

Theology Matters

Let Marriage Be Held in Honor

by Alan F. H. Wisdom

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Law must rest upon “the basis of the idea of the family, as consisting in and springing from the union for life of one man and one woman in the holy estate of matrimony; the sure foundation of all that is stable and noble in our civilization, the best guaranty of that reverent morality which is the source of all beneficent progress in social and political improvement.”

The phrases above were quite unremarkable when first set down, in an 1885 Supreme Court decision (*Murphy v. Ramsey*). It was taken for granted that the marriage-based family was the building block of civilization, and that society had a special interest in encouraging strong marriages. There were no differences on this point between statesmen and churchmen, or between the various denominations of Christians. All would affirm the wisdom of the biblical injunction: “Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled; for God will judge the immoral and adulterous” (Hebrews 13:4).

Today, suddenly, these phrases have become controversial. They slam squarely against the growing movement to abolish all moral and legal distinctions between marriage and other kinds of “committed” sexual relationships. Those other relationships are given various names: “holy unions,” “same-sex unions,” “civil unions,”

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and “domestic partnerships.” Sometimes a semantic difference is allowed to persist provisionally, with the word “marriage” still reserved for the lifelong union of man and woman. But strenuous efforts are made to eliminate as many practical differences as possible between marriage and other sexual relationships. The ultimate goal is to storm the bastion of marriage, opening it to all sexual partners who have been excluded.

This revolutionary cultural change has been nurtured quietly for years in law review articles, “alternative” church liturgies and some (not all) circles of the homosexual community. Now it has burst upon the public scene. In Vermont a 1999 court decision ordered the legislature to erase all practical distinctions between marriage and homosexual relationships. Now “civil unions” –treated as marriages in every possible way—are on the books in one state of the Union. It is to be expected

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that other states, and many churches, will be asked to recognize these relationships that now have legal status. The outcome is uncertain in both church and society.

Because the Presbyterian Church (USA) is a “mainline” denomination, this movement has inevitably found its way into our church. The failed 1991 human sexuality report proposed that “justice-love” should displace marriage as the standard of Christian sexual morality. At the 2000 General Assembly, the philosophy of sexual leveling found expression in two unsuccessful overtures, which proposed to treat marriage as merely one among many sexual relationships that the church might bless.

The Permanent Judicial Commission decision in the Hudson River case (May 2000) would allow this movement to proceed unchecked. “Same-sex unions” could be celebrated in every way as weddings, as long as the word “marriage” was not used.

The arguments for “gay marriage” have great appeal in an individualistic, experience-oriented society such as ours. Here is an outline of some of those arguments:

* Sexual relationships are a private and personal choice. Individuals should be left free to seek their sexual happiness as they deem best. Neither the state nor the Church should favor any one relationship over another.

* The greatest good in life, to which everyone is entitled, is an intense individual experience producing a sense of self-fulfillment and connection to other persons and the universe. Sexual intercourse is such an experience, and therefore good sex becomes a kind of “human state and the Church should grant “equal rights” to all persons who are enjoying this profound spiritual experience.

* Marriage is an artificial construct of society. It is “just a piece of paper.” Marriage was defined by law to suit past social convenience, and it can be redefined by law to suit today’s social convenience.

* The bodies of the sex partners do not matter. What matters are their feelings of love for one another. It is “sex discrimination” to insist that the bodies of the partners must be male and female.

* Childbearing has no necessary connection to right sexual relationships. Some couples choose to have children, some couples choose not to, and some couples are infertile—it makes no difference. There should be nothing special in the eyes of the state or the church about a man and a woman who are prepared to raise a family.

* Both state and Church should be practical and accommodate themselves to current sexual realities. Since many people have sex outside of traditional marriage, we should make room for those relationships in our legal code and Church teaching. Perhaps the persons involved

might even be somewhat less promiscuous if the state and Church treated them like monogamous married couples.

* Lastly, there is the challenge posed by Rep. Barney Frank (D-MA) on the floor of Congress: What harm would it do to their heterosexual neighbors if he and his partner Herb were granted a marriage license? The assumption behind the question is that no harm is done. Therefore the conclusion is that the two men (and any other pair of sexual partners) should receive their marriage license. Or else marriage should be abolished as a distinct form of relationship.

In a “mainline” setting, it is surprisingly hard to resist such arguments. The liberal assumptions behind them have already penetrated deeply into the minds of many decision-makers. Conservatives may quote Bible verses condemning sodomy and fornication; however, large segments of our religious elites no longer regard the Bible as authoritative in the Church. And they certainly do not believe that Christians should “impose” biblical principles upon others. Conservatives may warn that endorsing “gay marriage” will be divisive, and they may quote polls showing roughly 70 percent of the lay people opposed to it. But liberals will respond by claiming the high moral ground, saying that they are standing on principles of justice for the sexual outcasts of our society.

The moderate majority in the mainline is often intimidated from making even these unsuccessful arguments. It knows that any defense of traditional marriage will be met with a harsh misconstrual of motives. Anyone who exalts the one man-one woman model of marriage will be tagged as a “bigot,” a “homophobe,” a “Pharisee” obsessed with imposing “narrow religious doctrines” upon the supposedly free-thinking majority. It is little wonder that persons who see themselves as compassionate, broad-minded, and peaceable would shrink back from engaging the debate under such terms.

Yet the debate must be engaged. The stakes are too high to ignore the questions that have been raised: What is marriage? And why does it deserve society’s special favor? The Church and our Western democratic tradition have developed some good answers to these weighty questions:

* Marriage is not merely a personal choice. It is an institution, among others, established by God for the benefit of humankind. The Church across the ages and around the world has understood the nature of marriage to be inscribed in the order of creation. When the Westminster Confession (6.131) defines marriage as “a union between one man and one woman,” it is not stating a peculiarly Reformed doctrine. Nor is this a narrowly Christian teaching. Marriage, according to the confession, is “ordained of God” for “the happiness and welfare of mankind” (6.131).

* Marriage is not defined by the state. Nor is it defined by the Church. It is defined instead by God's purpose in the creation, when he formed man and woman and brought them together as "one flesh." Thus marriage goes back before Jesus' earthly ministry, before Moses, before all churches and all states. Human societies around the world and throughout history have recognized the pattern of marriage (in some form). "The distinctive contribution of the Church in performing a marriage ceremony is to affirm the divine institution of marriage," according to the Westminster Confession (6.136). Nothing in the Church's liturgy should "diminish the Christian understanding of -4.9004).

* As an institution, marriage has its rules. Among these rules are: that it should unite a man and a woman (the two complementary sexes), that it should be freely and deliberately chosen, that it should be exclusive and monogamous, and that it should be a total and permanent commitment. Marriage is not an infinitely flexible contract that can be extended to any two persons. For any individual considering marriage, the pool of eligible partners is limited. Many categories of persons are excluded from the pool: minors, close blood relatives, persons already married, prisoners and legally incompetent persons, as well as members of the same sex. These exclusions are not some kind of arbitrary "discrimination;" they flow from the rules of marriage that apply equally to all.

* There is no other human relationship that is the equivalent of marriage, and therefore no other relationship should be treated as if it were the equivalent of marriage. Our Presbyterian confessions list among the purposes of marriage: as "the medicine of incontinency" (4.246); as a "spiritual and physical union" providing "mutual esteem and love," comfort in trouble, and economic support to the partners (6.131); "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" (6.134); as an alternative to "anarchy in sexual relationships," and a demonstration of "the responsible freedom of the new life in Christ" (9.47). Other relationships may serve some of these purposes, but none of them serves them all so powerfully as marriage. No other relationship is so fundamental to the healthy ordering of society. No other human relationship, except perhaps that between parent and child, is lifted up so highly in the Scriptures as an analogy for the relationship between God and his people.

* The union of the two sexes in marriage is an intrinsic good, even apart from any personal or social functions that it may serve. The same cannot be said of other sexual relationships—which may manifest some forms of love and may bring some benefits, but which nevertheless violate God's design for the right use of the good gift of sexuality.

* It is misguided to see socially-approved sex as some kind of "human right" owed to all persons. Sexual intercourse is not required for individual happiness, social adjustment, or spiritual maturity. Christianity has a long tradition of respect for celibate men and women who, by the grace of God, deny their own desires and offer a special service to God and the community. Such individuals are citizens of God's kingdom and the state in the fullest sense. The fact that the unmarried have different responsibilities and receive different benefits does not imply that they have been deprived in any way.

* The bodies of the partners do make a difference in marriage. Marriage is far more than just an intense emotional experience of love. It is the mystery of how "the two become one flesh." That mystery necessarily involves the leap across the great divide between the two sexes, male and female, which God created for each other.

* Childbearing does have a necessary connection to marriage. The most vital interest that society has in marriage is its concern for the healthy upbringing of the next generation of citizens. Sociological studies have shown conclusively that a child fares best under the care of a father and mother who are married to one another. Moreover, our current social scene demonstrates the damages that result when childbearing is separated from marriage. Therefore both Church and state have powerful reasons to recognize and subsidize marriage which do not apply to other sexual relationships.

* The fact that some marriages are childless does not eliminate the distinction between these marriages and other relationships. The authorities in both Church and state do not know which couples applying for marriage will turn out to be infertile. Nor do they know which will choose to have children, and which will have children contrary to their previous intentions. As far as the Church and the state are concerned, every couple coming to be married is a potential set of parents, and both Church and state are prepared to support that couple in parenthood.

* Finally, there is an answer to the challenge posed by Barney Frank: What harm would it do to their neighbors if Herb and he were married? The answer is that the granting of a marriage license always affects many more than the two individuals listed. It not only brings those two inside the institution of marriage; it also defines (or redefines) marriage by the example that they will set for their neighbors. If they follow the rules of marriage and keep their vows, then their example strengthens their neighbors' marriages. But if they ignore or break the rules of marriage, then they tear the fabric of society in places that they had not imagined. The bad example of a debased marriage or a broken marriage may not shake the couple next door who are already firm in their commitment. But it could convey to the young and the unmarried observers a warped and devalued conception of what marriage is all about. And when the bad example is imitated—and, worse, when society approves—then the damage to family

structures spreads rapidly. We have already seen this phenomenon in our society with the rise of illegitimacy and the explosion of divorce. With the crisis that the family already faces in American society, we must ask ourselves: Is this the time to start a new, more radical experiment in redefining marriage?

The more honest among the advocates of “gay marriage” admit that they are seeking more than just “inclusion” inside the institution of marriage; they are seeking to change the institution from within. This was the theme of an April 1997 conference of liberal Episcopalians in Pasadena, CA. Speakers at the conference, entitled “Beyond Inclusion,” leveled a volley of complaints against traditional marriage. They condemned it as sexist, patriarchal, and violent. “I don’t want the relationship I enter into with a partner to be the same as heterosexual marriage, thank you,” said the Rev. Juan Oliver, canon missionary of the Episcopal Diocese of New Jersey.

Another participant remarked, “I’ve started to think that maybe we are a threat to marriage as we know it, and maybe the Church needs to redefine marriage.” Along those lines, Oliver distributed a report proposing an Episcopal Church rite to bless same-sex unions. The sample rite showed striking differences from the traditional wedding ceremony: (1) It omitted the promise to stay together “until we are parted by death.” (2) It dropped the vow to “forsaking all others, be faithful” to the spouse. (3) It cut out all references to “the procreation of children and their nurture in the knowledge and love of the Lord.” (4) It had no place for parents to “give” or bless their children in marriage.

Of course, Presbyterian same-sex partners might choose a more traditional liturgy. Or they might devise their own version of the ceremony. But there is nothing in the Permanent Judicial Commission decision in the Hudson River case that would stand in the way of a rite like Oliver’s.

Oliver defended his rewriting of the marriage ceremony, arguing that the only two essential elements of marriage are commitment and blessing. “It is more important to praise God for Sally and Sue, even in the face of infidelity, than to praise God for their 42 years of a genitally exclusive monogamous relationship, during which they have hated each other,” Oliver said. “Faithfulness is not about plumbing.” Others at the conference reinforced the point that strict monogamy was not so important to them. Prominent homosexual advocates, such as Andrew Sullivan, have made the same point repeatedly.

Thus “gay marriage,” as envisioned by its advocates, would involve a dual process: The status of marriage would be broadened to include all sorts of relationships formerly considered sinful. As a result, at the same time, the traditional responsibilities and functions of marriage would be drastically narrowed. Any relationship with a

vague “commitment” between the partners would be eligible for the blessing of Church and state.

At the Pasadena Episcopal conference, the Rev. Jennifer Phillips of University City, MO, spoke of “deconstructing these categories [the boundaries of marriage]” as “part of Gospel work.” “What’s next?” Phillips asked. “Maybe we bless non-celibate single people. What a thought!” The audience laughed.

The Rev. Marilyn McCord Adams of Yale Divinity School repeatedly challenged the audience to “remove the blinders of taboo.” She referred to the Trinity as “the Gay Men’s Chorus,” and cited it as an example suggesting that the Church might bless relationships involving three or more persons—rather than just couples. Indeed, it is undeniable that every argument used to justify “gay marriage” could also be used on behalf of polygamy or incest between adults. There are even a few quarters of the left in which pedophilia already has its defenders.

Our churches and our society must face squarely the question: Is this the road down which we wish to travel? Do we wish to reduce the strong bonds of marriage down to some vaguely-stated “commitment” between any two (or more?) sexual partners? And do we wish to destroy all the taboos that tend to channel sexual activity toward the warmth and safety of the marriage bed?

Ultimately, the choice is between Christian marriage as God’s gold standard—or no standard at all. Moderates and conservatives in all U.S. denominations must be prepared to make these arguments with vigor, intelligence, and compassion for those who have been caught up in the sexual disorders of our time. Simply quoting Bible verses and warning against division in the church will not be enough. This debate will not be won by stern moralists trying to lay down the law and make the sexual misfits keep quiet. It will be won by gentle, humble Christians who seek to hold marriage in the unique honor that it deserves—as part of God’s good provision for the happiness of sinful humans and their troubled societies.

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New Video Introduces Kids To Same-Sex Couples

By Ed Vitagliano

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“My family is special because we love each other,” a little girl on screen tells the viewer.” Another says of her family, “They’re always here for me when I need them, they’re always caring for me.” Those tender words are from a couple of the sweet kids who appear in the new documentary *That’s A Family!*, the slickly-produced, 35-minute documentary from Helen Cohen and Debra Chasnoff. If those names sound familiar to pro-family groups, it’s because the pair also produced another controversial children’s film, the 1996 video *Elementary: Talking About Gay Issues in School*.

While *It’s Elementary* was intended to instruct teachers and school administrators about how to introduce the subject of homosexuality to schoolchildren, *That’s A Family!* is intended to be shown directly to children.

There’s even more to come from the duo. In a letter to supporters last year, Cohen and Chasnoff said *That’s A Family!* was the first of a three-part video series entitled *Respect for All*. The next two videos will focus on the subjects of dispelling “gay” and lesbian stereotypes in other words, anything that argues against the normalcy of homosexuality—and offering strategies to deal with name-calling against homosexuals. The untitled videos are also intended to be shown directly to children.

That target audience makes the strategy of *That’s A Family!* all the more potent: children do virtually all the talking, turning this film into something of a one-on-one experience for the schoolchildren who are watching in class. These bright, adorable kids on screen are speaking to the viewer like a friend might do sitting across the lunch table or on the playground at recess. The impact on the hearts and minds of innocent viewers must be palpable—a fact that could hardly have been lost on Cohen and Chasnoff when they set out to develop the series.

‘That’s what a family is all about’

So just what will these onscreen kids be saying to the schoolchildren of America? In the first few minutes of *That’s A Family!*, young faces tell the viewer things like, “To have a good family everyone needs to take care of each other...and to feel comfortable with each other...you can feel trust and friendliness.”

In one particularly poignant moment, a girl with her wheelchair-bound father says to the camera, “My Dad is in a wheelchair, but it doesn’t really matter because he still loves me and my family still loves me, and that’s what a family is all about.”

Who can argue with such sweet sentiments? In fact, that sweetness is the coating on the entire theme of *That’s A Family!* Children who are adopted, who are being raised in single-parent homes, or by grandparents, or who have divorced parents, or parents from different racial, religious and ethnic backgrounds, all talk about the love and caring that exists in their homes.

The film takes special care to honor this diversity of family framework. Emily, a third-grader, has parents with different ethnic backgrounds—the father is Chinese, while the mother is German. “There are a lot of kids like me in the world who have mixed families, and they don’t all have to be the same,” she says. “There are a lot of

And how. Interspersed throughout what most people would consider the normal variations of family structures that appear in *That’s a Family!* are same-sex couples. They are families, too, say the children in such homes.

“If you knew my dads,” insists 10-year-old Breanna, “you would know how cool they are. They’re the best dads

In this manner Cohen and Chasnoff let “gay” and lesbian couples elbow their way in and latch on to the claim of family, while the pressure of sentiment is falling heavily on the viewer. Instead of guilt by association, it is an attempt to acquire legitimacy by association.

One boy, speaking on behalf of his three siblings while two proud homosexual men look on, says, “It’s really cool to have two gay dads because they brought us into a home, they adopted us and they love us.”

It is true that most of us think of our families in terms of togetherness, love, and caring. However, this strategy of legitimacy by association involves a classic fallacy. Just because all dogs are mammals doesn’t mean that all mammals are dogs; likewise, just because families love

each other doesn't mean that all people who love each other are families.

A family, according to the most concise definition, is a group of people related by blood (ancestry), marriage, or adoption. There's no doubt that all people need love and find it in a variety of relationships. However, not all relationships constitute a family, any more than the camaraderie experienced by the players on a softball team or the crew of a nuclear submarine makes those individuals technically a family. It may feel like a family, but it's not one.

Thus the fallacy in *That's A Family!* is actually quite a simple one, but therein lies the awful rub: the simple minds of the schoolchildren watching the video will undoubtedly miss the sleight-of-hand being played out in front of their very eyes.

Redefining the Family

Activists like Cohen and Chasnoff appear to have completely absorbed the fallacy, however, and not only firmly believe it, but have constructed an entire strategy with it at the core.

A. Cornelius Baker, executive director of the National Association of People With AIDS, admitted in a 1997 article for the homosexual magazine *The Advocate* that homosexuals are "engaged in redefining the society in which we live—how marriage is viewed, how family is viewed..."

The same sentiments found in *That's A Family!* are heard over and over by those participating in this "redefine. For example, in an article in the Dallas Morning News highlighting the development of townhouses as dwellings for groups of young homosexuals, the headline states, "New cultural phenomenon provides young gays a family

"A family is a group of people who join together, love each other and stick by one another no matter what," insisted the 33-year-old house "father" of one such Florida dwelling.

The same fallacy is used to stretch the definition of family to include same-sex couples when the issue is adoption. In 1999, a Los Angeles Superior Court judge ruled that two British homosexual men must both be named the parents of a child born to an American surrogate mother. The same-sex couple wanted both names on the birth certificate, something that British authorities had been unwilling to do.

"We are celebrating a legal victory," said one of the homosexual men, Barry Drewitt. "The nuclear family as we know it is evolving. The emphasis should not be on it being a father and a mother, but on loving, nurturing

parents, whether that be a single mother or a gay couple living in a committed relationship."

Why do activists insist that the concept of the nuclear family "evolve" into an entirely new animal, completely eliminating the necessity for "a father and a mother?" It is because homosexuals understand intuitively that such a model excludes them—and their relationships—from legitimacy.

In the classic 1972 anthology, *Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberation*, one writer says, "Gay men and women are undoubtedly oppressed to a large extent because their choice of love falls outside the model sanctioned by society: the family."

The traditional model, after all, is a strictly heterosexual construction. The nuclear family is built around the marriage of one man and one woman, who are sexually complementary beings. Any society which adopts that model as the basic building block for its culture will—even without realizing it—effectively lock out of the circle of legitimacy nonmarried cohabitating couples, homosexual variations, and even polygamous combinations.

For more than three decades, U.S. culture has undergone a struggle by nontraditionalists to legitimize cohabitation. If the lack of social stigma is any indicator, the battle has largely been won.

Homosexuals now want their turn, and societal refusal to grant their relationships the legitimacy for which they thirst is maddening. For example, prior to the successful passage of a state initiative last November that limited marriage to the heterosexual variety, California state legislator and lesbian activist Sheila Kuehl fumed that the "far right" refused to "budge" on the issue of family.

"This defense [of the traditional concept of the family] inevitably takes the form of drawing a tight circle around one form of an otherwise flexible word [family]. Then that circle is fixed into law, demonizing all those who don't fit its narrow definition," she said.

A new definition, a new reality

Since they cannot be included in the nuclear family model—which necessitates heterosexual marriage—then activists demand that society change the definition of family to include same-sex coupling.

When singer Melissa Etheridge and her girlfriend Julie Cypher appeared on the cover of a 1996 issue of *Newsweek* with the headline, "We're having a baby," very few Americans appeared to do more than shrug their shoulders. "Can gay families gain acceptance?," a subhead asked.

Four years later it was learned that rock star David Crosby

was the biological father of the lesbian couple's baby, having been the donor for the artificial insemination procedure. Crosby said, "The traditional American family is a little rare on the ground now, and it's getting redefined." He added, "All that matters is the relationship [between Etheridge and Cypher] is a loving one and that it provides a good place to plant the seed of a child."

Crosby, however, couldn't understand the opposition of traditionalists towards "gay" marriage and adoption. He said of his critics, "To them, my being the biological father of a lesbian couple's children means that I'm somehow promoting the breakdown of the American family."

He was one step removed from being right. Critics don't necessarily see his actions as contributing to the breakdown of the American family—other factors are doing a fine job of that—but the razing of the concept of family itself.

This is why the type of approach used in *That's A Family!* becomes so instrumental for Cohen, Chasnoff and their ilk. Through the soft voices of children, the concept of family becomes so blurred as to become virtually meaningless. After all, if by family we mean nothing really specific—or if we define it in the most malleable of terms—then family really comes to mean nothing at all. It is like a formless, intangible vapor that can enter and fill a jar of any shape.

Thus, while Kuehl gripes that pro-family groups are too rigid about their definition of family, homosexual activists are busy being so elastic in their definition as to threaten to scrub the facing off the institution like paint off a mural. Once "family" can basically include anything, homosexuals can then ask, "If no relationship is excluded from the concept of family, then why not include us?"

A Critical Review of "Changing Families" A Churchwide Study Document

1

By Christine A. Bruce

What would you do if you were given a voice in defining our denomination's social witness policy toward understanding and under girding today's "changing families"? Hopefully you would speak out clearly for reclaiming a biblical definition of family. You would advocate robust, compassionate, restorative action into the complexity of human relationships today, with spiritual and moral redemption as its core value. Hopefully you would not let such an opening pass without your input. Yet I wonder what percentage of the *Theology Matters* readership has taken advantage of this course-plotting opportunity?

It's not too late for a large number of us to respond to the invitation of the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP) to join in the formulation of their upcoming recommendations to the 215th General Assembly (2003) concerning "the church's 21st century ministry and witness to all families in both church and society."² ACSWP is encouraging comment from individuals, sessions and study groups at every level of

church organization, through June 30, 2002. Timely feedback will be considered as the Task Force prepares their report. The forum provided is the churchwide study document, "Changing Families," which has been in circulation since January 1, 2001. We dare not relinquish our right to be involved in the process, and then complain about the outcome!

The purpose of this review is to supply a first view of the study document, its underlying assumptions, format, strengths and weaknesses, and to provide some recommendations for a response to the "Changing Families" Task Force of the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy.

Underlying Assumption of the Study Document

The principal assumption of the study document is that the church must continually update its understanding of "family" in pace with a changing social and cultural context, in order to effectively minister to the needs of families and especially, children:

Clearly, it must be recognized that no singular or narrow definition of "family" can be adequately

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descriptive or definitive for all times or for all social and cultural contexts, even within Christian history or culture.³

The Task Force views “changing families” as an “idea” that requires definition in order to proceed with social witness policy. Family forms listed in the purview of the study include, among other variations, “same-sex partners (sometimes raising children) for whom there is little consensus today concerning the use of the term ‘family’.”⁴ Could we identify a specific Task Force direction in highlighting the homosexual household as an item for study? The list does not specifically address concern for unmarried heterosexual persons living together or the children of such households. We are not directed to consider the needs of children raising each other when parents are absent or incapable due to incarceration or substance abuse, although these are critical. In any case, the need for study and comment by the church on all family matters is clear, whether or not we agree that our understanding of “family” needs to change.

Format

Beyond the introduction, called “Concerns and First Questions,” the document consists of four study sessions, appendixes and a response form. Each session contains a selection of Scripture references with questions for interpreting them into the context of the study, excerpts from the Book of Confessions with questions about their continued “helpfulness,” and a variety of other study materials, including research findings, an excerpt from the *Book of Order* G-5.0102, and most notably, the 1992 document “*A Vision for Family Ministries*” with attending questions of application. The response form is brief and open ended.

Strengths of the Document

The foremost strength of this document is in its invitation to open response. Although one might feel led by some of the questions in a certain political or hermeneutical direction, there is freedom to answer according to conviction. In addition, there was clearly an attempt to honor theological diversity in the formulation of the study questions, although this gives a bit of a “teeter-totter” effect as the study attempts neutrality. Finally, it is a helpful preview of the contributing influences and type of thought process through which the Task Force is constructing their policy recommendations.

Weaknesses of the Document

A major weakness of “Changing Families” and a primary caution to study groups is its approach to biblical material. For example, Session I includes a lengthy list of “select, but not exhaustive passages for discussion that may directly or indirectly inform your understanding of the Bible’s various perspectives on family.”⁵ These passages are all about diversity, humility and acceptance of one another within the Body of Christ, and gracious evangelism towards those outside. The accompanying

study questions lead toward the redefinition of “family,” as if these passages spoke to a biblical model for constructing and understanding families. There are many passages of Scripture that do speak to family structure, directly or indirectly, but none of these is mentioned. For example, we in the Body of Christ (The Bride) are ourselves not a complete family without the Bridegroom, who is Christ. Why not include some of the many biblical references to the manner in which the believer’s intimate family relationships reflect the relationship of Christ and the Church? These are conspicuously absent. There is none of the *Haustafel* for relationships inside or among households (e.g. Titus 2:3-5). Are we not to wrestle with these texts in the context of understanding families? Thus one gets a feeling of dishonesty and manipulation from the very outset of the document. Throughout the four sessions the hermeneutic unabashedly lodged in the study questions is that of applying biblical texts out of context. Responders need to speak clearly to this flaw, an abuse of Scripture.

In each Session, the study questions the ongoing validity of the Confessions for guidance on family matters and then almost parenthetically allows that they may still apply. On the other hand, the authors make extensive positive use of the resource “*A Vision for Family Ministries*,” which tends to define families and households much more loosely, equates “the relationship of marriage” with “relationships of mutual love and commitment,” and makes other statements of inclusion that might make someone committed to homosexual “exit ministries,” for example, feel quite unwelcome. Thus the study presents a consistently liberal slant that might be seen as courting the theological and political middle of the church too much.

Recommendations

What can you do to make the most of this open forum on families? Don your spiritual armor and jump into the fray! Argue for the authentic, timeless precepts of Scripture that have the ability not only to speak to any culture and society, but also to heal it. Suggest additional biblical, confessional and social visioning resources that must be taken into account as policy is formulated. Object to the hermeneutic of proof-texting and re-contexting Scripture. Propose social witness policy toward change in keeping with our biblical mandate to make disciples of all people groups, teaching them to obey *everything* Jesus has commanded. In the words of Paul, “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.”

1. Changing Families, a Churchwide Study Document from the Task Force on changing Families of the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy, 2001.
2. Ibid, p.6.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid, p.11.

To order a copy of “Changing Families” call PDS at 1-800-524-2612, order #68-600-01-001. The cost is \$5.

The State of Our Unions

By David Popenoe
Barbara Dafoe Whitehead

Popenoe, David and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead. "What's Happening to Marriage?" from The State of Our Unions, 1999, copyright 1999 by the National Marriage Project at Rutgers University. Reprinted by permission of the National Marriage Project.

Amid reports of America's improving social health, we hear little about the state of marriage. How is marriage faring in American society today? Is it becoming stronger or weaker? Sicker or healthier? Better or worse?

Answers to these questions from official sources have been hard to come by. The federal government issues thousands of reports on nearly every dimension of American life, from what we eat to how many hours we commute each day. But it provides no annual index or report on the state of marriage. Indeed, the National Center for Health Statistics, the federal agency responsible for collecting marriage and divorce data from the states, recently scaled back this activity. As a consequence, this important data source has deteriorated. Neither the Congress nor the President has ever convened a bipartisan commission or study group to investigate and report on the state of contemporary marriage. And no private agency, academic institution or private foundation has stepped forward to take on the task of monitoring the indices of marital health.

The neglect of marriage is all the more remarkable because mating and marrying behavior has changed dramatically in recent decades. Although some measures of these changes, such as the rise in unwed childbearing, have been duly noted, discussed and monitored, the state of marriage itself has been slighted. Why this is so remains a great puzzle. Marriage is a fundamental social institution. It is central to the nurture and raising of children. It is the "social glue" that reliably attaches fathers to children. It contributes to the physical, emotional and economic health of men, women and

The National Marriage Project is a nonpartisan, nonsectarian and interdisciplinary initiative located at Rutgers, the State University of NJ. The Project's mission is to provide research and analysis on the state of marriage in America and to educate the public on the social, economic and cultural conditions affecting marital success and wellbeing. The project is co-directed by David Popenoe, Ph.D., and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, Ph.D. Popenoe, a professor and former social and behavior sciences dean at Rutgers, is the author of numerous publications including, Life Without Father, Disturbing the Nest. Whitehead writes extensively on issues of marriage, family and child wellbeing. She is author of the Divorce Culture and the Atlantic Monthly article, "Dan Quayle Was Right."

children, and thus to the nation as a whole. It is also one of the most highly prized of all human relationships and a central life goal of most Americans. Without some sense of how marriage is faring in America today, the portrait of the nation's social health is incomplete.

The National Marriage Project seeks to fill in this missing feature in our portrait of the nation's social health with *The State of Our Unions*. This report includes what we consider the most important annually or biennially updated indicators related to marriage, divorce, cohabitation, fragile families with children and youth attitudes about marriage and family. For each area, a key finding is highlighted. These indicators will be updated annually and will provide opportunities for fresh appraisals each June.

We have used the latest and most reliable data available, as of late spring 1999. We cover the period from 1960 to the present, so these data reflect historical trends over several decades. Most of the data come from the United States Bureau of the Census. All of the data were collected by long-established and scientifically reputable institutions that rely on nationally representative samples.

What's Happening To Marriage?

Americans haven't given up on marriage as a cherished ideal. Indeed, most Americans continue to prize and value marriage as an important life goal, and the vast majority of us will marry at least once in a lifetime. By the mid-thirties, a majority of Americans have married at least once.

Most couples enter marriage with a strong desire and determination for a lifelong, loving partnership. Moreover, this desire may be increasing among the young. Since the 1980s, the percentage of young Americans who say that having a good marriage is extremely important to them as a life goal has increased slightly.

But when men and women marry today, they are entering a union that looks very different from the one that their parents or grandparents entered.

- o As a *couples relationship*, marriages are more likely to be broken by divorce than by death. And although one might expect that greater freedom to leave an

unhappy marriage might increase the chances that intact marriages would be very happy, this does not seem to be the case. Marriages are less happy today than in past decades.

- o As a *rite of passage*, marriage is losing much of its social importance and ritual significance. It is no longer the standard pathway from adolescence to adulthood for young adults today. It is far less likely to be closely associated with the timing of first sexual intercourse for young women and less likely to be the first living together union for young couples than in the past.
- o As an adult *stage in the life course*, marriage is shrinking. Americans are living longer, marrying later, exiting marriage more quickly, and choosing to live together before marriage, after marriage, in-between marriages, and as an alternative to marriage. A small but growing percentage of American adults will never marry. As a consequence, marriage is surrounded by longer periods of partnered or unpartnered singlehood over the course of a lifetime.
- o As an *institution*, marriage has lost much of its legal, religious and social meaning and authority. It has dwindled to a “couples relationship,” mainly designed for the sexual and emotional gratification of each adult. Marriage is also quietly losing its place in the language. With the growing plurality of intimate relationships, people now tend to speak inclusively about “relationships” and “intimate partners,” burying marriage within this general category. Moreover, some elites seem to believe that support for marriage is synonymous with far-right political or religious views, discrimination against single parents, and tolerance of domestic violence.
- o Among *young women*, social confidence in marriage is wavering. Until very recently, young women were highly optimistic about their chances for marital happiness and success. Now, according to youth surveys, their confidence in their ability to achieve successful marriage is declining. Moreover, they are notably more accepting of alternatives to marriage, such as unwed parenthood and cohabitation.
- o At the *national policy* level, marriage has received remarkably little bipartisan study or attention. During a four-decade period of dramatic historic change in marriage, no national studies, government commissions or task forces have been set up to examine the status of marriage or to propose measures to strengthen it.¹ Indeed the United States lags well behind England, Australia, and Canada in the level and seriousness of governmental response to the widespread evidence of the weakening of marriage.

The Marriage Relationship

One reason Americans prize marriage so highly is that it is the source of deeply desired benefits such as sexual faithfulness, emotional support, mutual trust and lasting

commitment. These benefits cannot be found in the marketplace, the workplace or on the Internet.

Most people aspire to a happy and long-lasting marriage. And they will enter marriage with the strong desire and determination for a lifelong and loving partnership. While they are married, most couples will also be sexually faithful to each other as long as the marriage lasts. According to the most comprehensive study of American sexual behavior, married people are nearly all alike in their sexual behavior: “once married, the vast majority have no other sexual partner; their past is essentially erased.”²

However, although Americans haven’t stopped seeking or valuing happy and long-lasting marriage as an important life goal, they are increasingly likely to find that this goal eludes them. Americans may marry but they have a hard time achieving successful marriages. One measure of success is the intactness of the marriage. Although the divorce rate has leveled off, it remains at historically high levels. Roughly half of all marriages are likely to end in divorce or permanent separation, according to projections based on current divorce rates. Another measure of success is reported happiness in marriage. Over the past two decades, the percentage of people who say they are in “very happy” first marriages has declined substantially and continuously. Still another measure of success is social confidence in the likelihood of marital success. Young people, and especially young women, are growing more pessimistic about their chances for a happy and long-lasting marriage.

The popular culture strongly reinforces this sense of pessimism, even doom, about the chances for marital success. Divorce is an ever-present theme in the books, music and movies of the youth culture. And real life experience is hardly reassuring; today’s young adults have grown up in the midst of the divorce revolution, and they’ve witnessed marital failure and breakdown first-hand in their own families and in the families of friends, relatives, and neighbors. For children whose parents divorced, the risk of divorce is two to three times greater than it is for children from married parent families. But the pervasive generational experience of divorce has made almost all young adults more cautious and even wary of marriage. The percent of young people who say they agree or mostly agree with the statement “one sees so few good marriages that one questions it as a way of life” increased between 1976 and 1992, while the percent of those who say it is very likely they will stay married to the same person for life decreased over the same time period for both males and females.³

Marriage as a Rite of Passage

For most of this century and certainly before, marriage was one of the most important rites of passage in life. It accomplished several goals associated with growing up: an economic transition from the parental household into

an independent household, a psychosexual transition merging two selves and lives into one, and a social and legal transition from status as a single person to a spouse. Across time and culture, betrothal and wedding rituals reflected these economic, social and sexual dimensions of young people's coming of age.

Today, marriage has lost much of its role and significance as a rite of passage. For earlier generations of women, first sexual intercourse and marriage were closely linked and timed. Ninety percent of women born between 1933-42 were either virgins when they married or had premarital intercourse with the man they wed.⁴ For today's generation of young women, the timing of first sexual intercourse is increasingly distant from the timing of first marriage. Just over half of teenage girls have experienced first sexual intercourse by age 17.⁵ Teenage girls are sexually active for seven or eight years on average before marriage. Indeed, premarital sex has become something of a misnomer. Sex is increasingly detached from the promise or expectation of marriage.

Secondly, because young adults are postponing marriage until their late twenties, they pass through much of their twenties as never-married singles. They are likely to live apart from the parental household, as singles, in a peer-group household, or in a cohabiting relationship. Many have "their own lives and their own jobs" long before they marry.

During the years before first marriage, many young adults make the economic transition from dependence to independence. The National Marriage Project's recent study of never-married, noncollege young men and women in northern New Jersey finds that these young adults are not inclined to see marriage as a way to get ahead by pooling paychecks.⁶ Rather, they describe marriage as a relationship where each partner contributes to the maintenance of the household but keeps control of his or her own earnings. Moreover, these men and women believe that each partner has to demonstrate a capacity to take care of himself or herself economically before marrying. As one young woman in the group explained, "men learn to hate you if you try to live off them."

The pathway leading to marriage has changed as well. The pattern of mating used to follow a sequence: couple dating, going steady, sexual experimentation—sometimes including premarital sexual intercourse—and then marriage and children. Few people lived together before marriage, and most women were either virgins at the time of marriage or had premarital intercourse only with their future husband.

Today the pathway is more complex and varied, but it goes in roughly this order: In high school and college, young people socialize in coed groups with some pairing off for purposes of love and sex. First sexual intercourse occurs in the late teens but it is typically not premarital. In their twenties, young people are likely to enter a

cohabiting partnership as a first living together union. Cohabiting unions are short-term. Either they break up or, more likely, lead to marriage. An estimated 60 percent of cohabiting unions end in marriage.⁷ Pregnancy and childbearing might occur at almost any point in this mating sequence.

Cohabitation is emerging as a significant experience for young adults. It is now replacing marriage as the first living together union. It is estimated that a quarter of unmarried women between the ages of 25 and 39 are currently living with a partner and about half have lived at some time with an unmarried partner.⁸ A growing percentage of cohabiting unions include children. For unmarried couples in the 25-34 age group, the percentage with children approaches half of all such households.⁹

Recent studies point to significant differences between never-married, childless, engaged cohabiting couples and cohabiting couples who have not set a definite date to marry. Prenuptial cohabitators seem to look a lot like married couples in the level of commitment, happiness and frequency of conflict. Non-nuptial cohabitators, however, are significantly more likely than married or prenuptial cohabiting couples to experience domestic violence, to be sexually unfaithful, to have lower expectations and levels of commitment.¹⁰

University of Chicago sociologist Linda J. Waite finds that cohabitation involves a different "bargain" than marriage. Compared to married couples, cohabitators expect less mutuality and sharing of resources, friends, leisure activities and goals.¹¹ They are less likely than married couples to "specialize" in their living together unions and thus to achieve higher levels of productivity. In many respects, cohabiting couples behave like roommates, sharing a residence and some household expenses, but remaining separate in many of their social and economic pursuits.

Marriage in the Life Course

Marriage occupies a significant proportion of the adult life span. Because of increasing longevity, one might expect the duration of marriage to increase in the future. But longer lives probably will not result in longer marriages, for several reasons. One is the later age of first marriage. Young people are postponing first marriage until they are well into their twenties. The second is the higher likelihood of divorce today. Still another is the decline in the rate of marriage and remarriage, especially for women. Finally, there is the rise in cohabiting unions after divorce or as an alternative to marriage. Older widowed or divorced individuals may choose to cohabit rather than remarry in order to avoid legal, economic and health-related entanglements. As a result of these forces, the lifetime proportion of marriage has declined slightly for women since mid-century, although the decline has been far steeper for Black women than others.

There are also some indications that lifelong singlehood may be increasing. The likelihood that adults will marry has declined dramatically since 1960. Much of this decline results from the postponement of first marriages until older ages, but it may also reflect a growing trend toward the single life. In 1960, 94 percent of women had been married at least once by age 45. If the present trend continues, fewer than 85 percent of current young adults will marry.

Another important trend toward singlehood is apparent in the status of single mothers. In the past, single mothers were likely to be widowed or divorced. For those who bore children out of wedlock, moreover, single motherhood tended to be a temporary status. They went on to marry and to have other children in wedlock. Today, single mothers are increasingly likely to have never married. And they are more likely to stay single, so unwed motherhood has become a permanent status for many women.

These convergent forces suggest that although marriage remains an important feature of adulthood, it no longer looms like Mount Everest in the landscape of the adult life course. It is more like a hill that people climb, up and down, once or twice, or bypass altogether.

Marriage as A Social Institution

Marriage is losing much of its status and authority as a social institution. According to legal scholar John Witte Jr., “the early Enlightenment ideals of marriage as a permanent contractual union designed for the sake of mutual love, procreation and protection is slowly giving way to a new reality of marriage as a ‘terminal sexual contract’ designed for the gratification of the individual parties.”¹² Marriage has lost broad support within the community and even among some of the religious faithful. In some denominations, clergy avoid preaching and teaching about marriage for fear of offending divorced parishioners. Marriage is also discredited or neglected in the popular culture. Consequently, young adults, who desperately want to avoid marital failure, find little advice, support and guidance on marriage from the peer or popular culture or from parents, clergy or others who have traditionally guided and supported the younger generation in matters of mating and marrying.

This loss of broad institutional support for marriage is evident in the marital relationship itself. Not so long ago, the marital relationship consisted of three elements: an economic bond of mutual dependency; a social bond supported by the extended family and larger community; and a spiritual bond upheld by religious doctrine, observance and faith. Today many marriages have none of these elements.

The deinstitutionalization of marriage is one of the chief reasons why it is more fragile today. For most Americans, marriage is a “couples relationship” designed primarily to meet the sexual and emotional needs of the spouses.

Increasingly, happiness in marriage is measured by each partner’s sense of psychological wellbeing rather than the more traditional measures of getting ahead economically, boosting children up to a higher rung on the educational ladder than the parents, or following religious teachings on marriage. People tend to be puzzled or put off by the idea that marriage has purposes or benefits that extend beyond fulfilling individual adult needs for intimacy and satisfaction. In this respect, marriage is increasingly indistinguishable from other “intimate relationships” which are also evaluated on the basis of sexual and emotional satisfaction.

Women and Marriage

When we look at the state of marriage today, it is useful to consider the behavior and attitudes of young women. Historically, women are the normsetters in courtship and marital relationships as well as the bearers of the cultural traditions of marriage. (To test this proposition, simply compare the amount of space devoted to marriage in women’s magazines to that in men’s magazines.) So women’s attitudes and expectations for marriage are an important measure of overall social confidence in the institution and a weathervane of which way the marital winds are blowing.

What do we know about the mating and marrying behavior of young women today? For one thing, women are older when they marry. The median age of first marriage for a woman is now 25, compared to 20 in 1960. For another, women who marry today are much less likely to be virgins than women in past decades. For yet another, most young women enter marriage after having lived with a partner, though not always their marriage partner. Finally, a significant percentage of young women have children outside of marriage. Women who become single mothers are less likely to ever marry.

Compared to men, young women are more disenchanted with marriage. This growing pessimism is particularly pronounced among teenage girls. For high school girls who expect to marry (or who are already married), the belief that their marriage will last a lifetime has declined over the past two decades while high school boys have become slightly more optimistic. Teenage girls are increasingly tolerant of unwed childbearing. Indeed, they outpace teenage boys in their acceptance of unwed childbearing today, a notable reversal from earlier decades when teenage girls were less tolerant of nonmarital births than teenage boys.

Women’s disenchantment should not be taken as a lack of interest in having husbands. But their growing pessimism may reflect two convergent realities. One is women’s higher expectations for emotional intimacy in marriage and more exacting standards for a husband’s participation in childrearing and the overall work of the household. These expectations may not be shared or met by husbands,

and thus the mismatch may lead to deep disappointment and dissatisfaction. The other is women's growing economic independence. Because women are better educated and more likely to be employed outside of the home today than in the past, they are not as dependent on marriage as an economic partnership. Consequently, they are less likely to "put up" with a bad marriage out of sheer economic necessity and more likely to leave when they experience unhappiness in their marriages. Moreover, because wives are breadwinners, they expect a more equitable division of household work—not always a fifty-fifty split but fairness in the sharing of the work of the home. Thus, the experience of working outside the home contributes simultaneously to greater economic independence and less tolerance for husbands who exempt themselves from involvement with children and the household. "I don't need a grown-up baby to take care of," is a complaint often voiced by working married mothers.

Some Good News about Marriage

Not all the marriage indicators are negative. Here and there, we find modest signs of positive change in attitudes or behavior.

- Married couples today are somewhat less likely to end up in divorce court than several years ago. After one and a half decades of sharp increase, the divorce rate has declined slightly and stabilized in recent years. Although projections based on the current rate suggest that close to half of all marriages are likely to end in divorce or permanent separation, that projection could change if the divorce rate declines in the future.
- The rate of unwed births has declined for the third year in a row, although the ratio of unwed and marital births remains the same. Mainly as a consequence of the modest reduction in both divorce and unwed births, the percentage of children living in single parent families has remained stable in the past two years (1996-98).
- The percentage of young Americans who say that having a good marriage is extremely important to them as a life goal has increased slightly since the 1980s.

Conclusion: Marriage is weakening but it is too soon to write its obituary . . .

Taken together, the marriage indicators do not argue for optimism about a quick or widespread comeback of marriage. Persistent long-term trends suggest a steady weakening of marriage as a lasting union, a major stage in the adult life course, and as the primary institution governing childbearing and parenthood. Young people's pessimism about their chances for marital success combined with their growing acceptance of unwed parenthood also do not bode well for marriage.

Nonetheless, there are some reasons for hope. For example, given the increased importance of marriage to teenagers, it is possible that this generation will work hard at staying happily married. The decline in the unwed birth rate is also a good sign. And there are stirrings of a larger grass-roots marriage movement. Churches in more than a hundred communities have joined together to establish a common set of premarital counseling standards and practices for engaged couples. A marriage education movement is emerging among marriage therapists, family life educators, schoolteachers and some clergy. In the states, legislators are considering or have passed bills creating incentives for engaged couples to receive premarital education. Florida now requires marriage education for high school students.

This is not the first time in the millennial-long history of western marriage that marriage has seemed headed for the dustbins and then recovered. Certainly it is possible that the nation is on the cusp of a turnaround in some of the negative marital trends. Perhaps the last four decades have merely been a "great disruption," in the words of social analyst Francis Fukuyama, and Americans will respond to the weakening of marriage with renewed dedication and success in achieving the goal of a long-lasting happy marriage. The positive trends bear watching and are encouraging, but it is still too soon to tell whether they will persist or result in a comeback of this important social institution.

¹ For two "think-tank" reports that are notable exceptions to the general neglect of marriage in the policy world, see: Theodora Ooms, *Toward More Perfect Unions: Putting Marriage on the Public Agenda* (Washington, DC: Family Impact Seminar, 1998); and *Marriage in America: A Report to the Nation* (New York: Council on Families in America, 1995).

² Robert T. Michael, John H. Gagnon, Edward O. Laumann, and Gina Kolata, *Sex in America: A Definitive Survey* (Boston, MA: Little Brown and Company, 1994), 105.

³ Norval D. Glenn, "Values, Attitudes and the State of American Marriage," *Promises To Keep: Decline and Renewal of Marriage in America*, ed. David Popenoe, Jean Bethke Elshain, and David Blankenhorn (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), 21.

⁴ Michael et al, 97.

⁵ Kristin A. Moore, Anne K. Driscoll, Laura Duberstein Lindberg, *A Statistical Portrait of Adolescent Sex, Contraception and Childbearing* (Washington DC: The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, March 1998), 3. Figure is based on 1995 National Survey of Family Growth.

⁶ Barbara Dafoe Whitehead and David Popenoe, *Why Wed? Young Adults Talk About Sex, Love and First Unions* (New Brunswick, N.J.: National Marriage Project, Rutgers University, 1999).

⁷ Larry Bumpass and James Sweet, "National Estimates of Cohabitation," *Demography* 24-4 (1989): 615-625.

⁸ Larry Bumpass and Hsien-Hen Lu, "Trends in Cohabitation and Implications for Children's Family Contexts." Unpublished manuscript, 1998. Center for Demography, University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI.

⁹ Wendy D. Manning and Daniel T. Lichter, "Parental Cohabitation and Children's Economic Well-Being" *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 58 (1996): 998-1010.

¹⁰ Linda J. Waite, "Cohabitation: A Communitarian Perspective," unpublished paper presented to the Communitarian Family Task Force, Washington, DC, January 1999, 13.

¹¹ Waite, 8-13, *passim*.

¹² John Witte, Jr., *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion, and Law in the Western Tradition* (Louisville, KY, Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 209.

This series has been developing three goals which if accomplished will do much to renew the church. We are skipping to goal three, “our form of government requires that higher governing bodies hold lower governing bodies accountable to the Gospel which is given expression in our confessions” because of the current situation in the church.

Repent, Remember, Overcome: A Proposal to Renew the Church, Part 4

By Terry Schlossberg

After Amendment A: Maintaining the Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church, and The Importance of Protecting and Defending the Constitution of the PC(USA)

On February 19, the Presbyterian Church (USA) once again affirmed—and by a significantly greater margin than before—God’s intent that sexual relationships be within the bonds of marriage between a man and a woman. Some in the church, however, did not rejoice. Some of them had already declared their unwillingness to live by this standard of the Presbyterian constitution. Refusal to obey the constitution, left uncorrected, will create a constitutional crisis that could threaten the continued existence of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

A unique characteristic of our reformed polity is that we are a self-governing people who take vows to adhere to a common set of beliefs.

Unlike many other denominations, Presbyterians are self-governed and, therefore, we commit ourselves to live under the provisions of a written constitution. Our constitution provides for us not only a system of polity (government) but also our confession of faith. Our officers take vows to accept the authority of Scripture, to be instructed and led by our confessions, and to be governed by our church’s polity and abide by its discipline (G-14.0405).

We now have a body of legal and judicial precedents to carry out.

The church made its historic “fidelity and chastity” ordination requirement explicit in the *Book of Order*, Part II of our church constitution, in 1997. The amendment was a direct result of an action by our highest church court, the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission (GA-PJC). Prior to 1997, the standard was implicit and church rulings called “Definitive Guidance” and “Authoritative Interpretation” held in check challenges to the standard. During the past thirty years, permanent judicial commissions have rendered decisions consistent with the legislative decisions of the church, so that we have a body of applicable court precedents.

It now appears that we need pastoral and administrative application of these decisions in cases where governing bodies find complying with the standard difficult.

Examples of challenges to the constitutional sexual standards in which the constitution was obeyed

Those in the church who wish to see the “fidelity and chastity” standard removed have for several years pressed the matter with attempts to ordain and install elders and ministers of Word and Sacrament who do not meet the standard. Two instances prior to 1997 worked their way through the disciplinary processes of the lower governing bodies and were finally decided by the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission (GA-PJC). The high court decisions effectively prevented two self-confessed lesbians from being installed as a minister of Word and Sacrament in one case, and from being certified ready to receive a call to the ministry of Word and Sacrament in the other.

Each of the cases began when members of presbyteries—elders and pastors—witnessed an unconstitutional decision and took corrective action consistent with the process provided in our Presbyterian constitution. Each case was resolved when the presbytery in question complied with the order of the court.

A self-governed people cannot ignore the need for discipline when it arises.

Obviously, we have no denominational police force. The effectiveness of our constitutional form of government depends on the willingness of Presbyterians to honor the vows they have taken, on governing bodies to exercise their pastoral and administrative responsibilities under the constitution, and on the General Assembly’s Stated Clerk to exercise the powers of his office to preserve and defend the constitution. (*Standing Rules of the General Assembly*, G.2.e. p. 44.)

The website of the Presbyterian Coalition (www.Presbycoalition.org) carries public statements issued by a number of churches, mostly—but not exclusively—in the Synod of the Northeast, stating unwillingness to abide by

G-6.0106b, the “fidelity and chastity” requirement for ordination. One, for example, says: “We have not, cannot, and will not abide by G-6.0106b.” (A more complete listing of churches unwilling to comply with G-6.0106b appears on the More Light Church Network website: <http://www.mlp.org/newdissent.html>.) These are ordaining bodies declaring that they will not abide by the constitution when they ordain officers.

The courts have decided the matter

One of these cases of refusal to abide by the constitution has already been dealt with in the courts of the church. Christ Presbyterian Church in Burlington, VT, issued to the Presbytery of Northern New England a statement of intent not to obey the “fidelity and chastity” provision of the *Book of Order*. Another session in the presbytery, fulfilling its obligation as a connected part of the body, sought remedial action from the church courts. The intent was to prompt the presbytery to discharge its responsibility and bring the Christ Church session into compliance with the constitution.

The case was appealed finally to the GA-PJC as *Londonderry et al. v. Presbytery of Northern New England*. The court found that the statement by Christ Church exceeded the limits of dissent and crossed over to defiance. Dissent is allowed; defiance is not. In July of 2000, the GA-PJC said that dissent “may not include an intent by those who have vowed to be governed by the church’s polity to violate the Constitution.” The court ordered the Presbytery of Northern New England to “exercise pastoral and administrative oversight of Christ Church...” and “...continue to work pastorally with the Session of Christ Church to assist it in fulfilling its obligation to comply with the Constitution.”

In response to this decision, the presbytery formed a committee that met with the session and read the decision. Christ Church shows no sign of compliance with the constitution. Today the statement that led to the court’s action has not been withdrawn and continues to be posted on their website. In more than eighteen months since the ruling, there is no evidence that the presbytery has taken any further action.

The presbytery appears to have taken the minimal first step required by the PJC, but it has not achieved the result directed by the court and required by the constitution.

The ruling in the *Londonderry* case set a court precedent that should be sufficient to prompt presbyteries to act in other cases of refusal to obey. But there has been no follow through in the Christ Church situation, and no effort to bring the other sessions into compliance either.

The Stated Clerk and the General Assembly both have duties to help the constitution to hold and to help the lower governing bodies accept and comply with decisions of the majority

The GA-PJC cannot carry out its own decisions. The governing bodies must do that. The wellbeing of the church is enhanced when pastoral and administration action is initiated in response to the court by the nearest responsible governing body.

In these cases of session refusal to obey, presbyteries are not responding, and both the peace and unity of the whole church are thereby at serious risk. But, though proper response is delayed, there is yet opportunity for a satisfactory resolution.

The General Assembly’s Stated Clerk is our chief constitutional officer. He is charged by the *Standing Rules of the General Assembly* (G.2.e) to “preserve and defend the constitution.” Especially when a matter of such debate has been determined by church law and upheld by the church court, the Clerk has both the power and the obligation to insist that the governing bodies and their officers comply. The *Standing Rules* require the Clerk to make a “full report to the next General Assembly” regarding any case that involves compliance with a GA PJC ruling. Although the *Londonderry* decision was rendered in July of 2000, inexplicably, the Clerk did not report to the next Assembly. He is expected to bring his “full report” to the upcoming General Assembly.

In response to the Clerk’s report, the *Standing Rules* provide that, “if the General Assembly deems such compliance inadequate, the assembly may make such further order or orders as it deems necessary to ensure compliance....”

Can the church long endure if the constitution is of no effect?

A letter to churches from the Presbyterian Coalition calls the “fidelity and chastity” paragraph one of the best-defended provisions of our constitution. Not only is this standard embedded in our confessional and scriptural heritage, it has been reaffirmed by major votes of the church three times in the past five years. We are beyond any doubt of the church’s will on this matter. The time has come to accept and comply.

Our constitution recognizes that major decisions are made to which not all will agree. It provides three acceptable alternatives for response in those cases:

[W]hen any matter is determined by a major vote, every member shall either actively concur with or passively submit to such determination; or if his conscience permit him to do neither, he shall, after sufficient liberty modestly to reason and remonstrate, peaceably withdraw from our communion without attempting to make any schism. Provided always that this shall be understood to extend only to such determination as the body shall judge indispensable in doctrine or Presbyterian government. (G-6.0108b)

Surely, this ordination standard, viewed from any angle, must now be regarded as “indispensable.”

Church governing bodies and church leaders must now aid the church in finding peace and maintaining unity on this matter. Obedience is essential to that, as is pastoral care. In every case of known refusal to obey the constitution on this matter, church officers in the presbytery should be seeking pastoral and administrative action from the presbytery based on the *Londonderry* precedent.

If church officers repudiate their vows but continue to serve, the constitution is threatened. If governing bodies allow defiance of the constitution, the constitution will no longer bind us. If we are no longer bound by the constitution, we are no longer the Presbyterian Church (USA).

The upcoming General Assembly carries an enormous burden to help the church end its strife over this matter. Both the Stated Clerk and commissioners have a critical role to play to avert a constitutional crisis if they begin their work with sessions still declaring their refusal to accept and obey the decision of the church on “fidelity and chastity.”

A series on the current situation regarding compliance with the GA decision is on the Presbyterian Coalition web site at www.presbycoalition.org

Terry Schlossberg is Executive Director of Presbyterians Pro-Life and Moderator-elect of the Presbyterian Renewal Network.

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The Rev. Dr. Kari McClellan is President of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry (PFFM). Rev. Susan Cyre is Executive Director and Editor of *Theology Matters*. The Board of Directors of PFFM includes 12 people, clergy and lay, women and men. PFFM is working to restore the strength and integrity of the PC(USA)’s witness to Jesus Christ as the only Lord and Savior, by helping Presbyterians develop a consistent Reformed Christian world view. *Theology Matters* is sent free to anyone who requests it.

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