

What Do Presbyterians Say About Marriage?

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Biblical Foundations

For Presbyterians the primary resource for understanding marriage is Scripture. The creation story implies one purpose of marriage, companionship: “it is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as a partner” (Gen. 2:18). This purpose is connected, though not synonymous, with the earlier injunction for humanity to be fruitful and multiply. The subsequent forms of marriage recorded in the Old Testament are surprisingly wide. Many OT writers, for example, assume polygamy as part of God’s blessing for humanity. Some marriages occur as the result of morally reprehensible actions, such as abduction (Judg 21). And, in the longest sustained passage of human relationship in Scripture, the Song of Solomon celebrates the sexual love between a man and a woman without referring to marriage directly. These varied depictions suggest that God’s blessing is not confined to particular forms of marriage, but extends across culture and redeems fallen relationships whenever persons live in faithfulness to God’s covenant together. As God redeems humanity, no one cultural form of marriage emerges as normative for all others.

The New Testament specifically blesses singleness and marriage, at times favoring the former. Jesus’ own singleness does not come at the expense of binding personal relationships, but intensifies them as they are directed to God’s Reign. Paul prefers singleness to marriage in much of his writing because God’s Reign is imminent: “So then, he who marries his fiancée does well; and he who refrains from marriage will do better” (1 Cor. 7:38). Jesus’ sayings against divorce are stronger than anything found in the Old Testament (Mk. 10:11-12), indicating that the bonds of marriage endure throughout time. Yet Jesus also claims that the demands of the gospel may pit family

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members against one another (Mt. 10:35-7). However strong the covenant of marriage is between partners, the covenant between God and humanity initiated in Jesus Christ is primary and may cause ruptures in the former. In the NT, the promises of marriage are always provisional in comparison to the promise of God's Reign.

Reformed Confessional and Theological Heritage

Reformed theology serves as aid in interpreting the primary witness of Scripture, yet an overarching theology of Christian marriage does not exist in our tradition. Calvin and the Reformers rejected the notion of a *sacrament* of marriage, because it is not a "visible word" by which God expresses the promises of grace and communion in and through Jesus Christ. They preferred to call marriage an *ordinance* instituted by God, profitable for God's people (Second Helvetic, 5.171). One way of approaching a Reformed theology of marriage is to claim that its traditions understand marriage as both a *sign* of grace and a *response* to grace already given. Marriage represents a journey shared by two persons, in covenant before God and the community of faith, pledged over a lifetime. In this sense, a married couple, in the Reformed tradition, is always *on the way* to Christian marriage.

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John Calvin devotes surprisingly few words to marriage in his *Institutes*. He married somewhat late in life, and wrote comparatively little – and then only reservedly – about his own marriage and family life. Calvin celebrates marriage as a blessing for human happiness and as an antidote to sin: "Man has been created in this condition that he may not lead a solitary life, but may enjoy a helper joined to himself...Therefore, the Lord sufficiently provided for us in this matter when he established marriage, the fellowship of which, begun on his authority, he also sanctified by his blessing...The companionship of marriage has been ordained as a necessary remedy to keep us from plunging into unbridled lust" (*Institutes* 2.8.41). For Calvin, the *restraint* of marriage is also a joy.

Following Calvin, the Westminster Confession of Faith contains a clear endorsement of marital union as a public good: "Christian marriage is an institution ordained of God, blessed by our Lord Jesus Christ, established and sanctified for the happiness and welfare of mankind, into which spiritual and physical union one man and one woman enter, cherishing a mutual esteem and love, bearing with each other's infirmities and weaknesses, comforting each other

in trouble, providing in honesty and industry for each other and for their household, praying for each other, and living together the length of their days as heirs to the grace of life” (6.131).

Notably absent from this ringing chorus are injunctions of procreation. The good of marriage is not tied directly to the rearing of children. Its underlying purpose is neither to propagate the species, nor to establish a seal of sexual union. In this sense, Westminster de-mystifies both sexual intercourse and the raising of children, anchoring both in the public goods of happiness and human welfare. Sexual union and children are the fruits of that wider good rather than their source. They are gifts that may occur in the context of a marriage. Indispensable gifts, however, they are not. In our age that glorifies sex as a means of spiritual union and overburdens children as means of parental happiness, this Reformed emphasis is a decidedly counter-cultural strain.

Contemporary Reformed theology has extended Westminster’s emphasis on the public good, intimating the healing of brokenness and heralding the relationship that God establishes with creation. Shirley Guthrie suggests an

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analogy, where marriage is “a partnership that reflects the covenant relationship between God and the people of God.” Glimpsed in this light, the covenant of marriage extends not only to the couple, but to the entire community of faith. As Guthrie writes, “Marriage is never a purely private relationship between two individuals...[It] is thus a social and communal matter...and a wedding is the public recognition, acceptance, and commitment to this fact.” A Christian marriage attests to neither the private choice of one couple, nor the apotheosis of courtly love. Rather, a marriage

expresses public claims of God’s covenantal love, witnessed in mutual human love.

A Christian marriage, then, is an anticipatory event, offering a foretaste of the heavenly banquet and assurance of our present participation in Christ’s covenant with the world. A prayer from the Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship* expresses this hope for marriage, not only for the church, but for all creation: “Make their life together a sign of Christ’s love to this sinful and broken world, that unity may overcome estrangement, forgiveness heal guilt, and joy conquer despair.”

Interpreting Our Heritage Today

The biblical authors and Reformed heritage both assume that a marriage covenant is between a man and a woman. The question of same-sex marriage simply does not enter their interpretive world. Since the church must continually re-interpret its heritage in light of new questions in the attempt to be faithful to the Good News of Jesus Christ, Presbyterians are warranted in asking whether or not the distinctive strands of our tradition would allow for or prohibit same-sex unions or marriages. The burden for either side, in my opinion, lies in whether proposals for same-sex unions meet the theological criteria for marriages outlined in our tradition: May such unions, as Westminster stresses, serve the common good? Are they dim reflections of God's covenant with humanity, as the Old Testament suggests? Do they direct human persons to one another and to the ultimacy of God's Reign as the New Testament upholds? Do they, as Calvin urged, model restraint from sin and joy in companionship? Do they, however imperfectly, anticipate God's communion with all creation in Christ, as our liturgy celebrates?

Marriage, in the Reformed tradition, stresses covenant, God's desire for communion with all persons, mutual restraint and joy, the response of God's people, and the public good.

If the church refuses to entertain these questions, then we fall under the judgment outlined in the Confession of 1967: "The church comes under the judgment of God and invites rejection by man when it fails to lead men and women into the full meaning of life together, or withholds the compassion of Christ from those caught in the moral confusion of our time" (9.47). Marriage, in the Reformed tradition, stresses covenant, God's desire for communion with all persons, mutual restraint and joy, the response of God's people, and the public good. Whenever we debate same-sex marriage, those themes - not sex, procreation, and gender roles - demand our greatest attention.

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