

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

The mystery of marriage

By God's own decree, the Church is the bride of Christ (II Corinthians 11:2). There is a wedding planned and the expectation is that the bride will be presented to the bridegroom pure and undefiled (Revelation 19:7). This mysterious quality distinguishes authentically Christian marriages from every other variety of civil marriage or domestic partnership. It is this "institution" that is commanded to be kept undefiled and held in honor among all (Hebrews 13:4).

The world will decide what it will. The Church has a responsibility to make decisions based on God's will. The only way to insure that end is to make those decisions based on the revealed will of God found in the Bible. As Presbyterians, we interpret those Scriptures first through the lens of the confessional standard of our Reformed tradition, not by our own earthly desires.

As we approach the issue of marriage, let us be reminded that the Church is in the world to demonstrate the Kingdom of God, not to give people an excuse to live in licentiousness. The Church is in the world to show forth the Gospel of Jesus Christ, not that her people might all fully express their own personal inclinations. The Church is in the world to make Jesus visible – Jesus who did not abolish the law but perfectly fulfilled it; Jesus who took sin so seriously that He died to forgive it; Jesus who humbled Himself in willing submission to the Father's will. So, with that in mind, how is distinctively Christian marriage called to make the Gospel visible in the world today?

From beginning (Genesis 2:19-25) to end (Revelation 19:7) the Word of God speaks to the subject at hand. And it was relevant to Jesus. John tells us that Jesus attended a wedding with His mother and disciples, and as an act of extraordinary blessing to the couple, performed His first sign-miracle at their wedding in Cana. Jesus directly addressed the subject of marriage and clearly affirms God's will for marriage in Matthew 19:1-12. When asked about marriage in relationship to the resurrection, Jesus is quoted in all three of the synoptic gospels as giving such a good answer they dared not ask Him anything else.

This study will seek to prepare believers for conversations within the Church and in the world when the subject is "marriage." If we are going to call ourselves Christians and enter into the debate on the definition of marriage, then we need to have a true understanding of what God says on the matter.



The open letter (below) from The Presbyterian Lay Committee was written to all Presbyterians on April 24, 2004

"The institution of marriage between one man and one woman, an essential cornerstone of civil society, is under cultural assault. The Presbyterian Lay Committee believes with Scripture that God ordained the lifelong marriage of a man and a woman in the very order of creation and that Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, blessed and sanctified this relationship.

"For centuries, the Church universally has affirmed this most precious relationship, believing from Scripture that it is a gift of the Creator God. We call on all believers in Christ to affirm their unequivocal support for marriage and to endorse "A Christian Declaration of Marriage" as an important and timely ecumenical commitment. We urge the governing bodies of our denomination publicly to affirm and implement this declaration."

The text of "A Christian Declaration of Marriage" can be found at www.religioustolerance.org/mar_stat1.htm

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What the PCUSA confessions say about marriage

The following is excerpted from an editorial published in the Dec. 2009 issue of The Layman.

What do our confessions say about marriage?

Chapter 29 of the **Second Helvetic Confession** offers instruction on singleness, marriage and parenting. Paragraph 5.246 reads: *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 (Matthew 19:4ff). Whereupon we know that the apostle said: "Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled" (Hebrews 13:4). And again, "If a girl marries, she does not sin" (1 Corinthians 7:28).*

The **Westminster Confession of Faith** covers marriage in chapter XXIV. What now appears in our *Book of Confessions* are two columns of edited text, one representing changes made by the former Presbyterian Church in the United States and the former United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America:

UPCUSA

1. Christian marriage is an institution ordained by 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.

PCUS

1. Marriage is a union between one man and one woman, designed by God to last so long as they both shall live.
2. 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.

3. All persons who are able with judgment to give their consent to marry, ... But no marriage can be fully and securely Christian in spirit or in purpose unless both partners are committed to a common Christian faith and to a deeply shared intention of building a Christian home. Evangelical Christians should seek as partners in marriage only persons who hold in common a sound basis of evangelical faith.

Question 20 of the **Larger Catechism** asks, "What was the providence of God toward man in the estate in which he was created?" The answer includes among the litany, "ordaining marriage for his help." (7.130)

The Confession of 1967 reads:

d. 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. ... 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.

Our Confessions could not be more clear. We are bound to lead the people of God according to the Scriptures, and our interpretation of the Scriptures is to be instructed by our mutually agreed upon confessional standards.

EDITOR'S NOTE:

Carmen Fowler is the author of the equipping section that appears in the center of each issue of *The Layman*.

Your feedback is greatly appreciated as future studies are planned.

Share your comments with Carmen via e-mail at cfowler@layman.org, call 1-800-368-0110 or write her at P.O. 2210, Lenoir, NC 28645.

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Week I: It's all about putting the Gospel on display

Read Philippians 2:1-18

Are you saying to yourself, “this says nothing about marriage?” Then, consider how this passage provides a framework for a conversation about the Christian life.

In all things, including marriage, Christians should have the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus.

What would marriage look like if it were pursued “not out of selfish ambition nor vain conceit” but with a genuine humility that regarded blessing your spouse as a priority?

What would marriage look like if it were pursued by two Christians who looked not only to their own interests but to the interests of one other – and together looked to the interests of others beyond them?

What would marriage look like if it were pursued by two Christians who did not consider equality with one another as something to be grasped but humbled themselves, in submission to God, in submission to Christ, in submission to the Spirit?

What would marriage look like if it were actively pursued by two Christians who were mutually working out their own salvation with fear and trembling, actively submitting every day to the ongoing work of God to bring them individually and corporately into alignment with His will and purpose?

What would marriage look like where life was lived without complaint or argument? A marriage where the Word of life is held out for others?

That would be a marriage that would attract attention! It would shine like a star in the midst of a dark and depraved generation where marriage has been degraded, devalued and in many cases is devoid of Christ. Where many experience marriage as a many-splintered thing, this distinctively Christian marriage would give people a glimpse of the many splendored thing God intends!

For discussion:

1. Who do you know that has a marriage that lives up to the Philippians 2 calling?
2. How might you cultivate a marriage marked by the characteristics described above?
3. From a Biblical worldview, God draws people into marriage because He can accomplish more of His Kingdom work through them together than He could separately. Who do you know that has a marriage like that? Would you consider asking them to mentor you in marriage?

For further study:

Alan Wisdom's Mount Nebo paper on Marriage at www.theIRD.org, or printed on last page of this section.

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Week II: There is an order to things

Read Genesis 2:19-25

Jesus quotes this passage from Genesis 2 in His teaching on the subject of marriage in Matthew 19 and Mark 10.

It is God who made humanity in His image, male and female. He created them and blessed them (Genesis 1:27). Why not just make man or just woman? Why is one gender not enough? Because to fully express the image of God, One God in Three Persons, both man and woman are required (Genesis 5:1-3). It is a mystery, indeed. It was God who judged that it was not good for man to be alone and it was God who gave man a fitting companion, woman (Genesis 1:27).

In quoting Jesus from Mark 10, pastors are ultimately quoting Genesis 2 when they pronounce couples married at the conclusion of a wedding ceremony. Those weddings open with a litany that reminds us that “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. 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. God gave us marriage for the well-being of human society, for the ordering of family life, for the birth and the nurture of children. And God gave us marriage as a holy mystery in which a man and woman are joined together and become one, just as Christ is one with the church” (Statement of the Gift of Marriage, *The Book of Common Worship*).

For discussion:

1. When you consider that you were made in the image of God, what does that communicate about God’s interest in you and value of you?
2. When you consider that from God’s perspective it takes both a man and woman to fully express the image of God, what does that indicate to you about the nature of God and God’s intention for human relationships?

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Week III: Considering ‘submission’ in the context of grace

*Read 1 Peter 2:10-4:11, Ephesians 5:21-33,
Romans 12-13 and Colossians 3*

A distinctively Christian life puts the Gospel on display in the midst of a fallen and broken world. Likewise, a distinctively Christian marriage puts the Gospel on display in the midst of a culture of relational confusion.

These texts, read in conversation with each other, describe the distinctive witness of Christian relationships. All relationships are set in the context of Christian faith and God-given grace. These teachings will not make sense to non-believers.

These concepts will be utterly foreign to people who are not operating from a Biblical worldview. But these ideals are more than aspirational for Christian households; living in accordance with God’s Word is a living demonstration of the faith and it is our mutual calling in Christ.

These texts talk about “submission.” When we consider submission to God, our minds return to the Garden of Gethsemane, to Christ on His face before the Father, pleading in prayer that the cup of God’s wrath might pass, yet in submission yielding, “Not my will, but Thine be done.” Submission is not demanded, it is freely offered in genuine humility.

Submission in marriage is mutual: Both husband and wife submit to God, and yes, in respect for the order of things, wives also submit to their husbands. Check your spirit as you consider that truth. How do you feel? Why? Re-read Philippians 2. Is your attitude the same as that of Christ Jesus? What was Jesus willing to yield that you are not?

For discussion:

1. How does this week’s lesson challenge you – spiritually, culturally and relationally?
2. What would a marriage look like if it were marked by submission in the context of grace?

For further study:

Read and reflect on Hebrews 13:1-21 and James 4:7-10.

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Week IV: Leading a life worthy of the Gospel

Read I Corinthians 7.

Set in the midst of conversations about lawsuits among believers, sexual immorality and food sacrificed to idols, the summary sentence of this section of Paul's instruction to the Christians in Corinth is found in I Corinthians 10:23-24, "Everything is permissible, but not everything is beneficial. Everything is permissible, but not everything is constructive. Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others."

Apparently the Corinthians were just as confused about marriage as post-modern Presbyterians. In much the same way that Presbyterians have been seeking "definitive guidance" since the '70s and now seek "authoritative interpretations" from this year's General Assembly, the Christians in Corinth wrote to Paul about how Christians ought to live in the midst of a culture marked by rampant sexual immorality.

Paul does not give them permission to simply live as their pagan neighbors. On the contrary, he commends marriage between one man and one woman (I Corinthians 7:2) or chastity, celibacy, to those who are so gifted (I Corinthians 7:7). Paul acknowledges that in terms of a life committed to the advancement of Christ's Kingdom, it is more easily accomplished if one's time, attention and affection are not divided. One presumes this is where the Roman Catholic notion of an unmarried clergy originates.

All of Paul's instruction on the subject flows out of I Corinthians 6:12-20 wherein we are reminded that although everything is permissible, not all things are beneficial; that our bodies are not our own, we were bought with a price; that we are members of Christ's body; that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit; and that therefore we should honor God with our bodies. The standards of sexual behavior for Christians and the instruction on marriage are inextricably intertwined.

For discussion:

1. When considered in the context of living a life that is a demonstration of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world, how do your relationships, your finances and your social practices line up to the Biblical standards?
2. How might we gain a new witness with our neighbors if we genuinely began treating our bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit? What would you stop doing? What would you start doing? What would you no longer allow into your body? What would you do with it (and not do with it)? From what would you protect it? With whom would you share it?

For further study:

Read and reflect on The Song of Solomon.

If you find yourself in a state of sexual confusion or brokenness, please visit OnebyOne at www.oneby1.org.

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Is marriage worth defending?

The following excerpt is from The Institute on Religion & Democracy's Mount Nebo Paper, "Is Marriage Worth Defending?" by Alan F.H. Wisdom, vice president for research and programs.

From the executive summary

By many measures, marriage has weakened in our society over the past two generations. Fewer people marry. More people divorce. Increasing numbers of people move through a series of sexual relationships without ever forming a lasting marriage.

Not only the practice but also the understanding of marriage has shifted. Our society's view of marriage, centered on mutual emotional satisfaction, is already far from classic Christian teaching. Now pro-homosexuality advocates are seeking to radically redefine the institution, reducing it to a relationship between any "two people who love each other." Amidst all this conflict, is it worth the cost for Christians to continue to defend and promote this embattled institution?

The Bible teaches that God brought together man and woman in marriage for the good of all humankind. The love between husband and wife is a temporal image of the eternal bond between God and His people. All major branches of the church bless and honor marriage for the way in which it unites the two sexes as "one flesh," provides the appropriate setting for child-bearing and childrearing, offers a legitimate channel for sexual desire, and fosters faithful lifelong companionship between husband and wife.

Marriage is the most basic building block of human society. Almost every known culture distinguishes the marriage of man and woman from other relationships. Typically, marriage is the means by which children are ensured the care of a socially obligated father and mother. The state has a crucial interest in marriage as the incubator for the next generation of citizens. Contemporary social science confirms the benefits of marriage – in terms of physical and psychological health, social adjustment, and economic prosperity – for both adults and children.

As marriage comes under challenge, U.S. Christians face three options: They can yield to the cultural trends devaluing marriage. Or they can admit defeat in society but try somehow to maintain traditional teachings inside the church. Or they can swim against the current and insist that both church and society lend a hand in strengthening marriage. We believe that only this last option is faithful to the Scriptures and conducive to the long-term good of society.

The first word to which Christians must attend in any matter is the Word of God. We receive that Word especially in the incarnate Son of God, Jesus the Christ, as revealed by the Holy Spirit through the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.

Those Scriptures have much to say about marriage, from the first chapter of Genesis to the last chapter of Revelation. The marital relationship opens a window to understanding both God and humankind. Biblically grounded Christians will place a high value on marriage, as Jesus did.

On several occasions, Jesus faced interlocutors who raised questions related to marriage. He responded with a very high and demanding view of the institution. Most important is this incident, recounted in Matthew 19:3-6.

The Pharisees pose a question about a particular situation, pushing Jesus to see how far a husband might go in extricating himself from an unsatisfactory marriage. But Jesus quickly turns the conversation from human desires to God's intentions.

Jesus affirms that the author of marriage is God, not human society. It is God who "joins together" every husband and wife – not merely the wills of the two spouses.

Jesus also affirms that God's establishment of marriage goes back to "the beginning," to God's providential design in creation. Marriage, in Jesus' telling, is rooted in God's choice to "make them [humans] male and female." It is an essentially "gendered" relationship uniting the two sexes. Jesus, by explaining marriage in terms of God's order of creation, makes clear that marriage was instituted for all humankind. The law of Moses contained particular provisions regulating marriage and divorce within Israel, which was what interested the Pharisees. Jesus, however, looks to a pattern of "a man ... leav[ing] his father and mother and be[ing] joined to his wife" that was practiced far more widely. ...

Conclusions

... Marriage is worth defending, and we have a duty to defend it. To whatever extent we succeed in building communities that honor marriage, in the church and in society, we will glorify the God who designed marriage. In addition, we will bring blessings to many neighbors whose lives are enriched through marriage. To whatever extent we fail in this task, we and our neighbors and the witness of the Gospel will suffer loss.

But we ought not to worry too much about losses that we may suffer. Ultimately, the defense of marriage does not fall on our weak human shoulders. The One who truly upholds marriage is the sovereign God who created man and woman and joined them together in the marriage bond. God is not mocked. In due time He will vindicate His truth – about marriage, and everything else – so that all eyes may see.

No human trend is irreversible. ... We can expect that a society that devalues God's good gift of marriage will not prosper in the long run.

We must believe that, in God's providence, those who depart from God's path will eventually experience the consequences. Even in the far country of individual autonomy and moral relativism, the prodigal can recognize the fruitlessness of his ways. ... He can turn back toward the place where God is ready to receive and restore him.

The Bible and human history are full of these kinds of surprising reversals. The times when "everyone does what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25) and society falls apart are followed by times of repentance and renewal. Sexual license and family disintegration go only so far before a countervailing drive toward family reintegration takes hold.

In Acts 3:19-20 the apostle Peter promises "times of refreshing" for the people of Jerusalem if they will "[r]epent therefore and turn to God." We pray and work that it may be so in our day and our land.

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