

APPENDIX 1: Essays on Marriage

Contents

Introduction

1. A Biblical and Theological Framework for Thinking about Marriage
2. Christian Marriage as Vocation
3. A History of Christian Marriage
4. Marriage as a Rite of Passage
5. The Marriage Canon: History and Critique
6. Agents of the State: A Question for Discernment
7. Changing Trends and Norms in Marriage

Introduction

One of the defining characteristics of our Anglican tradition is how we approach significant matters that require faithful discernment. We rely upon three interrelated resources that provide a holistic and balanced method of consideration: Scripture, tradition, and reason.

The resolution that defined the work for the Task Force on the Study of Marriage (2012-A050) was broad, to say the least. It asked us to consider the historic, theological, biblical, canonical, legal, liturgical, and social dimensions of marriage. Our budget and our time together were, however, very limited.

Nevertheless, the advantage of having such a broad charge was to ensure that we would approach this important subject holistically, from all three of the traditionally Anglican viewpoints. In some of the seven essays that follow, one viewpoint may be more evident than another, but throughout them all, we have attempted to engage deeply with Scripture, tradition, and reason.

This introduction summarizes a few of the highlights of each essay, in order that the reader might see where we are headed. Those who take the time to read the essays themselves, however, will find a much richer and more nuanced treatment than what this introduction provides. We begin with a biblical and theological foundation in the first two essays, examine our history in the following three, and conclude with two on contemporary issues: whether clergy should act as agents of the state in performing marriages; and some data and reflections on the current state of marriage in our society and Church.

Please keep in mind that these seven essays, however holistic, are not an attempt to be comprehensive, and we do not consider them to be the final word. They are simply our present, admittedly limited contribution to a process of study and discernment that has gone on, and will continue to go on, for a long time.

It is our hope that these essays will provide something more than interesting reading for those who take the time. Given the changing norms and practices around marriage, blessing, singlehood, and other forms of what people consider to be “family,” the subject bears close and faithful consideration by our Church on a broad basis.

Therefore, we encourage the use of the essays, alongside our “Dearly Beloved” toolkit, as study materials in diocesan, congregational, and other settings. After assigning them as reading, facilitators might use the discussion and reflection questions that are provided in some of the essays or come up with other questions of their own.

As we begin our first essay, “**A Biblical and Theological Framework for Thinking about Marriage,**” we make it clear that we approach the subject of marriage — as has the Church for centuries — not as a matter of dogma or core doctrine, but as a concern of pastoral or moral theology. While the former is considered to be unchanging, the latter can, and does, evolve considerably over time.

Our lead-up to the subject also includes an overview of the wide range of values and regulations for marital relations that are found in biblical texts. This overview shows just how complex, evolving, and contradictory our Scriptures are on the subject, and therefore how tricky it is to speak of “the biblical view of marriage.” We demonstrate how different biblical views and practices of marriage have variously formed and influenced different parts of the faith community through history, even into our own day.

The paper then moves to the heart of the matter: a theological framework that we offer for thinking about marriage. This framework includes several powerful biblical models that serve as analogies for the relationship of marriage: God’s unconditional faithfulness and forgiveness; the paradox of union and difference in Christ; and Christ’s self-offering in love that is at the heart of the Paschal Mystery.

Finally, the essay concludes with a discussion about the marriage of same-sex couples, making four points. The first is that when our criteria for a holy marriage are based upon the moral values of self-offering love, our conclusion is that same-sex couples are as capable of a holy marriage as are different-sex couples.

Second, the essential quality of marital unity *in difference* outlined previously can be present for same-sex couples in ways other than the often-cited “complementarity” of different-sex couples.

Third, “it is not in the sex difference, or in sex itself (whether understood as the sex of the bodies involved or the sexual act) that moral value lies,” since moral value is determined by “the context and relationship of the actors,” rather than by actions alone.

And last, the clear expectations that General Convention resolution 2000-D039 set forth for any committed lifelong relationship, including same-sex couples, are seen as central to our understanding of the very nature of marriage and its vows.

In our second essay, “**Christian Marriage as Vocation,**” we consider marriage itself as “a calling, a spiritual practice, a particular, vowed manner of life ... , a way of being in and engaging the world, of ordering our life in ways that facilitate our participation in the wider purposes for which God created us, redeemed us, and brings us into newness of life.” This vocation is not for everyone, for Scripture itself reminds us that not all are called to marriage. However, it is set within, and as a part of, the more fundamental, universal vocation of love.

A section follows that more fully examines the notion of union-in-difference and “complementarity” that the previous essay introduced. Relying upon Paul’s understanding of the “new creation” that is made in Christ, where traditional binary distinctions of male/female, slave/free, Jew/Gentile are broken down, we can then see the gift of marital difference in terms much broader and more complex than those of sex. It is the mystery of union and difference that matters in marriage, rather than the sex of the partners.

Gospel and Pauline themes provide depth to our understanding of the vocation of marriage, as they show how “particular graces or charisms gifted to each of us from God can come to their fullest fruition through the relationships and commitments we form,” including marriage. The theme of “abiding” in John 15 helps us see marriage as a form of avowed stability, a vessel that God uses to help us to bear the fruit of love. Paul emphasizes the transformational quality of life in Christ in which we are made anew, and in marriage we can see the possibility of gradual, lifelong metamorphosis. As such, the vocation of marriage can be “a way of participating in the ongoing renewal of creation.”

The following three essays are historical. The first of these, “**A History of Christian Marriage**,” demonstrates, as do our sections on Scripture, just how complex and diverse the beliefs and practices about marriage have been within the faith community.

The various practices of early Jewish and Roman Hellenistic marriage are discussed, with themes that range from marriage as a partnership within a social context, procreation, belovedness, divorce, polygamy, patriarchy, and power.

In the early Church, we see a countercultural shift that “invites Christians to imagine a different kind of family from the paternalistic families of either Judaism or Rome,” as family was now found through spiritual identification rather than through blood lines and social status. In the late New Testament era and beyond, the Church began, on the one hand, to commend abstinence and singleness over marriage, and on the other, to align more closely with the values of the empire.

In medieval times, familial and tribal partnerships are paramount; and in the High Middle Ages, an emphasis on chivalric romance — along with its objectification of women as noble, chaste, and pure beings — becomes a part of the backdrop for marriage. The Reformation rejected the primacy of the celibate life and emphasized companionship and the family as the central building blocks of the Christian life. In the New World, there were “numerous ways in which marriage law was used to oppress, and ... numerous ways in which subjugated people continued to find means to establish intimate bonds of familial relationship despite the impediments to volitional marriage.”

The modern age brought a new call for rights and freedoms for women, and this, in turn, led to dramatic changes in the nature of marriage and family life, including a more peer-based relational model. At the same time, “the imperative to develop a theologically sound and culturally sensitive response to the question of the sanctity of a same-sex marriage has heightened.”

A part of this complex history of marriage is the closer focus of “**Marriage as a Rite of Passage**,” our next essay. Beginning with a model introduced by 20th-century anthropological studies, we see how marriage, like other rites of passage, consists of a formal ritual action designed “to help individuals or communities transition from one life state to a new one.”

This time of transition serves as a “liminal state,” wherein the participants are separated from their old way of life and yet are not fully incorporated into their new one. This liminal space can provide an experiential context, allowing for greater freedom, intimacy, and reinvention.

In the past, this liminal space between singleness and marriage was marked by rites of betrothal. As these practices have gone out of use, new ones have somewhat replaced them: the publishing of banns, premarital counseling, and, increasingly in our day, cohabitation as a stepping-stone to marriage. From an anthropological point of view, one could see this latter development as “a potential correction” to the loss of liminal space prior to marriage, recapturing something of the sense that marriage is something “that can and should be eased into rather than jumped into.”

The essay concludes with the assertion that marriage can, at times, be a rite that subverts the status quo, a prophetic act. Examples given are interfaith and interracial marriages and new familial bonds that are created across class lines, political affiliations, and ethnicities. As younger generations cross these boundaries more easily than those before them, we now have greater potential to incarnate a Gospel vision of the world as it can be — a world marked by more equality, richness, and diversity.

The third in our series of historical essays is “**The Marriage Canon: History and Critique**,” which shows that discussions in The Episcopal Church about marriage have largely been about remarriage after divorce. As is

often the case, changes in canon law have followed changes in practice. And so the essay traces some of these changes in society that forced issues resulting in canonical responses.

At first, remarriage after divorce was prohibited entirely, then only in the case of adultery, and then finally in other cases, but by petition to the bishop. In addition, other regulations were introduced after society experienced a significant rise in the divorce rate: requirements for pastoral preparation and instruction, verification that the couple had a legal right to be married, the presence of witnesses, the entry of information into the parish register, and so on.

The essay concludes with a series of questions that offer a critique of the current marriage canon. Included in this critique are explanations for each of the changes to the marriage canon that this Task Force proposes in resolution form.

Our essays now shift to two contemporary subjects. The first of these is discussed in “**Agents of the State: A Question for Discernment**,” which directly addresses the question that many today are asking: “Should the Church be in the marriage business at all?” — that is, as agents of the state. Without drawing a firm conclusion, we note that whatever the Church may decide on this matter, our discernment must include practical and ethical considerations about whether our participation in civil marriage enables us to be better agents of social transformation, makes us complicit in furthering injustice, or potentially does both.

Our final essay is “**Changing Trends and Norms in Marriages**.” As required by our enabling resolution 2012-A050, we consulted broadly with individuals, couples, scholars, and ecclesial partners; and we considered current social research and data on marriage. These consultations and the information we uncovered were extremely helpful in gaining a clearer picture of the state of marriage today.

The main issue that we identified for our reflection as a church has to do with the current drop in marriage rates, and for those who do marry, a delay until a later age than ever before. Cohabitation, as a temporary option or alternative to marriage, is significantly on the rise. Possible historical causes, as well as costs and benefits of these trends, are outlined, including possible impacts that the Church may consider in its mission and pastoral ministry.

The essay concludes with a section on differences in marriage trends among groups identified by race and ethnicity: African Americans, Hispanics and Latinos, Native Americans, and Asian Americans. Finally, we included some statistics regarding same-sex marriage that were current as of the time that this document was submitted.

Note: the Task Force on the Study of Marriage wishes to thank Peggy Van Antwerp Hill, who expertly and promptly edited the essays that follow.