

Christian Marriage Study

Rev. Dr. Kenneth L. Cuthbertson

An adaptation of the study guide “Christian Marriage in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)”
offered by the Office of Theology and Worship*

<http://www.presbyterianmission.org/media/uploads/theologyandworship/pdfs/christianmarriagestudy.pdf>

Session 1: The Gift of Marriage

Opening Prayer

Introduction of the Study (some history as to why we are doing this)

Question: What were your first impressions as a child about what marriage is, or should be? How may those ideas have changed over the years?

Reflective Reading – Genesis 1: 1 – 2:3 (sections to readers: 1: 1-5, 6-8, 9-13, 14-19, 20-23, 24-25, 26-31, 2: 1-3)

- How does the creation of human beings fit into the story of creation in Genesis 1?

Other Background Texts (handout 1)

- Name ways in which marriage is a gift to you and to the human community.
- 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 on whether the faith community was present at the wedding?
- How does the sexual identity (orientation) of those who marry inform the understanding of marriage as a covenant relationship, witnessed by the community of faith, in which God has a part?

Closing Prayer: *Holy God, you have gathered us together as one body in Christ; help us to enter into relationship with you, and with one another, in such a way so that we may receive, share, and honor the gifts you have lovingly given to us and to all humankind. Amen.*

***Supplemented with materials from Covenant Network of Presbyterians, and other sources.**

Session 2: God Created Us

Opening Prayer

Review Question: How does the sexual identity (orientation) of those who marry inform the understanding of marriage as a covenant relationship, witnessed by the community of faith, in which God has a part?

Reflective Reading – Genesis 2: 18-25

- What does this story “say” to you?
- How do you understand “companionship”?
- 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 our understanding of the metaphor “one flesh”?
- What does the story say about God?

Reflective Reading – Mark 10:1-9

- What are the implications of Jesus’s words, “the two will be one flesh” and “humans must not pull apart what God has put together”?
- 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? (*KLC Note:* According to Josephus, and others, Jews in the time of Jesus still allowed and practiced polygamy, although it was exceptional. Early Christians quickly adhered to the Roman practice of marital monogamy. There were two schools of thought concerning divorce among the Jews of the time, and Jesus’s view echoes the more conservative.)

Other Background Texts (handout 2)

- How does the sexual identity (orientation) of those who marry inform the understanding of marriage as part of God’s created order?
- How do the changing roles of men and women in heterosexual marriage affect the discussion of marriage between two men or two women?

Closing 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. Amen.*

Session 3: The Expression of Love

Opening Prayer

Review Question: How does the sexual identity (orientation) of those who marry inform the understanding of marriage as part of God's created order?

Reflective Reading – I Corinthians 7: 1-9

- What does this passage “say” to you?
- What is the role of physical intimacy in marriage?
- What does Paul’s instruction for spouses to meet the sexual needs of the other teach us about marriage? (How has this instruction been abused over time?)
- 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?

Reflective Reading – Song of Songs 8:6-7

- What stands out for you in this passage? How does the passage make you feel?

Other Background Texts (handout 3)

- How does the sexual identity (orientation) of those who marry inform the understanding of marriage as an expression of love?

Closing Prayer: *God of mercy, your faithfulness to your covenant frees us to live together in the security of your powerful love. Amid all the changing words of our generation, help us to discern your eternal Word that does not change. Then may we respond to your gracious promises by living faithfully through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.*

Session 4: The Well-Being of Society

Opening Prayer

Review Question: How does the sexual identity (orientation) of those who marry inform the understanding of marriage as an expression of love?

Reflective Reading – Genesis 1:28

- How are the ordering of human society and the birth and nurture of children connected?
- In an age of concerns about overpopulation, how do we regard the command to “be fruitful and multiply”? What about the use of contraceptives, family planning, etc., in this regard?
- 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?

Reflective Reading – Deuteronomy 6: 1-9

- How do you understand the connection between keeping covenant with God and multiplying in the land?
- 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?
- Is there a different understanding of these verses when viewed from the perspective Christian scriptures such as the Great Commission (Mt. 28:18-20)?

Reflective Reading – I Timothy 5: 1-8

- How does the author of I Timothy view the interrelationship of marriage and family with the Christian community and social order?

Other Background Texts (handout 4)

- The PCUSA confessions and constitution assume a consistency between the definition of marriage by the state and by the church. The U.S. now has a patchwork of marriage laws. How do we, as church, deal with these differences?
- What does it mean for ministers to act as agents of the state in officiating at marriages? (How do ministers feel about this role?)
- How does the sexual identity (orientation) of those who marry inform the understanding of marriage as supporting the well-being of society?

Closing Prayer: *Holy God, may your kingdom come, and your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven, so that we may all live together in peace and well-being. Amen.*

Session 5: A Holy Mystery

Opening Prayer

Review Question: How does the sexual identity (orientation) of those who marry inform the understanding of marriage as supporting the well-being of society?

Reflective Reading – Hosea 2:14-23

- The people of God had been unfaithful and idolatrous, but God pledges to love them still. How does God's promise inform our understanding of God? What does it say about the nature of marriage?
- What is the significance of gender in the metaphors comparing marriage with the relationships between God and human beings? How do these metaphors reflect the understanding of marriage at the time they were written? What do they say concerning the roles of men and women, and the relationships of women and men in contemporary society?

Reflective Reading – Revelation 21:2-3

- In the new creation the relationship of Christ and the Church is pictured as that of a bridegroom and bride. What does the phrase "a bride adorned for her husband" mean to you?
- What about the relationship between Christ and the church is represented by the metaphor of marriage? Do any of these qualities depend on gender?

Reflective Reading – Galatians 3:23-29

- What is the relevance of Galatians 3: 23-29 to the church's discernment about the meaning of marriage?

Other Background Texts (handout 5)

- What makes marriage holy?
- What does it mean to live together "before" God as married partners?
- How do you see same-gender marriage as an image of Christ's relationship to the church?
- How do other metaphors for God's faithfulness speak to the marriage issue? (See "A Brief Statement of Faith" excerpt.)

Closing Prayer: *Holy God, as you have revealed to us your unceasing love in Jesus, make us one in Christ's body so that our life together may proclaim the mystery of that love. Amen.*

Session 6: A New Way of Life

Opening Prayer

Review Question: How do you see (same-gender) marriage as an image of Christ's relationship to the church?

Reflective Reading – Galatians 5:16-25

- What does the “fruit of the Spirit have to do with living together in a covenant relationship?
- In what ways have you seen marriage promote discipleship in Christian life? (In your own life?)
- Is marriage ever a hindrance to living the Christian 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?

Reflective Reading – Hebrews 13:4

- Protestants have historically criticized the Roman Catholic “discipline” of clerical celibacy (as opposed to recognizing that individuals may feel a “call” to single life). How does that aspect of our tradition speak to the matter of “honoring” marriage?
- 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?
- What is the effect of denying marriage to a couple who wishes to live out their discipleship in their relationship?

Other Background Texts (handout 6)

- How does the sexual identity (orientation) of those who marry inform the understanding of marriage as a means by which spouses live out their lives of discipleship together?

Concluding the Study

- What have you gained from this study? What questions remain?

Closing 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. Amen.*

Session 1: The Gift of Marriage

Main Idea

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

Background Texts

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 blessings upon them, so that they might 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 and 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

Session 2: God Created Us

Main Idea

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

Background Texts

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

Session 3: The Expression of Love

Main Idea

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

Background Texts

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.

Supplemental 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:

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

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

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

The Confession of 1967

The relationship between man and woman exemplifies in a basic way God's ordering of the interpersonal life for which he created mankind. Anarchy in sexual relationships is a symptom of man's alienation from God, his neighbor, and himself. Man's perennial confusion about the meaning of sex has been aggravated in our day by the availability of new means for birth control and the treatment of infection, by the pressures of urbanization, by the exploitation of sexual symbols in mass communication, and by world overpopulation. The church, as the household of God, is called to lead men out of this alienation into the responsible freedom of the new life in Christ. Reconciled to God, each person has joy in and respect for his own humanity and that of other persons; a man and woman are enabled to marry, to commit themselves to a mutually shared life, and to respond to each other in sensitive and lifelong concern; parents receive the grace to care for children in love and to nurture their individuality. The church comes under the judgment of God and invites rejection by man when it fails to lead men and women into the full meaning of life together, or withholds the compassion of Christ from those caught in the moral confusion of our time.

Book of Confessions, 9.47

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

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

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.

Supplemental 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

A Brief Statement of Faith:

... God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation. In everlasting love, the God of Abraham and Sarah chose a covenant people to bless all families of the earth. Hearing their cry, God delivered the children of Israel from the house of bondage. Loving us still, God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant. Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home, God is faithful still.

Book of Confessions, 10.3

Directory for Worship:

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

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

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.

Supplemental 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