

**Report
of the
Diocese of El Camino Real
Task Force
on the Theology of Marriage**

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ahead. As we took turns telling each other how marriage had shaped us, one thing became very clear: based on our separate histories, the word “marriage” meant very different things to each one of us. For every one of us it carried a different ratio of pain and hope. Learning something of the variety of that pain and that hope turned out to be a vital first step in understanding and valuing the other differences in outlook we would encounter over the months ahead.

THE FIRST LEG OF THE STOOL: MARRIAGE IN SCRIPTURE

The Method of Scriptural Inquiry

The actual process of theological inquiry began during our second meeting with the examination of scripture. In order to keep this process manageable, we established a structure to hold it within bounds. Over the course of the weeks leading up to our second meeting, everyone in the group was asked to read and reflect, then submit any passages from the Old and New Testaments that she or he felt had any bearing on marriage at all. Every passage named was added to the list without further question. By the end, the list included 10 passages from the Old Testament (Genesis 1:27-31; 2:18-25; 20:1-14; 24; 29:16-30:6; 2 Samuel 11:2-17 and 12:7-10; Nehemiah 13:23-27; Jeremiah 29:1-9; Hosea 1:2-9 and 2:14-3:5, and Malachi 2:14-16) and 12 passages from the New Testament (Matthew 5:27-32; 19:1-12; Mark 10:1-12; Luke 20:27-36; John 2:1-11; Romans 7:1-6; 1 Corinthians 7:1-16; 13:1-13; Ephesians 5:21-33; 1 Timothy 5:3-10; Hebrews 13:4, and 1 Peter 2:11-3:12).

With this collection of texts to work with, we agreed to examine each in turn, approaching it with a sort of “naïve openness.” Our goal was always to answer one question and one question only: *“What is this passage telling us about marriage?”* We had to spend some time as a group discussing what we actually meant by the phrase “naïve openness.” Some of us had considerable scriptural training and could read the texts in the original languages, so this “naïve openness” could include going back to the original Hebrew and Greek. It could also include seeking to understand the text by placing it within the cultural and historical context in which it was written. Mainly, then, the intention to approach each passage with a “naïve openness” meant resolving to try to come to it as if for the first time, letting go of all the ways in which we may have heard it interpreted in the past so that we could hear as freshly as possible its answer to that one question: what is it saying about marriage? This especially meant not using a passage from one book of scripture or biblical era to build upon or interpret a second passage from another book or era. Our goal, in other words, was biblical interpretation, not biblical theology.

Each passage had to speak for itself. Our goal as a group was to listen to and discuss how we each heard each passage answer the question, “What is this passage actually telling about marriage? If, at the end of our discussion, we could agree on what we heard, we would then try to summarize that agreement into a single succinct statement. If we could *not* agree, we would try to summarize those differing views into however

many separate statements were needed. To our utter astonishment we were able, after ten hours discussion, to reach enough of an agreement to write brief consensus statements for every passage except one.

Building Trust Once More: Prelude to Examining Scripture

One of the things that may have assisted us in at least being open to the possibility of finding common ground in an area as sadly divisive as scriptural interpretation is that we took the time before we began our work to expand upon our earlier effort at trust-building by reflecting together and sharing with each other the different experiences of the Bible that we were each bringing to this task.

We began with personal reflection as everyone in the group was asked to consider in silence a series of questions:

1. *What was your first memory of hearing the Bible? How old were you? Who read it or quoted it to you? What was the context?*
2. *How important was the Bible to you as a child? Did you hear it often? Occasionally? Never?*
3. *How about when you were a teenager or young adult — how was the Bible viewed by those close to you, your family and friends? With reverence? With ridicule? Or was it entirely off the horizon?*
4. *Did you ever have the Bible quoted to you in a way that hurt you?*
5. *Did you ever have a specific experience of the Bible that you found distinctly life-giving?*
6. *Did you ever have an experience that dramatically changed how you viewed the Bible? —
something that either shook your faith in it **or else**
something that caused you to view it with new appreciation?*

Once again, as with our sharing of our many and varied personal experiences of marriage, we discovered how very different our experiences of the Bible had been. We also discovered that there was no one whose experience and feelings towards the Bible had not changed over the years — sometimes many times and quite dramatically. We further discovered that there were few among this group of deeply committed Christians whose experience of the Bible had always been unequivocally positive. There were some to whom the Bible had been quoted in ways that hurt them and was intended to hurt them. There were others who had used it to set impossible standards for themselves and still others who felt that the Bible had been used to exclude them. Some had at one time had very little use for the Bible only to find at a later point in their lives that it began to open up a new world for them, either suddenly or gradually.

Virtually everyone had come to a point of deep love for scripture, or at least deep admiration, although there were a number of the group who had reached this point only after following long, circuitous, and often painful routes. Hearing the variety of those journeys, and the real suffering they sometimes entailed, helped us listen to the different ways we were coming at the text with a bit more care, aware of the many roads that had brought us all there that day to talk together about this book that we all now had come to know as holy.

Marriage in Scripture: Conclusions

As already noted, the group was able to find enough agreement about what each biblical text was saying about marriage to write a brief statement summarizing the consensus opinion for every passage except one. The point of this single disagreement involved only one section of that one passage. This meant, to give but a few examples, that we were able to agree that Genesis 1:27-31 “does not specifically refer to marriage...[but] is a statement about who we are as humans and our role in creation, which includes procreation.” We were able to agree that 2 Samuel 11:2-17 and 12:7-10 presents the “ancient Hebrew view that polygamy is an institution accepted, even encouraged, by God.” We were able to agree that Luke 20:27-36 reflects a position “that marriage is for this life: it is not eternal and is culturally conditioned” and that, among other things, 1 Peter 2:11-3:12 “makes explicit the spiritual worth of women.” *For a complete presentation of all 22 passages considered as well as the consensus statement of what the group heard each passage saying about marriage, see Appendix A.*

We did not have an opportunity to reflect as a group about what it had been like to move through the Bible in this way, from Genesis to the pastoral letters, considering together, if not every reference to marriage in the Bible, at least many of the most significant. One member did make a point, though, of sharing his reaction to the process with the chair of the Task Force. “I found this very helpful,” he said. “I used to think that the Bible’s presentation of marriage was the same throughout, but as we’ve moved through scripture, looking at marriage from Genesis through the Prophets then on to the end of the New Testament, I could see a real development. It’s given me a very different view of things.”

THE SECOND LEG OF THE STOOL: MARRIAGE IN THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

Method for Examining Marriage in the Christian Tradition

The next step in the theological process we had set for ourselves was a consideration of marriage in the tradition we had inherited — marriage as it has come down to us in Christian history and in Western culture in general. If a consideration of the presentation of marriage in the Bible had seemed a daunting task, this new project appeared far more so. We had succeeded in keeping the examination of marriage in scripture within manageable limits by confining it to a specific set of predetermined texts and by restricting our inquiry of those texts always to a single question: “What is

this passage telling us about marriage.” We knew that we would need to structure a similar set of limits in order to keep our next project within bounds too.

We did this in two ways. The first was to identify a narrow set of texts for us to work from. Drawing on the expertise of those in the group, we were able to compile and agree upon a short list of articles and chapters from books that would provide the basis for our discussions in this area. Some of the group had done considerable work in some of the fields touched upon at this stage of our inquiry. Limiting ourselves to materials we had all read went a long way in leveling the playing field. The materials we all read ahead of time were these:

“Matrimony” in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd Ed., Rev., edited by E. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp 1060-2.

A History of the Wife by Marilyn Yolam (New York: HarperCollins/Perennial, 2002) pp. 45-145.

Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation by Nancy Cott (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), chapters 1 and 2 (pp. 9-55).

Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage, by Stephanie Coontz (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), chapters 3, 4 and 5.

From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion and Law in the Western Tradition by John Witte, Jr. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997).

With the article on matrimony as a starting point, the three books on the history of marriage gave an eye-opening overview of just how complex, varied, and alien to its contemporary expression past understandings of marriage can appear — far more than many of us who thought we knew something about the subject suspected. The final work provided a valuable structure for our discussion of the different theologies of marriage by offering useful summaries of several of the most important ways that marriage has been approached both in theory and in practice over the course of the last 2000 years of Christian history and within different Christian denominations. It did this by presenting five models of marriage. These are: (1) marriage as sacrament as found in the Roman Catholic tradition, (2) marriage as social estate according to the Lutheran Reformation, (3) marriage as covenant, the Calvinist model, (4) marriage as commonwealth in the Anglican tradition, and finally (5) marriage as contract, the model developed in the Enlightenment.

Having a select core of common texts would help to center our work, but we would need much more than that if we were not to be overwhelmed by the magnitude of the task. To keep the discussion within bounds we would have to confine ourselves to several carefully chosen questions. We chose four, and they became the focus of our next two meetings.

The Discussion

What follows are the four questions we set for ourselves and a summary of the group's discussion:

Question 1: Coontz says: "Marriage is a social invention, unique to humans." The Book of Common Prayer says: "The bond and covenant of marriage was established by God in Creation." How are we to fit these two statements together? Is there a way in which we can embrace them both, or must we choose one or the other?

As we discussed this we noted that marriage is unique to humans. Some species mate for life, others do not. Human beings have a choice to marry or not to marry. All this seems to suggest that it is a social invention. It is not identical with our biology, because people marry for more reasons than simply for procreation, and it is of course possible to conceive a child and never marry. On the other hand, to believe that God created marriage implies that we need another person in life, a life-long intimate partner, and the fact is that marriage has always meant more than having children. There have always been those who married later in life when having children was no longer possible or when one of the couple was sterile. Marriage is also about companionship, but this suggests a different sort of need — a need for an intimate other, a need that can itself be seen as a gift of grace.

There are many ways that marriage can be lived out, however. Different circumstances and social conditions can lead to very different practices. Where polygamy was the norm for the tribes of ancient Israel, serial monogamy was the norm for the 18th century Iroquois. For many young couples in Silicon Valley in the 21st century, where both partners work and are very busy, marriage no longer seems as necessary simply because the economic component does not now apply.

So, is there any conflict between Coontz's description of marriage as "a social invention" and the Book of Common Prayer's account of it as a "bond and covenant ... established by God"? Could it be the same thing viewed from different angles? The writer Michael Dowd has come up with two phrases to talk about what he describes as the two sides of the single coin we know as experience.¹ One way to account for our experience is in terms of what he calls "day language." Examples of day language include the terms and methodologies of the natural and social sciences. Its tools are measurement, precision, calculation, and classification. Its goal is to identify those aspects of experience that can be verified objectively, but it can also be reductionist. Another way to view our experience, however, is in terms of what he calls "night language." Examples of night language include poetry, liturgy, and the language of emotion and mysticism. Its tools are metaphor, parable, and story, and its goal is to open us to revelation through a rich, symbolic language that points to realities larger than it can name. Much in human experience can be described in either day language or in night language. A flower can be

¹ Michael Dowd, *Thank God for Evolution!* (San Francisco: Council Oak Books, 2007) p. 113 ff.

described, for example, in the clinical terminology of botany or in the evocative similes of poetry. Both are equally valid as accounts of the different ways that human beings can encounter a flower. The full truth is in their unity. In a similar way, the group decided, it seemed equally valid to say that marriage is a social invention, as Coontz claims, and to say that it was established by God as stated in the Book of Common Prayer. One member had a significant “aha” at this point, in realizing that the Book of Common Prayer states that God established the “bond and covenant” of marriage but says nothing about the form — that is, the human social institution.

In the end, the group reached a general agreement that the statements by Coontz and the Book of Common Prayer are compatible.

Question 2: Brainstorming as a group, what are the major elements of each of Witte's five models of marriage in the West, the model of marriage as (a) sacrament, (b) social estate, (c) covenant, (d) commonwealth, and (e) contract?

In his book *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion and Law in the Western Tradition*, John Witte says this of the sacramental model of marriage found in the Roman Catholic Church:

The *Catholic sacramental model* of the mid-twelfth century...came to treat marriage and the family in a threefold manner — at once as a natural, contractual, and sacramental unit.... The temporal union of body, soul, and mind within the marital estate symbolized the eternal union between Christ and His Church, and brought sanctifying grace to the couple, the church, and the community.... Though a sacrament and a sound way of Christian living, marriage, however, was not considered to be particularly spiritually edifying. Marriage was more of a remedy for sin than a recipe for righteousness.²

In response to this model the group noted, among other things, that the sacramental implications of marriage did not seem to be very well developed. Apart from identifying the bond of marriage with the relationship between Christ and His church, very little else was done with it. We did note, though, that in this tradition, it was specifically because marriage was seen as a sacrament that it was considered indissoluble. Also, consent of both parties was extremely important. Consent was emphasized to such a degree, in fact, that it seemed to come from an effort to counter the custom of the culture that Christianity was replacing.

With regard to marriage in the Lutheran tradition, Witte writes:

Marriage, Luther and his colleagues taught, was a social estate of the earthly kingdom of creation, not a sacred estate of the heavenly kingdom of redemption. Though divinely ordained, marriage was directed primarily to human ends, to

² John Witte, Jr., *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion and Law in the Western Tradition* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997) pp. 3-4.

the fulfilling of “uses” in the lives of the individual and of society. Marriage revealed to persons their sin and their need for God’s marital gift.... As part of the earthly kingdom, marriage was subject to the state, not the church. Civil law, not canon law, was to govern marriage.... Civil marriage courts replaced church courts.... Marriage was for them the community of the couple in the present, not their sacramental union in the life to come. Where that community was broken, for one of a number of specific reasons (such as adultery or desertion), the couple could sue for divorce.³

In our discussion of this, the group noted it as an early attempt to separate church from state. Another first, at least for Christianity, was that marriage was no longer viewed as a way of life secondary to celibacy. And yet, for all that, this model seemed to offer even fewer insights into the potential for grace within marriage than did the model it sought to supplant. Unlike the sacramental model of marriage, the Lutheran understanding of marriage as a social estate seemed to value it primarily for its benefits to society. Marriage was not a sacrament. It was not a source of grace. It was, rather, primarily an aid to the community.

About the third of his models, the Calvinist covenantal mode, Witte wrote:

This Calvinist covenantal model mediated both sacramental and contractual understandings of marriage. On the one hand, this covenantal model confirmed the sacred and sanctifying qualities of marriage without ascribing to it sacramental functions. Marriage was regarded as a holy and loving fellowship, a compelling image of the bond between Yahweh and His elect, between Christ and His church. But marriage was no sacrament, for it confirmed no divine promise. On the other hand this covenantal model confirmed the contractual and consensual qualities of marriage.... Marriage depended for its validity and utility on the voluntary consent of the parties. But marriage was more than a contract, for God was the third party to every marriage covenant, and God set its basic terms in the order and law of creation.⁴

This model, the group noted, deepened the understanding of marriage in several ways. In addition to joining the sacred and sanctifying view of marriage found in the Roman Catholic tradition with the Lutheran appreciation for the practical benefits that marriage can provide to our earthly condition, it was finally in the Calvinist understanding that we saw the word love introduced as something significant to the spirituality of marriage. Not only that, since Calvin saw marriage as “a sacred bond,” “a holy fellowship,” and “a divine partnership,” marriage was no longer simply a place where sex was allowed but often little more than tolerated. Contrary to the popular stereotype, early Calvinists viewed the marital bed as a holy state, and married couples were encouraged to continue an active sex life apart from the goal of having children.

³ Ibid. pp. 5 & 6.

⁴ Ibid. p. 8.

Also, for the first time, marriage was seen as a place that had as its central aim the *protection* of children as well as their conception.

About the fourth model of marriage, the Anglican commonwealth model, Witte writes:

The *Anglican tradition*, particularly during the Tudor and Stuart periods from circa 1540 to 1640, brought forth a *commonwealth model* of marriage. This model embraced the sacramental, social, and covenantal models but went beyond them. Marriage was at once a gracious symbol of the divine, a social unit of the earthly kingdom, and a solemn covenant with one's spouse.⁵

Also, some of the Anglicans of the period more inclined to Calvinism took up and extended the emphasis of their continental counterparts on the importance of love in marriage. This can be seen with particular clarity in the writings of Thomas Becon, a student of Hugh Latimer and chaplain to Archbishop Cranmer. Beginning with a quote from Becon, Witte goes on to comment:

"The first cause" of marriage, Becon wrote, "is, that for asmuch as the solitary life is a sorowfull and uncomfortable life, and man in nature is desirous of company, and gladly liveth not alone: God...appointed this most holye order of life ... [that the couple] might be a comfort, joye and help [one to] another in all honest and godly things."... Becon stressed these virtues of marital love several times, treating love as the sine qua non of marriage and the sacramental symbol and seal of Christ's love for his church.⁶

In our discussion of this model the group noted that, typical of Anglicanism, no one voice dominated, although it was very helpful to hear Becon's account of marriage as the product a God-given need for a "significant other." And yet, it is also true that not everyone is called to marriage. We also discussed the interesting role that this idea of marriage seemed to have in the growing movement towards democracy, both in the way that each marriage was seen as a brick in the larger social edifice and perhaps even more importantly in how the move towards equality in the marriage partnership (even if it was only a very small one) could prefigure the move towards equality within society in general.

In the end, the group was able to draw no general conclusions from this survey of the various models of marriage within the Christian tradition. As we discussed it, though, a number of us expressed disappointment that there was so little talk of the holiness of marriage in any of these traditions and so little talk of mutual love. Both ideas were there, but you really had to look for them. The preoccupation was far more on the legal and political aspects of marriage. A number of us who had not studied this history in depth were surprised by the extent that the true spiritual fruits of marriage seemed to be so little recognized for most of Christian history. It was as if the seeds necessary to

⁵ Ibid. p. 8-9.

⁶ Ibid. p. 144.

bring forth those fruits within a truly live-giving theology of marriage had simply remained unplanted.

By this point a number of us were feeling that the tradition had let us down. It had failed to give us much guidance in locating the potential riches of a theology of marriage. As a result, we found that our two remaining questions had changed. They had grown simpler. We found ourselves asking:

Question 3: What is special about marriage? If we say that marriage is a holy union, where does the holiness lie? What makes it holy? What does a good marriage look like?

... and ...

Question 4: Can we embrace the idea that God's revelation with regard to marriage may be ongoing, that the Holy Spirit may be guiding us to a deeper understanding of marriage?

We dealt with these two questions together and we quickly discovered that in doing so we had touched on two points of division in the group.

The first point of division came up because, in the process of considering what made a marriage holy, we began to discuss the ways in which two people could honor each other as images of God and as children of God. That led one person to note how laden marriage has been — and in many ways still remains — with inequality towards women, abuse being only the most extreme example of this, expressing the opinion that the word “holiness” can never apply where such blatant disregard of women as images of God and as children of God remains in place. Building on this, another person pointed out that for much of Christian history gay persons have also been excluded from those recognized as children of God, as images of God. This has happened in many, many ways, but one of them has been in denying them the possibility of marrying *their* life partner because that life partner is of the same sex.

This was not the first time that the subject of same gender marriage had been approached in the group. It was, however, the first time that it had been raised in a way that touched directly on the immediate question that we were then considering. Rather than confronting the issue head-on at this point, however, by a sort of collective, unconscious logic the group shifted the topic of discussion to the last of our four questions, which dealt with what was actually an even more foundational concern. This was the question of whether we as a group (and we as a Church) could embrace the possibility that our idea of marriage might be growing and evolving through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

This change of focus hardly made the problem go away. Rather, it moved the discussion into an area of even more fundamental theological disagreement, the question of whether God's revelation is fixed or ongoing. As the group itself noted in the course of its conversation, this may be the point that has most deeply and consistently divided liberals and conservatives in the church, both past and present. On the one hand, there

is the liberal view. As stated in at least one of its forms, this view sees humanity as being called by the Holy Spirit over the course of salvation history to grow closer and closer to Christ so that both individuals and the Church learn increasingly to open their hearts in a way that they can see Christ in everyone and so honor all persons equally, just as they would Christ. In this way, according to this liberal view, the Holy Spirit is calling Christians to extend their circle to include more and more of those they had previously excluded and in this manner lead the way in transforming society to God's love. On the other hand, there is the conservative view. This conservative view strives, among other things, to hold firmly to the eternal truths that Scripture has proclaimed once and for all. In this manner, according to this conservative view, Christians aim to resist in every way possible the seductive call of the wider culture to replace those eternal truths with an ethic of relativism.

There is no easy way to bridge these two positions, and we were certainly unable to do so that day. And yet, as we ended that session, it was not with a sense of division, but with one of connection. As we brought that meeting to a close, members of the group took time to note the increasing level of intimacy and trust and to say that they felt that this had become a safe place to share both their thoughts and their feelings. We decided that we were ready to shift to the third leg of our theological stool: a consideration of our own experience of marriage: marriage in the current culture.

THE THIRD LEG OF THE STOOL: THE EXPERIENCE OF MARRIAGE IN THE CURRENT CULTURE

Method for Examining the Experience of Marriage in the Current Culture

By "marriage in the current culture" we meant roughly marriage since the turn of the 20th century. Once again, this was an enormous task. Only by setting strict limits would the project be manageable. Once again we did this in two ways. The first was by establishing a narrow set of texts, which would become the common resource from which our discussion would draw. We polled the group's expertise and succeeded in limiting ourselves to reading selections from three books and one complete text. They were:

Homosexuality as a Site of Anglican Identity and Dissent by Caroline Hall (Dissertation, 2009) pp. 62-66.⁷

Modernity and Self-Identity by Anthony Giddens (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991) pp. 80-98.

Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage, by Stephanie Coontz (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), chapters 16 and 17.

⁷ Available online at: <https://sites.google.com/site/anglicanidentity/>

Sacred Unions: A New Guide to Lifelong Commitment by Thomas E. Breidenthal (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2006).

Using these texts as our guide we set two tasks for ourselves to structure the discussion:

- (1) to make a list of as many of the changes that have transformed marriage in the last century as seem relevant, then
- (2) to decide which of these changes we need to discuss in connection to our specific task of considering a theology of marriage.

Given this framework, we thought we could keep the topic in bounds.

The Discussion

As it turned out, very little of what followed went as planned. That was because soon after we began compiling the list of changes that we believed had transformed marriage in the last century, discussing as we did so the possible implication of each of these changes for a theology of marriage, one of our colleagues stopped us. She told us that she was feeling completely disconnected from what we were discussing. She said that she was finding it impossible to relate any of what we were saying to her own views of marriage. In doing this we knew that she was acting completely appropriately. She was applying the fifth of our five guidelines for listening (see page 5 above). We also knew that we could not move forward until her concern was met.

At this point, the group offered to help our colleague to put her outlook into words. She agreed. With that, we lay the rest of the day's agenda aside and spent most of the meeting's remaining time assisting our colleague, first, to identify each of the major elements of her view of marriage then, second, to compose these elements into a unified statement. After several hours of group effort involving brainstorming, list-making, revising and editing, we ended with a final statement in the form of a single paragraph, which our colleague endorsed as an accurate account of her views. The statement is this. (It is repeated in Appendix B: One (Conservative) Member's Theology of Marriage):

God created man and woman to become one flesh through sexual intimacy and, if it is God's will, to procreate. Marriage is the structure established by humans to fulfill this purpose. A Christian marriage is one in which a man and woman come together in sacrificial commitment modeled after Christ's sacrifice and love for the church. This provides for the protection and security of both the woman and the man, is the optimal environment for raising children, and is therefore in the best interest of society. The sacrament of marriage performed by the church brings God into the relationship, providing faith, strength, and spiritual support to the couple to stay the course of their sacrificial commitment through good times and bad.

When asked by the group to identify what in particular is most important about this

definition, the author responded that the most important aspect of this definition is "the protection of children...designing and promoting a secure, loving, nurturing, optimal environment that includes a mother and a father for children to grow into healthy adults." She also saw the church's role "as one of providing guidance, structure, a moral compass and support for its members to follow in the midst of changing societal morals rather than changing its tenets to accommodate society."

Since the group effort of helping our colleague to identify her position and to find the language to express it had occupied nearly the whole of the meeting, we knew that we were going to have to change the plan for how we moved ahead. With our time nearly done for that day, we decided that we would invite everyone else in the group to write a statement or essay on their own time that presented *their* theology of marriage. Each of us would then email these separate compositions to the rest of group before our next meeting. With this range of opinions before us, we decided that when we next gathered we could skip the step of noticing what changes had occurred in marriage during the last 100 years and jump directly to a discussion of which elements of these separate theologies of marriage, if any, we could endorse as a group.

As it turned out, though, only one other member of the Task Force was able to compose a theology of marriage in time for our next meeting. It was considerably longer than the previous statement — four pages as opposed to a single paragraph. It also represented a position that was much more liberal. *This second theology of marriage can be found in Appendix C: One (Liberal) Member's Theology of Marriage.* We include it in the Appendix and not in the body of the report in part because it is so much longer. Much more important, though, we include it in the Appendix and not in the main report because it represents the opinion of only one member of the group and was composed without any group participation. As such, it represents not only one person's opinion but also that person's separate effort. This is in contrast to the briefer statement, which we *do* include in the body of the report. That is also just one person's opinion, but it was composed with the help of the entire group.

FINDING COMMON GROUND: SEVEN POINTS TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF MARRIAGE

When the group began its next meeting it found itself faced, then, with two very different theologies of marriage, each representing the individual outlook of a single member of the group. One position presented a theology of marriage that was quite conservative, the other a theology of marriage that was quite liberal. The difference between them looked enormous. The viewpoints seemed so far apart, in fact, that they appeared to give us little to compare. And yet simply *because* the gap separating them appeared so great, we decided to survey the space between them for potential areas of common ground within the group.

It became a group effort. We brainstormed together until we were able to identify seven phrases that we all agreed were important to marriage. These were marriage (1) as an

expression of God's mission of reconciliation, (2) as the joining of the spiritual and the physical, (3) as a reflection of the image of God and the Trinity (4) as a means to see Christ in the other, to love our neighbor as ourself, (5) as a spiritual calling, a vocation of sanctification, (6) a covenant between two persons and God, and (7) as a call to serve the community.

With these seven areas identified, we then sought to spell out exactly what we meant by them. This too was a group effort through a process of brainstorming and discussion. The result was a series of phrases, which we then composed into the seven paragraphs identifying elements of marriage. They are:

Christian marriage is...

(1) a vocation.

Christian marriage is a vocation, a way of living. Not all are called to marriage, but for those who realize this call, marriage, like all vocations, is a gift filled with divine grace. Those called to marriage walk a path of discipleship that supports the individual and the couple as they serve their community. Those who have received and accepted this vocation, who have committed themselves to this spiritual discipline, will find themselves growing together in godliness and joy.

(2) a covenant between two persons and God.

Marriage is a covenant initiated by God between two persons and God as a solemn and binding relationship incorporating faithfulness, loyalty and unity in all aspects of the relationship and a firm foundation of trust. Each partner regulates and nurtures the other.

(3) an expression of human beings as the image of God, that is, an expression of God as Love and God as relationship through the Trinity.

We believe that we are made in the image of God. Although we do not know exactly what that means, we do know both that God is love and that "everyone who loves is born of God and knows God" (1 John 4:7 & 8). We also know from our tradition that God as Trinity is essentially relational: God exists in a constant, loving, passionate, joyful, submissive, and sacrificial relationship as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We believe that the marriage bond is one of the most profound ways in which two people can come to know both themselves and each other as created in the image of God. In this way each learns how to bring into concrete reality the image of God we all carry within us through a commitment to a lifetime of mutual love for another human being, a commitment to care for and to honor the image of God they carry too. It is in this process, dedicated to loving and honoring another human being, that we come to know more fully the God who is both within us and guiding us. It is in this manner that we find in God's immanence a way to discover God's transcendence.

(4) a call to discover what Christ meant when he asked us to see Christ in others and to love one another as Christ loved us.

Jesus said in the Gospel of Matthew (chapter 25) that whatever we do to the least of our brothers and sisters we do to him. He also commanded us in the Gospel of John (15:12) to “love one another as I have loved you.” Marriage offers a particularly focused and sustained opportunity to work through exactly what it means both to see Christ in another and to try to love that person with the sort of openness and acceptance that Jesus does. It is easy enough to present a public image of sympathy and concern to people we see only now and then. The real test comes in learning how to love steadily and consistently the one person we see every day, the person we know more intimately than any other. Mercy, forgiveness, understanding, love — the virtues of the Christian life often find their most rigorous trial at home. They are tested in the course of marriage’s shared journey though the messiness of life, to be strengthened and enriched in the joy, trust, and companionship that can result.

(5) a physical embodiment of our spiritual reality.

We are both physical and spiritual beings. Since marriage draws on all aspects of who we are, it reveals with a special clarity how our physical reality is at once a subset of our spiritual reality but also how, for human beings, that spiritual reality must always find concrete expression. Marriage opens the space for spiritual and physical intimacy to a degree that is rivaled by few other relationships. There is the tenderness and joy of sexual intimacy, first of all, but the spiritual bond of love finds many other concrete expressions in marriage too. There is the care that each person gives for the other’s bodily welfare, especially in times of illness. There are the periods of shared work and shared play. There are also the times of quiet companionship and of simple physical closeness. In all of these ways marriage opens us to the larger truth that the spiritual reality of who we are is something we embody physically.

(6) an expression of God’s mission of reconciliation.

Marriage is one very concrete way in which we are able to participate in God’s mission of reconciliation. Living together in intimate relationship calls us to be reconciled again and again with our spouse. This mission of reconciliation then extends beyond the married couple to children, in-laws, neighbors, the couple’s wider extended family, and the community.

(7) a foundation for community and for Christian service in the world.

Being in relationship with another person through marriage prepares both to go forth into the community to love and serve others. In a Christian marriage, each partner learns to see Christ in the other responding with a sacrificial love. That love is extended then to their children, their extended family, and their neighbors. Each partner supports the other in their individual or common ministry, vocation, or interest. Support from a church community contributes to the lasting relationship of the married couple.

We feel that it is essential to emphasize that *no one in the group saw these seven statements as in any way a complete account of Christian marriage*. Some members of our group were particularly adamant that we make absolutely clear as part of this report that, for them, these seven statements about marriage would remain *incomplete* as long as they did not also include a statement that marriage could only be between a man and a woman. Others in the group were equally insistent that *their* understanding of marriage required that such an additional statement *not* be included. Beyond this, though, everyone in the group would have added more to their own description of Christian marriage. These are, however, the points on which we could all agree. They are areas where we found common ground even while there were many other points — some quite significant and apparently intractable — where we continued to disagree. What these seven points represent, then, is our collective answer to the question *what else* is Christian marriage apart from a ground for conflict over the issue of same gender unions. We do not see this answer as the final one, though. We pray, in fact, that it is only the beginning.

So this is it. For 14 months, eight committed Christians went on a journey together. We struggled to listen to each other, to honor each other, and to seek the Christ in each other as we also sought to work together to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit in discovering what we as a church needed now to learn about Christian marriage. This was not always easy. Sometimes it was even quite painful, but we kept talking. More important still, we kept listening. We believe that somewhere in all of this there is a way ahead.

A Way Ahead: Towards an Open Conversation about Marriage

by

The Rev. Dr. Caroline J. Addington Hall

INTRODUCTION

This guide is provided as a suggestion for congregations who are ready to engage in a conversation about Christian marriage. This is a subject that has deep resonances for all of us, and is also an area where Christians differ — same-gender marriage has become a flashpoint for religious and political dissension. A conversation that can bridge the polarizing forces of our culture is healing for those involved and for the wider community. It is, however, a conversation that should be undertaken with a degree of caution and a large dose of prayer.

Ideally a conversation group would be led by two people with some skill in group leadership, and whose viewpoints are known to differ in some area – not necessarily marriage. The leaders must be willing not to attempt to impose their own views upon anyone in the group but to allow and help all members to speak clearly. Every communication recruiting the group members should emphasize that this is not about reaching a common agreement, but about deepening our understanding of the subject and of each other. We recommend that group members sign up in advance, and are asked to make a commitment to attend the entire seven weeks. The broader the range of opinions you can enroll, the richer the experience will be. An ideal group size will be 6-8 people plus two leaders. You may also wish to have a note-taker so that you can recapture the conversation.

The group agreements listed on page 5 of the Marriage Task Force Report provide the groundwork for group safety. It is the responsibility of the group leaders to ensure that these are kept to, and to pay special attention to the needs of those who are the “minority voice” at any given time.

The structure that follows is a suggestion based on the experience of the Marriage Task Force, reduced to fit within a 90 minute weekly meeting. It may be necessary to completely jettison, at least for a while, the proposed structure in order to meet the needs of the group members. This is where the skill of the group leaders and the guidance of the Holy Spirit take over.

OUTLINE

Week One: Experiences of Marriage

Week Two: Experiences of the Bible

Week Three: What does the Bible say about Marriage?

Week Four: What have Theologians said about Marriage?

Week Five: Is Marriage a Human Social Institution or God-Given?

Week Six: What is Holy about Holy Matrimony?

Week Seven: I Believe, We Believe

WEEK ONE: EXPERIENCES OF MARRIAGE

This is the first group meeting so it is important that firm foundations are laid. To provide maximum safety the group leaders will have had to set the room up beforehand, provided hospitality and prayed for the group and each member in advance.

Even though most people will know each other this is a new journey. After an opening prayer, begin by introducing and reviewing the group agreements:

1. *Let each person speak until they are finished.*
2. *As you listen, look for the points where you connect with the person.*
3. *Listen especially for the goodness in the person.*
4. *As you listen, when you find yourself reacting to what you are hearing with resistance, hostility, skepticism, or anger, before responding, ask yourself if this is a reaction to what is happening here and now, or a past hurt. Ask the person to tell you a little bit about why what they just said is important to them.*
5. *If at any point what is happening in the group either (a) does not feel safe to you, (b) has changed in tone in a way that seems to be undermining the process, (c) seems either to have stalled, become blocked, or begun to circle endlessly around the same issue, or (d) in any other way appears to have gone off track, you have permission to ask that we as a group stop and put on our other hat as group process consultants. As best you can describe the problem you see. If you can't do this but just sense something wrong, say this and ask us to help you in assessing the problem. Then ask us what we as a group would suggest that we do to get over this impasse.*

The group may wish to make changes or add other agreements such as starting on time, ending on time, confidentiality etc. It is helpful to have the agreements on newsprint on the wall at every group meeting.

Invite people to share their experiences of marriage throughout their life. It may be helpful to have one of the leaders start in order to model talking about childhood experiences, adolescent hopes and fears, adult experiences and current thinking.

You may not have enough time for deep sharing, depending on the size of the group and how long it took to review group agreements. You might choose to defer some sharing until the next meeting or *if necessary* to start by having deep sharing in pairs or triads and then report back to the large group areas of similarity and difference.

Thank everyone for their honesty and the depth of their sharing (provided of course that they have been honest and deep!). Close with a prayer.

Supplies needed: Newsprint with group agreements

Homework: Reflect on your experiences of the Bible.

WEEK TWO: EXPERIENCES OF THE BIBLE

This session will begin as always with prayer and a review of the group agreements. Are they still okay? Are there reflections on the previous week's meeting?

If the previous session did not allow time for everyone to share their experiences of marriage this is the time to continue. Again start with a leader to model talking about childhood experiences, adolescent hopes and fears, adult experiences and current thinking. Once everyone has had a chance to share, take a few moments for silence and then ask for reflections.

Only when everyone has had a chance to share their experiences of marriage is it time to turn to the second question – how have you experienced the Bible? This will continue to deepen the group's level of trust and also lays the ground for a discussion of the Bible's approach to marriage which will follow next week. Here are some questions you can invite group members to reflect on:

1. *What was your first memory of hearing the Bible? How old were you? Who read it or quoted it to you? What was the context?*
2. *How important was the Bible to you as a child? Did you hear it often? Occasionally? Never?*
3. *How about when you were a teenager or young adult — how was the Bible viewed by those close to you, your family and friends? With reverence? With ridicule? Or was it entirely off the horizon?*
4. *Did you ever have the Bible quoted to you in a way that hurt you?*
5. *Did you ever have a specific experience of the Bible that you found distinctly life-giving?*
6. *Did you ever have an experience that dramatically changed how you viewed the Bible?— something that either shook your faith in it **or else** something that caused you to view it with new appreciation?*

Ideally everyone will share in the whole group – you may want to have a time limit for each person. It is helpful to complete this sharing by the end of the meeting rather than let it flow into next week. Because of time constraints the leaders may choose to invite sharing first in dyads, and then a briefer sharing in the whole group.

Allow time at the end of the meeting for the group to reflect on what worked well and how they might want to do things differently at the next meeting.

(Close with prayer.)

Supplies: Group agreements, list of Bible passages for next week (one for each person).

Homework: Read the Bible passages in preparation for next week. Bring along any additional passages that relate to marriage and are important to you.

WEEK THREE: WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT MARRIAGE?

After an opening prayer, invite the group's reflections. How have the first two sessions been for them? Are there any concerns that need to be voiced?

Then turn your attention to Bible passages. We have all been trained to hear the Bible in specific ways. The intention here is to try to listen to what the verse is saying, not what you have been taught it is saying – to try to listen with new ears open to the possibility that it may be saying something different from what you expect. With each verse invite the group to reach agreement about what it says. If no agreement is possible then record the two (or more) opinions. Record them on flipchart paper with two columns – one headed “Some Think” and the other “All Agree”.

This is an important test of the idea that we are not trying to force any one perspective but allow an open conversation. Group leaders will want to be very sensitive to make sure that every member's opinion is truly represented.

Verses you might include:

Genesis 1:27-31	Matthew 19:1-12
Genesis 20:1-14	Luke 20:27-36
Genesis 29:16-30:6	1 Corinthians 7:1-16
Nehemiah 13:23-27	Ephesians 5:21-33
Jeremiah 29:1-9	1 Timothy 5:3-10
Malachi 2:14-16	

For a complete list of the verses that the Marriage Task Force considered, and their statements see Appendix A of the Report on page 26. This took two meetings to complete so you will want to choose a shorter list! It is valuable to get a range of the Biblical witness on marriage – for example, its social form changes from the Patriarchs' polygamy to the monogamy assumed by the time of Jesus.

Listen for those who have a minority opinion and thank them for speaking up. Remember to remind the group that this is a conversation and you are not expecting everyone to reach agreement. Neither are you asking anyone to change their minds.

Make sure you allow time at the end of the meeting for people to reflect on their experience – were there surprises? Things that didn't get covered? Does everyone feel heard and respected?

Supplies: Flipchart and pens

Homework: Read the Introduction to From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion and Law in the Western Tradition by John Witte, Jr. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997) pp 1-15. As it is less than 10% of the book you can copy it for everyone.

WEEK FOUR: WHAT HAVE THEOLOGIANS SAID ABOUT MARRIAGE?

As usual you will want to start with providing an opportunity for people to talk about last week, and also about how this process is going for them. This is the halfway point in the group and some people may be feeling uncomfortable – check that everyone has had an opportunity to say what they need to say before introducing the material for this week.

This material can seem dry. Prepare in advance by placing the following four statements (printed as large as you can and at least double spaced) on sheets on the wall:

The *Catholic sacramental model* of the mid-twelfth century...came to treat marriage and the family in a threefold manner — at once as a natural, contractual, and sacramental unit.... The temporal union of body, soul, and mind within the marital estate symbolized the eternal union between Christ and His Church, and brought sanctifying grace to the couple, the church, and the community.... Though a sacrament and a sound way of Christian living, marriage, however, was not considered to be particularly spiritually edifying. Marriage was more of a remedy for sin than a recipe for righteousness.⁸

Marriage, *Luther* and his colleagues taught, was a social estate of the earthly kingdom of creation, not a sacred estate of the heavenly kingdom of redemption. Though divinely ordained, marriage was directed primarily to human ends, to the fulfilling of “uses” in the lives of the individual and of society. Marriage revealed to persons their sin and their need for God’s marital gift.... As part of the earthly kingdom, marriage was subject to the state, not the church. Civil law, not canon law, was to govern marriage.... Civil marriage courts replaced church courts.... Marriage was for them the community of the couple in the present, not their sacramental union in the life to come. Where that community was broken, for one of a number of specific reasons (such as adultery or desertion), the couple could sue for divorce.⁹

This *Calvinist covenantal model* mediated both sacramental and contractual understandings of marriage. On the one hand, this covenantal model confirmed the sacred and sanctifying qualities of marriage without ascribing to its sacramental functions. Marriage was regarded as a holy and loving fellowship, a compelling image of the bond between Yahweh and His elect, between Christ and His church. But marriage was no sacrament, for it confirmed no divine promise. On the other hand this covenantal model confirmed the contractual and consensual qualities of marriage without subjecting it to the personal preferences of the parties. Marriage depended for its validity and utility on the voluntary consent of the parties. But marriage was more than a contract, for God was the third party to every marriage covenant, and God set its basic terms in the order and law of creation.¹⁰

⁸ John Witte, Jr. *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion and Law in the Western Tradition* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997) pp. 3-4.

⁹ Ibid, pp. 5 & 6.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 8.

The *Anglican tradition*, particularly during the Tudor and Stuart periods from circa 1540 to 1640, brought forth a *commonwealth model* of marriage. This model embraced the sacramental, social, and covenantal models but went beyond them. Marriage was at once a gracious symbol of the divine, a social unit of the earthly kingdom, and a solemn covenant with one's spouse.¹¹

Give everyone two colored pens (e.g. red and green), and ask them to underline in green the things that speak to them in each statement and in red the things they find untrue or disagreeable.

When everyone has finished you can use this as the basis for a conversation.

Here are two possible ways to integrate this material:

1. Look at the Marriage Service in the Book of Common Prayer (p.423) – do you see elements of any of these theological models in the service?
2. For each model of marriage, try to come up with a consensus on what is helpful and is in line with our current thinking. Record this on a flip chart – if you can't reach consensus, record all the differing views, working to articulate where the areas of agreement or difference lie.

As usual finish the meeting with a time for reflection: How is it going? Is there anything that needs to be expressed? Are group members feeling comfortable/uncomfortable? Does the group need to change course in any way?

Supplies: the four statements printed BIG and double spaced. Two different colored pens for each person. Flipchart. BCPs.

Homework: read Marriage, a History by Stephanie Coontz, chapters 3,4,5,8,9.¹² It would be best if everyone read all of this but it's a lot so you may want to assign chapters and ask people to be prepared to share about their chapter.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 8-9.

¹² Stephanie Coontz, Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage, (New York: Penguin, 2006)

WEEK FIVE: IS MARRIAGE A HUMAN SOCIAL INSTITUTION OF GOD-GIVEN?

As usual, open with prayer and then take time for checking in and reflection on the experience of the group. Did they have any further thoughts after last week? Is anything especially fascinating? Especially challenging?

Invite those with chapter assignments to talk about the chapters, in numerical order. After each chapter has been presented invite brief discussion:

What changes, if any, happened in marriage during the period covered?

What aspects of contemporary marriage do you see in the historic descriptions?

Does anything surprise you or particularly catch your attention?

You will need to limit the discussion – perhaps a maximum of 10 minutes to consider each chapter, because once the material from the reading has been covered, here's the big question:

Coontz says: "Marriage is a social invention, unique to humans." The BCP says: "The bond and covenant of marriage was established by God in Creation." How are we to fit these two statements together? Is there a way in which we can embrace them both, or must we choose one or the other?

This is A Big Question and it will be okay for it to run into next week's session. However it is important that everyone leaves feeling heard and safe. You may want to invite everyone to give their initial response before any discussion happens. Listen for those who are in a minority and thank them for speaking up. This is a good time to remind the group that this is a conversation and you are not expecting everyone to reach agreement. Neither are you asking anyone to change their minds.

Close with prayer.

Supplies: Copies of The Big Question

Homework: Coontz Chapters 16 and 17

WEEK SIX: WHAT IS HOLY ABOUT HOLY MATRIMONY?

After last week, the group is dealing with the question which carries so much charge for some of us. This is a good time to remind people about the group agreements and thank everyone for being so present and honest. Then go around the group and ask them to share how the conversation is going for them. What is especially challenging? What is especially helpful?

Now there's time to revisit The Big Question from last week:

Coontz says: "Marriage is a social invention, unique to humans." The BCP says: "The bond and covenant of marriage was established by God in Creation." How are we to fit these two statements together? Is there a way in which we can embrace them both, or must we choose one or the other?

Can you reach consensus? Are there two views? If so, articulate these clearly on newsprint. Make sure that everyone agrees with one or the other. If necessary, create a third. This careful articulation can be laborious but it is important in hearing each other. Marriage is a complex and emotional subject. By articulating our beliefs clearly and carefully, we clarify and change our own ideas at the same time that we come to appreciate someone else's viewpoint.

Time is moving on and you will have to make decisions about whether you:

1. Discuss the chapters from Coontz about contemporary marriage, and/or
2. Begin to talk about what makes Christian marriage different from secular marriage.

Invite members to share about a marriage they have observed or experienced which was "holy". What were its special qualities?

What puts the Holy in Holy Matrimony?

What does our faith tradition have to tell us about the qualities of a holy marriage?

How is this relevant to us today?

With just one week left, this is a good time to ask the group what they need to feel that the conversation is "wrapped up" for now... of course it will be ongoing, but there needs to be a feeling of completion by the end of next week.

Supplies: Flipchart and pens

Homework: There's no homework for next week but some of the group may like to read Sacred Unions: A New Guide to Lifelong Commitment, Thomas E. Breidenthal. It's a fairly easy read and provides one perspective on living marriage as integral to your faith journey.

WEEK SEVEN: I BELIEVE, WE BELIEVE

It's wrap up time. What your group needs at this point only you can discern. You will want to complete leftovers from last week. You will want to give everyone time to thank each other and talk about what the group has meant to them.

Here are some ideas:

- Create a list of qualities of a holy marriage (can everyone agree to these)?
- Consider the following excerpt from General Convention Resolution 2000-D039¹³

Resolved, That we acknowledge that while the issues of human sexuality are not yet resolved, there are currently couples in the Body of Christ and in this Church who are living in marriage and couples in the Body of Christ and in this Church who are living in other life-long committed relationships; and be it further Resolved, That we expect such relationships will be characterized by fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, careful, honest communication, and the holy love which enables those in such relationships to see in each other the image of God;

Does this reflect the beliefs of your group? Where would they differ?

- Develop a statement about Christian marriage to guide people interested in getting married in your church.
- Write a paragraph together to go in the congregation's newsletter telling about this conversation.
- Celebrate! Close with a Eucharist together.

¹³ http://www.episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/acts/acts_resolution.pl?resolution=2000-D039

view the world through *our* eyes. God went so far as “to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us” (BCP p. 362). For us, of course, such love will always be much more mundane in addition to being far, far less perfect. More than anything else, though, I believe that such a love will always involve listening — listening at a very deep level, listening without judging, listening even when you disagree. Listening never requires agreement. Listen long enough, though, and I believe that, even as the disagreement continues, listening and love will become indistinguishable.

The Task Force on the Theology of Marriage tried to make such listening the center of its theological method, which means that we tried to make love the main tool of our inquiry. We did this, first, by listening closely to scripture. We did it further by listening closely to our tradition. We had intended also to try to listen closely to how the Holy Spirit was guiding us in our contemporary culture, but because we were determined to listen to each other above all else, we found the Spirit guiding us to listen to the concerns of one of our colleagues instead. As it turned out, it was in *that* process that the Spirit eventually led us to find the areas of our common agreement.

It is my personal hope that, in this period of increasing division both in our church and in our world, we in the Episcopal Church can become a beacon of God’s love by showing that it is possible to love not only those who are closest to us but also those who are “on the other side,” those with whom we disagree. More than anything else, though, that means being willing to listen to them. No matter what, to listen. That is the larger story of this Task Force. We all learned that such a thing is possible. It is not easy, but it *is* possible.

I want especially to thank the extraordinary individuals who signed on to take part in all this: Caroline Hall, Michael Ferrito, Fred Heard, Lawrence Robles, Judith Sato, Marilyn Westerkamp, and Julie Zinstmaster. Every one of them gave fully not only of their time but also of their hearts. There are two who deserve special recognition, though. The first is Caroline Hall. It was she who distilled the long and complicated process of the Task Force into the elegant seven week program she calls “Towards an Open Conversation about Marriage,” a program that can be easily used by any parish wishing to begin a similar ground-breaking discussion among themselves. Finally, I want to thank Julie Zinstmaster. Somehow Julie managed to take detailed and careful notes of every meeting while also always remaining a wise and active contributor to the discussion. I am deeply grateful to every one of these seven individuals. Their willingness to listen to God, to listen to the councils of their hearts, and always also to listen to each other, was truly transforming. To witness something as remarkable and sacred as this changes a person. It changed me.

— Ernest Boyer

APPENDIX A: THE BIBLICAL TEXTS ON MARRIAGE THAT THE MARRIAGE TASK FORCE CONSIDERED AND THE CONCLUSIONS THEY REACHED

What follows are the 22 scriptural passages that the Task Force read during its consideration of marriage in the Bible. Most are quoted in their entirety. The statements in bold type that follow each passage are the consensus statements that the group composed to summarize the agreements that grew from the discussion of each text. In the one passage where the group ended divided, both opinions are noted.

OLD TESTAMENT

Genesis 1:27-31

²⁷ So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. ²⁸God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.' ²⁹God said, 'See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. ³⁰And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.' And it was so. ³¹God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

While this passage does not specifically refer to marriage, it is a statement about who we are as humans and our role in creation, which includes procreation.

Genesis 2:18-25

¹⁸ Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.' ¹⁹So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. ²⁰The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. ²¹So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. ²²And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. ²³Then the man said, 'This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.' ²⁴Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. ²⁵And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

This passage does not specifically mention marriage, but prefigures marriage (as an idealized precursor) that some feel does not have to be as rigidly interpreted as when it was written.

Genesis 20:1-14

²⁰ From there Abraham journeyed towards the region of the Negeb, and settled between Kadesh and Shur. While residing in Gerar as an alien, ²Abraham said of his wife Sarah, 'She is my sister.' And King Abimelech of Gerar sent and took Sarah. ³But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night, and said to him, 'You are about to die because of the woman whom you have taken; for she is a married woman.'

⁴Now Abimelech had not approached her; so he said, 'Lord, will you destroy an innocent people? ⁵Did he not himself say to me, "She is my sister"? And she herself said, "He is my brother." I did this in the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands.' ⁶Then God said to him in the dream, 'Yes, I know that you did this in the integrity of your heart; furthermore it was I who kept you from sinning against me. Therefore I did not let you touch her. ⁷Now then, return the man's wife; for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you shall live. But if you do not restore her, know that you shall surely die, you and all that are yours.'

⁸ So Abimelech rose early in the morning, and called all his servants and told them all these things; and the men were very much afraid. ⁹Then Abimelech called Abraham, and said to him, 'What have you done to us? How have I sinned against you, that you have brought such great guilt on me and my kingdom? You have done things to me that ought not to be done.' ¹⁰And Abimelech said to Abraham, 'What were you thinking of, that you did this thing?' ¹¹Abraham said, 'I did it because I thought, There is no fear of God at all in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife. ¹²Besides, she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife. ¹³And when God caused me to wander from my father's house, I said to her, "This is the kindness you must do me: at every place to which we come, say of me, He is my brother." ' ¹⁴Then Abimelech took sheep and oxen, and male and female slaves, and gave them to Abraham, and restored his wife Sarah to him.

Even though this passage is clearly talking about the institution of marriage, it reflects a very different view than the current understanding of the institution of marriage.

Genesis 24 (abridged)

24 Now Abraham was old, well advanced in years; and the Lord had blessed Abraham in all things. ²Abraham said to his servant, the oldest of his house, who had charge of all that he had, 'Put your hand under my thigh ³and I will make you swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and earth, that you will not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I live, ⁴but will go to my country and to my kindred and get a wife for my son Isaac.' ⁵The servant said to him, 'Perhaps the woman may not be willing to follow me to this land; must I then take your son back to the land from which you came?' ⁶Abraham said to him, 'See to it that you do not take my son back there. ⁷The Lord, the God of heaven, who took me from my father's house and from the land of my birth, and who spoke to me and swore to me, "To your offspring I will give this land", he will send his angel before you; you shall take a wife for my son from there. ⁸But if the woman is not willing to follow you, then you will be free from this oath of mine; only you must not take my son back there.' ⁹So the servant put his hand under the thigh of Abraham his master and swore to him concerning this matter.

¹⁰ Then the servant took ten of his master's camels and departed, taking all kinds of choice gifts from his master; and he set out and went to Aram-naharaim, to the city of Nahor. ¹¹He made the camels kneel down outside the city by the well of water; it was towards evening, the time when women go out to draw water. ¹²And he said, 'O Lord, God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today and show steadfast love to my master Abraham. ¹³I am standing here by the spring of water, and the daughters of the townspeople are coming out to draw water. ¹⁴Let the girl to whom I shall say, "Please offer your jar that I may drink", and who shall say, "Drink, and I will water your camels"—let her be the one whom you have appointed for your servant Isaac. By this I shall know that you have shown steadfast love to my master.'

¹⁵ Before he had finished speaking, there was Rebekah, who was born to Bethuel son of Milcah, the wife of Nahor, Abraham's brother, coming out with her water-jar on her shoulder. ¹⁶The girl was very fair to look upon, a virgin whom no man had known. She went down to the spring, filled her jar, and came up. ¹⁷Then the servant ran to meet her and said, 'Please let me sip a little water from your jar.' ¹⁸'Drink, my lord,' she said, and quickly lowered her jar upon her hand and gave him a drink. ¹⁹When she had finished giving him a drink, she said, 'I will draw for your camels also, until they have finished drinking.' ²⁰So she quickly emptied her jar into the trough and ran again to the well to draw, and she drew for all his camels. ²¹The man gazed at her in silence to learn whether or not the Lord had made his journey successful.

22 When the camels had finished drinking, the man took a gold nose-ring weighing a half-shekel, and two bracelets for her arms weighing ten gold shekels, ²³and said, 'Tell me whose daughter you are. Is there room in your father's house for us to spend the night?' ²⁴She said to him, 'I am the daughter of Bethuel son of Milcah, whom she bore to Nahor.' ²⁵She added, 'We have plenty of straw and fodder and a place to spend the night.' ²⁶The man bowed his head and worshipped the Lord ²⁷and said, 'Blessed be the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who has not forsaken his steadfast love and his faithfulness towards my master. As for me, the Lord has led me on the way to the house of my master's kin.'

28 Then the girl ran and told her mother's household about these things. ²⁹Rebekah had a brother whose name was Laban; and Laban ran out to the man, to the spring. ³⁰As soon as he had seen the nose-ring, and the bracelets on his sister's arms, and when he heard the words of his sister Rebekah, 'Thus the man spoke to me', he went to the man; and there he was, standing by the camels at the spring. ³¹He said, 'Come in, O blessed of the Lord. Why do you stand outside when I have prepared the house and a place for the camels?' ³²So the man came into the house; and Laban unloaded the camels, and gave him straw and fodder for the camels, and water to wash his feet and the feet of the men who were with him. ³³Then food was set before him to eat; but he said, 'I will not eat until I have told my errand.' He said, 'Speak on.'

...

50 Then Laban and Bethuel answered, 'The thing comes from the Lord; we cannot speak to you anything bad or good. ⁵¹Look, Rebekah is before you; take her and go, and let her be the wife of your master's son, as the Lord has spoken.'

52 When Abraham's servant heard their words, he bowed himself to the ground before the Lord. ⁵³And the servant brought out jewellery of silver and of gold, and garments, and gave them to Rebekah; he also gave to her brother and to her mother costly ornaments. ⁵⁴Then he and the men who were with him ate and drank, and they spent the night there. When they rose in the morning, he said, 'Send me back to my master.' ⁵⁵Her brother and her mother said, 'Let the girl remain with us a while, at least ten days; after that she may go.' ⁵⁶But he said to them, 'Do not delay me, since the Lord has made my journey successful; let me go, that I may go to my master.' ⁵⁷They said, 'We will call the girl, and ask her.' ⁵⁸And they called Rebekah, and said to her, 'Will you go with this man?' She said, 'I will.' ⁵⁹So they sent away their sister Rebekah and her nurse along with Abraham's servant and his men. ⁶⁰And they blessed Rebekah and said to her, 'May you, our sister, become thousands of myriads; may your offspring gain possession of the gates of their foes.' ⁶¹Then Rebekah and her maids rose up, mounted the camels, and followed the man; thus the servant took Rebekah, and went his way.

62 Now Isaac had come from Beer-lahai-roi, and was settled in the Negeb. ⁶³Isaac went out in the evening to walk in the field; and looking up, he saw camels coming. ⁶⁴And Rebekah looked up, and when she saw Isaac, she slipped quickly from the camel, ⁶⁵and said to the servant, 'Who is the man over there, walking in the field to meet us?' The servant said, 'It is my master.' So she took her veil and covered herself. ⁶⁶And the servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. ⁶⁷Then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent. He took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.

This passage demonstrates the marriage customs of the time.

We agree that the bible is giving us a picture of what customs looked like in this period, which included arranged marriage, exchange of property, and parental consent within the context of maintaining tribal cohesiveness.

Genesis 29:16-30:6

¹⁶Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. ¹⁷Leah's eyes were lovely, and Rachel was graceful and beautiful. ¹⁸Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, 'I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.' ¹⁹Laban said, 'It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me.' ²⁰So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her.

²¹Then Jacob said to Laban, 'Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed.' ²²So Laban gathered together all the people of the place, and made a feast. ²³But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob; and he went in to her. ²⁴(Laban gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her maid.) ²⁵When morning came, it was Leah! And Jacob said to Laban, 'What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?' ²⁶Laban said, 'This is not done in our country—giving the younger before the firstborn. ²⁷Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me for another seven years.' ²⁸Jacob did so, and completed her week; then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as a wife. ²⁹(Laban gave his maid Bilhah to his daughter Rachel to be her maid.) ³⁰So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah. He served Laban for another seven years.

³¹When the Lord saw that Leah was unloved, he opened her womb; but Rachel was barren. ³²Leah conceived and bore a son, and she named him Reuben; for she said, 'Because the Lord has looked on my affliction; surely now my husband will love me.' ³³She conceived again and bore a son, and said, 'Because the Lord has heard that I am hated, he has given me this son also'; and she named him Simeon. ³⁴Again she conceived and bore a son, and said, 'Now this time my husband will be joined to me, because I have borne him three sons'; therefore he was named Levi. ³⁵She conceived again and bore a son, and said, 'This time I will praise the Lord'; therefore she named him Judah; then she ceased bearing.

³⁰When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she envied her sister; and she said to Jacob, 'Give me children, or I shall die!' ²Jacob became very angry with Rachel and said, 'Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?' ³Then she said, 'Here is my maid Bilhah; go in to her, that she may bear upon my knees and that I too may have children through her.' ⁴So she gave him her maid Bilhah as a wife; and Jacob went in to her. ⁵And Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a son. ⁶Then Rachel said, 'God has judged me, and has also heard my voice and given me a son'; therefore she named him Dan.

This passage reinforces such customs of marriage of the period as the giving away of a daughter and the importance of children, descendants, and inheritance. Within the patriarchal culture of the time, it clearly affirms as normative the importance of polygamy, including concubines.

This is also the first time love comes up in a relationship.

2 Samuel 11: 2-17 and 12:7-10

11 ²It happened, late one afternoon, when David rose from his couch and was walking about on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; the woman was very beautiful. ³David sent someone to inquire about the woman. It was reported, 'This is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite.' ⁴So David sent messengers to fetch her, and she came to him, and he lay with her. (Now she was purifying herself after her period.) Then she returned to her house. ⁵The woman conceived; and she sent and told David, 'I am pregnant.'

⁶So David sent word to Joab, 'Send me Uriah the Hittite.' And Joab sent Uriah to David. ⁷When Uriah came to him, David asked how Joab and the people fared, and how the war was going. ⁸Then David said to Uriah, 'Go down to your house, and wash your feet.' Uriah went out of the king's house, and there followed him a present from the king. ⁹But Uriah slept at the entrance of the king's house with all the servants of his lord, and did not go down to his house. ¹⁰When they told David, 'Uriah did not go down to his house', David said to Uriah, 'You have just come from a journey. Why did you not go down to your

house?' ¹¹Uriah said to David, 'The ark and Israel and Judah remain in booths; and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field; shall I then go to my house, to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife? As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do such a thing.' ¹²Then David said to Uriah, 'Remain here today also, and tomorrow I will send you back.' So Uriah remained in Jerusalem that day. On the next day, ¹³David invited him to eat and drink in his presence and made him drunk; and in the evening he went out to lie on his couch with the servants of his lord, but he did not go down to his house.

¹⁴In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab, and sent it by the hand of Uriah. ¹⁵In the letter he wrote, 'Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, so that he may be struck down and die.' ¹⁶As Joab was besieging the city, he assigned Uriah to the place where he knew there were valiant warriors. ¹⁷The men of the city came out and fought with Joab; and some of the servants of David among the people fell. Uriah the Hittite was killed as well.

12 7 Nathan said to David, 'You are the man! Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: I anointed you king over Israel, and I rescued you from the hand of Saul; ⁸I gave you your master's house, and your master's wives into your bosom, and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah; and if that had been too little, I would have added as much more. ⁹Why have you despised the word of the Lord, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. ¹⁰Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, for you have despised me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.

Nathan is taking on God's voice to express to David an affirmation of the ancient Hebrew view that polygamy is an institution accepted, even encouraged, by God.

Notable also is that this passage interprets adultery as a property violation, akin to theft.

Nehemiah 13: 23-27

²³In those days also I saw Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab; ²⁴and half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and they could not speak the language of Judah, but spoke the language of various peoples. ²⁵And I contended with them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair; and I made them take an oath in the name of God, saying, 'You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves. ²⁶Did not King Solomon of Israel sin on account of such women? Among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was beloved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel; nevertheless, foreign women made even him to sin. ²⁷Shall we then listen to you and do all this great evil and act treacherously against our God by marrying foreign women?'

In the post exilic period described here, women had far more influence within the family than was true in the patriarchal period. This is a deviation from earlier customs, and a tradition that may have been carried on until Jesus' day, that the culture of religion came through the mother.

This passage sees marriage as a way of maintaining tribal purity.

Jeremiah 29: 1-9

²⁹These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. ²This was after King Jeconiah, and the queen mother, the court officials, the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the artisans, and the smiths had departed from

Jerusalem. ³The letter was sent by the hand of Elasah son of Shaphan and Gemariah son of Hilkiah, whom King Zedekiah of Judah sent to Babylon to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. It said: ⁴Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. ⁷But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. ⁸For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, ⁹for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the Lord.

This passage affirms the importance of marriage and family as a basic core unit of civilization. It also affirms the importance of the family going outwards to community building.

This is a prophetic statement offering another way to live given the situation that they are in. The message is: do not give up hope, I am still your God.

The passage also indicates that God is not connected to a particular geographical area or place. God can be found everywhere.

Hosea 1:2-9 and 2:14-3:5

1 ² When the Lord first spoke through Hosea, the Lord said to Hosea, 'Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord.' ³So he went and took Gomer daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son.

4 And the Lord said to him, 'Name him Jezreel; for in a little while I will punish the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel. ⁵On that day I will break the bow of Israel in the valley of Jezreel.'

6 She conceived again and bore a daughter. Then the Lord said to him, 'Name her Lo-ruhamah, for I will no longer have pity on the house of Israel or forgive them. ⁷But I will have pity on the house of Judah, and I will save them by the Lord their God; I will not save them by bow, or by sword, or by war, or by horses, or by horsemen.'

8 When she had weaned Lo-ruhamah, she conceived and bore a son. ⁹Then the Lord said, 'Name him Lo-ammi, for you are not my people and I am not your God.'

2 ¹⁴ Therefore, I will now persuade her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her.

¹⁵ From there I will give her her vineyards, and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. There she shall respond as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt. ¹⁶On that day, says the Lord, you will call me, 'My husband', and no longer will you call me, 'My Baal'. ¹⁷For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and they shall be mentioned by name no more. ¹⁸I will make for you a covenant on that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety. ¹⁹And I will take you for my wife for ever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. ²⁰I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord. ²¹ On that day I will answer, says the Lord, I will answer the heavens and they shall answer the earth; ²² and the earth shall answer the grain, the wine, and the oil, and they shall answer Jezreel; ²³ and I will sow him for myself in the land. And I will have pity on Lo-ruhamah, and I will say to Lo-ammi, 'You are my people'; and he shall say, 'You are my God.'

3 The Lord said to me again, 'Go, love a woman who has a lover and is an adulteress, just as the Lord loves the people of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love raisin cakes.' **2**So I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and a homer of barley and a measure of wine. **3**And I said to her, 'You must remain as mine for many days; you shall not play the whore, you shall not have intercourse with a man, nor I with you.' **4**For the Israelites shall remain many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or pillar, without ephod or teraphim. **5**Afterwards the Israelites shall return and seek the Lord their God, and David their king; they shall come in awe to the Lord and to his goodness in the latter days.

This passage is not primarily about marriage but is about the covenantal relationship between God and God's people. However, to the extent that we aim towards a covenantal marriage, God's fidelity could be held up as a model for us.

Malachi 2:14-16

14You ask, 'Why does he not?' Because the Lord was a witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. **15**Did not one God make her? Both flesh and spirit are his. And what does the one God desire? Godly offspring. So look to yourselves, and do not let anyone be faithless to the wife of his youth. **16**For I hate divorce, says the Lord, the God of Israel, and covering one's garment with violence, says the Lord of hosts. So take heed to yourselves and do not be faithless.

This passage is using covenant as a way of constructing relationships between humans in general and between human beings and God. It starts with God's covenant with Levi (an attack on priests). We have a covenant with our ancestors. Marriage becomes a covenant. Divorce becomes a marker for all the other breaks of covenants.

NEW TESTAMENT

Matthew 5:27-32

27 'You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery." **28**But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. **29**If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. **30**And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

31 'It was also said, "Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce." **32**But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

This passage reflects that the social situation had changed where divorce can lead to poverty. Jesus is providing a protection for women. Jesus is holding men to a higher standard in two ways: one is that a man is not allowed to divorce unless his wife is unfaithful, and a second is that lust after a woman itself is adultery.

Matthew 19:1-12

19 When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went to the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. **2**Large crowds followed him, and he cured them there.

3 Some Pharisees came to him, and to test him they asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?' ⁴He answered, 'Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning "made them male and female", ⁵and said, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh"? ⁶So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.' ⁷They said to him, 'Why then did Moses command us to give a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her?' ⁸He said to them, 'It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but at the beginning it was not so. ⁹And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery.'

10 His disciples said to him, 'If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.' ¹¹But he said to them, 'Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. ¹²For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.'

This passage reaffirms the basic point of divorce in Matthew 5, but extends the concept of marriage through Jesus' reference to Genesis -- God's creation of male and female; that they are joined to become one flesh and that God does the uniting.

Beyond that, it presents an understanding of divorce in Mosaic law as an accommodation to man's hardness of heart, but not God's original purpose.

Jesus also affirms the non-married, celibate state.

Mark 10:1-12

10 [Jesus] left that place and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan. And crowds again gathered around him; and, as was his custom, he again taught them.

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

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

This passage agrees with the parallel passage in Matthew in the affirmation of marriage as one flesh joined by God, but differs in that it does not make any reference to unchastity, and so identifies no explicit grounds for divorce, and more significantly recognizes the possibility of a wife divorcing her husband as well as a husband divorcing his wife, both of which are identified as adultery.

Luke 20:27-36

27 Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him ²⁸and asked him a question, 'Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. ²⁹Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; ³⁰then the second ³¹and the third married her, and so in the same way all

seven died childless. ³²Finally the woman also died. ³³In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her.'

³⁴ Jesus said to them, 'Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; ³⁵but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. ³⁶Indeed they cannot die any more, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection.

This passage reflects that marriage is for this life: it is not eternal and is culturally conditioned.

The Levirate law that is referenced is based on economics and immortality through descendants. The Sadducees are asking for Jesus' response to a possible exaggeration of circumstances, couched within the concept of resurrection.

John 2:1-11 (abridged)

² On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee,.... ¹¹ Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

According to the Gospel of John, Jesus performed his first miracle at a wedding. It was hard for us as a group to see the significance of this passage as it applies to marriage.

Romans 7:1-6

⁷ Do you not know, brothers and sisters—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law is binding on a person only during that person's lifetime? ²Thus a married woman is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives; but if her husband dies, she is discharged from the law concerning the husband. ³Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man, she is not an adulteress.

⁴ In the same way, my friends, you have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God.

⁵While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. ⁶But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we are slaves not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit.

Paul is using the point that marriage is not eternal, which he apparently assumes, as a set up for a larger point regarding the law.

1 Corinthians 7:1-16

⁷ Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: 'It is well for a man not to touch a woman.' ²But because of cases of sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. ³The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband.

⁴For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. ⁵Do not deprive one another except perhaps by agreement for a set time, to devote yourselves to prayer, and then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. ⁶This I say by way of concession, not of command. ⁷I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind.

8 To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am. ⁹But if they are not practicing self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion.

10 To the married I give this command—not I but the Lord—that the wife should not separate from her husband ¹¹(but if she does separate, let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife.

12 To the rest I say—I and not the Lord—that if any believer has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. ¹³And if any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. ¹⁴For the unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through her husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. ¹⁵But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so; in such a case the brother or sister is not bound. It is to peace that God has called you. ¹⁶Wife, for all you know, you might save your husband. Husband, for all you know, you might save your wife.

All in the group believed that Paul’s mindset in this passage is that Christ is going to return within his generation.

Some in the group further believed that, working from this standpoint, Paul presents a new justification for marriage that has not been seen before — that the only reason right now for Christians to marry is to prevent sexual immorality.

Others in the group disagreed with that last point and believed instead that, working from this standpoint, Paul presents the idea that if two people are going to engage in sexual activity it is better to do so within the context of marriage.

All were able to agree on the next point, though, that within this context, Paul makes room for an understanding of sexual expression in equal parts by both men and women. He is also offering his opinion about believers and non-believers who are married. Having an unbelieving spouse is not in itself grounds for divorce but is a valid basis for separation if it is the unbelieving spouse who initiates it.

All were also able to agree that Paul is talking about different groups of people: married, unmarried, believers and unbelievers, and how they should interact with each other. In this he is offering inclusion of unbelievers as a defining element of the Christian community.

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

13 If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ²And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

⁴ Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

8 Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. ⁹For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; ¹⁰but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. ¹¹When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. ¹²For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. ¹³And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

This passage is not about marriage, but about Christian love.

Ephesians 5:21-33

21 Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.

22 Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. ²³For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior. ²⁴Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands.

25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, ²⁷so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish. ²⁸In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, ³⁰because we are members of his body. ³¹For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' ³²This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church. ³³Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband.

Beginning with a basic equality in Christ (vs. 21), Paul goes on to talk about marriage in a way consistent with the patriarchy of his time. He uses language that talks of the obligation of a husband to his wife in terms of love, and the obligation of a wife to her husband in terms of subordination. The passage also makes a metaphorical link between marriage and the relationship between Christ and His church, introducing a spiritual dimension to marriage with the notion that a husband's role should be sacrificial in relation to his wife.

We also noted that this passage has historically been used as a basis for the subordination of women.

1 Timothy 5:3-10

3 Honor widows who are really widows. ⁴If a widow has children or grandchildren, they should first learn their religious duty to their own family and make some repayment to their parents; for this is pleasing in God's sight. ⁵The real widow, left alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day; ⁶but the widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives. ⁷Give these commands as well, so that they may be above reproach. ⁸And whoever does not provide for relatives, and especially for family members, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

9 Let a widow be put on the list if she is not less than sixty years old and has been married only once; ¹⁰she must be well attested for her good works, as one who has brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the saints' feet, helped the afflicted, and devoted herself to doing good in every way.

This passage shows that already in the church there was a clearly recognized alternative to marriage as a spiritual way of life. This passage identifies a post-marriage group

(widows) for their collective benefit to the church and the life of sanctity that they offered to the community.

Hebrews 13:4

⁴Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers.

In this passage, the author implies that the bonds of marriage should be universally respected, and calls for marital fidelity.

1 Peter 2:11-3:12

2 ¹¹Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. ¹²Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.

13 For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, ¹⁴or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. ¹⁵For it is God's will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish. ¹⁶As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. ¹⁷Honour everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

18 Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh. ¹⁹For it is to your credit if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. ²⁰If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, where is the credit in that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. ²¹For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. ²²'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.' ²³When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. ²⁴He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. ²⁵For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

3 Wives, in the same way, accept the authority of your husbands, so that, even if some of them do not obey the word, they may be won over without a word by their wives' conduct, ²when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. ³Do not adorn yourselves outwardly by braiding your hair, and by wearing gold ornaments or fine clothing; ⁴rather, let your adornment be the inner self with the lasting beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in God's sight. ⁵It was in this way long ago that the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves by accepting the authority of their husbands. ⁶Thus Sarah obeyed Abraham and called him lord. You have become her daughters as long as you do what is good and never let fears alarm you.

7 Husbands, in the same way, show consideration for your wives in your life together, paying honor to the woman as the weaker sex, since they too are also heirs of the gracious gift of life—so that nothing may hinder your prayers.

8 Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. ⁹Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called—that you might inherit a blessing. ¹⁰For 'Those who desire life and desire to see good days, let them keep their tongues from evil and their lips from speaking deceit; ¹¹let them turn away from evil and do good; let them seek peace and pursue it. ¹²For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.'

Living within the pagan world, the writer suggests that Christian men and women should express Christian ethical values within the social structure of their time.

This passage also makes explicit the spiritual worth of women.