

Evangelical Presbyterian Church Position Paper on the Sanctity of Marriage

I. Introduction.

We believe marriage is a gift from God for the blessing of men, women and children and for the good of society. However, given the present practice of cohabitation outside of marriage, the prevalence of same-sex unions and the disintegration of marriages in Western culture, we of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church offer the following Biblical principles relative to the sanctity of the institution of marriage. In this position paper we seek to think about marriage under the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ and God's written Word, the Bible (2 Timothy 3:16). We believe that God has revealed to all people in all cultures at all times a sense of morality in the ordering of human relationships. Therefore, there is a moral imperative which governs all human relationships, including marriage.

II. Marriage as a Creation Ordinance.

When God created Adam and Eve, He ordained marriage as the fundamental institution of society (Genesis 1:27-28). In marriage, a man and woman leave their families of origin and become united as "one flesh" in a new family unit (Genesis 2:24). The judgment of Scripture is that marriage is to be honored by all (Hebrews 13:4).

Marriage is a covenant between one man and one woman and between the participants and God (Malachi 2:14-16). It is therefore more than a temporary agreement of convenience, a contract or a well-intentioned promise. As a binding relationship established by promises, the marriage covenant is solemnly sealed by a ceremony witnessed by family and friends and regulated by the state. When a believer marries, it is God's will that he or she should be united only with another believer (2 Corinthians 6:14). Because God has created and instituted marriage as a lifelong covenant (Matthew 22:23-30) and because the marriage covenant is to reflect the strength of God's covenant love for His people (Hosea 3:1), any variation from His ordained decree is harmful to the participants and in violation of God's mandates for all people (Mark 10:11-12).

God ordained marriage for the following ends:

The Glory of God: Marriage exists first and foremost to glorify God. Human beings individually are image bearers of God (Genesis 1:26), but man and woman in marriage also display His glory (vv. 27-28). Marriage as a creation ordinance glorifies God as creator. Beyond that, however, marriage is to glorify God as redeemer, for Christian marriage is the consummate illustration of the redeeming grace of God in Christ (Ephesians 5:22-33). To the degree that Christians live out this pattern of God's love through His grace in Christ (Ephesians 5:1-2), they witness to one another, their children, the church and the world the gospel of God's redeeming love in Christ. However, God's glory and our good are complementary. For this reason, marriage exists also for our good in the following ways.

Companionship: Genesis 2:18a teaches that “it is not good for a man to be alone.” Therefore, from the beginning God called men and women to promote mutual care and friendship within their marriage relationship.

Mutual Assistance: Genesis 2:18b adds “I will make a helper suitable for him,” reminding us that we are to be a help to one another in the marriage relationship. Also, each husband is to love his wife as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her (Ephesians 5:25).

The Bearing, Nurturing & Training of Children: Genesis 1:28 and Ephesians 6:4 teach that the marriage relationship is also for procreation and moral teaching of children (Deuteronomy 6:4-7).

Promoting the Stability of Society: When marriage, the foundational human relationship, is degraded, the family unit disintegrates and the fabric of any nation unravels (cf. Genesis 2).

Affirming the Proper Context of Human Sexuality: Hebrews 13:4 clearly teaches that sexual intimacy should be reserved for a man and a woman within the covenant of marriage.

III. The Biblical View of Singleness.

The sanctity of marriage does not negate the gift of celibacy (1 Corinthians 7:6). While marriage is a great blessing, it is not God’s will that all should be married. This was certainly the case for the Lord Jesus and probably for Paul.

Singleness in Scripture is also a great blessing and offers unique opportunities for an undivided devotion to the Lord (1 Corinthians 7:1,35). Consequently, those whom God has called to be single for His sake should be recognized and honored in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church.

IV. The Biblical View of Marriage.

Scripture teaches that the one-flesh union of marriage constitutes an intellectual, emotional, physical and spiritual unity. “So they are no longer two, but one” (Matthew 19:5-6). When the two become one flesh, the God-created individualities of the husband and wife are not lost; rather they complement and enrich each other. Furthermore, the Apostle Paul demonstrates that this “profound mystery” is analogous to the spiritual relationship between Christ and His church. “I am talking about Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:31-33).”

From Genesis to Revelation, sexual union in marriage is to be between a man and a woman. Scripture emphatically condemns same-sex unions and sexual intercourse between people of the same sex. In the Old Testament a homosexual relationship was a capital offense, and in the New Testament it is repeatedly condemned (Leviticus 18:22

and 20:13, Romans 1:24-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, and see the EPC “Position Paper on Homosexuality”).

God designed marriage to be a lifelong relationship. Jesus said, “What God has joined together, let not man separate (Mark 10:9).” The marriage covenant should be kept sacred and unbroken under those conditions stated in the Bible. Given the complexities and challenges inherent in the merging of two lives into one, pastoral counseling or guidance is strongly recommended in the period prior to the marriage ceremony. (See the EPC “Position Paper on Divorce and Remarriage” and *Book of Worship* 5.5.).

God-ordained marriage should remain pure in thought, motive and practice. The seventh commandment prohibits adultery (Exodus 20:14). Jesus sets an even higher standard in his statement: “...anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery” (Matthew 5:27-28). Furthermore, sexual relations outside of marriage are forbidden by Scripture (1 Corinthians 6:16-20 and 1 Thessalonians 4:3-4). The Apostle Paul specifically commands believers to “abstain from sexual immorality” (1 Thessalonians 4:3). In contemporary culture infidelity all too frequently occurs with tragic consequences. Thus, the author of Hebrews solemnly warns that “God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral (Hebrews 13:4).” The modern axiom that “everyone is doing it, so it must be okay” is condemned by unequivocal Biblical teaching. Emotional unfaithfulness to one’s spouse is equally sinful and hence, destructive to the marriage relationship. In order to strengthen their covenant relationship, couples are encouraged to seek godly and practical ways to enrich their relationship through marriage retreats, couples seminar or classes and pastoral counsel. (See the EPC “Position Paper on Divorce and Remarriage.”)

All forms of emotional and physical abuse violate the one-flesh covenantal relationship. We urge abused persons to consider their own safety and that of family members first and to seek help from the church and, as necessary, professional and legal resources, to bring healing to the individuals and to the marriage relationship. (See “Position Paper on Divorce and Remarriage.”)

God’s Word indicates how husbands and wives should relate to one another in the home. Ephesians 5:21 states that Christians should “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” Mutual submission means that Christian husbands and wives must respect and honor one another, acknowledge one another’s gifts, mobilize one another’s strengths and build one another up.

Out of reverence for Christ as savior and lord of their marriages, Christian wives are to respect and subject themselves to their husbands as to the Lord. And Christian husbands are to love their wives even “as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her (Ephesians 5:22-26).” In such a marriage bond in Christ, husbands and wives seek together the Spirit’s guidance in family decisions, in the nurturing and training of their children in the Christian faith and in all aspects of the well being of their family and as a witness to the grace of God in their life together. This relationship between the man and the woman in marriage is informed by the relationship of the three persons of the Trinity,

where Father, Son and Holy Spirit are equal in essence, power and glory, while admitting different functional roles.

V. Conclusion.

The Bible teaches that marriage is a covenant, formal and sacred, and is to be held in honor among all people. Marriage is a serious commitment, involving vows taken publicly before the God of truth and covenant.

The familiar text of the wedding liturgy states, “Dearly beloved we are assembled here in the presence of God to join this man and this woman in Holy marriage, which is instituted by God, regulated by His commandments and to be held in honor among all.”

May the words of our Lord Jesus Christ rule in our hearts: “What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate (Mark 10:9).”

Soli Deo Gloria

Adopted by the 24th General Assembly of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church
June 2004