

## **Christian Marriage: A Discussion**

*This document and the accompanying video are intended to help facilitate meaningful conversation about Christian marriage. In order to have the most effective format for sharing, conversation groups should be no more than 10 people. 6-8 people would be best. This discussion can be done in 2-3 hours, depending on the group. Please allow as much time as is needed for everyone to be able to share.*

Note to facilitators: Please watch the entire video in advance as you prepare to lead, so you will be familiar with where the breaks are to invite conversation among your groups.

Opening Prayer

Introduction/Purpose of Study (video)

*Move straight into video responses to question 1...*

### **What do you most value about being Presbyterian?**

Share in small groups. (Make sure this part includes introductions around the table if there are people in the groups who do not already know each other.)

*Watch responses to question 2...*

### **What informed your earliest impressions about marriage as a child? How has that changed over time? How would you define marriage now?**

Share in small groups.

Facilitators will share some biblical texts that refer to marriage. Invite a few people to read these aloud while others follow along from the attached handout. Read them one after another. This is not intended to be extensive Bible study – simply a review of some of the diversity of biblical texts that refer to marriage.

After the texts have been read, invite the groups to discuss the following question:

### **What do we mean when we refer to “biblical marriage”?**

After some time of conversation, say, “Our confession states that: The Bible is to be interpreted in the light of its witness to God's work of reconciliation in Christ. The Scriptures, given under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are nevertheless the words of men, conditioned by the language, thought forms, and literary fashions of the places and times at which they were written. They reflect views of life, history, and the cosmos which were then current. The church, therefore, has an obligation to approach the Scriptures with literary and historical understanding. As God has spoken his word in diverse cultural situations, the church is confident that he will continue to speak through the Scriptures in a changing world and in every form of human culture (*Confession of 1967*, 9.29).”

**How do we discern which scriptures are culture-bound  
and which ones are timeless principles?**

Allow some time for groups to discuss.

Then, say, “Faithful people will arrive at different conclusions on this, as we know. So we think there is a more important question for us to consider as we move forward in the church (though we will not be able to answer this adequately today).”

**How *can* we let scripture inform us  
when we arrive at different conclusions on important matters?**

Watch responses to question 3...

**Why is marriage important for the Christian community?**

Note: Your groups will not answer this question. After watching the responses in the video, review the handout, *A Snapshot of Some Reformed History on Marriage*.

Question for discussion: **What does it mean for the church to honor marriage?**

Watch responses to question 4...

**What do you want the presbytery to hear about marriage from your own perspective?**

Note, the groups will not answer this question. It is our hope that the diversity of perspectives is well-represented in this portion of the video.

Instead, conclude with the following:

“Here, we have faithful people with a variety of perspectives on this issue. We all have different things we want to say about marriage, and we certainly haven’t said it all here. But we are the church. And our differences on this issue do not cease to make us the church. Our call is to bear with one another, to listen to one another, to respect one another as we move forward, regardless of the issues we face. Let us end our time together by affirming our faith, using the words of *A Brief Statement of Faith*, a confession written to mark the reunion of our denomination in 1983.”

## APPENDIX

### From Book of Order - Foundations

#### F-1.01 GOD'S MISSION

The good news of the Gospel is that the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit— creates, redeems, sustains, rules, and transforms all things and all people. This one living God, the Scriptures say, liberated the people of Israel from oppression and covenanted to be their God. By the power of the Spirit, this one living God is incarnate in Jesus Christ, who came to live in the world, die for the world, and be raised again to new life. The Gospel of Jesus Christ announces the nearness of God's kingdom, bringing good news to all who are impoverished, sight to all who are blind, freedom to all who are oppressed, and proclaiming the Lord's favor upon all creation. The mission of God in Christ gives shape and substance to the life and work of the Church. In Christ, the Church participates in God's mission for the transformation of creation and humanity by proclaiming to all people the good news of God's love, offering to all people the grace of God at font and table, and calling all people to discipleship in Christ. Human beings have no higher goal in life than to glorify and enjoy God now and forever, living in covenant fellowship with God and participating in God's mission.

#### *F-1.0301 The Church Is the Body of Christ*

The Church is the body of Christ. Christ gives to the Church all the gifts necessary to be his body. The Church strives to demonstrate these gifts in its life as a community in the world (1 Cor. 12:27–28): The Church is to be a community of faith, entrusting itself to God alone, even at the risk of losing its life. The Church is to be a community of hope, rejoicing in the sure and certain knowledge that, in Christ, God is making a new creation. This new creation is a new beginning for human life and for all things. The Church lives in the present on the strength of that promised new creation. The Church is to be a community of love, where sin is forgiven, reconciliation is accomplished, and the dividing walls of hostility are torn down. The Church is to be a community of witness, pointing beyond itself through word and work to the good news of God's transforming grace in Christ Jesus its Lord.

#### *F-3.0101 God Is Lord of the Conscience*

- a. That "God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship."
- b. Therefore we consider the rights of private judgment, in all matters that respect religion, as universal and unalienable: We do not even wish to see any religious constitution aided by the civil power, further than may be necessary for protection and security, and at the same time, be equal and common to all others.

#### *F-3.0104 Truth and Goodness*

That truth is in order to goodness; and the great touchstone of truth, its tendency to promote holiness, according to our Savior's rule, "By their fruits ye shall know them." And that no opinion can either be more pernicious or more absurd than that which brings truth and falsehood upon a level, and represents it as of no consequence what a man's opinions are. On the contrary, we are persuaded that there is an inseparable connection between faith and practice, truth and duty. Otherwise it would be of no consequence either to discover truth or to embrace it.

#### *F-3.0105 Mutual Forbearance*

That, while under the conviction of the above principle we think it necessary to make effectual provision that all who are admitted as teachers be sound in the faith, we also believe that there are truths and forms with respect to which men of good characters and principles may differ. And in all these we think it the duty both of private Christians and societies to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other.

See also: Guidelines for Presbyterians during Times of Disagreement:  
<http://www.pcusa.org/media/uploads/peacemaking/pdf/guidelines.pdf>

### **Genesis 2:18-25**

18 Then the LORD God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.' <sup>19</sup>So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. <sup>20</sup>The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. <sup>21</sup>So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. <sup>22</sup>And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. <sup>23</sup>Then the man said, 'This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.'

<sup>24</sup>Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. <sup>25</sup>And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

### **Judges 21:16-21**

<sup>16</sup>So the elders of the congregation said, 'What shall we do for wives for those who are left, since there are no women left in Benjamin?' <sup>17</sup>And they said, 'There must be heirs for the survivors of Benjamin, in order that a tribe may not be blotted out from Israel. <sup>18</sup>Yet we cannot give any of our daughters to them as wives.' For the Israelites had sworn, 'Cursed be anyone who gives a wife to Benjamin.' <sup>19</sup>So they said, 'Look, the yearly festival of the LORD is taking place at Shiloh, which is north of Bethel, on the east of the highway that goes up from Bethel to Shechem, and south of Lebonah.' <sup>20</sup>And they instructed the Benjaminites, saying, 'Go and lie in wait in the vineyards, <sup>21</sup>and watch; when the young women of Shiloh come out to dance in the dances, then come out of the vineyards and each of you carry off a wife for himself from the young women of Shiloh, and go to the land of Benjamin.'

### **1 Corinthians 7:38**

<sup>38</sup>So then, he who marries his fiancée does well; and he who refrains from marriage will do better.

### **Mark 10:2-12**

2 Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?' <sup>3</sup>He answered them, 'What did Moses command you?' <sup>4</sup>They said, 'Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.' <sup>5</sup>But Jesus said to them, 'Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. <sup>6</sup>But from the beginning of creation, "God made them male and female." <sup>7</sup>"For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, <sup>8</sup>and the two shall become one flesh." So they are no longer two, but one flesh. <sup>9</sup>Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.'

10 Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. <sup>11</sup>He said to them, 'Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; <sup>12</sup>and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.'

### **Revelation 21:1-2**

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. <sup>2</sup>And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

### **Galatians 3:27-28**

<sup>27</sup>As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. <sup>28</sup>There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

## **A Snapshot of Some Reformed History on Marriage from David Jensen (Theology Prof at Austin Theological Seminary)**

### **Calvin**

“Calvin and the Reformers rejected the notion of marriage as a sacrament, because it is not a ‘visible word’ by which God expresses the promises of grace and communion in and through Jesus Christ. They preferred to call marriage an ordinance instituted by God, profitable for God’s people (Second Helvetic, 5.171)... Calvin devotes surprisingly few words to marriage in his *Institutes*... Calvin celebrates marriage as a blessing for human happiness and as an antidote to sin: ‘Man has been created in this condition that he may not lead a solitary life, but may enjoy a helper joined to himself... Therefore the Lord sufficiently provided for us in this matter when he established marriage, the fellowship of which, begun on his authority, he also sanctified by his blessing... The companionship of marriage has been ordained as a necessary remedy to keep us from plunging into unbridled lust’ (Institutes 2.8.41).”

### **Westminster Confession**

Marriage as a public good: “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 to the grace of life” (6.131).

### **Book of Common Worship – Wedding Prayer**

“...Make their life together a sign of Christ’s love to this sinful and broken world, that unity may overcome estrangement, forgiveness heal guilt, and joy conquer despair.” (BCW, p. 848)

"The burden lies in whether proposals for same-sex unions meet the theological criteria for marriages outlined in our tradition: May such unions, as Westminster stresses, serve the common good? Are they dim reflections of God’s covenant with humanity as the Old Testament suggests? Do they direct human persons to one another and to the ultimacy of God’s reign as the New Testament upholds? Do they, as Calvin urged, model restraint from sin and joy in companionship? Do they, however imperfectly, anticipate God’s communion with all creation in Christ as our liturgy celebrates?

Marriage, in the Reformed tradition, stresses covenant, God’s desire for communion with all persons, mutual restraint and joy, the response of God’s people, and the public good. Whenever we debate same-sex marriage, those themes, - not sex, procreation, and gender roles - demand our greatest attention" (Jensen, *Sexuality, the Bible and the Church*, Ted Smith, editor. p.62).

\*Affirmation of Faith (responsive) from *The Brief Statement of Faith* (PC(USA))

***In life and in death we belong to God.***

Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel, whom alone we worship and serve.

***We trust in God the Holy Spirit,***

Women: everywhere the giver and renewer of life.

Men: The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith,

Women: sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor,

***and binds us together with all believers in the one body of Christ, the Church.***

Men: The same Spirit who inspired the prophets and apostles rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture,

Women: engages us through the Word proclaimed,

Men: claims us in the waters of baptism,

Women: feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation,

***and calls women and men to all ministries of the church.***

In a broken and fearful world the Spirit gives us courage to pray without ceasing, to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior, to unmask idolatries in Church and culture,

***to hear the voices of peoples long silenced, and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.***

Women: In gratitude to God,

Men: empowered by the Spirit,

***we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks and to live holy and joyful lives,***

even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth, praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

***With believers in every time and place, we rejoice that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.***