenant and echoes the word of Paul in 1 Cor. 7:3–7 regarding the sexual mutuality of marriage.

Supplementary Liturgical Resource 3: Christian Marriage, 90

Second Helvetic Confession:

For marriage (which is the medicine of incontinency, and continency itself) was instituted by the Lord God himself, who blessed it most bountifully, and willed man and woman to cleave one to the other inseparably, and to live together in complete love and concord (Matt. 19:4 ff). Whereupon we know that the apostle said: “Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled” (Heb. 13:4). And again: “If a girl marries, she does not sin” (1 Cor. 7:28). . . . We therefore condemn polygamy, and those who condemn second marriages.

Book of Confessions, 5.246

Directory for Worship:

(Note: Words or phrases in **bold** pertain to main ideas in this session.)

Marriage is a gift God has given to all humankind for the well-being of the entire human family. Marriage is a civil contract between a woman and a man. For Christians marriage is a covenant through which a man and a woman are called to live out together before God their lives of discipleship. In a service of Christian marriage **a lifelong commitment** is made by a woman and a man to each other, publicly witnessed and acknowledged by the community of faith.

Book of Order, W-4.9001

Additional Resources:

For a survey of biblical texts related to marriage, see Civil Union and Christian Marriage report, pages 3–4 (committee report), 26–28 (minority report). For a summary of historical developments in the institution of marriage, see pages 5–8 (committee report), 28–31 (minority report).

Opening Worship

Prayer:

This prayer may be spoken in unison or by the leader, or the leader may offer another prayer.

Loving God, as Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding feast in Cana, change our sorrow into joy, our weakness into strength, and our fear into hope. Help us to purify our thoughts, measure out our words, and drink deeply of your wisdom. Above all, surprise us with the abundance of your grace, the joy of your Spirit, and the fullness of life that is ours through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Reflective Reading:

- Read 1 Corinthians 7:3–7 or 1 Corinthians 13:1–13 aloud.
- Invite all to listen for a word or phrase as the passage is read again and reflect on that word or phrase in silence.
- Invite all who wish to share the word or phrase that spoke most deeply to them.

Prayer:

Loving God, hear our prayers today as we seek to follow you more faithfully:

(spoken prayers may be offered)

Hear us now as we pray together, saying, “Our Father . . .”

Conversation

- Review the background texts (p. 7). Share observations, reflections, and insights on the reading.
- If you read 1 Corinthians 7:3–7, ask: *What stood out to you from 1 Corinthians 7:3–7? The phrase “The wife doesn’t have authority over her own body, but the husband does” has been abused to support the subservience of women. As you heard these verses today, how would you understand this teaching? What does Paul’s admonition for spouses to meet the sexual needs of the other teach us about marriage? Why is physical intimacy so important to the marital relationship?*
- Read Song of Songs 8:6–7. Ask: *How do you interpret this passage? What words stand out to you? How does this explicit reference to sexual desire inform your understanding of marriage?*
- Ask: *What similarities and differences do you see between the Song’s description of physical intimacy and 1 Corinthians 7:3–7 or 1 Corinthians 13:1–13?*
- This study has focused on the church’s conviction that marriage should be an expression of love. Ask: *How does the sexual identity of those who marry inform the understanding of marriage as an expression of love?*

Conclusion

Prayer:

Holy God,
as you have given yourself to us
through your Word made flesh,
teach us, by your Spirit,
to give ourselves for others,
so that our lives may be a true expression
of your generous love;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Hymn:

“Love Divine, All Loves Excelling” (*Presbyterian Hymnal*, 376)



Session 4: The Well-Being of Society

Main Idea

In the Reformed tradition, marriage is understood to contribute to the well-being of society.

Background Texts

Scripture:

Genesis 1:28 This passage connects human flourishing with care over all creation.

Deuteronomy 6:1–9 In Deuteronomy we find the Great Commandment, that we should love God with all that we are; this covenant is extended throughout generations.

1 Timothy 5:1–8 This passage speaks of the Christian's duty to respect, honor, and provide for family.

Statement on the Gift of Marriage:

God gave us marriage for the well-being of human society, for the ordering of family life, and for the birth and nurture of children.

Book of Common Worship, 842

Commentary on the liturgy for Christian Marriage:

“God gave us marriage . . . for the birth and nurture of children . . .” This statement affirms the role of marriage in sustaining humankind and the place of marriage as a basic unit of ordered human society. The birth and nurture of children are essential for the continuation of the human race and are an expression of hope and confidence in God's providential care. Since this statement is part of a general declaration about the church's understanding of marriage, it is ordinarily appropriate to say these words even if the particular couple being married, for reasons of health, age, or personal choice, are unlikely to have children themselves. At this point in the service, the theological affirmations are about marriage in general. Later in the rite the language will become more focused upon the specific marriage being celebrated this day.

Supplemental Liturgical Resource 3: Christian Marriage, 90–91

Westminster Confession of Faith:

Marriage is designed for the mutual help of husband and wife; for the safeguarding, undergirding, and development of their moral and spiritual character; for the propagation of children and the rearing of them in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

Book of Confessions, 6.134

Marriage for the Christian has religious as well as civil significance. The distinctive contribution of the church in performing the marriage ceremony is to affirm the divine institution of marriage; to invoke God's blessing upon those who enter into the marital relationship in accordance with

his word; to hear the vows of those who desire to be married; and to assure the married partners of God's grace within their new relationship.

Book of Confessions, 6.136

Directory for Worship:

(Note: Words or phrases in **bold** pertain to main ideas in this session.)

Marriage is a gift God has given to all humankind for the **well-being of the entire human family**. Marriage is a civil contract between a woman and a man. For Christians marriage is a covenant through which a man and a woman are called to live out together before God their lives of discipleship. In a service of Christian marriage a lifelong commitment is made by a woman and a man to each other, publicly witnessed and acknowledged by the community of faith.

Book of Order, W-4.9001

A service of worship **recognizing a civil marriage** and confirming it in the community of faith may be appropriate when requested by the couple.

Book of Order, W-4.9006

Additional Resources:

For more information on the relationship between civil union and Christian marriage, see Civil Union and Christian Marriage report, pages 8–10 (committee report), 31–32 (minority report). For information on the effects of current laws (circa 2010) on same-gender partners and their children, see pages 10–12 (committee report), pages 32–34 (minority report).

Opening Worship

Prayer:

This prayer may be spoken in unison or by the leader, or the leader may offer another prayer.

Loving God, as Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding feast in Cana, change our sorrow into joy, our weakness into strength, and our fear into hope. Help us to purify our thoughts, measure out our words, and drink deeply of your wisdom. Above all, surprise us with the abundance of your grace, the joy of your Spirit, and the fullness of life that is ours through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Reflective Reading:

- Read 1 Timothy 5:1–8 aloud.
- Invite all to listen for a word or phrase as the passage is read again and reflect on that word or phrase in silence.
- Invite all who wish to share the word or phrase that spoke most deeply to them.

Prayer:

Loving God, hear our prayers today as we seek to follow you more faithfully:

(spoken prayers may be offered)

Hear us now as we pray together, saying, "Our Father . . ."

Conversation

- Review the background texts (p. 10). Share observations, reflections, and insights on the reading.
- Read Genesis 1:28. Ask: *How are the ordering of human society and the birth and nurture of children connected? In an age of effective contraception and concerns over overpopulation, how do we practice this command to “be fertile and multiply”?*
- Read Deuteronomy 6:1–9. Discuss the connection of keeping covenant with God and multiplying in the land.
- Read 1 Timothy 5:1–8. Ask: *How does duty to family and society connect with our understanding of marriage? How can marriage be a good thing for society and for those who are not married? What do good marriages contribute to society?*
- The marriage standards of the PC(USA) assume a consistency between the definition of marriage by the state and by the church. The United States now has a patchwork of marriage laws. (See ncsl.org/issues-research/human-services/same-sex-marriage-overview.aspx for a summary of marriage laws by state.) Ask: *How do we as a church deal with these new differences between marriage as understood by the church and marriage as understood by the state? Is it important that ministers be agents of the state when they officiate at wedding ceremonies? Why or why not? What would it look like for the church to differ from the state in its understanding of marriage?*
- This study has focused on the church’s conviction that marriage contributes to the well-being of society. Ask: *How does the sexual identity of those who marry inform the understanding of marriage as supporting the well-being of society?*

Conclusion

Prayer:

Holy God,
as you rule the nations
with wisdom and truth,
bring righteousness and justice
to every land and home,
so that all your children may live
according to your love;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Hymn:

“Blest Be the Tie That Binds” (*Presbyterian Hymnal*, 438)



Session 5: A Holy Mystery

Main Idea

In the Reformed tradition, marriage is understood as an image of Christ's relationship to the church.

Background Texts

Scripture:

Hosea 2:14–23 The image of marriage is a way of understanding the relationship between God and the people of God.

Revelation 21:2–3 Marriage imagery is used as a symbol of the Day of the Lord, when God's intentions are complete for all of creation and we once again walk with the Holy One on earth.

Statement on the Gift of Marriage:

God gave us marriage as a holy mystery in which a man and a woman are joined together, and become one, just as Christ is one with the church.

Book of Common Worship, 842

Commentary on the liturgy for Christian Marriage:

“God gave us marriage as a holy mystery . . .” This statement is based upon Ephesians 5:31–33, in which the relationship between a husband and wife is presented as a profound mystery, analogous to the relationship between Christ and the church. Marriage, therefore, points beyond itself to the redemptive activity of God in Christ.

Supplementary Liturgical Resource 3: Christian Marriage, 91

Confession of 1967:

Biblical visions and images of the rule of Christ, such as a heavenly city, a father's house, a new heaven and earth, a marriage feast, and an unending day culminate in the image of the kingdom. The kingdom represents the triumph of God over all that resists his will and disrupts his creation. Already God's reign is present as a ferment in the world, stirring hope in men and preparing the world to receive its ultimate judgment and redemption.

Book of Confessions, 9.54

Directory for Worship:

(Note: Words or phrases in **bold** pertain to main ideas in this session.)

Marriage is a gift God has given to all humankind for the well-being of the entire human family. Marriage is a civil contract between a woman and a man. For Christians marriage is a covenant through which a man and a woman are called to live out together **before God** their lives of discipleship. In a service of Christian marriage a lifelong commitment is made by a woman and a man to each other, publicly witnessed and acknowledged by the community of faith.

Book of Order, W-4.9001

Additional Resources:

For a discussion of the place of covenanted same-gender partnerships in the Christian community, see Civil Union and Christian Marriage report, pages 12–16 (committee report), 21–26 (minority report).

Opening Worship

Prayer:

This prayer may be spoken in unison or by the leader, or the leader may offer another prayer.

Loving God, as Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding feast in Cana, change our sorrow into joy, our weakness into strength, and our fear into hope. Help us to purify our thoughts, measure out our words, and drink deeply of your wisdom. Above all, surprise us with the abundance of your grace, the joy of your Spirit, and the fullness of life that is ours through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Reflective Reading:

- Read Hosea 2:14–23 aloud.
- Invite all to listen for a word or phrase as the passage is read again and reflect on that word or phrase in silence.
- Invite all who wish to share the word or phrase that spoke most deeply to them.

Prayer:

Loving God, hear our prayers today as we seek to follow you more faithfully:

(spoken prayers may be offered)

Hear us now as we pray together, saying, “Our Father . . .”

Conversation

- Review the background texts (p. 13). Share observations, reflections, and insights on the reading.
- The understanding of God’s covenantal relationship to a particular people as being like that of a marriage is a theme that runs throughout the Bible.
- Read Hosea 2:14–23. God’s people have been idolatrous, serving other gods. In Hosea, though, God pledges to love the people despite their unfaithfulness.
- Ask: *How might God’s vow to love in righteousness, justice, steadfast love, and mercy inform our understanding of marriage?*

- Read Revelation 21:2–3. The passage pictures the new creation, signified by the holy city, emerging from heaven like “a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.” Think about how we adorn ourselves for a wedding ceremony. Ask: *Why do we do this?*
- Ask: *What is it that makes marriage holy?*
- This study has focused on the church’s conviction that marriage is an image of Christ’s relationship to the church. Ask: *How do you see or not see same-gender marriage as an image of Christ’s relationship to the church?*

Conclusion

Prayer:

Holy God,
 as you have revealed to us
 that you are Three-in-One,
 make us one in Christ’s body
 and one in your Spirit,
 so that our life together may proclaim
 the mystery of your love;
 through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Hymn:

“The Church’s One Foundation” (*Presbyterian Hymnal*, 442)



Session 6: A New Way of Life

Main Idea

For those who marry, marriage is a means by which Christian spouses live out their lives of discipleship together.

Background Texts

Scripture:

Hebrews 13:4 The author of Hebrews writes that marriage should be honored in the Christian community.

Galatians 5:16–25 Paul outlines for the Galatians the differences between a life of Christian discipleship and a life of self-indulgence. The fruit of the Spirit represents a new way of living that puts the well-being of others before personal or individual desires. The fruit of the flesh is marked by self-interest and selfishness.

or

Colossians 3:12–17 The author of Colossians urges Christians to take on the markers of God's love for us: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.

Statement on the Gift of Marriage:

In marriage, husband and wife are called to a new way of life, created, ordered, and blessed by God. This way of life must not be entered into carelessly, or from selfish motives, but responsibly, and prayerfully.

Book of Common Worship, 842

Commentary on the liturgy for Christian Marriage:

"In marriage, husband and wife are called to a new way of life . . ." Here the church affirms that the choice to marry is, in a sense, a vocational choice. In baptism all Christians are called to a new way of life, and Christians who are married are to express that baptismal call in and through their marriages. Marriage is not a place where two self-serving people meet to satisfy their desires; it is a journey of faith where two are joined as one in Christ for discipleship and mission.

Supplementary Liturgical Resource 3: Christian Marriage, 91

Westminster Confession of Faith:

Marriage is designed for the mutual help of husband and wife; for the safeguarding, undergirding, and development of their moral and spiritual character.

Book of Confessions, 6.134

Directory for Worship:

(Note: Words or phrases in **bold** pertain to main ideas in this session.)

Marriage is a gift God has given to all humankind for the well-being of the entire human family. Marriage is a civil contract between a woman and a man. **For Christians marriage is a covenant through which a man and a woman are called to live out together before God their lives of discipleship.** In a service of Christian marriage a lifelong commitment is made by a woman and a man to each other, publicly witnessed and acknowledged by the community of faith.

Book of Order, W-4.9001

Additional Resources:

For a discussion of the place of covenanted same-gender partnerships in the Christian community, see Civil Union and Christian Marriage report, pages 12–16 (committee report), 21–26 (minority report).

Opening Worship

Prayer:

This prayer may be spoken in unison or by the leader, or the leader may offer another prayer.

Loving God, as Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding feast in Cana, change our sorrow into joy, our weakness into strength, and our fear into hope. Help us to purify our thoughts, measure out our words, and drink deeply of your wisdom. Above all, surprise us with the abundance of your grace, the joy of your Spirit, and the fullness of life that is ours through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Reflective Reading:

- Read Galatians 5:16–25 or Colossians 3:12–17 aloud.
- Invite all to listen for a word or phrase as the passage is read again and reflect on that word or phrase in silence.
- Invite all who wish to share the word or phrase that spoke most deeply to them.

Prayer:

Loving God, hear our prayers today as we seek to follow you more faithfully:

(spoken prayers may be offered)

Hear us now as we pray together, saying, “Our Father . . .”

Conversation

- Review the background texts (p. 16). Share observations, reflections, and insights on the reading.
- Ask: *What does the fruit of the Spirit have to do with living together in a covenant relationship? or What is the importance of being “clothed with love” in the covenant relationship of marriage?*
- Ask: *In what ways have you seen marriage promote discipleship in the Christian life? Is it ever a hindrance to living the Christian life?*

- In baptism we are claimed by God and we respond in gratitude by dedicating our lives to God's service. Ask: *In what ways might a person live out the claims of baptism through marriage? How might that look in your life?*
- Ask: *If you are married, how can your relationship with your spouse deepen your life of discipleship? If you are not married, what relationships in the church community deepen your life of discipleship?*
- Read Hebrews 13:4. Ask: *What does it mean for the church to honor marriage today?*
- Ask: *What have you gained from this study? What questions remain?*
- This study has focused on marriage as a means by which Christian spouses live out their lives of discipleship together. *How does the sexual identity of those who marry inform the understanding of marriage as a means by which spouses live out their lives of discipleship together?*

Conclusion

Prayer:

Holy God,
 as you have raised us from death
 by the gift of your grace,
 help us to follow Christ each day,
 walking in newness of life,
 so that we may be a new creation
 in the glory of your love;
 through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Hymn:

"Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us" (*Presbyterian Hymnal*, 387)



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Appendix 1:

Interpreting Scripture

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is guided by its confessions in the understanding and interpretation of Scripture. The Westminster Confession of Faith teaches that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are “given by the inspiration of God, to be the rule of faith and life” (6.002). The Confession of 1967 states: “The one sufficient revelation of God is Jesus Christ, the Word of God, incarnate, to whom the Holy Spirit bears unique and authoritative witness through the Holy Scriptures, which are to be received and obeyed as the word of God written. The Scriptures are not a witness among others, but the witness without parallel” (9.27).

The 1982 United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America study on *Biblical Authority and Interpretation* provides a seven-point summary of confessional teaching on the interpretation of the Bible and a helpful set of guidelines for seeking the meaning of Scripture:

- (1) keep *Jesus Christ*, the Redeemer, at the center;
- (2) rely on the *Holy Spirit* in interpreting and applying God’s message;
- (3) be guided by the *rule of faith*, the doctrinal consensus of the church expressed in its creeds, confessions, and catechisms;
- (4) let all interpretation be in accord with the *rule of love*, the two-fold commandment to love God and neighbor;
- (5) focus on the *plain text*, in its grammatical and historical context;
- (6) remember that all interpretation requires *earnest study*; and
- (7) seek to interpret a particular passage in light of the *whole Bible*.

Review and discuss these principles before you begin your study of Scripture. It might be helpful to write them on a board or post them on newsprint.



Appendix 2:

Interpreting the Confessions

The confessions of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) are not merely historical artifacts, but they have ongoing relevance and authority in the life of the church. As the *Book of Order* explains:

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) states its faith and bears witness to God's grace in Jesus Christ in the creeds and confessions in *The Book of Confessions*. In these statements the church declares to its members and to the world who and what it is, what it believes, and what it resolves to do. These statements identify the church as a community of people known by its convictions as well as by its actions. They guide the church in its study and interpretation of the Scriptures; they summarize the essence of Reformed Christian tradition; they direct the church in maintaining sound doctrines; they equip the church for its work of proclamation. They serve to strengthen personal commitment and the life and witness of the community of believers.

The creeds and confessions of this church arose in response to particular circumstances within the history of God's people. They claim the truth of the Gospel at those points where their authors perceived that truth to be at risk. They are the result of prayer, thought, and experience within a living tradition. They appeal to the universal truth of the Gospel while expressing that truth within the social and cultural assumptions of their time. They affirm a common faith tradition, while also from time to time standing in tension with each other. (F-2.01)

The confessions are to be understood as standards of Christian faith and life. As the *Book of Order* asserts:

These confessional statements are subordinate standards in the church, subject to the authority of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, as the Scriptures bear witness to him. While confessional standards are subordinate to the Scriptures, they are, nonetheless, standards. They are not lightly drawn up or subscribed to, nor may they be ignored or dismissed. The church is prepared to instruct, counsel with, or even to discipline one ordained who seriously rejects the faith expressed in the confessions. Moreover, the process for changing the confessions of the church is deliberately demanding, requiring a high degree of consensus across the church. Yet the church, in obedience to Jesus Christ, is open to the reform of its standards of doctrine as well as of governance. The church affirms *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei*, that is, "The church reformed, always to be reformed according to the Word of God" in the power of the Spirit. (F-2.02)

As you study the confessional statements on Christian marriage, consider in particular how they inform who *we are*, *what we believe*, and *what we resolve to do*.



Appendix 3:

Perspectives on Marriage in Historical Context

In Western Christian tradition, there have been four interconnected and complementary perspectives on marriage. These four perspectives or facets of marriage are the *spiritual perspective*, the *social perspective*, the *contractual perspective*, and the *naturalist perspective*. As John Witte writes:

A spiritual perspective regards marriage as a sacramental or covenantal association, subject to the creed, cult, and canons of the church community. *A social perspective* treats marriage as a social estate, subject to the expectations and exactions of the local community and to special state laws of contract, property, and inheritance. *A contractual perspective* describes marriage as a voluntary association, dependent upon the consent of the parties, subject to the wills and preferences of the couple, their children, and their household. Hovering in the background is a *naturalist perspective*, which treats marriage as a created institution, subject to the natural laws of reason, conscience, and the Bible. According to Voltaire's quip: "Among Christians, the family is either a little church, a little state, or a little club" blessed by nature and nature's God.¹

Witte suggests that these four perspectives on marriage have been emphasized and combined in different ways by different traditions to yield five models of marriage in contemporary Western society:

- (1) the Catholic sacramental model;
- (2) the Lutheran social model;
- (3) the Calvinist covenantal model;
- (4) the Anglican commonwealth model; and
- (5) the Enlightenment contractarian model.²

The Office of Theology and Worship recommends John Witte Jr., *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion, and Law in the Western Tradition*, second edition. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012) as a comprehensive analysis of the place of marriage in the Western tradition.

1. Witte, *From Sacrament to Contract*, 2.

2. *Ibid*, 3.



Appendix 4:

Marriage: A Theological Statement

Primary Reference: GA *Minutes* 1980: 174–187

Denomination: PCUS

I. MARRIAGE IN RELATION TO GOD’S ACTIVITY WITH PERSONS

To understand marriage and its associated meanings and problems, the Christian community first recognizes and remembers that marriage is a human reality.

Marriage may be understood from the perspective of God’s purpose for human life, seen in the Biblical creation account in Genesis 1 and 2 and in Jesus’ references to God’s creative act. Marriage is also to be seen from the perspective of the ambiguity of human sinfulness and of God’s dealing with his people in preserving, judging and forgiving human beings. Finally, marriage is to be seen in the context of the new creation, of the kingdom which is to come and is already present. The church falls into error or misunderstanding when it ignores any of these modes of human existence in relation to marriage or when it elevates one or another of them over the rest.

1. Marriage in Relation to Human Creation

When Jesus was asked about marriage by the Pharisees, his response (Mark 10:6–9, Matt. 19:4–6) cited two passages from the Genesis creation accounts: “God made them male and female” (Gen. 1:27) and “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one (flesh)” (Gen. 2:24). Our Lord thus yokes marriage with creation.

Sexual differentiation as male and female is at the center of the creation of human beings. In Genesis 1 that differentiation is included in the image of God and is related to God’s own purpose in creating. In Genesis 2 that differentiation is the outcome of God’s intention to give the lonely human a helper and counterpart. In both cases it is clear that human beings are made to be in relation to one another.

Sexual unity of male and female in marriage is one of the divine intentions in the creation of human beings. In this union we symbolize on one hand the unity and intimacy of relation in the being of the triune God, and on the other hand the creative intention of intimate unity between human folk and God’s own self, which is part of the signification of the terms *image* and *likeness*.

The movement from separateness to unity which is involved in the intimate relation in marriage of woman and man is a significant element in the meaning *of love*. That movement to unity is the central element in the form of love called *eros*, which is one form of the love we are to have for God.

Jesus also saw the Genesis passage as calling for a union, which involved “leaving father and mother,” as wife and husband to form a new family. God’s creative act not only shows us God’s intention for personal relatedness and for our understanding of God’s own nature and intent for our relation to him. It also directs us to recognize a new social reality in each marriage and God’s intention for the maintenance of the social order of families.

2. Marriage in Relation to Human Sinfulness and God’s Preservation and Judgment

The context in which Jesus spoke about marriage in relation to creation was a question from some Pharisees about divorce. (Mark 10:2–12, Matt. 19:19). Jesus, as we have noted, first reminded the questioners of the divine creative intention for the intimate permanent relationship of a woman and a man in marriage. The Pharisees, however, pressed Jesus further by asking why Moses issued a commandment about the form of divorce for men. Jesus responded that the law of Moses was given because of the hardness of the human heart; that is, that sin is the occasion of the possibility of breaking the permanence of marriage, of divorce.

Divorce is a human possibility, related to the brokenness and sinfulness of fallen human life. It is a possibility offered in the judgment and justice of God through the Law. But it is not the only possibility in God’s dealing with human sinners in their life in the world. Mosaic law sees divorce the way to deal with sin infected marriage, but the prophets offer another possibility.

Marriage itself is offered in the prophetic writing as a symbol of God’s covenant fidelity and of God’s forgiveness. The key prophetic passages are in the early chapters of Hosea (especially Hosea 1–3; other references are Jeremiah 2:2, 3:6–10; Isaiah 54:1–8, 62:1–5; and Ezekiel 16). In the Hosea account we see God’s fidelity to wayward Israel portrayed in Hosea’s fidelity to a wayward wife. In Hosea also we see forgiveness given and received—God’s forgiving and Israel’s receiving it, Hosea’s forgiving and Gomer’s receiving.

Love is presented here in terms of undeserved self giving, resembling the *agape* of the New Testament. Love is also shown as a steady, certain, faithful constancy and presence.

3. Marriage and Beyond Marriage in the Kingdom

Jesus was challenged by the Sadducees in relation to another problem of marriage in the Law (Mark 12:18–27, Matt. 22:23–33, Luke 20:27–40)—this time the problem of multiple marriage in relation to life after death. Jesus’ response is that marriage is not to be understood as a feature of the resurrection reality of the Kingdom: “when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage.” (Mark 12:25, Matt. 22:30, but cf. Luke 20:34–35). Jesus thus sees marriage in this passage as a dispensable reality, not a clue to the life of the Kingdom.

Paul also characterizes marriage as dispensable in the coming age (I Cor. 7:25–31) and implies that the imminence of the End may call for Christians not to enter marriage and assume its responsibilities. The good of marriage may have to yield to a greater good of the Kingdom.

So while creation implies the marriage relation as the path to unity and intimacy, and while even in the brokenness of sin marriage is a symbol of God’s fidelity and forgiveness, yet the order of the Kingdom transcends the orders of creation and preservation, promises fulfillment of human relations, and makes marriage relative, not final. Marriage points to the reality of our relation to God and signifies important dimensions of God’s relation to us even in our sin, but in Jesus Christ both the union of intimate relation and the fidelity and forgiveness of God are present in a new way which transcends even the marriage relation. To be in the Kingdom is to be in something better than marriage.

4. Summary Principles from Biblical Understanding

To see how Jesus dealt with marriage, how he related to the Old Testament understandings, and how he, followed by Paul, suggested that in the Kingdom marriage is transcended, is not precisely to face what we are to do today with marriage nor to locate the life of today's Christians and today's church in respect to marriage. We understand that we are continuing in God's creative activity and purpose, that we also continue in sin and are preserved and judged, and that we live in the foretaste and promise of the Kingdom. What does that imply for our theological understanding of marriage?

First, we are to understand that marriage relates to God's creative intention for human beings created by God as male and female. Marriage is for the achievement and realization of intimate union—one flesh (Gen. 2:25)—and marriage is a key symbol of human interrelatedness and of relatedness between human beings and God. Marriage is an achievement of unity in diversity and of personal relatedness which are the real character of being human and of being in the image of God. However much our willfulness and apathy, our sinfulness, may distort and twist God's intent, still we live out even in distorted ways the reality of relatedness in marriage, and we are in the path of intimacy.

Second, we are to understand that in marriage the partners are called to a life of fidelity and a life of forgiveness, for God has shown us that marriage can be a powerful symbol and pattern of God's fidelity to a faithless people and of God's forgiveness of a wayward sinful people. When we are faithful and forgiving in marriage, we exhibit the pattern of the divine activity, and when we experience the fidelity of another and above all when we receive forgiveness, we experience the reality of God's covenant.

Third, we are to understand that both the divine call to marriage and the calling to be single carry God's blessing. Further even the relation of wife and husband in marriage is not ultimate or final, but is subject to the relation to God in Jesus Christ. In the new creation, in the Kingdom of God, we shall discover a new way of being male and female.

Fourth, we do not yet live in the Kingdom. We live in the hope of the Kingdom and in the presence of the Holy Spirit in the church and in the world. We also live in the reality of marriage as a symbol of Christ and the church (Cf. Eph. 5:23–32). So we enter into and live out our marriage relationships as those who belong to Jesus Christ, as those who are loved and cared for by him, as those who are to love and care for and serve each other. To be the church is to be called to live with each other. To be the church is to be called to live with each other and with Jesus Christ in mutual love and service. To be married is to be called to experience the mutual love and care also in one household.

II. MARRIAGE IN SEVERAL DIMENSIONS

The Christian community recognizes that marriage is a personal decision of a woman and a man and an agreement between them. At the same time marriage is a social reality and a community institution, structured and regulated by and for the society to which the couple belongs. Thus marriage is for Protestant Christians a state regulated and state required institution and act, and the legality of marriage is set by the state. Yet the Christian couple, their families, the church, and the minister who officiates at the wedding ceremony all in one way or another expect and claim God's part in marriage. The agreement between the two, legalized as a contract by the state, is entered with God's blessing and lived out with God's participation, and so marriage is sanctified.

1. Marriage as a Personal Act

The Biblical understanding of marriage clearly involves the personal intimate relationship of a woman and a man, wife and husband. Two people are joined and join themselves to each other. “A man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife” (Mark 10:7, Gen. 2:24).

However much the marriage is arranged for and supported by family or community, still the woman and the man take vows personally and make promises to each other.

The personal character of marriage is crucial for developing and realizing a Christian understanding of marriage. God’s intention for love as the movement from separation to unity in the intimacy of one flesh is dependent upon the personal relation. That relation is essential if fidelity is to have meaning in terms of one who is faithful to the other and to the covenant made. The personal context is the only setting in which forgiveness can be understood not only as a giving but also as a receiving. Conversely, only in the reality of intimate love and fidelity and forgiveness is the personal relation of marriage truly fulfilled so that it is not simply an agreement between two people, but a life long commitment and a symbol of the divine human relation, a covenant.

2. Marriage as a Reality Within a Community

The Bible understood marriage as a legal and therefore as a communal or social reality. Marriages were arranged. There were customary social forms, and there were legal requirements. Society had an interest in marriage as an adequate and generally permanent institutional arrangement for the propagation of the race or the perpetuation of the line, for the bearing and rearing of children, and for forming the family as the basic social unit. So it was in Israel, in the Greco Roman world, in the Middle Ages, and so it is still today. Even in our contemporary Western civilization’s stress upon the personal character of marriage, we regulate, protect, and support marriage for the good of the community. The state through its laws, licenses, and court actions oversees and regulates marriage in its beginning, its continuance, and even its dissolution.

To a significant degree the church’s interest in marriage and the church’s role in marriage have been related to this communal character. The parish was a geographical and social unit, and publishing the banns and registering the marriage in parish records was a communal function. The loss of that meaning of parish in the United States generally and among Protestants especially has weakened the communal role of the church in the marriage covenanting process. Yet a proper Christian understanding of marriage will claim again the role of the church as a fundamental approving and supporting community in which a marriage of two persons may not only make an appropriate beginning but in which also that marriage may be supported. Without making marriage a sacrament or supplanting the state, the church may offer, as it does in infant baptism, a community in which covenants are made and publicly acknowledged, are nurtured and brought to fulfillment.

3. Marriage as a Covenant Before God

Neither in the Old Testament nor in the New Testament is there any indication of God’s direct participation in marriage covenanting as a partner to the covenant. It is understood, of course, that God has in the very creation established and blessed the union of woman and man that is known as marriage. The marriage act, however, in the Bible, in Israel and the early Church, was more a civil than a cultic concern.

Jesus was not married and did not attach peculiar religious significance to marriage or consecrate marriage by some particular action. He did indicate his understanding that God “joined together” the partners in marriage (Mark 10:9, Matt. 19:6). Paul and other New Testament writers address counsel, warnings, and encouragement to those who are married or those considering marriage, but they give no indication of God’s participation in the wedding act in some special way.

The church in its history struggled with its role (and, by interpretation, God’s role through the church) in the secular reality of marriage, and first gradually secured for itself the legal control of the marriage ceremony and agreement and then developed a sacramental theory and practice for marriage. Marriage became a means of the imparting of grace through the agency of the church’s action on God’s behalf. The Reformers rejected the sacrament of marriage as unwarranted in Scripture but they did not deny its Christian significance. They returned the marriage agreement to the state as a legal act, and they accompanied that by developing a religious service parallel to state action. The understanding was that God somehow and to some extent entered into the marriage relationship, but how and to what extent has often been neither clearly understood nor clearly interpreted.

An appropriate Christian understanding of God’s role in marriage will draw upon God’s clear intention in creation for there to be the intimate personal relation of women and men in marriage. God has established marriage. The Christian understanding will also remember that God preserves and governs the created order and establishes, sustains, and rules all the relationships of life. God’s choice of marriage as a symbol of divine fidelity and forgiveness has dignified the marriage relationship and has enjoined a faithful and loving character of relationship in marriage. As we understand God’s intention and God’s support, we may undertake and live out our marriage in the context of God’s active participation in a covenant which is both personal and communal.

4. The Christian Marriage

When a woman and a man make a commitment to each other to be united in one flesh, to be drawn into closer intimacy and union, and to live in faithfulness and mutual forgiveness for as long as they live; when their commitment is publicly sealed and witnessed and acknowledged by the Christian community; when they acknowledge God’s presence in the giving and taking of vows and endeavor to live out their lives in the context of God’s faithfulness and activity; then that woman and that man intend and exemplify the structure of a Christian marriage.

There may be no discernible or empirical external marks of a Christian marriage apart from the place and manner of the wedding ceremony and the life in the church of husband and wife. But a Christian marriage is a distinctive reality, marked by the commitments of wife and husband to each other before God and by their seeking to live in accord with the Lordship of Christ.

III. SOME CRUCIAL QUESTIONS

Out of this understanding of marriage and out of our life and experiences certain questions arise. This paper seeks to apply and extend and clarify its position on marriage by responding to some of these questions.

- Should everyone be married? Is marriage the normative state for Christians and everyone?
- Is divorce legitimate? Is marriage to be understood as a permanent covenant?

- Is intimacy possible or desirable apart from marriage? What about “open marriage”? Are extra-marital relationships open to Christians?
- What is the appropriate structure of marriage? Is the husband the head? What is the role of the wife?
- Is it necessary to have a wedding ceremony to have a true marriage? Can a couple commit to each other without going through the ceremony?
- Must a marriage involve the intention to have children? Is it appropriate to plan not to have a family?
- Is monogamy the necessary form of marriage? Can a Christian have more than one spouse?
- Must both partners be Christians?

Exploring these questions may help us see more clearly and helpfully the Christian understanding of marriage.

1. Should everyone be married?

The Old Testament understood the marital union of a woman and a man to be the creative intention of God. In Israel there was no question of marrying or not marrying; it was assumed that everyone is married or will marry.

In the New Testament, on the other hand, there is the powerful example of Jesus, who was not married and who declared that marriage is not the order of being in the Kingdom. Also there is the struggle of Paul, who accepted the Old Testament understanding that marriage is good and natural but who also saw that marriage may be a hindrance to discipleship and readiness for the Kingdom and accepted Jesus’ understanding that marriage is not part of the Kingdom order.

The Church early on accepted celibacy for the sake of discipleship, and later raised celibacy in this life to the position of a special grace and holiness even above marriage. The Reformation sought to reverse that development and dignified marriage again as equal to celibacy.

The heirs of the Reformation have sometimes been tempted to make of marriage a sacramental revelation of the divine human union, perceived and received through the intimate sexual union of marriage. On this view those who are married have access to an understanding and living out of relation to God that singles can never have. On the other hand, the heirs of the medieval church have been tempted to make celibacy, in the sense of singleness, and chastity an imitation of Jesus Christ that offers a special advantage for entry into the Kingdom.

We have already seen that singleness or non marriage belongs to the Kingdom order and that sexual union in marriage belongs to the creative intention of God. So God wills both marriage and singleness. Following Paul we can see that each is God’s gift and that gifts may differ.

Further, while the paradigm of intimate union is the bodily unity of one flesh in marriage, intimacy is possible apart from bodily unity (as the Holy Spirit unites us to Christ and to each other), and those who never engage in sexual union may nonetheless experience significant intimacy with another or others.

Likewise, while a good marriage is a paradigm of fidelity and of forgiveness, both fidelity and forgiveness may be realized and experienced by unmarried persons in friendship and other relationships.

On the other hand, in the light of Jesus, celibacy is one sign of single minded devotion to the Kingdom and of a style of true discipleship. That same quality of devotion, however, is possible

to those Christians whose marriage is undertaken not simply out of self fulfillment or devotion to each other but also in joint intentional devotion to God and the Kingdom.

2. Is divorce legitimate?

Asked this way, the question of divorce may simply be a legal one and the answer is obviously yes. Even in the Law of Moses, God's revealed will for Israel, divorce was legitimate, as the Pharisees pointed out to Jesus. In the secular legal realm in which marriage takes place today, divorce is also legitimate (and is increasingly common, even assuming the form of "no fault"). Protestant churches, and particularly the Presbyterian church have recognized divorce as legitimate, not only on grounds of adultery (which Jesus sanctioned, according to Matt. 19:9) or desertion (the old terms in the Westminster Confession of Faith) but also "where a continuation of the legal union would endanger the physical, moral, or spiritual well being of one or both of the partners or that of their children" (*Book of Church Order* 215:5)

In Mark's account Jesus saw divorce as never legitimate and, if one remarried, as creating adultery, which is a serious and major sinful and unlawful act (Mark 10:10–12). Jesus, as he so often did for many human actions, radicalized and absolutized the meaning of marriage as a permanent, life long, intimate personal union. Jesus himself, however, recognized that sin has corrupted the possibility of everyone's realizing the full meaning of marriage (and even of anyone's realizing it in full), so that he acknowledged divorce as a reality, but without approving it.

Thus, while as a church we recognize the reality of divorce and even in some cases the necessity of divorce, we must do so because of the reality of sin and as having only the necessity borne out of sin. It is sin that created the impermanence and the loss of intimacy. It is sin that destroys the possibility of forgiving or accepting forgiveness. It is sin that undercuts fidelity. Sin may be the expression of self centeredness which sets up its own standard of self gratification in marriage and then declares that the marriage is no longer gratifying. Sin may be the expression of apathy which is incapable of consideration of others or care for them. Sin may be the expression of rebellion which is unable to sustain the given conditions of life together.

In the situation of sin the Church may, as Jesus did (and the O.T. and Paul), add its declaration to the recognition of brokenness and thus accept divorce. The Church should, however, seek first the reconciliation and the healing of brokenness in keeping with its character as the community of healing. The acceptance of divorce must not modify the church's view of marriage as part of God's intention as a way of revealing positive values of fidelity and forgiveness in a world wracked by sin.

Christians, who are also sinners, do divorce, and the church must deal both with those whose marriages are breaking and with its own role and task. The church is to be a community of healing, and it should seek the healing of marriages. The church is to be a community of forgiveness, and it should mediate forgiveness in the brokenness of divorce among its members. The church is to be a community of fidelity, and it should demonstrate fidelity to those in whose marriages fidelity has been lost. Further, the church may call forth among Christian people whose marriages are broken, the giving and accepting of forgiveness. The church may foster the forging of new forms of fidelity in the midst of divorce—fidelity to children and to others whose lives have been involved in the marriage.

The church in the face of every divorce among its members must acknowledge its own involvement in the failure of the marriage and must examine its failure as a community of support and nurture. At the same time, it will help its people to face honestly where there has been the failure

of love, the failure to achieve unity and intimate self giving, and the failure to live in faithful and forgiving commitment. With those who have been divorced it will raise the issue of readiness, willingness, and ability for those relationships in marriage.

A particular responsibility for the church is dealing with divorce among its officers, especially its ministers. Officers of the church, above all ministers of the word and sacraments, are called upon to be examples of the Christian graces and of Christian life. They are not more free of sin than any Christian, and they, too, may be involved in failures of marriage. They, in their positions of leadership, also should be the recipients of forgiveness and fidelity in the church. They, likewise, should exemplify the receiving and giving of forgiveness and the forging of new fidelity.

3. What about intimacy apart from or alongside of marriage?

There is more than one level of concern and of experience in this question. One level has to do with the possibility of meaningful unity or intimacy apart from sex activity for single or non married persons. We have faced this concern above in dealing with the necessity of marriage. Another level has to do with sexual relations of the not married. Can two achieve the authentic sexual union and intimacy of one flesh apart from entering formally into marriage? Still another level has to do with the so called “open marriage.” Can a marriage be supplemented or even enhanced, by sexual relations with others beyond one’s spouse?

The question about the not married in a sense raises the issue of when and how marriage truly comes into being. Some assert that marriage is only a personal agreement, that the commitment of persons to each other is all that counts and that the sexual union may represent that commitment quite apart from ceremonies and licenses. Christian marriage, however, is more than a personal agreement. It is also a social or communal covenant within the blessings and expectations of the covenant with God. The Christian Church understands that to have the full intimacy and the fidelity and forgiveness which we understand God to have intended by “one flesh” is to enter the covenantal commitment of Christian marriage. The fidelity that is accompanied by forgiveness cannot be grounded adequately in a merely personal commitment.

The question of “open marriage” implies sexual relationship parallel to or supplementing those in marriage. Authentic intimacy based on the union in love seems not to be possible with more than one partner. Fidelity is stretched out of meaning by the assumption of multiple relationships even with the spouse’s consent. A couple will find that forgiveness is called for and is difficult if not impossible to give or receive.

At the same time, we must acknowledge that marriage is not the only relationship between persons or the only relation any of us may be called to have. Certainly, within the fellowship of Christians, levels of intimacy, union, fidelity, and forgiveness are achieved apart from sex activity with others than one’s spouse that leave intact (and even may enhance) the intimacy and union, fidelity, and forgiveness of one’s marriage.

4. What is the appropriate structure of marriage?

One of the questions seriously raised now about marriage has to do with the roles of husband and wife. Sensitive Christians who acknowledge that the traditional subordination of women has powerful counter forces in Scripture (especially in Jesus’ treatment of women and in Galatians 3:28) are confronted with the biblical characterization of the primacy of the husband in marriage.

One passage is in Genesis 2 where the woman even succeeds the man in creation. A close examination of the passage as a whole, however, indicates that whatever the order of creation, the two are related to each other as helpers fit for each other. *Help* in the Old Testament is used of God's relation to human beings as well as the woman to the man. *Fit for* in the Old Testament means *corresponding to*, without any sense of subordination.

A troublesome passage is Ephesians 5, where it is stated, "For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior." (Eph. 5:23). The passage reflects, at least on its surface, the first century social structure of inequality in marriage. At a deeper level, it bears witness to the mutuality of the relation of wife and husband.

Seen in its full context and read in the light of Christian understanding of Jesus Christ and of his call to discipleship, the passage reveals a structure in marriage where husband and wife are equally symbols of reality beyond marriage, have equally significant responsibilities, and are equally subjects of the devotion of the other. (Cf. 5:21 "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.") Wives model the subjection of the church to Christ (a modeling of significance also to husbands who are subject to Christ) and husbands model the servant headship of Jesus Christ (a servanthood also shared by wives). Husbands are to love, cherish, and serve their wives as Christ does for the church; wives are to respect their husbands as the church does its Lord. What wives are called to do and be, both husbands and wives are called to do and be before Christ, and what husbands are called to do and be, both wives and husbands experience Christ as being and doing for them. So the husband's "headship" is that of servant, and the wife's "subjection" is that of the one loved and set free. Each cares for the other; each is enhanced by the other.

5. Is it necessary to have a wedding ceremony to have a true marriage?

On the basis of what has already been stated, one can see that a wedding ceremony is not itself necessary for marriage in the Christian sense. That does not mean, however, that two persons can simply agree to enter into a relation of intimacy with a commitment to faithfulness to each other and constitute a Christian marriage. The open acknowledgment in the midst of the Christian community and the seeking of God's participation are also needed. That the latter requisites may be achieved apart from a formal wedding ceremony is possible, but some service akin to the wedding will in fact be utilized.

6. Must a marriage involve the intention to have children?

At stake in this question is the understanding of the purpose of marriage and at a deeper level an understanding of the sexual act that is represented in the "one flesh" of marriage.

In Genesis 1, God is shown as telling the man and the woman that they are to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth and subdue it (Genesis 1:28). In Genesis 2, the relationship of male and female involves the becoming one flesh (Gen. 2:24), but the purpose of bringing woman and man together is that they not be alone and be helpers fit for each other (Gen. 2:18). Genesis 1 may imply childbearing, but Genesis 2 does not make begetting children central to the relationship of man and woman in marriage.

While the understanding in Israel seems to have been that a major purpose of marriage was childbearing and the propagation of the people of God, there is clear evidence that other purposes were also recognized and that the New Testament church shared that view of many purposes. Jesus calls into question the very existence of marriage in the Kingdom. Paul also relativizes marriage.

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul's discussion envisions children in a marriage, but his focus is on the sexual relation of wife and husband for mutual satisfaction.

The Roman Catholic understanding of marriage has included procreation, the bearing of children, as a central purpose or function of marriage and sexual intercourse, while the Protestant understanding has more often focused upon marriage as providing for the family as the basic social unit and as an appropriate context for nurture, and upon sexual intercourse for the expression of love and intimate commitment without any necessary intention for procreation.

God's intention for humankind is to be fruitful and multiply. A couple may, however, in their marriage covenanting and in relation to their understanding of God's gifts and intentions for them come to see their marriage as being fulfilled without children.

7. Is monogamy the necessary form of marriage?

This paper has drawn its Biblical basis from passages which deal with marriage as involving one man and one woman and the expression of intimacy between these two alone. In short, the understanding has all been of monogamy. Yet the Bible itself, in many places, recognizes marriages that are not in this pattern, but involve multiple spouses, usually more than one wife.

Our Western culture has been officially committed to monogamy, but the Christian gospel has been received in cultures where polygamy is the cultural norm or at least a cultural norm. More recently in our own society we have had what is sometimes called "serial polygamy" or "serial monogamy," referring to the succession of spouses for one person. (The situation is in some ways like the case posed to Jesus in Mark 12:18–27 and parallels.)

While the tests of unity in intimacy and fidelity and forgiveness would seem to be strained, as already noted in relation to the "open marriage," still, where the acceptance by a particular society and by the Christian community (as on a mission field) and when the seeking to live in accord with God's gifts are clearly present, the church has recognized polygamous marriages.

8. Must both partners be Christians?

The theological understanding of Christian marriage presented here includes several elements, but central to it is seeing marriage as a covenant to which God is significantly present and is recognized to be present by the wife and the husband. That element cannot be neglected or ignored by the Church in its teaching and counseling functions.

Yet we are not the judges finally of the human heart. God chooses and enters into covenant. God's terms are not ours. God is present and active even where no one acknowledges God to be. So God may be in a marriage where one or even both partners make no open commitment to Christian faith.

Still, to stand in the midst of the Christian community and to seek the blessing of God is no small thing. Paul saw clearly that marriage in context for the consecration of spouses and children (1 Corinthians 7:12–16). We ought not to despise that insight, while we seek for open Christian commitment as involved in the reality of Christian marriage.

CONCLUSION

No doubt there are other questions which could be raised and answered. The basic guidelines for their answers can be found, however, in the Biblical and theological understandings set forth here. God has set out in the life of Israel, and Jesus confirmed, that marriage is for the intimate union of man and woman, and that authentic marriage is marked by the commitment in fidelity and forgiveness that represents God's own covenant love. Jesus further has shown that while marriage is a genuine good, it is not a necessary part of the Kingdom of God, while at the same time Jesus Christ in his relation to the church shows us again true understanding of the inner relationship of marriage. Through reflection on the Bible and the history of the church, we can see that while marriage involves the free consent of a woman and a man to live with each other, it also involves the community as the context and support of that relation. Above all Christians make marriage covenants before God and with the expectation of the living presence and activity of the Faithful One.

When the church can affirm this understanding of marriage and ask its members to undertake and live out their marriages in the light of it then we can expect that the joys and trials of marriage can be shared in the perspective of God's creative, governing, and redeeming activity among the covenant people in the world.