



Christian Reflection
A Series in Faith and Ethics

Christian Reflection
Center for Christian Ethics
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Study Guides for

Marriage

These guides integrate Bible study, prayer, and worship to help us articulate and live into a Christian view of marriage. Use them individually or in a series. You may reproduce them for personal or group use.

- Who Needs a Covenant?** 2
Our quest for true and unforced love, ironically, has led only to weaker marriages. A covenant takes faithless people and coerces them to keep faith. The problem is not that a binding marital covenant is a tyranny, but that nonbinding marital contracts undercut the very nature of marriage itself.
- For Better or For Worse** 4
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- What God Has Joined Together** 12
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Focus Articles:

- 📖 Who Needs a Covenant?
(*Marriage*, pp. 11-18)

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Who Needs a Covenant?

Our quest for true and unforced love, ironically, has led only to weaker marriages. A covenant takes faithless people and coerces them to keep faith. The problem is not that a binding marital covenant is a tyranny, but that nonbinding marital contracts undercut the very nature of marriage itself.

Prayer

God of unfailing love, teach us to be people of commitment and compassion, who give ourselves sacrificially to each other in covenant love. Show us that true freedom comes in giving ourselves and our power away. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Malachi 2:13-16

Reflection

"Covenants are God's way of organizing, sustaining, and reclaiming relationships established in creation but damaged by sin," notes David Gushee. God initiates them to restore community with and among faithless people by spelling out responsibilities for all parties, eliciting binding promises from them, and marking their commitments with a sign or symbolic action. "But are covenants really necessary?" we may ask, "Can't we all just love one another?" Well, that's the rub, isn't it? Our love for one another and God comes and goes, our feelings change, but thankfully a covenant binds us together anyway – because we need the relationship. Covenants do not replace love, but they allow it to grow and flourish. "For the sake of our love," as Margaret Farley says, "we almost always commit ourselves to certain frameworks for living out our love. The frameworks, then, take their whole meaning...from the love they are meant to serve."

A few biblical passages, like Malachi 2:13-16, apply the concept of covenant directly to human marriage. We have been created by God with needs for "companionship, sex, shared labor, and family partnership," says Gushee, but given our propensity for sin, we are unlikely to form the stable relationships that can satisfy these needs unless we are bound to one another by lasting promises. The marriage covenant provides the structure that can bind a husband and wife together, in spite of their changing whims and desires, for their common good.

Gushee explores seven ways that the marriage relationship is like other covenant bonds in Scripture:

- ▶ *Marriage is a freely entered agreement between two people.* Unlike most marriages today, a marriage in biblical times was an agreement between families and was not initiated just by the individuals. Nevertheless, "at its heart marriage is an agreement between two people to join their lives together."
- ▶ *Marriage publicly ratifies a relationship between a man and a woman.* It does not establish the relationship, but makes it subject "to objective standards and social responsibilities."
- ▶ *Marriage spells out the mutual responsibilities and moral commitments in this new form of community.* In marriage God intends for us to seek the goals of "companionship, sexual expression, procreation,



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and family partnership. The central rules embedded in marriage's sacred promises are sexual exclusivity and permanence." Marriages prosper through "mutual commitment reaffirmed by faithful conduct over time."

- ▶ *Marriage is sealed by oath-signs that publicly symbolize and "perform" the solemn commitments being made.* "The exchanged vows and rings, the promises publicly made, and consummation through sexual intercourse remain the central acts that bring the marital relationship into existence."
- ▶ *Marriage is a lifetime commitment, which can only be broken on biblical grounds for divorce and remarriage.*[†]
- ▶ *God is the witness and guarantor of the marriage promises.* This is true, Gushee says, even when a couple does not explicitly embrace God's role. "God is...the One who empowers any couple that manages to keep those vows for a lifetime."
- ▶ *There are dire consequences for breaking the marriage covenant's terms and great rewards for keeping them.* "The blessings and curses of marital success and failure are visible all around us," writes Gushee. "They are built into marriage and do not require an intervening act of divine judgment."

To enter a binding covenant with one's spouse may seem unattractive today, for it is "terribly unromantic about marital love" and reminds us that we are "faithless sinners," Gushee admits. "Yet covenant is not all vinegar and sandpaper.... If I am involved in a trustworthy covenantal marital bond with another, I can relax enough to both give and receive love. I can try and fail and try again to develop communication and sexual skills. Our mutual confidence in the permanence and exclusivity of our bond allows us to give ourselves away, and only as we give ourselves away can we maximize our progress toward human intimacy as God intended it."

Study Questions

1. God's covenant with Noah (Genesis 9:1-11) is the first one in Scripture. How does it illustrate the basic elements of the biblical concept of covenant?
2. What are the important differences, according to Gushee, between a contract and a covenant? Why does marriage need a covenantal structure?
3. Of the seven aspects of the marriage covenant presented by Gushee, which aspect(s) might seem especially onerous to people in our culture? Why?
4. What is the value of a marriage covenant? How does each of the seven aspects help achieve or protect that value?
5. While David Gushee sees the covenantal structure of marriage as God's response to human faithlessness, from another perspective Terry York interprets it as a completion of God's creative activity. How does he express this theme in his new hymn, "Two Are Called to Live as One"?

Departing Hymn: "Two Are Called to Live As One"

[†] For David Instone-Brewer's interpretation of the biblical grounds for divorce and remarriage, please see the companion article and study guide, "What God Has Joined Together."



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Focus Article:

📖 For Better or For Worse
(*Marriage*, pp. 29-36)

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For Better or For Worse

As Hyung Goo Kim and Margaret Kim Peterson were dating and falling in love, he revealed that he had been diagnosed as HIV-positive five years earlier. Yet they married. What did they discover together about Christian marriage and suffering?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a,13

Responsive Reading

Love is hope that promises new tomorrows and heals
yesterday's wounds,
compassion that dispels fear and nurtures the soul,
commitment that stands the test of time and overcomes
mistrust and neglect,
two souls breathing independent breaths in unison.
True love draws us to God
and to one another in covenant for all time.

Reflection

"I could not possibly have been more shocked and dismayed when Hyung Goo told me of his diagnosis," Margaret Kim Peterson recalls. "When I did eventually decide to marry Hyung Goo, I did so in large part because I had come to the conclusion that his HIV infection was not the most important thing about him.... [Our] minds were concentrated wonderfully, from the beginning of our marriage to the end of it. We were always waiting for the end to come, as indeed it did, and the anticipation of that end intensified every aspect of our life together: the happiness we found in and with each other, the intimate bond we forged as we moved deeper into marriage and into illness, the grief we felt over all our experienced and anticipated losses."

Though Peterson is reluctant to offer their brief marriage as a model for everyone, she believes "Hyung Goo and I were, by virtue of our circumstances, in a particularly good position to notice that...Christian marriage is not the same as the modern American fantasy of romance." She explores five differences:

- ▶ *Perfect partner vs. fellow pilgrim.* If we pick the perfect partner, marriage will be smooth sailing—that's a romantic fantasy. It matters whom we marry, but "the big falsehood is that the rest of the story will take care of itself," Peterson says. For the marriage "journey through uncharted territory," you need "a partner whom you can rely upon as a fellow pilgrim, someone whom you would trust with your very life...."
- ▶ *Fall in love vs. discern whom one can love.* Those "ineffable palpitations" of romantic love are wonderful to experience, but they are not enough to get marriage partners through the difficult times they must face. "It is far more important that you choose someone—and that you be someone—whose character is fertile ground for love, [mutual trust, and respect,] than that you be 'in love' with the person you marry before you marry him or her."
- ▶ *Self-reliance vs. leaning on a community.* In our mobile society, many of us depend on a spouse to provide continuity and companionship no matter where we move. But it is unreasonable to



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depend only on our marriages to provide the true community that we need.

- ▶ *Grand plans and gestures vs. small blessings and challenges.* Romance overvalues the dramatic proposal, dream honeymoon, and white-picket-fence aspirations. But strong marriage bonds grow from little things—sharing everyday blessings and overcoming small challenges. “We are always looking over one another’s shoulders at whatever it is we want and haven’t got yet, rather than... putting down roots ever more deeply into the soil of a truly common life.”
- ▶ *Living happily ever after vs. cherishing the moment.* Romance longs for “a curiously timeless, bloodless, future-without-end,” but does not treasure the moments we are given. As Christians we can see marriage as “an opportunity to look death in the eye and choose to love anyway, because that is what God in Christ has already done on our behalf.”

“Hyung Goo and I...couldn’t expect to live ‘happily ever after,’” Peterson writes. “What we could do was...be husband and wife together, accompanying one another on the Christian pilgrimage, depending together on God, on one another, on the many people who cared for us and cared about us.... It was profoundly healing and transformative and, yes, joyful.”

Study Questions

1. How do many Christians today, young and old, embrace the “American marriage fantasy”?
2. What made the Kims’ marriage so valuable?
3. Select one contrast between Christian marriage and the American fantasy of romance. How is your congregation helping its members to understand the difference?
4. How would you counsel a son, daughter, or friend whose fiancé has a chronic and debilitating disease?

Departing Hymn: “Oh Love That Will Not Let Me Go” (verses 1-3)

O Love that will not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee;
I give thee back the life I owe,
that in thine ocean depths its flow
may richer, fuller be.

O light that follows all my way,
I yield my flickering torch to thee;
my heart restores its borrowed ray,
that in thy sunshine’s blaze its day
may brighter, fairer be.

O Joy that seekest me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to thee;
I trace the rainbow through the rain,
and feel the promise is not vain,
that morn shall tearless be.

George Matheson (1882)

Tune: ST. MARGARET (Peace)



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Focus Article:

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

Suggested Articles:

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

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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



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Focus Article:

📖 Christian Marriage and Public Policy
(*Marriage*, pp. 19-28)

Suggested Article:

📖 The Promise of Marriage
(*Marriage*, pp. 46-47)

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Christian Marriage and Public Policy

The language of confessional faith often is ignored or misunderstood in the public square. So, how should Christians contribute to debates about the likely future of marriage, society's responsibilities for marriage, and the nagging question of who should or should not be permitted to marry?

Prayer

God of covenant, God of unfailing love, your love is hard, yet full of grace and mercy. Draw us to love and serve you, and, through your power, love and serve humanity. May we live in a way that draws all people to your Kingdom. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Hebrews 13:1-6

Reflection

"What truth does Christianity possess about public policy on marriage in a democratic and pluralistic society?" Don Browning asks, rather than "What should Christians believe within the confessing church?" He divides the topic this way because he thinks we should speak a different language in public debates than we use in church. Browning urges us to use a "twofold language" – a philosophical language enriched with scriptural narratives and metaphors – in the public square. "It should be both a language of faith and a philosophical language that contains naturalistic, contextual, and justice-oriented arguments."

Christians can make a significant contribution by critiquing the current trend toward separating "sex from marriage, marriage from childbirth, parenting from marriage, child rearing from marriage, and the workplace from family life," he writes. "Some of these separations we value, but others we rightly are beginning to question." This trend results from "modernization" – the idea that we no longer reason together about our common good, but only about the technical means for achieving individuals' short-term wants and needs. By contrast, the classic Christian texts on marriage over the centuries valued the common good and integrated "sexual desire, love, the birth of children, the raising of children, and the mutual assistance and enrichment of economic life into an integrated and mutually reinforcing whole known as the institution of marriage."

Browning illustrates with the twofold approach of Thomas Aquinas (1225/7-1274), "one of the chief synthesizers of Christian theology, Greek philosophy, and Roman law on marriage."

- ▶ *Following the guidance of Scripture*, Aquinas says that marriage is an institution created by God (see Matthew 29:4, quoting Genesis 1:27; compare Genesis 2:18, 21).
- ▶ *With scientific and philosophical arguments*, he shows that marriage and family serve the common good. A man joins the mother-infant family for four natural reasons: (1) the mother seeks his help to raise the infant, since the baby is dependent for so long; (2) a man wants to provide for his own offspring; (3) a man desires the continued assistance and affection of the infant's



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mother; and (4) a man seeks sexual intimacy with the mother. On the second point, which evolutionary psychologists today call “kin altruism,” Aquinas says, “in common with other animals and with plants, [men] have a natural desire to leave behind them an image of themselves.”

“Aquinas integrated these naturalistic insights about the motivational foundations of parenthood into his wider theological theories of marital fidelity, love, permanence, and mutual assistance,” Browning notes. “He was fully aware that humans have conflicting natural tendencies with no single fixed aim. But when human sexuality is guided by the needs of child rearing, then the inclinations toward kin altruism, reinforced by culture and religion, can and should have a commanding role in ordering our unstable natural tendencies.”

Study Questions

1. How is “market-style modernization” shaping the way many people think about marriage in our culture? Why should Christians resist this trend?
2. Explain what Browning means by using a “double language” in public debates about marriage. Why does he think Christians should use a double language, rather than confessional language, in the public square? Do you agree?
3. What do Aquinas and other theologians mean by “natural law”? What guidance does it give with regard to marriage?
4. “Many political and religious leaders are now saying that marriage should be delegalized, that it should not be a matter of state regulation,” Browning notes. “They argue that marriage should be a matter of personal choice and perhaps religious blessing but not legal accountability and enforcement.” Do you agree that marriage should not be a matter of law and public policy?
5. How does Jan van Eyck’s *The Arnolfini Wedding* depict marriage as both a legal agreement and a spiritual covenant?

Departing Hymn: “O Love Divine and Golden”

O Love divine and golden, mysterious depth and height,
to you the world beholden, looks up for life and light.

O Love divine and gentle, the blesser and the blest,
beneath your care parental the world lies down in rest.

O Love divine and tender, that through our homes can move,
veiled in the softened splendor O holy household love
A throne without your blessing were labor without rest,
yet cottages possessing your blessedness are blest.

God bless these hands united; God bless these hearts made one!
Unsevered and unblighted may they through life go on,
here in earth’s home preparing for the bright home above,
and there forever sharing its joy where “God is Love.”

John S. B. Monsell (1857), alt.

Suggested Tunes: AURELIA or ST. THEODULPH



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Focus Article:

📖 The Changing Shape of Family
(*Marriage*, pp. 62-65)

Suggested Article:

📖 I Know Who She Is
(*Marriage*, pp. 68-72)

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The Changing Shape of Family

Sometimes families are hurtful, dysfunctional, unhealthy systems. But “family” does not have to be an outdated or negative word. While many of us struggle with our families of origin, inclusion into the family of God brings freedom, healing, and redemption.

Prayer

God of covenant, God of unfailing love, enable us to trust others and make us trustworthy. Empower us to create families that model your love in this world. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Matthew 12:46-50

Reflection

When Jesus surveyed the many disciples seated around him and declared, “Here are my mother and my brothers!” it was not a dig at Mary and his brothers who were waiting outside. He was affirming his close relationship with his followers (Matthew 12:49; Mark 3:34; Luke 8:21). The good news is that when we do God’s will today, we too are members of the family of Jesus.

“Jesus models for us what it means to ‘do the will of the Father’” in human relationships, Bo Prosser writes. And in the Sermon on the Mount “Jesus tells how to be family”:

- ▶ *Smile at unfair demands.* Going far beyond the law’s limit on retaliation (taking “an eye for an eye,” as in Leviticus 24:19-20), Jesus tells us to “turn the other cheek,” “give our cloak also,” and “go the extra mile” (Matthew 5:38-42). When “we are hurt by unkind comments, insults, and emotional jabs...Jesus tells us that ‘doing the will of the Father’ means to relate redemptively to persons who make unfair demands on us,” notes Prosser. Sometimes, not insisting on what we are owed “allows us to be family with one another.”
- ▶ *Spend time together.* Jesus does not dismiss prayer and fasting and almsgiving, but he does tell us how to perform these tasks humbly and sincerely (Matthew 6:1-18). “Families must find time to share ministry and to worship together,” suggests Prosser. “In previous days we were given the myth of ‘quality’ time: just spend five minutes a day with each family member. This allowed us to rationalize our time spent away from family. The call to be family is the call to be intentional about sharing the love of Jesus with one another and the world.”
- ▶ *Serve one another in God’s love.* In case we missed Jesus’ first point about nonretaliation, in the next verse he extends the love commandment (Leviticus 19:18) to include everyone: “Love [even] your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:44-45a). “God’s love does not discriminate; neither should our own! We are called to be gracious to those who are not in our group, to those whom we do not know very well and may not like very well. Jesus has always been in the business of tearing down walls not building them,” writes Prosser. “What a difference we could make in the world if we did the will of the Father, if we were family!”



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- ▶ *Seek perfection.* “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). “God knows that we will never attain perfection,” Prosser admits, “but we are still to desire it. Too many of us are driven by wanting more stuff! Too many of us are driven by hoping that our next acquisition will be the one to fulfill us. Jesus calls us to be perfect, completed – to be completed in God’s love, not our love of stuff.”

Ginny Bridges Ireland echoes the last point in “I Know Who She Is” when she describes a loving marriage as “knowing and being known by God and reflected in knowing and being known by one another.” Marriage comes undone, she says, when like Adam and Eve we seek “a kind of knowledge and control wrapped in self-interest,” where “we crave a world created in our own images for our purposes.... We assume something better must exist just beyond our grasp in the next juicy apple.” Though no marriage is perfect, Ireland reminds us that we were created to enjoy a knowing intimacy, “graced with love and acceptance, that encourages the other person toward wholeness.”

Study Questions

1. How do family members put unfair demands on one another? Why are we more unfair in our expectations of spouses and other family members than of strangers?
2. What pressures and demands prevent families from spending time together today?
3. Bo Prosser suggests that in our culture families seek their fulfillment in stuff, not in love. Do you agree?
4. From Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, Prosser draws four instructions for how to be family: “Smile at unfair demands,” “Spend time together,” “Serve one another in God’s love,” and “Seek perfection.” How does each instruction help us to be family to one another? Would it be spiritually dangerous to follow one of these instructions without the others?
5. “Intimate marital knowledge sometimes backfires.... Betrayal, hurt, and manipulation for selfish ends can displace love’s comforting trust,” Ginny Bridges Ireland writes. Then “the power of intimate knowledge combined with strength and equality can be misused and abused.” Discuss her view.
6. How has your congregation become “family” to members who are separated from their parents, siblings, spouses, or children – by betrayal and distrust, physical distance, or illness and death?

Departing Hymn: “My Light and My Salvation” (verses 3 and 2)

Hear now my voice and answer; be merciful I pray.
Your face, Lord, I seek daily; do not turn me away.
For you have been my helper; do not reject me, God.
Though family may forsake me, I know that you will not.
One thing I ask and seek, Lord: to dwell with you always,
to gaze upon your beauty and seek you all my days.
For in the day of trouble, you’ll hide me, keep me safe.
My head will be exalted; I’ll sing and shout your praise.

Susan H. Peterson (2000)

Tune: AURELIA



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Focus Article:

📖 What God Has Joined Together
(*Marriage*, pp. 73-81)

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What God Has Joined Together

Thanks to recent research in ancient Judaism, we have a better understanding of the Pharisees' question of Jesus, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?" (Matthew 19:3). Furthermore, we find Jesus and Paul were in perfect agreement on the grounds of divorce and the possibility of remarriage.

Prayer

Scripture Readings: Matthew 19:3-12 and 1 Corinthians 7:7-16

Reflection

"Jewish rabbis at the time of Jesus were debating a new and very popular form of divorce called the 'Any Cause' divorce," writes David Instone-Brewer. This new no-fault form of divorce was an innovation by Hillelite Pharisees who read the basis for divorce in Deuteronomy 24:1 – "a cause of indecency" (or, "something objectionable," NRSV) – as two grounds for divorce: *indecency* (i.e., adultery) and *any cause*. The Shammaite Pharisees, on the other hand, read this as a single phrase that meant "nothing except adultery." Asked if he agrees with the Hillelite 'Any Cause' view, Jesus responds with the Shammaite slogan.

Jesus and Paul, when interpreted in the context of this debate, can be seen to agree about divorce and remarriage:

- ▶ *Jesus' teachings on divorce.* Not only does Jesus reject no-fault divorce, he departs from common Jewish opinion by objecting to polygamy, denying that divorce is necessary after adultery, saying procreation is not an obligation, and encouraging spouses to forgive and not divorce when marriage vows are broken (Matthew 19:4-12). Jesus does not mention neglect as a ground for divorce. However, since he disagrees with other common views, "his silence on divorce for neglect is deafening," says Instone-Brewer, and he concludes that Jesus agreed with the universal view among rabbis that Exodus 21:10-11 permits divorce for neglect.
- ▶ *Paul's views on divorce.* Paul seems to permit divorce for neglect (1 Corinthians 7:3-5 and 32-34 echo Exodus 21:7-11). This explains why believers who are abandoned (which would be a form of neglect) may regard themselves as divorced (7:15), yet believers should not abandon their spouses (7:11). "Paul and Jesus were against no-fault divorce – i.e., divorce without proper biblical grounds."
- ▶ *Reconciling Jesus and Paul's views on remarriage.* At first glance, Jesus seems to view remarriage as adultery, but Paul, in agreement with Old Testament and Roman laws, allows remarriage. Instone-Brewer reviews this in light of the Any Cause debate. Jesus' claim "that remarriage was adultery was presumably also a reply to [the Pharisees'] question. He was stating, in effect, that anyone with an Any Cause divorce was still married, so if they remarried they were committing adultery." Since Any Cause divorce was so common, "when Jesus criticized those who had remarried after divorce, he implicated virtually all remarried Jews. Therefore, when Luke and Matthew wanted to abbreviate Jesus' teaching into a couple of sentences, they were able to



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

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present the conclusion that ‘any man who remarries commits adultery’ and, because most divorced people remarry, ‘he causes his wife to commit adultery’ (Matthew 5:32; Luke 16:18). Jesus was not saying remarriage per se was adulterous, but that remarriage after an invalid divorce (such as an Any Cause divorce) was adulterous, because the person was still married.”

Study Questions

1. Discuss Instone-Brewer’s summary of Jesus’ teaching: “When Jesus spoke about ‘those whom God has joined,’ he used the imperative to order them ‘do not separate,’ or possibly ‘you should not separate,’ but it is impossible to translate this imperative as ‘you cannot separate.’”
2. How did the rabbis use Exodus 21:10-11 to define “neglect”? How should this biblical basis for divorce be applied today?
3. Do you agree with Instone-Brewer’s view that “In the modern world where believers can also be unresponsive to the demands of church discipline, Paul presumably would extend this provision [of not requiring a believer to return to his or her spouse] to all victims of divorce against their will”?
4. How might your congregation answer Richard Hays’ call “to provide deep and satisfying *koinōnia* and friendships to those divorced persons who choose not to remarry in order to devote their lives to the service of God outside the married state.... In other words, within the church we need to shatter the power of the myth that only married people are normal and that only marriage offers the conditions necessary for human fulfillment” (quoted, *Marriage*, p. 67)?
5. Should remarriage be discouraged or prohibited for a Christian for any reason today?

Departing Hymn: “Lead Us, Heavenly Father”

Lead us, heavenly Father, lead us
o’er the world’s tempestuous sea;
guard us, guide us, keep us, feed us,
for we have no help but thee;
yet possessing every blessing
if our God our Father be.

Savior, breathe forgiveness o’er us;
all our weakness you do know;
you did tread this earth before us,
you did feel its keenest woe;
lone and dreary, faint and weary,
through the desert you did go.

Spirit of our God, descending,
fill our hearts with heavenly joy,
love with every passion blending,
pleasure that can never cloy[†];
thus provided, pardoned, guided,
nothing can our peace destroy.

James Edmeston (1821), alt.

Suggested Tunes: MANNHEIM or LAUDA ANIMA

[†] Cloy = be too filling or sweet.

Appendix: Optional Lesson Plans for Teachers

For each study guide we offer two or three optional lesson plans followed by detailed suggestions on using the material in the study guide:

- ▶ An *abridged lesson plan* outlines a lesson suitable for a beginning Bible study class or a brief group session.
- ▶ A *standard lesson plan* outlines a more thorough study.
- ▶ For some guides a *dual session lesson plan* divides the study guide material so that the group can explore the topic in two meetings.

Each lesson plan is for a 30- to 45-minute meeting, with about one-third of the time being set aside for worship.

Who Needs a Covenant?

Lesson Plans

| <i>Abridged Plan</i> | <i>Standard Plan</i> |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Prayer | Prayer |
| Scripture Reading | Scripture Reading |
| Reflection (skim all) | Reflection (all sections) |
| Questions 2, 3, and 4 | Questions (selected) |
| Departing Hymn | Departing Hymn |

Teaching Goals

1. To understand the biblical concept of covenant as God's response to human faithlessness.
2. To appreciate the value of the covenantal structure of marriage.
3. To discuss possible sources of resistance in our culture to the marriage covenant.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 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 before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

"A lifelong fire in Robertson McQuilkin's bones blazed into reality as he was inaugurated as president of Columbia Bible College, now Columbia International University. Before long he led the school to become one of the greatest missionary training schools in America. But Alzheimer's disease spun its wicked web, snatching the personality and vibrancy of his wife's mind and body. McQuilkin submitted his resignation in order to care for her. His friends strongly objected and implored him to reconsider his decision to take on the unseemly daily tasks required to care for her. Yet his decision remained firm. In a last ditch effort, Tony Campolo brazenly pleaded with him saying, 'You are reneging on a promise to God!' McQuilkin replied, 'There's a promise that is higher [than the one to lead the school]. And that's the promise I made when I married, the promise to be there for her in sickness and in health.' 'She doesn't even know who you are!' Campolo protested. 'But I know who she is,' he countered, tenderly" (Ginny Bridges Ireland tells this story in *Marriage*, p. 68). How can our marriage promises become more than purely voluntary contracts? What transforms them into lifetime commitments?

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 Malachi 2:13-16 from a modern translation.

Reflection

The biblical concept of covenant can illuminate the nature of marriage, David Gushee suggests. He reminds us that marriage, like other human relationships that depend on faithfulness and are all too easily damaged by sin, requires the protection of a covenantal structure (rather than a nonbinding contract or agreement).

Gushee distinguishes between two dimensions of marriage: (1) its purpose, which is to satisfy the "[creation-based] needs of human beings for companionship, sex, and love," and (2) its covenantal structure that enables fickle and faithless human beings to achieve the creational purpose in marriage. In other words, the covenant is not the goal or point of marriage, but is a structure we must embrace if we are to accomplish the goal of marriage. Thus, "there can be no successful marriage that is not both creation-fulfilling and covenantal."

Since only a few biblical passages, like Malachi 2:13-16, apply the covenant concept to marriage, Gushee draws comparisons between marriage and other explicit covenants in Scripture.

Study Questions

1. Gushee identifies eight key elements in biblical covenants. (1) Someone, usually the stronger party, initiates the covenant. (2) It establishes or restores community between the parties. (3) It lists the mutual responsibilities of all the parties, including the goals of their relationship and the rules that apply to them. (4) It involves freely given promises and (5) it is marked publicly by signs or symbolic actions. (6) It is binding on all parties. (7) God witnesses and guarantees the covenant. (8) God promises blessings to those who keep the covenant and enforces penalties on those who break it.
2. Gushee highlights three differences. “[1] While contracts emphasize the precise obligations each party is taking on, covenants place more focus on the relationships that are being established or ratified. Contracts specify an exchange of money or services and terminate when the transaction is complete, while covenants establish a relationship that transcends any particular exchange of goods. [2] Contracts always contain “escape” clauses to enable people to back away from what they judge to have been unwise commitments or failed agreements, while covenants promise open-ended and permanent fidelity to the promises being undertaken and the relationship being established. [3] Finally, contracts are purely and simply human transactions, while covenants invoke the presence of God as guarantor and trustee—even when the covenant is undertaken at the human-to-human level.”
3. To the extent that we are radical individualists, where all of our important relationships are entered freely and may be dissolved when any party wants to leave, the last three aspects will seem onerous. To the extent we are relativists, who believe that we create our own values and rules, the second and third aspects will seem onerous. To the extent that we think our relationships are nobody else’s business, the aspect of public “oath-signs” will seem unnecessary and God’s involvement (the sixth aspect) will seem intrusive.
4. A marital covenant protects us from our own faithlessness. “It takes faithless people and coerces them to keep faith,” Gushee says. This moral coercion is a good thing when it keeps partners together despite their ordinary frustrations and boredom and changing whims. Put another way, a covenant provides a “safe context for the pursuit of the creational needs that are met in marriage.... If I am involved in a trustworthy covenantal marital bond with another, I can relax enough to both give and receive love. I can try and fail and try again to develop communication and sexual skills. Our mutual confidence in the permanence and exclusivity of our bond allows us to give ourselves away, and only as we give ourselves away can we maximize our progress toward human intimacy as God intended it.”
Encourage members to discuss how each aspect of the marriage covenant helps us to keep faith with our spouses.
5. In the first two verses, York suggests that God calls the husband and wife into a covenant relationship that is more than their own desires and wishes, but is a third reality. Through their marriage, which is characterized by an allusion to the Adam and Eve creation story, God continues to accomplish his creative purposes of “weaving lives, and love, and will.” The final verse calls on the marriage partners to “covenant with spouse and God”; in this way, they will “embrace, rehearse, and prove God’s plan.” Are York and Gushee’s views incompatible, or are they two perspectives on the same reality? Gushee says that God uses covenantal structures only after sin has distorted the creation. York stresses that the marriage covenant allows us to cooperate with God to pursue God’s good purposes in creation.

Departing Hymn

“Two Are Called to Live As One” is on pp. 53-55 of *Marriage*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

For Better or For Worse

Lesson Plans

| <i>Abridged Plan</i> | <i>Standard Plan</i> |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Prayer | Prayer |
| Scripture Reading | Scripture Reading |
| Responsive Reading | Responsive Reading |
| Reflection (skim all) | Reflection (all sections) |
| Questions 1 and 2 | Questions (selected) |
| Departing Hymn | Departing Hymn |

Teaching Goals

1. To contrast the contemporary American fantasy of romance to Christian marriage.
2. To consider how many Christians today embrace the American fantasy of romance.
3. To explore how congregations can encourage and support married couples that endure suffering and hard disappointments.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 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 before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Oh Love That Will Not Let Me Go” locate the tune ST. MARGARET (Peace) in your church’s hymnal or on the web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Story

When Margaret Kim Peterson was dating and falling in love with Hyung Goo Kim, he revealed that he had been diagnosed as HIV-positive five years earlier. “Because of the highly stigmatized nature of Hyung Goo’s health condition,” she writes, “I didn’t disclose it to everyone I knew, but from those I did tell, the response was swift and unanimous: end the relationship, and end it now. Some of the responses were kind and some were not so kind, but the substance of them was the same: sensible Christian people do not even think of marrying people who have serious things wrong with them.

“A particularly harsh reaction came from a male friend who, when I told him of Hyung Goo’s HIV status, responded with the story of his own first marriage. His wife had developed chronic kidney failure, a burden with which my friend found it impossible to live, so he divorced her. ‘If I had known that this would happen, I would never have married her, and I will not stand by and watch you throw your life away on this man,’ he said to me, heatedly. Even at the time, this seemed a tad self-justifying, but it was still profoundly upsetting. It was also illuminating. This wasn’t just about AIDS; this was about tragedy. It was about death and hardship and loss and the supposed responsibility of sensible people to steer as clear of all of them as possible” (*Marriage*, p. 30).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by praying that members will grow in love that draws them closer to one another and to God.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a, 13 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

Theologian Margaret Kim Peterson and Hyung Goo Kim dated, fell in love, and chose to marry despite Hyung Goo's having tested positive with the HIV virus five years earlier. Peterson tells the story of their remarkably intentional marriage focused on the goals of companionship and emotional intimacy in *Sing Me to Heaven: The Story of a Marriage* (Brazos Press, 2003).

Drawing upon her personal experience, Peterson keenly observes five differences between Christian marriage and the contemporary American ideal of romance. Her insights can benefit not only men and women who are contemplating marriage, but also married couples that encounter suffering and hard disappointments later in their relationships.

Study Questions

1. Peterson says that the fantasy “is held by at least ninety percent of the scores of young people who enroll in the senior-level college course in Christian Marriage that I teach. And those young people have often been encouraged in this fantasy by their elders, who are eager to portray marriage as a means by which Christian people gain access to the good things of life – sex, children, emotional intimacy, adult status – and who are very reluctant therefore to consider whether marriage might occasionally or routinely have a dark side as well as a sunny side.” She notes that Christians “patronize online dating services that promise bliss, pure bliss, if only we will follow their advice about finding romance with the perfect partner.... We sanctify our unions in weddings that are designed to be showcases for all the perfection money can buy, we read marriage-enhancement books written by people who claim never to have had a problem that couldn't be solved in ten minutes or less, and when we meet people whose problems are too serious to conceal – illness, bankruptcy, or (gasp!) divorce – we hold our metaphorical skirts aside and murmur, ‘Boy, am I glad it's not me.’”
2. “There was a kind of innocence to those years, an innocence that came with the singleness of purpose that our life embodied. Our marriage was about seeing each other through to the end, period,” Peterson says. “Hadn't our marriage been the very apotheosis of intimacy and self-giving? ... We were concerned for one another to the near-total exclusion of anything else.” Despite the hardships that they faced, they could “face life's limitations and gifts together, for as many days as we were given. We could be husband and wife together, accompanying one another on the Christian pilgrimage, depending together on God, on one another, on the many people who cared for us and cared about us.... It was profoundly healing and transformative and, yes, joyful.”
3. Invite members to form small groups to brainstorm a few of the contrasts. The culture entices us to embrace the fantasy of romance; thus, congregations must not only delineate the features of Christian marriage, but also show their value in a winsome way. How can each contrast be shown in discipleship groups (marital counseling, retreats, movie discussions, or weekly support groups), sharing of stories (interviews, stories, or testimonies about marriages in the congregation), regular worship (sermons, songs, and prayers of support and encouragement), and special services (weddings, funerals, and themed worship events)? Do young people, couples, and single adults reflect together about Christian marriage?
4. We want our children and friends to have good lives. If they marry, we hope marriage will bring them joy and strengthen their relationship with God. Should we encourage them to marry a fiancé with a chronic disease? No single advice fits every situation. Yet, Peterson shows that such a marriage can be fulfilling and lead to spiritual growth. She and Hyung Goo Kim discovered there is more “to the Christian moral life than the effort to protect and insulate oneself from difficulty and sorrow, or from the difficulties and sorrows of others.”

How might the specific circumstances influence our advice? What would we want to know about the resources, maturity, and Christian discipleship of our child or friend, and of his or her fiancé? What should we ask about our own resources and relationships?

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.

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.

Christian Marriage and Public Policy

Lesson Plans

| <i>Abridged Plan</i> | <i>Standard Plan</i> |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Prayer | Prayer |
| Scripture Reading | Scripture Reading |
| Reflection (skim all) | Reflection (all sections) |
| Questions 1, 2, and 3 | Questions (selected) |
| Departing Hymn | Departing Hymn |

Teaching Goals

1. To consider how Christians should enter public debates about the institution of marriage.
2. To review how Christian theologians like Thomas Aquinas employed a “double language” of Scripture and natural law to talk about marriage.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 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 “O Love Divine and Golden” locate the tunes AURELIA or ST. THEODULPH in your church’s hymnal or on the web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Comment

“The death of unconstrained patriarchy, the end of the status of wives and children as chattel, and the prohibition of child labor hardly signal that family life in the twenty-first-century America is now morally safe,” Sondra Wheeler writes. “American culture offers a full range of corruptions, shaped by its distinctive features of consumer capitalism and technological self-confidence. Marriage is now explicitly a life-style choice, and economic strategy, and courtship is more and more overtly conducted in a marketplace complete with advertising, both veiled and direct” (quoted in *Marriage*, p. 56).

How should Christians respond to the “deinstitutionalization” of marriage in our culture? Don Browning urges us to use a “double language,” rather than a strictly confessional or theological language, in public debates. Does this approach amount to “selling out” to the culture’s view to marriage, or is it a way of joining the wider discussion in a responsible way?

Prayer

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

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Hebrews 13:1-6 from a modern translation.

Reflection

For Christians, marriage has two dimensions: within the body of Christ marriage is a calling to ministry for some (but not all) members; in society it is a matter of law and public policy. In a companion study, “Marriage in the Fellowship of the Faithful,” we explored the first dimension. In this study we explore how we should enter public debates about marriage policy. On this important and disputed issue, Christians have taken (at least) four approaches:

1. *Marriage should be delegalized.* Rather than being a state-defined relationship that is subject to legal accountability and enforcement, marriage may be defined by various religious communities and receive their blessing.

2. *Marriage should be a matter of law and public policy.* Christians should discuss marriage with
 - a. the same rich language of Scripture and theology that we would use in church.
 - b. only the languages of psychology, sociology, medicine, or other “secular” disciplines.
 - c. a “double language” layered with both scriptural and natural reasons.

Don Browning recommends the final approach, which is the tradition of Christian natural law.

Study Questions

1. “Modernization” refers a focus on technical, how-to problems and a neglect of ultimate purposes. “In the United States, this takes the form of our no longer reasoning together about the common good, but merely expecting the marketplace to satisfy short-term individual wants and needs,” Browning says. “The spread of technical rationality energizes a host of separations in the marital field—sex from marriage, marriage from childbirth, parenting from marriage, child rearing from marriage, and the workplace from family life. Some of these separations we value, but others we rightly are beginning to question.”
He urges us to resist this general trend, since Scripture and the common good (the shared reasons why we value and socially support marriage at all) point to the value of “the marital integration of sexual desire, affection, childbirth, child rearing, and mutual assistance.”
2. “Double language” refers to philosophical/scientific terms and reasons “qualified and enriched by narratives and metaphors” from Scripture. The advantage of using it in public debate is that our arguments may be understood by and appeal to non-Christians. This Christian “natural law” approach is one of four options outlined above. “Discovering and using this double language challenges those Christians who want to influence public discourse on the basis of strictly confessional language and arguments. Law today is rightly demanding that legal arguments pass a ‘rational standard’ test which confessional language has difficulties passing,” Browning says. “My view also contradicts both conservative and liberal Christians who try to influence law and public policy by dropping theological language and advancing their arguments entirely with appeals to the disciplines of psychology, sociology, medicine, and other so-called secular forms of reason. This strategy unwittingly agrees with secularists who believe that religious language has no place in the public square.”
3. An appeal to natural law doesn’t refer to a set of rules (despite its name!), but goes like this: human beings naturally have certain inclinations and desires, and these set limits on what is good for us or will allow us to flourish. Of course, we act freely and deliberately on these desires, and not by instinct in the way other animals do. Regarding marriage, we desire our children to grow and flourish, but this requires much time, support, and education by both parents; we especially want to support our *own* children; we desire assistance and affection from a spouse; and we want sexual relations with a spouse. These desires are “natural” in the sense that they are grounded in common human nature, not in specific religious convictions we may hold. Aquinas knew that our natural tendencies can be in conflict, but he believed that reasoned reflection and scriptural revelation can help us sort through and order these desires. In this way, natural law must always be interpreted from within a tradition.
4. Browning argues that marriage should be a matter of law and public policy because it is an institution that we need in order to achieve our natural desires for companionship, sex, love, and the nurturing of our children. One proper role of government is to preserve the *possibility* for its citizens to live a good life and educate their children for the common good.
Some argue that marriage should be delegalized because in our culture there is little or no consensus about what marriage should be. Others say that marriage is essentially a religious institution and they fear that the state will impose a “secular” view of marriage.
5. The context of *The Arnolfini Wedding* is thoroughly secular: standing with Cenami in her house, Arnolfini raises his right hand as if to take an oath for a legal and financial agreement to their engagement. Yet the artist inserts spiritual references throughout the image: the dog may be an emblem of fidelity; the removed shoes may indicate the couple is standing on holy ground; images from the Passion and Resurrection narratives surround the mirror; a single lit candle (in the middle of the day) may symbolize the ever-present light of God.

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.

The Changing Shape of Family

Lesson Plans

| <i>Abridged Plan</i> | <i>Standard Plan</i> |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Prayer | Prayer |
| Scripture Reading | Scripture Reading |
| Reflection (skim all) | Reflection (all sections) |
| Questions 1, 2, and 4 | Questions (selected) |
| Departing Hymn | Departing Hymn |

Teaching Goals

1. To interpret how Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, tells us how to be family.
2. To discuss how a congregation can be family to members who are alienated by distrust, separated by distance, or separated by death from parents, siblings, spouses, or children.
3. To consider how intimate knowledge can be misused in a marriage.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 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 “My Light and My Salvation” locate the familiar tune AURELIA in your church’s hymnal or on the web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Story

“I have always felt like I had family,” Bo Prosser writes. “When my dad divorced my mother, I felt that he also divorced me. He wanted out of our family. When our broken family was trying to make sense of it all, several key families from my home church adopted me. They let me be a part of their families. They loved me unconditionally, fed me unselfishly, and tolerated me lovingly. How thankful I am for Bill and Ruby and Bundy and Anna, for Marion and Linda and their girls! These folks modeled family in the most healthy, intimate, and spiritual ways! They modeled what it meant to do the will of the Father, what it meant to be in the family of Jesus” (*Marriage*, p. 63).

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 Matthew 12:46-50 from a modern translation.

Reflection

In reality, our marriages and families “are not all they are cracked up to be.” They are pulled apart by our personal sin (e.g., our betrayal, distrust, and abuse of intimacy), by powerful forces in society (e.g., increasing career demands, desire to support the disparate interests and activities of family members, and relocation away from family members for specialized education or service), and by experiences of the debilitating sickness, aging, and death of loved ones. Increasingly, “we need the intimacy of God’s family as we journey,” Bo Prosser writes. Jesus’ promise that we are part of his family as we respond to the will of God can be realized in a very practical way when congregations answer the call to be the family of God.

In the suggested article, “I Know Who She Is,” Ginny Bridges Ireland explores how we sinfully misuse the intimate knowledge within marriage. “We crave a world created in our own image for our purposes,” she writes, “we shun God’s design for wholeness for us, which is found in the simplicity of knowing and being known by God and reflected in knowing and being known by one another.”

Study Questions

1. Do members agree that Jesus' teachings about responding to unfair demands apply to family relationships? Though some may suffer physical blows from family members, Prosser admits, more often we endure "unkind comments, insults, and emotional jabs." We may face unreasonable expectations to perform well—children to do unduly well in school, spouses to satisfy exaggerated sexual desires, wage earners to provide resources for family members' consumerist whims, or everyone to pick up and move just for one member's benefit.
Perhaps we are more unfair in our expectations of spouses and family members because we know them so well and trust them. Sometimes we take family members for granted and neglect to see how our exaggerated expectations are harming them. Or we may intentionally abuse our intimate knowledge of family members when we manipulate their emotions, make unworthy demands on their love, and count unfairly on their forgiveness.
2. Encourage members to consider pressures related to career and work, personal interests and hobbies, school activities and sports. How have television, the Internet, and 'virtual' relationships influenced their family time? How do the size of their city and the location of their home in relation to school, workplaces, shopping areas, and the church affect their family time? Don't forget the church. Do congregational responsibilities and ministry opportunities draw family members together or keep them apart?
3. Consider, on the one hand, how family members make money. Do their commitments at work or for education draw them together or increase their separation? Then examine how they spend money and leisure time. Are shopping activities, major purchases, vacations, and sporting events bringing them together or increasing their separation?
4. Each instruction points us toward loving and selfless behavior. The first urges us to seek redemptive reconciliation with family members who harm us; the second and third put the family's focus on ministry to others; and the fourth re-centers the family on loving relationships rather than possessions. Each instruction helps us to interpret the others. For instance, by itself the instruction to "seek perfection" might suggest the focus should be on one's virtue, but the other instructions correct this reading. Or "smile at unfair demands" might trend toward a docility that accepts abuse from others and allows hatred of the abusers, except that the other instructions call all members to loving relationships before God.
5. Encourage members to discuss why we are more able, and in some cases more likely, to manipulate and hurt a friend, or spouse, or child than a stranger. When a person reveals to us what he or she loves deeply, how he or she perceives the world, and how he or she thinks, the person has entrusted to us intimate knowledge that gives us great power. If we betray that trust, we can easily manipulate the person. Why would we do this? Of course, we might have selfish motives—by manipulating the person we have something to gain for ourselves. Sometimes we manipulate a friend or spouse or child for his or her own good, or for a greater cause that we honor. Some people do this in the name of the Gospel. Is this ever permissible, or is it always a betrayal of trust and a violation of the other person?
6. Does your congregation have programs or support groups that support members who have suffered betrayal by family members, must endure separation by physical distance, or are dealing with family members' illness or death? Consider ways in which members may minister to one another in less formal ways—through sharing meals on a regular basis, through visits and conversations, or other shared activities. How do members share their needs for family with one another? How does worship provide opportunity for members to learn about and express concern for one another's needs?

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.

What God Has Joined Together

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 Readings | Scripture Readings | Scripture Readings | Scripture Readings |
| Reflection (skim all) | Reflection (all sections) | Discuss biblical grounds for divorce | Discuss remarriage and attitudes toward divorced Christians |
| Questions 2, 3, and 5 | Questions (selected) | Questions 1, 2, and 3 | Questions 4 and 5 |
| Departing Hymn | Departing Hymn | Departing Hymn | Departing Hymn |

Teaching Goals

1. To interpret Jesus' teachings on divorce in light of the first-century rabbinical debate of Any Cause divorce.
2. To compare Jesus' and Paul's teachings concerning divorce and remarriage for believers.
3. To examine congregational attitudes toward divorced Christians.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-13 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Marriage (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Lead Us, Heavenly Father" locate a tune, MANNHEIM or LAUDA ANIMA, in your church's hymnal or on the web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Comment

David Instone-Brewer is studying a remarkable set of documents at Cambridge University. "The treasures found by Indiana Jones are boring compared to the fabulous discoveries made by two elderly widowed sisters in the 1890s, Agnes Lewis and Margaret Gibson," he says. "After unexciting marriages to Scottish lawyers, during which they passed the time by learning ancient languages, they decided to set out on adventures in the Middle East. Their knowledge of Syriac, Aramaic, and other languages helped them gain entrance to St. Catherine's Monastery at Mount Sinai where they found more valuable manuscripts than the monks knew what to do with. The butter dish at one meal turned out to be fashioned from a fifth-century Syriac Gospel!

"Such discoveries spurred them to seek out other neglected manuscripts, and after following several leads they went to an old synagogue in Cairo where they found a Geniza (a rubbish room for sacred manuscripts) that had not been cleared out for a thousand years. They gained permission to take the oldest manuscripts to Cambridge University, where they arrived in several tea chests – so many, that scholars have only recently finished the work of identifying and cataloging them all.... These and other such discoveries have now enabled us to understand the question that the Pharisees asked Jesus about divorce, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?'" (*Marriage*, p. 73).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to guide our Christian love for friends who suffer the pain and loss of divorce.

Scripture Reading

Ask two members to read Matthew 19:3-12 and 1 Corinthians 7:7-16 from a modern translation.

Reflection

Do not miss the forest for the trees in this study! Instone-Brewer invites us to understand Jesus' and Paul's teachings on divorce and remarriage through the eyes of a first-century Jewish reader who was aware of the rabbinic debates about Any Cause divorce. This chart summarizes Instone-Brewer's fresh reading of some key passages:

| | <i>Issue</i> | <i>Instone-Brewer's reading</i> |
|--|-----------------------------|---|
| Matthew 19:3; Mark 10:2-9 | Does Jesus permit divorce? | Yes, on biblical grounds of adultery (stated in text) or neglect (based on Jesus' not opposing the universal rabbinic opinion). Jesus opposes 'Any Cause' divorce. Mark's wording on this is abbreviated. |
| Matthew 5:31-32; 19:9; Mark 10:10-11; Luke 16:18 | Does he permit remarriage? | Not after 'Any Cause' divorce (use this explicit context of Matthew 19:9 to read other passages). Jesus wasn't asked about other cases. |
| 1 Corinthians 7:12-16 | Does Paul allow divorce? | Yes, if abandoned by unbelieving spouse (equals neglect). Don't initiate a no-fault Roman divorce. Paul wasn't asked about adultery. |
| 1 Corinthians 7:15 | Does Paul allow remarriage? | Yes, after neglect (context of 1 Corinthians 7:15; Paul wasn't asked about adultery). Divorcees must remarry under Roman law. |

For more information about this helpful research, see David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002).

You might extend this discussion to two sessions. In one session, consider how to apply Jesus' and Paul's teachings on divorce today. In the other session, discuss how to reconcile their teachings about remarriage and examine attitudes today toward Christians who are divorced.

Study Questions

1. Jesus urges reconciliation, for God's intention is that marriages be lasting. Instone-Brewer writes, "Jesus taught forgiveness rather than hasty divorce, though he agreed that a hard-hearted partner who repeatedly broke marriage vows unrepentantly could be divorced."
2. Exodus 21:10-11 requires that a slave wife who has been neglected in regard to "food, clothing, or marital [love]" must be permitted her freedom. The rabbis reasoned "that if the lowest of society had these rights, then the rest of society certainly shared them. Therefore anyone (man or woman) who suffered neglect could demand a divorce." How would these three criteria of neglect apply today? Should other criteria (e.g., unwarranted limits on communication, emotional support, medical care, educational or social opportunities, or information about finances; or lack of care for one's children) be added to the list?
3. When a believer abandons an unbeliever, Paul tells the believer to return to the marriage partner (1 Corinthians 7:10-11); yet when an unbeliever abandons a believer, Paul says "let it be so" and that the believer "is not bound" to the marriage (7:15). Why this difference? David Instone-Brewer suggests the reason is pragmatic: "Paul could command a believer to return to his or her spouse, but he could not command an unbeliever." Now suppose the departing partner is a Christian who does not respond to the congregation's discipline – should the abandoned partner be treated as free from the marriage on the grounds of neglect?
4. How are divorced men and women integrated into the life of the congregation? Are they fully accepted, chosen as leaders, and employed by the church? What restrictions are placed on their service based on their experience during or responsibility for the divorce? Hays is concerned that even when divorced persons are spiritually mature, we think they must remarry. In my experience, this especially is true when they have been pastors or other leaders of the congregation. Why is this? How can we encourage divorced men and women in fulfilling lives of service if they choose not to remarry?
5. Paul says believers who abandon their spouses (without the biblical grounds of adultery or neglect) should not remarry (1 Corinthians 7:10-11). He says the Lord commands this. Might a believer today abandon his or her spouse in a manner or for an unsupportable reason that would make remarriage impermissible for the believer? (What might such a reason be?) If the believer repents, should he or she be allowed to remarry another person, or should the believer be urged to reconcile (if possible) with the spouse?

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.