Christian Marriage in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

A Six-Week Study
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The 220th General Assembly (2012) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) received thirteen overtures on the question of same-gender marriage:

- four sought to amend the definition of marriage in the Book of Order (W-4.9000) in order to provide for marriage between two people of the same gender;
- six called for authoritative interpretations of the church’s constitution to allow for pastoral discretion in presiding at such services; and
- three sought to reaffirm the PC(USA)’s current definition of marriage.

After two days of committee meetings, hours of intense debate in plenary, and elaborate parliamentary procedure, commissioners found themselves without clear consensus. On one matter, however, there seemed to be a general consensus—commissioners shared a desire to help councils of the PC(USA) struggle faithfully with this important question in order to discern the will of God for the church.

In that spirit, the General Assembly instructed the Office of Theology and Worship to prepare a study on Christian marriage in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and to distribute it to all presbyteries and congregations. With this action, the General Assembly called for the PC(USA) to engage in a “season of serious study and discernment” around the meaning of Christian marriage. Presbyteries are asked to report the fruits of this discussion to the Office of the General Assembly at least three months before the 221st General Assembly (2014); the process for reporting is explained in the conclusion of this document.

The Office of Theology and Worship offers this resource to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) with the admonition to the Hebrews—
“Marriage must be honored in every respect” (Hebrews 13:4);

the hope of the Ephesians—
“Christ is our peace. He made both Jews and Gentiles into one group. With his body, he broke down the barrier of hatred that divided us” (Ephesians 2:14);

and the commandment of Jesus—
“Just as I have loved you, so you also must love each other. This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples” (John 13:34–35).

By the grace of God, may it be so.

The Office of Theology and Worship, Draft Review Copy, November 2012
This is a study of what the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has said on Christian marriage. The issue before the PC(USA) is whether to say something new about marriage, specifically concerning same-gender couples. The aim of this study is to equip the PC(USA) for this discussion by giving it a firm foundation in the church’s tradition on marriage.

The intent of this study is threefold:

- to supply primary documents for discussion in an easily accessible format, principally Scripture, The Book of Confessions, the Book of Order, and the Book of Common Worship’s marriage liturgy. (Note: The quotations from The Book of Confessions used in this study have not been altered to conform to contemporary language usage.)
- to offer tools for interpreting those documents within the larger context of the church’s theological tradition; and
- to provide a healthy process for discussing difficult questions in Christian community.

These three aims give shape to the content of each session in the study.

This study is organized around the “Statement on the Gift of Marriage” read in many weddings in Presbyterian churches (Book of Common Worship, 842, 858, 884). These familiar words provide a framework to show the breadth of the Reformed Christian understanding of marriage. (See “Appendix 3: Perspectives on Marriage in Historical Context” to read more about how marriage has been understood in Christian history.)

As the commentary on the marriage liturgy explains:

These words, spoken by the minister, serve three purposes. First, they remind the congregation of why they have gathered. Second, they provide a summary of what the church understands about marriage biblically and theologically by announcing the promises and actions of God in regard to marriage. And third, they provide ethical instruction regarding the responsibilities of marriage, not only for the bride and groom but also for the whole congregation (Supplemental Liturgical Resource 3: Christian Marriage, 90).

We hope that presbyteries, congregations, and sessions that engage in this study will arrive at:

- a common language for speaking about these matters;
- a clearer view of God’s good will for us in marriage;
- a deeper understanding of our tradition and context;
- a better sense of one another’s views; and
- a better way forward for the sake of Christ’s church.
In order to have conversations about marriage that are prayerful, deep, and fruitful, we encourage you to commit to these practices as you talk together:

Heed these words from Scripture: “by speaking the truth with love, let’s grow in every way into Christ . . .” (Ephesians 4:15).

Be present: bring your ideas, beliefs, and convictions with you, and be ready and willing to contribute them to the shared conversation.

Listen well: be attentive, respectful, and patient; ask for clarification when you don't understand.

Speak well: speak with confidence, yet with awareness that others may see things differently; make space for their voices too.

Build the conversation: make connections with previous sessions and with what others have said, so that the conversation grows and deepens as you go.

Practice friendliness: show warmth and kindness to others, and be ready to receive their friendship.

Don't force it: don't try to push an agenda or reach a pre-determined outcome, such as “consensus” or “having good feelings.”

Sometimes good conversations clarify the nature and extent of our disagreements. Good conversation is always a struggle with our own issues and the issues of others. This is not likely your last conversation on Christian marriage. Live in confidence that God will use these words and these times—even when they are difficult—for the building up of the body of Christ.
Main Idea
Marriage in the Reformed tradition is a covenant relationship, witnessed by the community of faith, in which God is an active part.

Background Texts
Scripture:
Genesis 1:24–31 In this first story of creation in Genesis, the origin of male and female is described. This passage has been used by the church to understand marriage as part of the created order and a gift to human beings.

John 2:1–12 The only description of a wedding in the Scriptures, this text has often been used in the church's tradition to say that Jesus honored marriage. The water pots were very large, an allusion to the prophecy of Amos: “The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when the one who plows will overtake the one who gathers, when the one who crushes grapes will overtake the one who sows the seed. The mountains will drip wine, and all the hills will flow with it.”

Statement on the Gift of Marriage:
We gather in the presence of God to give thanks for the gift of marriage, to witness the joining together of [name] and [name], to surround them with our prayers, and to ask God’s blessing upon them, so that they may be strengthened for their life together and nurtured in their love for God.

Commentary on the liturgy for Christian Marriage:
“We gather . . .” The opening paragraph reminds the congregation that they are not passive spectators at the wedding. Theirs is to be an active role. They are to worship God, giving thanks for the gift of marriage. They are to pray for the couple and to express the support of the community of faith by witnessing the couple’s vows.

Westminster Confession of Faith:
Christian marriage is an institution ordained of God, blessed by our Lord Jesus Christ, established and sanctified for the happiness and welfare of mankind, into which spiritual and physical union one man and one woman enter, cherishing a mutual esteem and love, bearing with each other's infirmities and weaknesses, comforting each other in trouble, providing in honesty and industry for each other and for their household, praying for each other, and living together the length of their days as heirs of the grace of life.
Directory for Worship:
(Note: Words or phrases in **bold** pertain to main ideas in this session.)

Marriage is a gift God has given to all humankind for the well-being of the entire human family. Marriage is a civil contract between a woman and a man. For Christians **marriage is a covenant** through which a man and a woman are called to live out together before God their lives of discipleship. In a service of Christian marriage a lifelong commitment is made by a woman and a man to each other, **publicly witnessed and acknowledged by the community of faith.**

*Book of Order, W-4.9001.*

Preparing to Lead
Read this study session and select questions and activities that you will use. What other questions, issues, or themes occur to you from your reflection?

Each session includes a hymn. Provide copies of your congregation’s hymnal. If you do not have a piano or keyboard and someone to play, consider asking someone to record the music on a tape or CD so that the group can sing the hymn.

Gathering
• Provide nametags and pens as people arrive.
• Provide simple refreshments; ask a volunteer to bring refreshments next week.
• Since this is the first session, agree on simple “ground rules” and logistics; e.g., time to begin and end session; location for meetings; welcoming all points of view; confidentiality; speaking with respect; listening for understanding; etc. Encourage participants to bring the study book and Bibles.
• Review format for these sessions: Gathering, Opening Worship, Conversation, and Conclusion.

Opening Worship
Prayer (unison):
Loving God, as Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding feast in Cana, change our sorrow into joy, our weakness into strength, and our fear into hope. Help us to purify our thoughts, measure out our words, and drink deeply of your wisdom. Above all, surprise us with the abundance of your grace, the joy of your Spirit, and the fullness of life that is ours through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Lectio Divina (reflective or prayerful reading):
• Read Genesis 1:24–31 aloud.
• Invite all to reflect for a few minutes in silence.
• After reflection time, invite all to listen for a word or phrase as the passage is read again and reflect on that word or phrase in silence.
• Read the passage a third time, asking all to offer a silent prayer following the reading.
• Invite all who wish to share the word or phrase that spoke most deeply to them.
Prayer:
Loving God, hear our prayers today as we seek to follow you more faithfully:
(speaken prayers may be offered)
Hear us now as we pray together, saying, “Our Father . . .”

Conversation
• Review the background texts (p. 1). Share observations, reflections, and insights on the reading.
• Invite each member of the group briefly to share a story, a moment, a relationship, or an event that helped them identify the meaning of Christian marriage. After all who want to have shared, reflect on common themes or characteristics from these stories.
• Name ways in which marriage is a gift to you and to the human community.
• Read John 2:1–12. Ask: Why is it important that Jesus was present at this wedding? What is the significance of Jesus’ miracle? What do you learn about marriage from this story?

Conclusion
Prayer:
Holy God,
as you have gathered us together
as one body in Christ,
now send us out together
to show and tell good news,
so that all the world may know
the gift of your saving love;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Hymn:
“Though I May Speak” Presbyterian Hymnal 335
Main Idea
In the Reformed tradition, marriage is understood as being part of God’s created order.

Background Texts
Scripture:
Genesis 2:18–25 God’s provision for human companionship and community as part of creation is central to this second story of creation.

Mark 10:7–8 Jesus teaches on marriage by referring back to the story of creation in Genesis 2.

Statement on the Gift of Marriage:
God created us male and female, and gave us marriage so that husband and wife may help and comfort each other, living faithfully together in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, throughout all their days.

Book of Common Worship, 842

Commentary on the liturgy for Christian Marriage:
“God created us male and female . . .” Biblically, marriage has its origins in God’s creation of human beings as male and female, to provide for them steadfast companionship and mutual support (Gen. 2:18–25; Mark 10:7–8)

Supplemental Liturgical Resource 3: Christian Marriage, 90

Confession of 1967:
God has created the peoples of the earth to be one universal family. In his reconciling love, he overcomes the barriers between brothers and breaks down every form of discrimination based on racial or ethnic difference, real or imaginary. The church is called to bring all men to receive and uphold one another as persons in all relationships of life: in employment, housing, education, leisure, marriage, family, church, and the exercise of political rights.

Book of Confessions, 9.44

Directory for Worship:
(Note: Words or phrases in bold pertain to main ideas in this session.)

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Book of Order, W-4.9001
Preparing to Lead
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Each session includes a hymn. Provide copies of your congregation’s hymnal. If you do not have a piano or keyboard and someone to play, consider asking someone to record the music on a tape or CD so that the group can sing the hymn.

Gathering
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• Review format for these sessions: Gathering, Opening Worship, Conversation, and Conclusion.

Opening Worship
Prayer (unison):
Loving God, as Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding feast in Cana, change our sorrow into joy, our weakness into strength, and our fear into hope. Help us to purify our thoughts, measure out our words, and drink deeply of your wisdom. Above all, surprise us with the abundance of your grace, the joy of your Spirit, and the fullness of life that is ours through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Lectio Divina (reflective or prayerful reading):
• Read Genesis 2:18–25 aloud.
• Invite all to reflect for a few minutes in silence.
• After reflection time, invite all to listen for a word or phrase as the passage is read again and reflect on that word or phrase in silence.
• Read the passage a third time, asking all to offer a silent prayer following the reading.
• Invite all who wish to share the word or phrase that spoke most deeply to them.

Prayer:
Loving God, hear our prayers today as we seek to follow you more faithfully:
(spoken prayers may be offered)
Hear us now as we pray together, saying, “Our Father . . .”

Conversation
• Review the background texts (p. 4). Share observations, reflections, and insights on the reading. How would you describe the creation of man and woman in this passage?
• The story of the creation of the woman informs our understanding of God’s gift of marriage. Ask: Why is the story so memorable? What were some of your reflections on that story? Why is companionship central to this story? What does it tell us about God?
• Read Mark 10:7–8. Ask: What does it mean to you that Jesus rehearses words from Genesis as a way to describe marriage? What are the implications of Jesus’ statement “and the two will be one flesh”?

Conclusion

Prayer:

Holy God,
as you have created us for community
and relationship with you,
keep us in covenant with you
and with one another,
so that we may be your faithful people,
redeemed by your love;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Hymn:

“For the Beauty of the Earth,” Presbyterian Hymnal 473
Main Idea
In the Reformed tradition, marriage is understood to be an expression of love.

Background Texts
Scripture:
Song of Songs 1:2–8 A biblical celebration of physical intimacy. The church has had difficulty knowing quite what to do with the Song of Songs, with its celebration of physical intimacy. Often it has been treated allegorically. Although the imagery of this passage can be foreign to the modern reader, the sense of passion still comes through.

1 Corinthians 7:3–4 This passage speaks quite openly about sexual intimacy in marriage within the context of a discussion of singleness and marriage.

Statement on the Gift of Marriage:
God gave us marriage for the full expression of the love between a man and a woman. In marriage a woman and a man belong to each other, and with affection and tenderness freely give themselves to each other.

Book of Common Worship, 842

Commentary on the liturgy for Christian Marriage:
“God gave us marriage for the full expression of the love between a man and a woman …” This is the first of three statements that begin with the refrain, “God gave us …” Marriage, which from a sociological perspective is a product of human society, is also understood theologically to be a good and gracious gift of God. A wedding is the only service of worship in the life of the church where sexuality and sexual union are major themes, and the phrase “the full expression of the love between a man and a woman” acknowledges that fact. In the lifelong covenant of marriage, the sexual relationship between a man and a woman finds its richest physical, emotional, and spiritual expression. “They are no longer two but one flesh” (Mark 10:8). The statement “In marriage a woman and a man belong to each other” further points to the depth of the marriage covenant and echoes the word of Paul in 1 Cor. 7:3–7 regarding the sexual mutuality of marriage.

Supplementary Liturgical Resource 3: Christian Marriage, 90

Second Helvetic Confession:
For marriage (which is the medicine of incontinency, and continency itself) was instituted by the Lord God himself, who blessed it most bountifully, and willed man and woman to cleave one to the other inseparably, and to live together in complete love and concord (Matt. 19:4 ff). Whereupon we know that the apostle said: “Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let
the marriage bed be undefiled” (Heb. 13:4). And again: “If a girl marries, she does not sin” (1 Cor. 7:28). . . . We therefore condemn polygamy, and those who condemn second marriages. 

_Book of Confessions, 5.246_

**Directory for Worship:**
(Nota: Words or phrases in **bold** pertain to main ideas in this session.)

Marriage is a gift God has given to all humankind for the well-being of the entire human family. Marriage is a civil contract between a woman and a man. For Christians marriage is a covenant through which a man and a woman are called to live out together before God their lives of discipleship. In a service of Christian marriage a **lifelong commitment is made by a woman and a man to each other**, publicly witnessed and acknowledged by the community of faith (W-4.9001).

**Preparing to Lead**
Read this study session and select questions and activities that you will use. What other questions, issues, or themes occur to you from your reflection?

Each session includes a hymn. Provide copies of your congregation’s hymnal. If you do not have a piano or keyboard and someone to play, consider asking someone to record the music on a tape or CD so that the group can sing the hymn.

**Gathering**
- Provide nametags and pens as people arrive.
- Provide simple refreshments; ask a volunteer to bring refreshments next week.
- Re-visit “ground rules” and logistics; e.g., time to begin and end session; location for meetings; welcoming all points of view; confidentiality; speaking with respect; listening for understanding; etc. Encourage participants to bring the study book and Bibles.
- Review format for these sessions: Gathering, Opening Worship, Conversation, and Conclusion.

**Opening Worship**

_**Prayer (unison):**_

Loving God, as Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding feast in Cana, change our sorrow into joy, our weakness into strength, and our fear into hope. Help us to purify our thoughts, measure out our words, and drink deeply of your wisdom. Above all, surprise us with the abundance of your grace, the joy of your Spirit, and the fullness of life that is ours through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

_**Lectio Divina (reflective or prayerful reading):**_
- Read 1 Corinthians 7:3–4 aloud.
- Invite all to reflect for a few minutes in silence.
- After reflection time, invite all to listen for a word or phrase as the passage is read again and reflect on that word or phrase in silence.
- Read the passage a third time, asking all to offer a silent prayer following the reading.
- Invite all who wish to share the word or phrase that spoke most deeply to them.
Prayer:
Loving God, hear our prayers today as we seek to follow you more faithfully:
(spooken prayers may be offered)
Hear us now as we pray together, saying, “Our Father . . .”

Conversation
• Review the background texts (p. 7). Share observations, reflections, and insights on the reading.
• Ask: What stood out to you as you read 1 Corinthians 7:3–4? The phrase “The wife doesn't have authority over her own body, but the husband does” has been abused to support the subservience of women. As you heard these verses today, how would you understand this teaching? What does Paul’s admonition for spouses to meet the sexual needs of the other teach us about marriage? Why is physical intimacy so important to the marital relationship?
• Read Song of Songs 1:2–8. Ask: How do you interpret this passage? What words stand out to you? How does the passage make you feel?
• Ask: What similarities and differences do you see between the Song’s description of physical intimacy and 1 Corinthians 7:3–4?

Conclusion
Prayer:
Holy God,
as you have given yourself to us
through your Word made flesh,
teach us, by your Spirit,
to give ourselves for others,
so that our lives may be a true expression
of your generous love;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Hymn:
“Love Divine, All Loves Excelling,” Presbyterian Hymnal 376
Main Idea
In the Reformed tradition, marriage is understood to contribute to the well-being of society.

Background Texts
Scripture:
Genesis 1:28 This passage connects human flourishing with care over all creation.

Deuteronomy 6:1–9 In Deuteronomy we find the Great Commandment, that we should love God with all that we are; this covenant is extended throughout generations.

1 Timothy 5:1–8 This passage speaks of the Christian’s duty to respect, honor, and provide for family.

Statement on the Gift of Marriage:
God gave us marriage for the well-being of human society, for the ordering of family life, and for the birth and nurture of children.

Commentary on the liturgy for Christian Marriage:
“God gave us marriage … for the birth and nurture of children …” This statement affirms the role of marriage in sustaining humankind and the place of marriage as a basic unit of ordered human society. The birth and nurture of children are essential for the continuation of the human race and are an expression of hope and confidence in God’s providential care. Since this statement is part of a general declaration about the church’s understanding of marriage, it is ordinarily appropriate to say these words even if the particular couple being married, for reasons of health, age, or personal choice, are unlikely to have children themselves. At this point in the service, the theological affirmations are about marriage in general. Later in the rite the language will become more focused upon the specific marriage being celebrated this day.

Westminster Confession of Faith:
Marriage is designed for the mutual help of husband and wife; for the safeguarding, undergirding, and development of their moral and spiritual character; for the propagation of children and the rearing of them in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.
Confession of 1967:
Marriage for the Christian has religious as well as civil significance. The distinctive contribution of the church in performing the marriage ceremony is to affirm the divine institution of marriage; to invoke God’s blessing upon those who enter into the marital relationship in accordance with his word; to hear the vows of those who desire to be married; and to assure the married partners of God’s grace within their new relationship.

*Book of Confessions, 6.136*

Directory for Worship:
(Note: Words or phrases in **bold** pertain to main ideas in this session.)

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*Book of Order, W-4.9001*

A service of worship recognizing a civil marriage and confirming it in the community of faith may be appropriate when requested by the couple.

*Book of Order, W-4.9006*

Preparing to Lead
Read this study session and select questions and activities that you will use. What other questions, issues, or themes occur to you from your reflection?

Each session includes a hymn. Provide copies of your congregation’s hymnal. If you do not have a piano or keyboard and someone to play, consider asking someone to record the music on a tape or CD so that the group can sing the hymn.

Gathering
- Provide nametags and pens as people arrive.
- Provide simple refreshments; ask a volunteer to bring refreshments next week.
- Re-visit “ground rules” and logistics; e.g., time to begin and end session; location for meetings; welcoming all points of view; confidentiality; speaking with respect; listening for understanding; etc. Encourage participants to bring the study book and Bibles.
- Review format for these sessions: Gathering, Opening Worship, Conversation, and Conclusion.

Opening Worship
Prayer (unison):
Loving God, as Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding feast in Cana, change our sorrow into joy, our weakness into strength, and our fear into hope. Help us to purify our thoughts, measure out our words, and drink deeply of your wisdom. Above all, surprise us with the abundance of your grace, the joy of your Spirit, and the fullness of life that is ours through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
Lectio Divina (reflective or prayerful reading):
• Read 1 Timothy 5:1–8 aloud.
• Invite all to reflect for a few minutes in silence.
• After reflection time, invite all to listen for a word or phrase as the passage is read again and reflect on that word or phrase in silence.
• Read the passage a third time, asking all to offer a silent prayer following the reading.
• Invite all who wish to share the word or phrase that spoke most deeply to them.

Prayer:
Loving God, hear our prayers today as we seek to follow you more faithfully:
(spesn prayers may be offered)
Hear us now as we pray together, saying, “Our Father . . .”

Conversation
• Review the background texts (p. 10). Share observations, reflections, and insights on the reading.
• Read Genesis 1:28. Ask: How are the ordering of human society and the birth and nurture of children connected? In an age of effective contraception and concerns over overpopulation, how do we practice this command to “be fertile and multiply”?
• Read Deuteronomy 6:1–9. Discuss the connection of keeping covenant with God and multiplying in the land.
• Read 1 Timothy 5:1–8. Ask: How does duty to family and society connect with our understanding of marriage? How can marriage be a good thing for society and for those who are not married? What do good marriages contribute to society?
• The marriage standards of the PC(USA) assume a consistency between the definition of marriage by the state and by the church. The United States now has a patchwork of marriage laws. (See ncss.org/issues-research/human-services/same-sex-marriage-overview.aspx for a summary of marriage laws by state.) Ask: How do we as a church deal with these new differences between marriage as understood by the church and marriage as understood by the state? Is it important that ministers be agents of the state when they officiate at wedding ceremonies? Why or why not? What would it look like for the church to differ from the state in its understanding of marriage?

Conclusion
Prayer:
Holy God,
as you rule the nations
with wisdom and truth,
bring righteousness and justice
to every land and home,
so that all your children may live
according to your love;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Hymn:
“Blest Be the Tie That Binds,” Presbyterian Hymnal 438
Main Idea
In the Reformed tradition, marriage is understood as an image of Christ’s relationship to the church.

Background Texts
Scripture:
Hosea 2:14–23 The image of marriage is a way of understanding the relationship between God and the people of God.

Ephesians 5:21–33 The marriage relationship is used as an analogy that demonstrates the relationship between Christ and the church.

Statement on the Gift of Marriage:
God gave us marriage as a holy mystery in which a man and a woman are joined together, and become one, just as Christ is one with the church.

Commentary on the liturgy for Christian Marriage:
“God gave us marriage as a holy mystery . . .” This statement is based upon Ephesians 5:31–33, in which the relationship between a husband and wife is presented as a profound mystery, analogous to the relationship between Christ and the church. Marriage, therefore, points beyond itself to the redemptive activity of God in Christ.

Confession of 1967:
Biblical visions and images of the rule of Christ, such as a heavenly city, a father’s house, a new heaven and earth, a marriage feast, and an unending day culminate in the image of the kingdom. The kingdom represents the triumph of God over all that resists his will and disrupts his creation. Already God’s reign is present as a ferment in the world, stirring hope in men and preparing the world to receive its ultimate judgment and redemption.

Directory for Worship:
(Note: Words or phrases in bold pertain to main ideas in this session.)

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discipleship. In a service of Christian marriage a lifelong commitment is made by a woman and a man to each other, publicly witnessed and acknowledged by the community of faith.

*Book of Order, W-4.9001*

**Preparing to Lead**

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Each session includes a hymn. Provide copies of your congregation's hymnal. If you do not have a piano or keyboard and someone to play, consider asking someone to record the music on a tape or CD so that the group can sing the hymn.

**Gathering**

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- Provide simple refreshments; ask a volunteer to bring refreshments next week.
- Re-visit “ground rules” and logistics; e.g., time to begin and end session; location for meetings; welcoming all points of view; confidentiality; speaking with respect; listening for understanding; etc. Encourage participants to bring the study book and Bibles.
- Review format for these sessions: Gathering, Opening Worship, Conversation, and Conclusion.

**Opening Worship**

**Prayer (unison):**

Loving God, as Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding feast in Cana, change our sorrow into joy, our weakness into strength, and our fear into hope. Help us to purify our thoughts, measure out our words, and drink deeply of your wisdom. Above all, surprise us with the abundance of your grace, the joy of your Spirit, and the fullness of life that is ours through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

**Lectio Divina (reflective or prayerful reading):**

- Read Ephesians 5:21–33 aloud.
- Invite all to reflect for a few minutes in silence.
- After reflection time, invite all to listen for a word or phrase as the passage is read again and reflect on that word or phrase in silence.
- Read the passage a third time, asking all to offer a silent prayer following the reading.
- Invite all who wish to share the word or phrase that spoke most deeply to them.

**Prayer:**

Loving God, hear our prayers today as we seek to follow you more faithfully:

*(spoken prayers may be offered)*

Hear us now as we pray together, saying, “Our Father . . .”
Conversation
• Review the background texts (p. 13). Share observations, reflections, and insights on the reading.  
  
• Christians have had a hard time reading and understanding Ephesians 5:21–33. Some have understood it to teach that wives are subservient to husbands, while others have read the injunctions to husbands to mean that husbands and wives are to be mutually submissive. Ask: How do you interpret the reading today? If you know marriages that resemble Ephesians 5, describe them. Do they work? Why or why not?
• Ask: How does marriage help us understand Christ’s relationship to the church? How does marriage help us understand the church’s relationship to Christ? How does this passage affect how you view the current issues on marriage before the church?
• Read Hosea 2:14–23. Ask: What does the passage from Hosea bring to light that is not as clear to you in the Ephesians passage? What similarities and differences between these two passages strike you?
• Understanding marriage as an analogy to Christ’s relationship with the church intensifies our understanding of the covenant between spouses. Ask: How might understanding marriage as a covenant affect the way spouses treat one another?

Conclusion
Prayer:
Holy God, 
as you have revealed to us 
that you are Three-in-One, 
make us one in Christ’s body 
and one in your Spirit, 
so that our life together may proclaim 
the mystery of your love; 
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Hymn:
“The Church’s One Foundation” Presbyterian Hymnal 442
Main Idea
For those who marry, marriage is a means by which Christian spouses live out their lives of discipleship together.

Background Texts
Scripture:
Genesis 17:1–22 This passage tells the story of the covenant God makes with Abraham and Sarah.
Hebrews 13:4 The author of Hebrews writes that marriage should be honored in the Christian community.

Statement on the Gift of Marriage:
In marriage, husband and wife are called to a new way of life, created, ordered, and blessed by God. This way of life must not be entered into carelessly, or from selfish motives, but responsibly, and prayerfully.

Commentary on the liturgy for Christian Marriage:
“In marriage, husband and wife are called to a new way of life . . .” Here the church affirms that the choice to marry is, in a sense, a vocational choice. In baptism all Christians are called to a new way of life, and Christians who are married are to express that baptismal call in and through their marriages. Marriage is not a place where two self-serving people meet to satisfy their desires; it is a journey of faith where two are joined as one in Christ for discipleship and mission.

Westminster Confession of Faith:
Marriage is designed for the mutual help of husband and wife; for the safeguarding, undergirding, and development of their moral and spiritual character.

Directory for Worship:
(Note: Words or phrases in **bold** pertain to main ideas in this session.)
Marriage is a gift God has given to all humankind for the well-being of the entire human family. Marriage is a civil contract between a woman and a man. For Christians marriage is a covenant through which a man and a woman are called to live out together before God their lives of discipleship. In a service of Christian marriage a lifelong commitment is made by a woman and a man to each other, publicly witnessed and acknowledged by the community of faith.
Preparing to Lead
Read this study session and select questions and activities that you will use. What other questions, issues, or themes occur to you from your reflection?

Each session includes a hymn. Provide copies of your congregation’s hymnal. If you do not have a piano or keyboard and someone to play, consider asking someone to record the music on a tape or CD so that the group can sing the hymn.

Gathering
- Provide nametags and pens as people arrive.
- Provide simple refreshments; ask a volunteer to bring refreshments next week.
- Re-visit “ground rules” and logistics; e.g., time to begin and end session; location for meetings; welcoming all points of view; confidentiality; speaking with respect; listening for understanding; etc. Encourage participants to bring the study book and Bibles.
- Review format for these sessions: Gathering, Opening Worship, Conversation, and Conclusion.

Opening Worship

Prayer (unison):
Loving God, as Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding feast in Cana, change our sorrow into joy, our weakness into strength, and our fear into hope. Help us to purify our thoughts, measure out our words, and drink deeply of your wisdom. Above all, surprise us with the abundance of your grace, the joy of your Spirit, and the fullness of life that is ours through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Lectio Divina (reflective or prayerful reading):
- Read Genesis 17:1–22 aloud.
- Invite all to reflect for a few minutes in silence.
- After reflection time, invite all to listen for a word or phrase as the passage is read again and reflect on that word or phrase in silence.
- Read the passage a third time, asking all to offer a silent prayer following the reading.
- Invite all who wish to share the word or phrase that spoke most deeply to them.

Prayer:
Loving God, hear our prayers today as we seek to follow you more faithfully:
(spoken prayers may be offered)
Hear us now as we pray together, saying, “Our Father . . .”

Conversation
- Review the background texts (p. 16). Share observations, reflections, and insights on the reading.
- Ask: The story of Abraham and Sarah links the relationship between husband and wife (and even children) with covenant with God. What do you observe about the connection between these covenants?
- Ask: In what ways have you seen marriage promote discipleship in the Christian life? Is it ever a hindrance to living the Christian life?
In baptism we are claimed by God and we respond in gratitude by dedicating our lives to God’s service. Ask: *In what ways might a person live out the claims of baptism through marriage? How might that look in your life?*

- Ask: *If you are married, how can your relationship with your spouse deepen your life of discipleship? If you are not married, what relationships in the church community deepen your life of discipleship?*
- Read Hebrews 13:4. Ask: *What does it mean for the church to honor marriage today?*
- Ask: *What have you gained from this study? What questions remain?*

**Conclusion**

**Prayer:**

Holy God,
as you have raised us from death
by the gift of your grace,
help us to follow Christ each day,
walking in newness of life,
so that we may be a new creation
in the glory of your love;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Hymn:**

“Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us,” *Presbyterian Hymnal* 387


Appendix 1:
Interpreting Scripture

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is guided by its confessions in the understanding and interpretation of Scripture. The Westminster Confession of Faith teaches that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are “given by the inspiration of God, to be the rule of faith and life” (6.002). The Confession of 1967 states: “The one sufficient revelation of God is Jesus Christ, the Word of God, incarnate, to whom the Holy Spirit bears unique and authoritative witness through the Holy Scriptures, which are to be received and obeyed as the word of God written. The Scriptures are not a witness among others, but the witness without parallel” (9.27).

The 1982 United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America study on Biblical Authority and Interpretation provides a seven-point summary of confessional teaching on the interpretation of the Bible and a helpful set of guidelines for seeking the meaning of Scripture:

(1) keep Jesus Christ, the Redeemer, at the center;
(2) rely on the Holy Spirit in interpreting and applying God’s message;
(3) be guided by the rule of faith, the doctrinal consensus of the church expressed in its creeds, confessions, and catechisms;
(4) let all interpretation be in accord with the rule of love, the two-fold commandment to love God and neighbor;
(5) focus on the plain text, in its grammatical and historical context;
(6) remember that all interpretation requires earnest study; and
(7) seek to interpret a particular passage in light of the whole Bible.

Review and discuss these principles before you begin your study of Scripture. It might be helpful to write them on a board or post them on newsprint.
The confessions of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) are not merely historical artifacts, but they have ongoing relevance and authority in the life of the church. As the Book of Order explains:

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) states its faith and bears witness to God’s grace in Jesus Christ in the creeds and confessions in The Book of Confessions. In these statements the church declares to its members and to the world who and what it is, what it believes, and what it resolves to do. These statements identify the church as a community of people known by its convictions as well as by its actions. They guide the church in its study and interpretation of the Scriptures; they summarize the essence of Reformed Christian tradition; they direct the church in maintaining sound doctrines; they equip the church for its work of proclamation. They serve to strengthen personal commitment and the life and witness of the community of believers.

The confessions are to be understood as standards of Christian faith and life. As the Book of Order asserts:

These confessional statements are subordinate standards in the church, subject to the authority of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, as the Scriptures bear witness to him. While confessional standards are subordinate to the Scriptures, they are, nonetheless, standards. They are not lightly drawn up or subscribed to, nor may they be ignored or dismissed. The church is prepared to instruct, counsel with, or even to discipline one ordained who seriously rejects the faith expressed in the confessions. Moreover, the process for changing the confessions of the church is deliberately demanding, requiring a high degree of consensus across the church. Yet the church, in obedience to Jesus Christ, is open to the reform of its standards of doctrine as well as of governance. The church affirms Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei, that is, “The church reformed, always to be reformed according to the Word of God” in the power of the Spirit. (F-2.02)

As you study the confessional statements on Christian marriage, consider in particular how they inform who we are, what we believe, and what we resolve to do.
In Western Christian tradition, there have been four interconnected and complementary perspectives on marriage. These four perspectives or facets of marriage are the *spiritual perspective*, the *social perspective*, the *contractual perspective*, and the *naturalist perspective*. As John Witte writes:

> A *spiritual perspective* regards marriage as a sacramental or covenantal association, subject to the creed, cult, and canons of the church community. A *social perspective* treats marriage as a social estate, subject to the expectations and exactions of the local community and to special state laws of contract, property, and inheritance. A *contractual perspective* describes marriage as a voluntary association, dependent upon the consent of the parties, subject to the wills and preferences of the couple, their children, and their household. Hovering in the background is a *naturalist perspective*, which treats marriage as a created institution, subject to the natural laws of reason, conscience, and the Bible. According to Voltaire’s quip: “Among Christians, the family is either a little church, a little state, or a little club” blessed by nature and nature’s God.¹

Witte suggests that these four perspectives on marriage have been emphasized and combined in different ways by different traditions to yield five models of marriage in contemporary Western society:

1. the Catholic sacramental model;
2. the Lutheran social model;
3. the Calvinist covenantal model;
4. the Anglican commonwealth model; and
5. the Enlightenment contractarian model.²


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¹ Witte, *From Sacrament to Contract*, 2.
² Ibid., 3.