

ESSAY 3: A History of Christian Marriage

The history of Christian marriage is as complex and diverse as the history of Christianity, with the meaning of that word “marriage” having changed and morphed as generations of faithful Christians have sought to define for themselves the nature of a holy life lived out in the midst of daily life. In the same way, in varied contexts, societal and cultural understandings of marriage have interfaced and shaped our understandings of Christian marriage over the course of the last two millennia. To better understand our own contemporary understandings of Christian marriage, it is helpful to look at the historical development of marriage over the centuries.

Marriage:

- A mystical relationship preordained by cosmic forces?
- A blessed physical and spiritual union that mirrors for us a human experience akin to God’s indissoluble steadfast love as it has found expression in the life of Christ?
- A legal relationship that protects property and inheritance?
- A social relationship that forms a basic fundamental unit of almost all human society?
- A less-than-optimal but necessary religious concession to the realities of the uncontrolled instincts and passions of earthly human creatures?
- An institutional social convention that restricts and restrains the boundaries of human relationship through social proscriptions and legal constraints on individuals’ sexual expression and personal identity?
- A self-chosen, psychologically driven relationship that offers stability and intimacy for human growth and development?

When we discuss the history of marriage, of which of these are we speaking? And when we discuss the history of Christian marriage, of which of these are we speaking?

One might wonder why — when so many books have been written, and when the subject of marriage has so fully been examined at the historical, anthropological, social, economic, and spiritual levels — even include a history in our Task Force’s study of marriage? The answer is partly because not only our definition of marriage, but even our understanding of what history is has changed in the 35 years since the 1979 Book of Common Prayer authorized its modern rite of marriage.

In an earlier era, we might have drawn one long, straight line from Adam and Eve to the marriage at Cana, to the various rites of the Book of Common Prayer over the centuries, to our contemporary rites for marriage. But now we see more clearly that there is no one line of history we can follow. There are many threads woven together and interwoven with one another, creating a rich and broad tapestry of understandings, viewpoints, and insights. Attending to these various strands and the ways in which they have cohered to create some sense of communally lived experience is the work of the contemporary historian — work that may benefit us greatly as we seek to understand the concept of marriage in our own historical era.

Marriage has meant numerous things in various geographic settings over the course of history, and even now when Episcopalians use the word “marriage,” that word does not mean the same thing to all those who hear it. Part of the work of the Task Force on the Study of Marriage is to help us, as 21st-century Episcopalians spread across the globe, remember that when we speak of marriage, everyone is talking at once, meaning different things, viewing history through many contextual lenses. To understand what our moment in history has to say about the nature of Christian marriage, we benefit from an examination of the many things marriage has meant over the millennia.

This paper will explore the numerous ways in which the term “marriage” has been understood throughout the history of the Church. Perhaps it will also invite reflection on how our historical expressions of Christian marriage can enlighten our current discussions. It may even lead us beyond the boundaries of the ways in which marriage has been viewed in the past into new insights and new language, helping us develop the capacity to speak more articulately to contemporary Episcopal experiences and viewpoints.

1. Jewish and Roman Marriage

Because early Christianity germinated and was formed out of its Roman, Jewish, and Hellenistic cultural context, it is helpful to step back and examine some of the roots of our Christian understandings of marriage in Judaism and in Roman Hellenistic culture. We begin our historical study of the topic with a discussion of our earliest recorded ritual text regarding marriage. Scripture and Jewish history are richly full of individuals who lived in family networks, households where they were bound together in sometimes-lifelong relationships — individuals such as Adam and Eve; Abraham and Sarah and Hagar; Jacob, Rachel, Leah, Zilpah, and Bilhah, whose lives and whose stories provide the pillars for all of Jewish history that follows.

However, it is not until deep in the intertestamental period that we see an extant example of a Jewish blessing prayer used as a part of the process of marriage. In the book of Tobit there are several blessing prayers — one put in the mouth of Sarah’s father, Raguel, which seems to be a blessing at the time of the betrothal of Tobias and Sarah. A second blessing prayer is offered by Tobias and stands as a witness before God given in the wedding chamber and asking God’s blessings and mercy on their life together.

Blessed are you, O God of our ancestors,
and blessed is your name in all generations for ever.
Let the heavens and the whole creation bless you for ever.
You made Adam, and for him you made his wife Eve
as a helper and support.
From the two of them the human race has sprung.
You said, “It is not good that the man should be alone;
let us make a helper for him like himself.”
I now am taking this kinswoman of mine,
not because of lust,
but with sincerity.
Grant that she and I may find mercy
and that we may grow old together. (NRSV Tobit: 8: 5b-7)

A third and final blessing is said by Raguel the morning after the couple’s marriage, and it is in this blessing that we see a blessing on parents, children, and future generations. In this third prayer, marriage is clearly linked to procreation, continuity of family lines, and a hallowing of the future of a people.

What do we learn from Tobit? We see here that marriage was a process, a process that took some time, had several stages, and involved multiple parties, not just the couple. We see that Sarah is never asked to consent, but that her father and her new husband are the actors. Nevertheless, we see that Tobias calls Sarah his beloved — that true marriage is not about objectification of another human being (lust), but about something else, a partnership that enriches the present and protects the future of a people. Raguel asks blessings upon both Tobias and Sarah through their union. Both are meant to be blessed by marriage. We see that in this model of marriage, Sarah is the helper to Tobias — not an equal, but a lifelong helper and companion, not a possession. We also see that in this world there is a clear link between marriage and procreation, the present and the future.

Third-century Talmudic texts also shed light on what Jewish marriage might have meant in the era in which Christian marriage was beginning to be defined. Jewish marriage, by this time, involved a two-step process of betrothal, where money was exchanged, contracts were agreed to, or, in some less-ideal (but perhaps quite common) circumstances, cohabitation began. Blessings were given at the time of betrothal, and further blessings were offered later (often a year later) at the time of marriage. The second stage of marriage involved fasting, confession, crowns, a veil for the bride (if a virgin), the formal signing of a contract, music, dancing, and feasting. At the end of the meal, the groom pronounced seven blessings, including the two below.

O make these loved companions greatly to rejoice, even as of old thou didst gladden thy creature in the garden of Eden. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who makes bridegroom and bride to rejoice.

Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who hast created joy and gladness, bridegroom and bride, mirth and exaltation, pleasure and delight, love, brotherhood, peace, and fellowship. Soon may there be heard in the cities of Judah, and in the streets of Jerusalem, the voice of joy and gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the jubilant voice of bridegrooms from their canopies, and of youths from their feasts of song. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who makes the bridegroom to rejoice with the bride. (Stevenson, *Nuptial Blessing*, 245)

In the seven marriage blessings of the Talmud, we see a picture of marriage that is about love (a love that has most likely developed during the time of the betrothal or perhaps as a result of having known each other since childhood). Marriage is about joy and gladness, love and delight, and fellowship. While a contract has been signed and a legal relationship established, there is, it seems from these blessings, something more — something deeply human, God-blessed, and God-blessing that is present in the character of marriage.

In conjunction with this rich and full image of blessing-filled life together, we must remember that Jewish laws of the time also allowed for divorce, and that some of the Jewish scholars of this era of first- and second-century Judaism were emphatic supporters of a man's right to divorce his wife on virtually any grounds, from an inability to bear children to such trivial grounds as burning a meal. While marriages may have begun with visions of belovedness, for many women this moment of joy and jubilation would eventually give way to a relationship of vulnerability and subservience to the man in the house who held legal power to sever the bonds earlier established in marriage. It is also important to remember that monogamy is not inherent in this particular model of marriage, and that polygamy was practiced by some who could afford to care for larger households. Contrary to our contemporary images of marriage, polygamy will continue to be part of the definition of marriage throughout much of the history of marriage and across numerous cultures.

At the same time that Christians from Jewish traditions were fashioning a view of marriage from the cultural vantage point of Judaism, Hellenistic Christians were developing an understanding of marriage based upon their cultural vantage point. In Hellenism even more than in Judaism, the central building block of society was the patriarchal family. Survival of this unit was possible only through the movement of women of childbearing ages from one household to another. The role of women in this setting was to ensure the line of their husbands and their fathers, the well ordering of a deeply patriarchal hierarchical society, and the inculcation of Roman patrilineal values from one generation to the next. Marriage provided the societal and legal vehicle to make this possible.

In contrast to the mutuality suggested by our Jewish blessing texts, Roman marriages were understood to be one-sided in their purpose. The Roman marriage changed the legal and familial status of a Roman woman, moving her from one household to another. The stages of Roman marriage in non-Christian settings were the arranging of the marriage by a marriage arranger, a local sacrifice to the gods on the morning of the marriage, the sealing of the marriage contract along with witnesses (with household gods present), and the

consent of the father of the bride to this marriage. There was no mutuality. There was no change in the man's status. There was no direct consent by the woman, as there was no direct consent by the woman in Jewish rites.

While in loving households the daughter's desires would have been attended to, ultimately she could not decide her own fate. Fathers might — on occasion for their own interests or to provide safeguards for their daughters — arrange for a marriage that was *sine manu* and left these daughters under the father's authority rather than, as was the more typical practice, transferring authority for the woman from the father to the husband. Fathers, if the marriage was *sine manu*, also had the right to emancipate their daughters so that they became the owners of their own property and were able to function as independent agents in society. It is likely that many of the women described as supporting the work of the apostles in the New Testament operated through this kind of legal sanction.

Families in a Roman household comprised all those who were under the authority of the father. They might be wives, children, slaves, or indentured servants. One remained under the authority of the father one's whole life long, or perhaps until authority was transferred to a husband in marriage if one was a woman, or until emancipation by the father, if that was given. For much of Roman history, only free Roman citizens had the right to marry. This left much of Roman society outside the bounds of legal marriage, vulnerable to unwanted dissolution of any intimate sexual or parental relationship to which they might choose to commit over the course of their lives.

What can we learn about marriage from Roman society? We can learn that marriages can function in society as means to order that society and protect the authority and property of those in power, and that western culture has a long heritage of refusing the legal privilege of marriage to those without freedom or without means and those living at the margins of society.

2. Christian Marriage in the Early Church

The early Church, through its several iterations, held various views of the nature of marriage. The first-century Christian eschatological worldview invites Christians to imagine a different kind of family from the paternalistic families of either Judaism or Rome. For these early Christians, family was found through identification with those with whom one formed spiritual bonds. Mothers and fathers were not created through either legal or genetic bonds. Mothers and fathers were those who had nurtured one in the faith and brought one from life outside the Christian community to life inside it.

Paul asserts that marriage was set aside for those who were not spiritually strong enough to maintain their chasteness in celibacy. The ideal was a celibate life spent devoting the whole of one's being to preparing for Christ's return. This new world order that is presented through Paul, the deutero-Pauline writers, the authors of the pastoral letters, and through the Gospel writers, stands in powerful, intentional, and direct contrast to the cultural mores of its day. Paul invites the Church into a way of life where none is viewed as property of another, none is objectified, and all live together in bonds of mutuality and mutual submission. One chooses as one's family members those who have chosen Christ, and the bonds that unite Christians as a family are as eternal, sacred, and nonseverable as the limbs of one's body are to one another.

While the early Church, in most communities, did not forbid marriage, the reality-forming values of the first-century Hellenistic world are turned on their heads by an approach to property, life, and family that defies the idolatry that frequently accompanied the patriarchal model of Hellenistic marriage. Marriage, in and of itself, is not seen as evil. Indeed, Christ's first miracle, according to John, was a blessing that took place at a marriage. But the attitudes and assumptions of first-century Hellenistic life that placed all authority in the hands of a human father rather than a heavenly father were found by the Church to be deeply suspect. Jesus' statements (Matthew 19:1-12, Mark 10:1-12) regarding marriage stress to his followers the priority of a life of devotion to God over any allegiance to societal or religious authorities or norms.

While Christians did engage in marriage, the ritual of marrying was not necessarily seen as a spiritual act unless it was entered into by two Christian persons who intended a relationship that would produce spiritual fruits. Not all Christians participated in Christian marriages. Christian women were strongly encouraged to bring their Christian values and ideals to their relationships, even when those relationships were with non-Christian husbands; and Christian husbands were encouraged to keep and convert their non-Christian wives. There is evidence that bishops of the patristic era questioned and contemplated the appropriateness of blessing marriages. If they happened to be in attendance at a marriage feast, they might be called upon to offer a blessing similar to what the father of the bride might offer at a non-Christian marriage feast.

But marriage rites were by nature in this time domestic rites with religious implications. Home and hearth, kin and community were aspects of life so fundamental that they were intricately related to human spirituality but less centrally focused on explicitly religious liturgical acts than what we will see in later moments of history when church and state become synonymous. While there is some patristic evidence that, in North Africa, Christian couples might have married in rites held within the faith community, there is no evidence to suggest this was common practice across the diverse geography of the early-church world or in the first generation of the Christian church.

As the Church moved deeper into the New Testament era, into the late first century and the second century, attitudes toward marriage changed in two directions. In both Hellenistic philosophy and in Christian understandings, there were strains of the tradition that grew even more deeply suspect of marriage and instead commended lives of abstinence, chastity, and singlehood as lifestyles more noble than marriage, even when the eschatological focus of Christianity had begun to wane. Because many human beings in the Mediterranean world were not eligible to participate in legal marriage because so many were slaves and not citizens, citizens and aristocrats in Roman society who were turning to Christianity as their religion wanted and needed their religion and their societal positions to come closer in line. Christianity was, in many settings, becoming less countercultural and more aligned with the practices and values of the empire, a necessary step if it was to grow beyond its first generation of followers.

The authors of the deutero-Pauline scriptural texts (scriptural texts likely written by followers of Paul after his death) and many of the early church fathers and mothers see the patrilineal ideals of Hellenism as not only appropriate to Christianity, but also as complementary to a now increasingly less apocalyptic and more present-focused vision of life in Christ. Many scholars believe that the Christian scriptural teachings about hierarchical understandings of marriage according to which the wife is subservient to the husband arise from this time period of the apostolic church.

It is also most likely that it was in this late-first-century Christian historical era that we see expressed for the first time the direct analogy that marriage represents the relationship between Christ and Christ's church, an analogy that would have easily grown out of familiarity with the several parables in the Gospels about brides and bridesmaids. This metaphor for marriage would have been understood by those hearing these letters for the first time as inherently hierarchical, and thereby in keeping with Roman sensibilities about the *pater familias*. At the same time, these passages continued to assert a Gospel message that was still countercultural to Hellenistic Roman worldviews since they assert a profound challenge to any repressive view of another as object or property.

Augustine, writing in the fourth and fifth centuries to an increasingly Christian culture, commends marriage and encourages those marrying to include the bishop in the arranging of marriages. Like many Christians of his day, his view of marriage is ambivalent, but he is clear in expressing the gifts marriage can offer to the Christian life. For Augustine, marriage was a sacred obligation, a *sacramentum*.

The reasons for marrying are threefold: fidelity, procreation, and the fulfilling of a sacred obligation. These values were deeply in keeping with the familial structure of Roman society, and still they invited those of

Hellenistic backgrounds to contemplate marriage as not simply an act requiring a sacrifice to the gods, but as an act that (particularly for brides who were the sole subjects of marriage rites in Augustine's world) was in and of itself a means of giving one's life to God's service. One loved one's husband as the Church loved Christ. If one did not have the spiritual strength or the economic resources to commit one's self to a fully devout life of celibacy, one could still choose faithfulness and a contained concupiscence. This was the next best thing to celibacy, and a proper and fitting gift of one's self to God and to Christian society.

In the patristic period, the eastern church was fashioning a somewhat different understanding of marriage. Here, too, celibacy was revered as the most holy state. However, for those who would marry, the nuptial blessings of marriage were given to both bride and groom. For both of them, the state of life and being was altered. As a central sign of this change of life status, and in recognition of the role marriage played in the spiritual life of the couple, crowns were placed on the heads of both bride and groom in marriage rites, signifying the high calling of Christ upon their lives and the eschatological nature of their life work. Bride and groom were expected to live lives worthy of this high calling given in Jesus Christ.

In its initial conversion of the western frontier to Roman Christianity, the church of the east held greater sway over the newly incubating Christian churches of Britain, Gaul, and Spain. This worldview allowed for an easier connection with Teutonic values than did the increasingly ascetic and aristocratically centered values of Rome. These eastern sensibilities would continue to influence Gallican (of what is now Western Europe) and Visigothic (of what is now Spain and Portugal) views on marriage long after Europe had been thoroughly Romanized.

What does the late patristic era tell us about marriage that might inform our present-day understandings of marriage? We see in this period of history a widening of understandings of what it means to be human in a way that does not simply equate the human condition with procreative capacities. Celibacy becomes a virtue. We see, as we saw in the early church, alternative models for how to live the Christian life — models that offered women as well as men the means to imagine a life of faith lived beyond the personal and legal confines of Roman marriage.

We continue to see a deeply stratified and diverse Christianity in which marriage is not available to all who desire it. We hear explicitly a deep suspicion of the human body and human sexual instincts, a suspicion based in part on recognition of the physical and medical dangers inherent in sexual relationships and in pregnancy in that day. We see an already present tension between the concepts of marriage as a legal and societal act and Christian marriage as a blessed state of life given by God and blessed by the Church.

3. Marriage in the Medieval Church

For the Teutonic peoples who were coming to see themselves as a part of the Roman Empire and who lived away from the Mediterranean boundaries of the western church, the world-renouncing spirituality of Rome was deeply problematic. Initially the concept of celibacy as a lifelong choice was abhorrent. Monogamy was a state reserved for those with the means only to procure one wife. In this setting, marriage was not essential, but an honoring of vows and promises was critical to the maintenance of the society.

As in the rest of the Christian church, betrothal was seen as essential to a proper marriage and formed a basic contract of commitment between two households. Marriage blessings were usually domestic in nature and often took place at feasts and at the marriage beds. For people who were still coming to grips with the notion of putting aside their gods of the home and hearth, the importance of domestic elements of blessing was critical. In these Teutonic cultures in these early centuries of Christian faith, the blessing was to be bestowed not just on the bride but on the groom as well, because it was only through their mutual familial partnerships that these tribal societies could continue.

As the centuries progressed into the period we now call the Middle Ages, Roman and Teutonic values became more deeply inculcated into one another, and the medieval church took on its new character. Celibacy took on great importance across the entire empire, as did the blessing offered by the now frequently celibate priest. Domestic life came to be seen as separate from and inferior to religious life. In eucharistic celebrations, the real bread of the hearth offered at the Eucharist gave way to “holy” bread formed in monastery kitchens and made by celibate holy hands. Coupling, birthing, and the raising of children continued, but these actions had even less to do with religious life lived in God than had been true in previous eras. By the medieval period, only priests could offer a marital blessing — not, as in earlier times, fathers or grooms.

The Church required monogamy in marriage, and linkages narrower than the seventh degree of relationship were considered incestuous, further reinforcing the chasm between the very few who could engage in blessed legal marriage and the vast majority who were forced to live, or were desirous of living, outside its boundaries. In a time of deeply concrete biblical literacy within the official church, those who entered into solemn marriage entered into an indissoluble state.

What marriage was, how it happened, and who was eligible to be married were matters of debate in this era of the Church. A marriage might involve a simple blessing by the priest at the doors of the church, a full nuptial mass within the church, or a blessing of the marriage bed. The consistent holdover from Roman law seems to have been the action that was still most associated with betrothal — namely, the consent to the relationship given by the groom and the agent who gave the bride.

Sacramentaries of the early medieval period resonate with a mishmash of the ideas of Augustine, the sensual sensibilities of Teutonic spirituality, and biblically based understandings of marriage. Marriage is given by God not just for the purpose of procreation but also for the exercise of fidelity, love, and mutual support. Throughout the next centuries in various parts of the Holy Roman Empire, different emphases in this amalgam of marriage paradigms take precedence, sometime highlighting the mutuality of the relationship, often hearkening back to earlier Roman sensibilities according to which it is the bride who is given and whose status is changed. Nowhere is this return to Roman perspectives more clearly expressed than in the Gregorian Sacramentary’s insertion into the marriage rite of the Ephesians’ analogy of the relationship between groom and bride as parallel to the relationship between Christ and his church.

In the High Middle Ages, a time when making the right marriage became critical, when much of medieval life and culture were built around feudal codes, and when veneration of the Virgin Mary was becoming a core element of medieval piety, a new concept of chivalric romance began to be constructed. While the lives of most everyday men and women could not be compared in any way with the heroic stories of chivalric romance being produced at this time, a changed appreciation for the relationship between men and women seems to have entered into western psychology.

Within the literate nobility, romance became a central theme in relationships between the sexes, and, as a result, a counter image to Eve the temptress was created, undoing much of the vilification of women that had entered life through western philosophy and asceticism. Unfortunately, what also resulted was a different kind of objectification of women as noble, chaste, fragile, pure beings; and this romanticized view of the relationship between men and women in centuries to come helped shape the development of romantic expectations for all marriages and all sexual unions.

By the late medieval period, we see a deepening divide between all things sacred and profane, as well as a fully developed societal and legal authority invested in the officers of the Church. The continuing importance of the betrothal, with its emphasis upon consent and commitment, led to the necessity to make this consent an action done as a part of the marriage rite in the presence of the priest. This led to a diminishment of the role and efficacy of the whole communal betrothal process. While periods of betrothal, engagement, and

courting clearly continued in society, cultural, social, and anthropological processes that had previously served as the building blocks of Christian society gave way in importance to brief formalized events now presided over by the priest and disconnected from the events of secular life.

The important part of a marriage rite — a rite that was becoming available to more individuals as the middle class began to burgeon in late medieval society — was now the consent given by the couples, and blessing given by the priest at the doors of the church, or followed by a full nuptial mass in the church with the nuptial blessing saved for the end of the mass.

As the scholastic church of the late medieval period was narrowing its understanding of how Christians were to understand sacrament, marriage (along with its counterpart, ordination) came to be seen as one of the seven sacraments of the Church. Both the man and the woman were now seen as entering into a sacramental act, and now both the man and woman were expected to voice their consent. Vows were exchanged — vows that in most circumstances (but not all) required the woman to swear her obedience to her husband. A life-transforming process that had formerly been left in the hands of families and communities who sought God’s blessing on it was now authoritatively placed in the hands of the official, priest-led church, with clearly structured expectations and obligations prescribed and demanded by the Church and the assurance of clear, spiritual benefit to be derived from formal marriage with its sacramental nuptial blessing.

What can we learn with regard to marriage from this late medieval period of history in the Church? In this period, we see that in the process of further sacralizing the nature of Christian marriage in a culture that was growing less enamored with celibate life as the ideal, there was also an unintentional desacralizing of the deeply human elements of marriage. Entering into marriage came to be associated with participating in a particular religious ceremony presided over by a priest, rather than participating in a communal multistage process presided over by the couple and their families and blessed by God in the midst of celebration and feasting.

The question of who is worthy of marriage and entitled to the sacraments of the Church has continued to be an issue even until our present day. The strict focus that developed around the actions of an official in validating and legitimizing marriage, as opposed to the witness of a whole community, further intensified the needs of the disenfranchised to gain this right and privilege for themselves. The nature of human sexuality and its inherent goodness in human life once again found expression in parts of the Church and society in this era, with evolving views of manhood and womanhood helping to shape future iterations of life in marriage.

It is difficult to overstress the critical role that property acquisition played in changing mores around marriage. In an earlier day when few held property or wealth of their own, communal understanding and consensus could form the framework of family life. In Roman times, the family included anyone under the authority of the *pater familias*. In the early medieval period, local chieftains decided and defined the nature of family, claiming for themselves significant numbers of the women and children of a village in their family and leaving others to define their place at the margins of society.

In the late medieval period, as more and more individuals gained their personal and economic freedom and became the holders of land and property, the need for formal marriage and legal marriage was accentuated. Questions regarding who was married, how public their marriage was, the legitimacy of offspring, and rights to inheritance became paramount. It was this new landed and propertied world that created a pervasive demand for unambiguous legal marriage that was previously unprecedented in the West. In the late medieval period, for perhaps the first time in the history of the West, a sizeable percentage of Christians had the opportunity and the necessity to pursue officially recognized lifelong marital partnerships.

4. The Reformation and Marriage

The primary changes to the understanding of marriage that arose from the Reformation were theological rather than practical. The rejection of the primacy of the celibate life was a core tenet of Reformation thinking, and with that rejection came a new emphasis upon marriage. Marriage was seen as the natural and original means of ordering human life. Established by God in creation, marriage was expected of all Christian people. In an adaptation of Augustine's teachings on marriage, Luther identified the three goals of marriage as procreation, a remedy for concupiscence, and companionship. However, this marital companionship no longer grew out of a sacramental understanding of marriage. Indeed, for Luther there were only two sacraments — Baptism and Eucharist.

Martin Bucer was the lone reformer who asserted that companionship was the primary purpose of Christian marriage. This companionship articulated by the reformers was based on a patriarchal model of life in keeping with ancient understandings of woman as the helper to man. Because marriage was no longer seen as a sacrament and Christ seems to allow for the possibility of divorce in the Gospels, divorce took on a prominent place in the Protestant history of marriage. Cranmer's 1549 rite of marriage names the service "Solemnization of Matrimony," indicating both its solemn importance to society and that it was not to be understood in that time as a sacrament. Rings were still exchanged, but were no longer blessed. The vows — the contract elements of marriage — were said in the nave of the church, and the blessing prayers for the couple were said at the altar, with the possibility of communion.

Protestant reformers saw the family as the central building block of the Christian life. They saw the act of marrying as a solemn act and a solemn obligation. They used marriage ceremonies as occasions to teach the entire community the Church's expectations regarding life lived in marriage — expectations that made procreation and childrearing the vocational center for all women, and which called all women to take vows of obedience to their husbands.

In contrast to some earlier periods of history, marital fidelity was an expressed expectation of both members of the marriage and not just of the woman. Familial and communal feasts and celebrations that had historically accompanied and been a part of marriage were severely criticized in some reform communities. If the medieval period had strongly urged that marriages take place in churches and be presided over by priests, most reformers absolutely required church marriages with pastors and witnesses present. While the theological principle of the priesthood of all believers was being espoused by reformers, they were simultaneously unwilling to allow the authority of local believers to govern the establishment of daily life, seeing church officials as the necessary religious and legal agents of society in the establishment of marriages.

At roughly the same time, the Council of Trent (1545-1563) was reaffirming that for Roman Catholics, marriage was a divinely given sacrament and therefore indissoluble. A new, formal definition of marriage appeared which required that all marriages be publicly announced with banns and vows before a priest and two witnesses. Most of the cultural activities associated with marriage continued: the celebrations, the dancing, and the feasting. But the Church had now made it clear that these activities, while encouraged by the Council for cultural reasons, did not validate a marriage. Only the church could validate a marriage. At this point it even became possible to validate marriages retroactively by gathering all children born prior to the marriage under the marriage canopy to legitimize them when a couple chose to receive the full sacrament of marriage.

In 1653, during the Puritan period of the English Commonwealth, the nature of marriage was once again reshaped by theological constraints. In this radical, Puritan setting, marriage became a simple vow between a man and a woman using a prescribed Puritan form from the Westminster Directory. The vow was made before a justice of the peace, and there were no prayers and no ordained minister involved, making it absolutely clear that marriage was not to be understood as a sacramental act, thereby allowing considerably

more latitude in arguing for the potential dissolubility of a marriage. Puritans saw marriage as an event with significant spiritual and religious implications. And yet, this form of marriage ceremony, carried out in a manner that was totally divorced from church life, opened the way in later historical periods for a returned view of marriage as a legal, social, and cultural event rather than a religious one.

This period of history tells us that Christian marriage, even when understood as both a legal and a religious act, has not held the same meaning for all Christians across the Church, nor has there been any form of consensus regarding the dissolubility of marriage. The divide between Catholic and Protestant understandings of marriage continued in the Reformation era to shape the Christian churches and especially Anglican dialogues about marriage. This was especially true within the New World, as The Episcopal Church continued to hold Old World sensibilities regarding marriage in creative balance with Protestant and Enlightenment worldviews.

Perhaps the only consistent elements within early modern Christian marriage practices were that marriages created legal contracts that protected the property rights of those with material goods; and that family and culture played a central role in how marriages were recognized and celebrated, even when the Church offered little opportunity for ritual celebrations to occur. The church and the state could control what took place in official settings; what happened outside those settings was less readily controllable.

5. Marriage in the New World

American understandings of marriage were diverse from the founding of the United States. Puritan values regarding marriage as a central building block of society were continued among white Protestant Americans; and the sacramental, unbreakable bonds of marriage continued to be upheld by Roman Catholic Christians of the New World.

A core stricture that entered into Roman Catholic Spanish marriage practices and then quickly became a part of Latin-American marriage practices was the principle of “equality” — not equality as a source of mutual companionship between the genders, but social, racial, and economic equality between the two parties marrying. While those who were black or of mixed race were initially exempted from this law, the *Real Pragmática* made it illegal for *españoles* (white individuals) to marry across social or economic boundaries, thereby assuring protection of property rights within the white landed aristocracy and preventing the possibility of intentional mixed marriages.

In addition, this act was unprecedented in Catholic practice in requiring parental permission for any marriage to take place, taking the power of choice away from the groom as well as the bride. Once the marriage had been attained, the understanding within society and within the Church was that the patriarchal role of head of household required obedience of the woman in her relationship with her husband and afforded him the privilege of “correction” of her through corporal and other forms of punishment. While fidelity was a stated goal of marriage, as it had been in previous eras, the deep concern with fidelity was still placed upon the wife, while husbands were forgiven for straying. Particularly in aristocratic families, honor and female sexual purity took on an important role in Christian marriage practices of the New World.

In colonial Latin America, in response to the pervasive ethnic, cultural, legal, and economic oppression that restricted the day-to-day existences of the vast majority, marriage was often viewed as an unavailable or an undesirable option for couples seeking to spend their lives together — it was often viewed with skepticism and cynicism regarding its value and its purposes. The Church played such a controlling role in marriage that many sought freedom of relationship outside the bonds of the Church.

As a result, illegitimate children were a pervasive reality of early modern Hispanic life, despite the real constraints and limits that illegitimacy placed upon the inheritance rights of these children. However, illegitimacy was understood as considerably more deleterious to the lives of the elite than it was to the lives

of slaves, mixed-race individuals, natives, and others whose rights to freedom, property, and autonomy had always been, at best, fragile.

Seventeenth-century confessional manuals that were used by priests of the New World define marriage as contractual in nature, with expectations that husbands would support their wives, and wives would be obedient to their husbands unless the husband's demands were deemed unreasonable, irrational, and unjust by civil authorities. Beginning in the 17th century, we also see pastoral language of equality and reciprocity that imagines marriage in the ideal as a mystical union. This ideal was rarely experienced in real life by women who married.

It is not until the 1928 Book of Common Prayer, with its Anglo-Catholic influences, that this language of mystical union enters into the Anglican rites of the Church. These evolving understandings of marriage, with the tension between the civil and the religious aspects of marriage and the tension between marriage as contract and marriage as spiritual union, continued to hold sway over the next several centuries in the development of our understanding of the nature of Christian marriage.

Methodist influences on marriage rites highlighted the high level of respect due to the institution of marriage. In the 1784 *Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America*, John Wesley removed the giving-away of the bride from the ceremony, and, as was most often already the case in practice, also removed the option of communion at the ceremony. The giving-away ceremony came and went from Methodist and Episcopal rites over the course of the next hundred years.

Those who were brought to the United States and the Caribbean as slaves were not eligible for any form of legal or Christian marriage, although particularly pious slaveholders did on occasion create for their slaves domestic rites with some semblance to Christian marriage — rites over which the slaveholder presided and which held no legal sway. Instead, slaves were the property of their owners and were subject to even greater vulnerabilities in their sexual and parenting relationships than had earlier been the lot of slaves in ancient and medieval societies. The Reformation valuation of marriage as a God-given duty, privilege, and responsibility did not hold for those members of society who were identified by their owners and oppressors as subhuman and incapable of consent.

Despite the lack of legal or societal support for their marriages, black slaves in the Americas developed their own rites of marriage and established their own highly valued networks of family and kinship. Slave marriages held no legal authority, and those who had united themselves to each other in such relationships often experienced the severing of those relationships through slave sales. For the purpose of producing more slaves, at times slaves were “married” to one another by their masters, against their will and in direct violation of any already existing, unofficial, self-chosen “slave marriage.” Following the emancipation of the American slaves, all black Americans were allowed to marry, as long as they married a member of their own race. Biracial marriage continued to be illegal in parts of the United States into the second half of the 20th century.

Across the Americas, Native Americans were denied legal marriage rights. Miscegenation laws making it illegal for a person of another race to marry a Native American abounded, and often Native Americans were treated similarly to slaves, subject to the whims and desires of their overlords. Coming out of cultures with a variety of different understandings of what constituted both family and marriage, Native Americans continued throughout the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries to develop their own network of kin, even while the religious and political authorities around them sought to coerce them into relationship definitions alien to their own cultural identity and values systems.

Asian Americans entering the Americas in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries found a world largely hostile to their own values of family and kin. Immigration quotas allowed for the immigration of very few

families, with almost no Asian women being allowed to immigrate. As a result, men built same-sex communities for support and protection. Often these immigrants left behind spouses in their Asian homelands and endured long absences from spouse and kin, so that they could offer financial support to extended networks still in Asia. In the early 20th century, single men who had immigrated from Japan and Korea, and who were not legally allowed to marry white women, sought “picture brides” from their homelands. These picture-bride marriages were performed by proxy in Asia, afterward allowing these Asian wives who had often never even met their new husbands to immigrate to the Americas as immigration restrictions were relaxed somewhat.

Indian and Filipino men living in the western United States often married Latino women, creating families of blended ethnicity. In some Asian cultures, arranged marriages continued to be the norm. Chinese cultures, with their deep Confucian valuation of family, kin, and ancestors, began to thrive when doors were open for the migration of whole families. One significant commonality among most Asian-American and Latino families of this era was the primary role of the husband to serve as breadwinner, and the role of the wife to respond in support and obedience to her husband.

This portion of history helps illuminate for the Church the numerous ways in which marriage law was used to oppress, and the numerous ways in which subjugated people continued to find means to establish intimate bonds of familial relationship, despite the impediments to volitional marriage. In communities of deep suffering, these self-chosen bonds played a critical role in helping to sustain the spirits and the life energies of those living in the midst of oppression and subjugation. Once again, we see the ways in which relationality, kin networks, and culture trump any legal or political restrictions imposed upon the deeply human relationship of marriage.

Episcopalians who have remained in their homelands and not confronted the particular challenges to marriage definition and practice that have been such a critical part of the immigrant experience have continued to fashion cultural and ritual practices of marriage in accord with the deep traditions of their communities, while at times finding themselves addressing the encroaching westernization of marriage practices that has influenced marriage traditions across the world. Aligning local cultural and social sensibilities with the language and symbolism of a very western marriage rite, as found in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, has offered its own particular challenges for these Indigenous communities.

6. The Victorian Concept of Marriage

In the 17th century, the 1662 Book of Common Prayer asserted that the purposes of marriage were procreation, a remedy against sin and fornication, and mutual society (help and comfort), indicating little change in understanding since the Reformation period. But with the Victorian era (1837-1901), new patterns of practice regarding marriage began to appear in British and American society. As a result of industrialization and changed upper-class familial practices, a greater separation between home and work developed. Working-class women postponed marriage as they spent their early adulthood in paid factory labor. Lower-class rural families married early and produced children to help provide the family the labor force needed for a subsistence life.

Expanding economic prosperity allowed couples to marry earlier if they had the financial means to do so, and greater maternal health led to increases in birth rates. The expanding use of birth control among women in their later childbearing years allowed working women to return to the work force or to revenue-producing activities, and prevented dependent children from further taxing the resources of the family as older sons and daughters were able to leave and begin their own lives.

In the Victorian era, the home-workplace split led to a reconfiguration of familial identity that made the husband in the household the sole breadwinner and defined the many and necessary tasks of the wife as homemaking. Prosperous families prided themselves on their ability to function with one breadwinner, and

children in this setting came to be seen less as essential contributors to the economy of the family and more as precious innocents who needed to be nurtured and formed in the faith by their ever-present mothers. Married women continued to perform significant tasks in support of the financial and personal well-being of the family, but their work was no longer seen as part of an economic partnership with their spouses, as it had been in a more agriculturally focused era.

Societal expectations, particularly for middle- and upper-class married women, were that wives were loving, genteel nurturers, caring for young children and providing spiritual and emotional support to the entire family, while husbands, as heads of the household, provided economic leadership and the public face of the family. Some families that could afford to redefine the boundaries of family life functioned as nuclear families with a husband, wife, and children living together in separate homes from their kin, unraveling long-standing traditions of extended family and multigenerational households and thereby developing the model of the modern family.

By the late Victorian era, with its neo-Gothic influences in society and religion, many of the romantic notions born in the age of chivalry were finding their way into popular culture and helping to shape a growingly romantic image of women as fragile flowers, men as their champions, and marriage as an idealized activity laced with passion and gallantry. The marriage of Queen Victoria to Prince Albert in 1840 provided Anglicans across the globe with a new romantic model for the ideal marriage ceremony. An elaborate ritual, a long white dress, a horse-drawn carriage, and sacred vows said before a priest came to be seen as the desirable way in which to marry.

In Anglo-Catholic segments of the Church, the term “sacrament” was again being used to explain the nature of the rite. The diversity of understandings regarding who was acting in marriage, under whose authority they were acting, and what role the Church was playing in this rite was significant. Many, of course, did not have the resources to allow for such elaborate celebrations of their marriages and made do with the legal requirements imposed by the state, coupled with whatever familial and cultural festivities were possible.

By the end of the Victorian era, we also see changes in the relationship between men and women impacting understandings of marital roles. These new paradigms for women and men neatly sliced up human life between the public and economic world of men and the private spiritual and domestic world of women. This public-private split had the effect of confining women’s activity to a degree that was in some ways unprecedented. Women who in the past had found their identities through participation in familial businesses and farms, through celibate lifestyles, and through economic partnerships (albeit unequal partnerships) with their husbands were now confined to the roles of mothering and homemaking. In working-class families where such clearly delineated roles were most often not possible, families were left with a sense of failure and shame.

The response to that narrowing of roles that arose by the late 19th century was a new call for rights and freedoms for women, including the right to vote. Women began to organize on behalf of themselves, the poor, exploited laborers, and children. The tension between women’s public selves in these arenas and in their private domestic roles would in the next century lead to dramatic changes in the nature of marriage and family life, including Christian marriage.

7. Twentieth-Century Episcopal Marriage

Women’s suffrage became law in the United States in 1920, signaling the radical changes in women’s roles and the nature of Christian marriage that were already afoot. The 1920s were an era of sexual and economic liberation for women, with many women rejecting the traditional boundaries of marriage that called for obedience to husbands and instead promoting sexual and marital relationships that were peer-based. In response to social and theological changes taking place in the Church, the Form of Solemnization of Matrimony in the 1928 Book of Common Prayer removed the vow for the wife to obey her husband.

Otherwise, the rite looked surprisingly similar to Cranmer's first marriage rite, despite the nearly 400 years of history and radical changes in marital, familial, and social customs and mores that had transpired.

U.S. marriages were to take place only within the confines of state law. An exhortation regarding the nature of marriage was still read. Vows were still exchanged. Rings could be given, and blessing prayers were still said by a priest. By the mid-20th century, all Christian persons were fit candidates for Christian marriage so long as there were no legal impediments that would prevent the marriage; however, miscegenation laws continued to make it illegal for persons to marry one another across racial lines. What was also changing was the prioritization of the reasons for marriage. The vision of companionship that Bucer had already promoted in the 16th century was now coming to play a central role in the understanding of the nature of marriage, but now more as companionship among equals rather than according to the hierarchical model of relationship expressed by the medieval and reform churches.

In response to changing cultural patterns, the 1967 General Convention of The Episcopal Church called for a study of issues closely related to sexuality, including contraception, abortion, divorce and remarriage, and homosexuality. Slow in materializing, the first clear response to that call was seen in a 1976 General Convention resolution stating that "homosexual persons are children of God who have a full and equal claim with all other persons upon the love, acceptance, and pastoral concern and care of the Church."

The second half of the 20th century brought the fruits of the Liturgical Renewal Movement to all the rites of the Church, including the "Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage" — language that would not have been used for such a rite since the Reformation. The new introduction to marriage in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer lists as the first intention of marriage the couple's mutual joy. This is followed by reference to the help and comfort given one another in prosperity and adversity (language, we have seen, that has been a part of the Church's understanding of marriage for hundreds of years).

Last in the priority is the procreation of children. After centuries of traditional ritual language that only in small degrees reflected the enormous, although gradual, changes taking place in the nature of Christian marriage, here was a rite for a new generation of Christians. Or was it? Quickly following its promulgation, there arose voices in the Church that questioned the wisdom of including the reference to Ephesians 5 in the introduction to the marriage rite and the inclusion of the Ephesians 5 reading in the list of options for the epistle in the service. Questions also arose about the advisedness of offering an option for the giving away or presentation of the bride. What did these rites say about the nature of Christian marriage and how Christian marriage related to understandings of largely egalitarian romantic marriage in the broader society?

Modern liturgical reformers have had fewer difficulties letting go of earlier reform sensibilities about the nature of the marriage rite. They describe marriage as a solemn and public covenant between a man and a woman — language that would have been in keeping with Protestant sensibilities regarding marriage. Requirements for this service are that at least one person be baptized, that there be at least two witnesses, and that the marriage conform to the laws of the state and the canons of the Church.

But there are also significant changes from the Cranmerian rites of the 16th century. Twentieth-century liturgical reformers added a clear blessing of the rings given in marriage, a pronouncement by the priest that the couple is husband and wife, and a specific prayer that is identified as the nuptial blessing and only to be performed by a priest or a bishop. Taken as a whole, this rite says more about the changes that have taken place in The Episcopal Church's understanding of itself and the role of priests (of who can bless and under what circumstances) than it does about its understanding of the nature of Christian marriage since the Reformation era.

In response to dramatic social and cultural changes, the 1991 General Convention further addressed the issue of human sexual relations by adopting a resolution designed to shore up established views of human

sexuality and marriage. That resolution stated that “the teaching of The Episcopal Church is that physical sexual expression is appropriate only within the lifelong monogamous union of husband and wife.” The resolution also recognized “the discontinuity between this teaching and the experience of many members” of The Episcopal Church.

By examining 20th-century issues related to marriage, we see that questions that have been a part of the pattern of the development of marriage continue to arise in the modern era. The Church affirms the significance of mutual joy as a central purpose of marriage, even as it expands its own definition of mutuality. The Church continues to ponder the question of divorce. It continues to struggle with the question of who may marry whom, and with the relationship between legal marriage and spiritual marriage. It continues to converse with the voices of culture and society that are so central to any people’s understanding of what marriage is. These same questions help shape our work in present-day discussions of marriage.

8. Twenty-First-Century Christian Marriage

Industrialized society has continued to change at breakneck speed over the 35 years since the ratification of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer. Women have been recognized as full partners in the workforce, even if they are not yet paid accordingly. Men and women expect to share the responsibility of childrearing. As the life expectancy of married persons has risen significantly, divorce rates have skyrocketed since the Victorian era to a new plateau, where, for the last 30-plus years, almost half of all marriages are expected to end in divorce. Sexual relationships before marriage are largely seen as normative, and sexual relations in general are understood to be a true gift and pleasure of human life. Cultural norms have changed so that increasingly greater numbers of people decide to cohabit before marriage, including older persons who, for financial reasons, are not economically able to make a decision to marry.

Birth control is readily accessible, and growing numbers of individuals choose to have children outside of marriage. Technological medical resources help couples to conceive outside the boundaries of heterosexual conjugal sexual relations, and those same technologies help bring to term the children that are produced, sometimes resulting in ambiguous answers to the question of who are the child’s real parents. Only a minority of cultural settings in The Episcopal Church support the notion of marriage as anything besides a partnership between equals. Those who reject marriage often do so because they fear that current cultural mores around marriage have not progressed far enough, and that the institution of marriage can be stifling and restricting, potentially depriving one or both members of the marriage of full opportunities to participate in contemporary society.

Another radical change in the nature of our understanding of marriage has come in the last several decades as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people have taken on greater visibility in our society and have worked to gain a voice, a presence, and legal rights within both the broader culture and the Church. The question of same-sex union has inevitably led The Episcopal Church into a discussion of whether culturally, legally, morally, and spiritually same-sex marriage fits our current definitions of Christian marriage. As states across the United States and nations around the world move to legalize same-sex marriage and to allow for adoption of children by same-sex couples, the imperative to develop a theologically sound and culturally sensitive response to the question of the sanctity of a same-sex marriage has heightened.

In response to a directive from the 2009 General Convention of The Episcopal Church, the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music (SCLM) developed and collected theological and liturgical resources addressing the issue of love and commitment in same-sex partnerships. It is in large part as a result of the conversations begun in that setting that the current Task Force on the Study of Marriage has been asked to develop resources that will help the Church more fully explore the historical, theological, practical, and canonical issues surrounding Christian marriage.

Harkening back to earlier chapters in the Church's history, the SCLM framed core Christian values identified within our marriage traditions and expressed those in language fitting to our contemporary context. The "'I Will Bless You, and You Will Be a Blessing'" document provided the following expectations for all persons desirous of living in a Christian marriage: that relationships "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." It is our hope that this brief historical overview of marriage will offer members of the Church a roadmap that allows us all to see the historical continuity between this definition and the unique elements of this definition that have come to our understanding of Christian marriage over the course of the last hundred years.

Words are not static representations of some concretized unmoving reality. They are fluid, symbolic vehicles for naming that which we know to be true in our own time, our own day. "Marriage," "mutuality," "faithfulness," "companionship," "love": when understood within the context of history, these words have meant different things in different times. How we define marriage in our own day can be guided and informed by the many definitions we have encountered in history. But like all aspects of our faith life, the call from God ultimately is to come to experience and understand the Christian life in our time, our places, and our widely divergent historical, spiritual, psychological, and sociological contexts. That work is left to the Church. All that we of the Task Force on the Study of Marriage can even hope to do is to shine a light on the many meanings and purposes of marriage that have been part and parcel of the Christian life and faith.

Discussion Questions Related to the History of Marriage

1. Reading through the entire history of marriage, draw a diagram that compares and contrasts the concepts of marriage that are held by the wealthy and powerful as compared to those held by the landless, propertyless, and powerless in a society. Is it possible that marriage means different things to people, even within the same historical and cultural time frame?
2. Much of history tells us that marriage is a process, not an event. One of the central features of almost all marriage practices is the presence of betrothal rites. In earlier periods of history, betrothals lasted longer and were more formalized. Many of the elements that have been subsumed into our contemporary marriage rite began as parts of Jewish, Roman, or medieval rites of betrothal. What benefit does betrothal offer a couple and the communities in which the couple participates? How might contemporary betrothal practices be augmented to further support the process of marriage?
3. Who writes laws that prohibit individuals from marrying each other, and, from a historical perspective, what have been the primary motivations for these laws?
4. Since the beginning of time, men and women have entered into sexual and domestic relationships for the betterment of their own lives and their societies. Sometimes those unions have been defined by a shared communal ethic. At other times definitions have been primarily legal. Occasionally marriages have been described as primarily spiritual unions. Are all legal marriages spiritual unions? Is legal marriage required to validate a spiritual union? How central to a marriage is the public nature of it — whether it is witnessed to and affirmed by extended family networks and social relationships?
5. When you look with a long lens at the history of marriage, has it evolved or simply changed? Are contemporary Episcopal understandings of marriage, and particularly of the necessity and significance of mutuality in marriage, more evolved understandings of the human condition than what was understood at earlier points in history?
6. How, if at all, does this discussion of the history of marriage inform your own views regarding the wisdom of the church allowing same-sex marriage?

7. If almost 50 percent of marriages are currently ending in divorce, is that good or bad? What might the 21st-century Episcopal Church do to make Christian marriage a more viable and robust institution in the coming decades?

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