



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Marriage in the Fellowship of the Faithful
(*Marriage*, pp. 37-43)

Suggested Articles:

📖 Water into Wine
(*Marriage*, pp. 48-52)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu

Christian Reflection

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Marriage in the Fellowship of the Faithful

Marriage is a calling to ministry for some Christians that is realized within and for the whole church. The love between husband and wife transcends the ideal of romantic love, for they share a friendship through which they develop the virtues they need to become Christ's faithful disciples and build up the church body.

Prayer

God of covenant, God of unfailing love, may we be committed to loving one another freely and completely. Unite us as individuals and couples into a new community, ready to be changed and to change the world through love. Amen.

Scripture Reading: John 2:1-11

Reflection

"Marriage is something which happens in and to the whole church," the contemporary Orthodox theologian Vigen Guroian writes, "for it is an institution with a purpose that transcends the personal goals or purposes of those who enter into it."

John Thompson helps us reclaim this richer sense of Christian marriage as more than the romantic choice of two individuals. He reminds us that Christian marriage is

▶ *a vocation from God.* Many couples get married today to overcome their loneliness and provide a supportive family. Some "churches merely echo this secular and pragmatic function of marriage with their extreme focus on family and family values," he admits. Yet, "the good news of the gospel is that in Christ strangers can become family." Marriage may even be a distraction from our discipleship (1 Corinthians 7:32-35).

"Scripture and the early church tradition proclaim that marriage is not necessary for a contented and complete Christian life." Thus, we should see marriage as a specific call to ministry for some, but not all members. A husband and wife are called to "a relation of mutual love and service to the other," in which "mutual forgiveness and patience are more important... than romantic love."

▶ *grounded in worship.* Baptism and communion are "the proper lenses" to help us see marriage. "Baptism lets us see that we are grounded in a community more determinative than marriage. The grace offered to us in our baptism allows us to see our spouses as family even before the marriage ceremony," Thompson writes. "In the celebration of communion we are reminded that our lives and our marriages are based on grace, that they are gifts." When observed through these two lenses, marriages are "great gifts from God that enrich and are enriched by the community of friendship in the Church."

Baptism, Communion, and marriage have long been related in church liturgy, especially in the feast of Epiphany (January 6). As Heidi Hornik explains in "Water into Wine," Michele Tosini's fresco, *Marriage of Cana*, is a remarkable example of integrating this liturgy with the biblical narrative.



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► *an abiding friendship*. Ideally, a husband and wife are drawn to love one another because they share a conception of the good as loving God and neighbor. This “enables couples to develop virtues, like forgiveness and patience, they need to be faithful disciples and build up the church body,” Thompson writes. “Marriages can build up the Church by being a grace-giving sign. By faithfully living out the vocation of marriage, husbands and wives bear witness to the reality and hope that we can share in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ.”

In this view of marriage, “husband and wife must acknowledge one another as friends, and their marriage must be lived out for the church body,” Thompson says. This will have many implications for premarital counseling (which “should be a continuation of proper catechization), the marriage ceremony (which “should never be divorced from the worship service”), and a congregation’s claim on a married couple (who should be willing “to commit their time and service to the church body”).

Study Questions

1. Do you agree that a Christian marriage can be a service of ministry to others and build up the body of Christ? Give examples from your experience.
2. If Christian marriage is a specific calling to ministry for some members, how should this influence premarital counseling, the marriage ceremony, and the married couple’s involvement in the congregation?
3. Discuss Thompson’s claim: “Scripture and the early church tradition proclaim that marriage is not necessary for a contented and complete Christian life.” Do you agree that many congregations are proclaiming a different message today?
4. In what sense can a Christian marriage be a “remarkable friendship?” How would you describe the relationship between friendship and romance in a Christian marriage?
5. How can the ordinances of baptism and Communion help us to understand the role of marriage in the Christian life?
6. According to Heidi Hornik, how is Christ’s miracle of turning water into wine, the topic of Michele Tosini’s *Wedding at Cana*, incorporated into the feast of the Epiphany? What does this suggest about the meaning of Christian marriage?

Departing Hymn: “O Father, All Creating” (verses 1 and 4)

O Father, all creating, whose wisdom, love, and power
first bound two lives together in Eden’s primal hour,
today to us your children your earliest gifts renew,
a home by you made happy, a love by you kept true.

Except you build it, Father, the house is built in vain;
except you, Savior, bless it, the joy will turn to pain;
but nothing breaks the union of hearts in you made one;
and love your Spirit hallows is endless love begun.

John Ellerton (1876), alt.

Suggested Tunes: WHITFIELD or NYLAND

Marriage in the Fellowship of the Faithful

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	1 Corinthians 7:32-35	John 2:1-11
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Discuss marriage as a specific calling	Discuss how marriage is shaped by worship
Questions 1, 2, and 4	Questions (selected)	Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions 4, 5 and 6
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To consider how marriage may be a specific call to ministry for some, but not all, Christians.
2. To explore what this distinctive view of marriage implies for premarital counseling, the marriage ceremony, and the Church's claim on the married couple.
3. To understand how Christ's miracle during the marriage at Cana has been incorporated into the Church's liturgy.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Marriage (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Oh Father, All Creating" locate one of the familiar tunes WHITFIELD or NYLAND in your church's hymnal or on the web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Comment

"Many Christians lack a clear sense of why they are married and raising families as church members," laments the contemporary Orthodox theologian Vigen Guroian. "Indeed, in so far as contemporary Christians even try to explain a social purpose for marriage they tend to do so primarily in sociological or secular political terms. They have lost sight of the significance of Christian marriage and family as a form of human community in service to the Church and the Kingdom of God" (*Incarnate Love: Essays in Orthodox Ethics*, quoted in *Marriage*, p. 66).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read John 2:1-11 from a modern translation.

Reflection

This study explores marriage within the context of Christian discipleship: Why do we get married? How is marriage an aspect of our Christian vocation? How are a husband and wife related to the gathering of the faithful, the Church?

You might extend this discussion to two sessions. In one, discuss how marriage is a specific calling to ministry for some, but not all, Christians, and explore the implications of this view for premarital counseling, the marriage ceremony, and a married couple's involvement in the congregation. In the other, explore how marriage is a friendship shaped by the Church's worship.

Study Questions

1. Some couples serve the church body in very practical ways as a team—"they work in the nursery, cook broccoli casseroles for church suppers, or sing in the choir," notes Thompson. They work together to build and repair church buildings, serve in foreign missions, or provide a loving home for foster children. They may plan how their families will serve God together as a team; several years ago some pastors even were encouraging couples to "take inventory" and write a "vision statement" for their families' discipleship.

Faithful couples also build up the church body in a more basic way. "By faithfully living out the vocation of marriage, husbands and wives bear witness to the reality and hope that we can share in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. Their steadfast union...shows us what is possible for human community here and now because we share new life in Christ."

2. Discuss Thompson's proposals and brainstorm other ideas. He says that *premarital counseling* "should be a continuation of proper catechization" as a couple worships with the congregation. Instead of announcing their engagement in a newspaper, a couple should "stand before the church body and seek its ordination of the marriage." The *marriage ceremony* might be integrated into a regular worship service. "Before their vows the couple could celebrate communion with the congregation. They would proclaim that the Church views marriage in a different way than secular culture by abstaining from the wasteful extravagance that accompanies most marriage ceremonies." Regarding a couple's *involvement in the congregation*, he says "marriage should not be granted to those who are unwilling to commit their time and service to the church body beyond merely attending weekly services."
3. "Jesus and Paul expressly relativize the priority of marriage within a Jewish culture that made marriage the norm," Thompson notes. He discusses at length Paul's advice in 1 Corinthians 7:32-35. "Though this new teaching on the superiority of singleness is not widespread or repetitious in the New Testament, it is univocal," he says. "Furthermore, early church tradition continues this emphasis." Thompson's examples from Methodius of Olympus (died ca. 311), Lactantius (4th Century), John Chrysostom (347-407), and Augustine (354-430) can be multiplied many times. Yet at the height of asceticism in late antiquity, Christians still valued marriage as a specific calling to ministry.

Encourage members to discuss the situation today. How do some congregations emphasize marriage and even suggest that it is essential to a complete Christian life?

4. In the ancient ideal of friendship, true friends are more than just pleasant and useful to each other; they share a conception of the good and encourage one another in virtue. "In Christian marriage, the common good of loving God and neighbor enables couples to develop virtues, like forgiveness and patience, they need to be faithful disciples and build up the church body," Thompson says. "Character...develops gradually through a process of discernment that requires talking and listening, understanding and sympathizing, leading and following. In a word, it requires that we exhibit some of the patience that God shows humanity by giving us time, hearing our prayers, enduring our sins." The Roman Catholic doctrine of a marriage as "church in miniature" captures this idea of "the friendship between spouses [as] appropriately distinctive...[yet] continuous with the friendship among all believers."

Most would agree that romantic love and friendship are compatible in marriage, and that each form of love can enrich the other. When friendship is built on a shared love for God and neighbor, the marriage can be (1) more "steadfast" and (2) "open to the wider friendship and support of members who seek one another's good through the church body."

5. The ordinances are communal and public actions that welcome us into the body of Christ. They make us brothers and sisters in Christ, and this becomes our fundamental identity. So, "within marriage or without, we are not alone. And if we do marry, our marriage is a relationship within a community of friends, and it enriches and is enriched by that community."
6. The feast of Epiphany marks several new beginnings and disclosures of God's grace; by the sixteenth century it included celebrations of the adoration of the Magi, the baptism of Christ, and the marriage at Cana. On Epiphany, the Church is married to Christ. A prayer response from the morning office ties these themes together: "Today the Church is joined to her celestial spouse, because in Jordan Christ doth wash her sins; the Magi hasten with gifts to the royal marriage feast, and the guests exult in the water turned to wine." Jesus' miracle of changing water into wine at Cana points toward the generous grace of Communion.

Marriage, which is a symbol of Christ's union with the Church, celebrates a new beginning in which God's grace is disclosed. It occurs in the context of baptism and Communion.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.