

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

Supplemental Resources for the Six-Week Study

Prepared by the Covenant Network of Presbyterians

The study “Christian Marriage in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.),” prepared by the Office of Theology and Worship of the Presbyterian Mission Agency, is a faithful effort to fulfill the General Assembly’s call for “serious study and discernment.” The study, which is available at <http://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/theologyandworship/marriage/>, is necessarily limited in its focus and draws on a short list of resources for congregational study. For its structure and content, it gives particular emphasis to the marriage liturgy in the *Book of Common Worship*, which was published in 1993. This document, in contrast to similar books in other traditions, does not have confessional or theological authority. Like a hymnal or seasonal liturgy prepared by denominational staff, its use is voluntary and, while frequently helpful, was never intended as the definitive statement of what Presbyterians believe.

The Covenant Network is hearing that many congregations would like a study that goes a step further, challenging groups of faithful Presbyterians to consider a wider variety of perspectives on interpreting the scriptural and confessional tradition of the church around marriage. In particular, we believe many churches would like to have conversations more directly engaging the General Assembly discussion concerning same-gender marriage that gave rise to the study in the first place.

To put it another way: Let’s explore openly what embodies the essence of marriage in scripture and the confessions, asking clearly and honestly how same-gender marriage—the presenting issue in today’s church and society—may (or may not) express the truth of God. Let us draw on theological reflection, both traditional and contemporary, that is open to the possibility that our understanding of marriage (like all our theology) might be “Reformed and always being Reformed.” Let us ask questions that directly confront the issues before it.

These supplemental questions and suggestions for study are an initial attempt to do that. Seeking to aid congregations who are using the official study, we have compiled a handful of additional discussion starters and resources that may be useful for groups seeking broader perspective than the study provides. Though this work was done necessarily quickly, we have also consulted with theologians, teaching elders, and Christian educators. We hope it is a blessing to faithful discerners of all theological stripes and to the whole church.

We invite those who wish to continue this study to join us for our national Covenant Conference, with the theme **“Marriage Matters” at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, October 31 to November 2, 2013**. More information is available at www.covnetpres.org. Finally, we invite congregations and individuals who find this study useful to consider making a financial gift to our organization. Your support makes this work possible, and we appreciate it! Contribution information (including a button for online giving) can be found at www.covnetpres.org/donate.

Brian Ellison, Executive Director

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Helpful Background

GA position papers: *Biblical Authority and Interpretation, Presbyterian Understanding and Use of Holy Scripture*: http://www.pcusa.org/media/uploads/_resolutions/scripture-use.pdf.

History of the polity concerning same-gender marriage in the PCUSA: <http://covnetpres.org/2013/02/a-pastoral-emergency/>.

Resources for Deeper Study

Previous Denominational Study

Referenced in the official study, but not explored, is *The Final Report of the Special Committee to Study Issues of Civil Union and Christian Marriage*, which was commended for study by the 219th General Assembly (2010) together with a minority report. It can be found at <http://www.pcusa.org/resource/final-report-special-committee-study-issues-civil-/>. The main report, pp. 3-16, provides an excellent overview of the issues produced by a theologically diverse group of Presbyterians.

Essays and Speeches for Reading and Discussion (available online)

Ted A. Smith, ed., *Frequently Asked Questions About Sexuality, the Bible, and the Church* (Covenant Network of Presbyterians, 2006). This resource is available free in its entirety online at <http://covnetpres.org/resources/faq/> or for purchase at <http://covnetpres.org/shop/>. Of particular interest are these essays:

David Jensen, "What Do Presbyterians Say About Marriage?" (<http://covnetpres.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/jensen-marriage.pdf>)

Mary McClintock Fulkerson, "Is Gender Complementarity Essential to Christian Marriage?" (<http://covnetpres.org/2009/11/is-gender-complementarity-essential-to-christian-marriage/>)

Mark Achtemeier, "The Redemption of Our Bodies" (<http://covnetpres.org/2012/11/the-redemption-of-our-bodies/>) and "The Plan-B God" (<http://covnetpres.org/2012/10/the-plan-b-god/>), addresses offered at regional conferences of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians in Fall 2012. These addressed the biblical case for same-gender marriage.

Book

Jack Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible and Homosexuality, Revised and Expanded Edition: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church*. This book (available for sale online) provides an excellent overview of a wide range of issues, including the question of same-gender marriage.

Suggested Supplemental Questions

The curriculum provided by the Office of Theology and Worship asks leaders, “What other questions, issues, or themes occur to you from your reflection?” *Here are a few to spur your own thinking further.*

Session 1: The Gift of Marriage

- From what sources did you get your first impressions as a child about what marriage is, or should be? Have those ideas changed over the years, and if so – how?
- In what way(s) is God “an active part” of a marriage?
- How is a particular marriage a gift to the wider community?
- What is the responsibility of the faith community to a married couple? Does that responsibility vary depending upon whether the community was present at the wedding?

Session 2: God Created Us

- How do the changing roles of men and women in heterosexual marriage affect the discussion of marriage between two men or two women?
- Other echoes of the phrase from Genesis 2: 23, “bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh,” are found in Genesis 29:14 (Laban to Jacob, “Surely you are my bone and my flesh”) and 2 Samuel 5:1 (the tribes of Israel to David, “We are your bone and flesh”). How do these references inform your understanding of the metaphor “one flesh”?
- How is Jesus’s condemnation of divorce interpreted in the church today, and how is that relevant to consideration of who is allowed to marry?

Session 3: The Expression of Love

- How does Paul’s acknowledgment in 1 Corinthians 7: 7 that “each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind” inform the consideration of varieties of family structures?
- Why does Paul honor celibacy over marriage? Is Paul’s preference important for today’s Presbyterians?
- How do the next two verses, 1 Corinthians 7:8-9, add to your understanding?

Session 4: The Well-Being of Society

- The biblical practice of levirate marriage – requiring the brother of a man who died childless to marry his widow and father a child to carry on his brother’s name – is one example of how different the worldview of the biblical writers is from our own. How do we discern which biblical admonitions are timeless principles and which are culture-bound?
- Adoption and a variety of other reproductive technologies (in vitro fertilization, surrogacy, etc.) have expanded the number of persons who can be parents beyond a fertile heterosexual couple, and children can be nurtured in a variety of family structures. What factors are most important to the well-being of children?
- If you are a minister, what is your attitude toward your role as an agent of the state for the purpose of marriage? If you are married or seeking marriage, is it important to you that a representative of the church perform that role? How would the ministry of the church be affected if ministers gave up that role and restricted their actions to counseling and celebrating relationships in worship, leaving the legal aspects to the civil authority?

Session 5: A Holy Mystery

- What exactly about the relationship between Christ and the church is represented by the metaphor of marriage? Do any of these qualities depend on gender?
- What is the significance of gender in the metaphors comparing marriage with the relationships between God/Christ and human beings? How do these metaphors inform the roles of men and women, and the relationships of women and men in society?
- What is the relevance of Galatians 3: 23-29 to the church's discernment about the meaning of marriage?

Session 6: A New Way of Life

- In what way does the opportunity to enter into marriage represent, for same-gender couples, the opportunity to enter into a new way of life?
- What is the effect of denying marriage to a couple who wishes to live out the claims of baptism in their relationship?
- What are the consequences of excluding some in the church from what is here referred to as "a new way of life," for the church's witness and for those individuals' lives?

For more information or assistance, contact the Covenant Network of Presbyterians:

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