

Overture to Heartland Presbytery from the Brookdale Session

RE: The process by which the Constitutional Definition of Marriage May be Changed (a request for an *authoritative interpretation of the Directory for Worship of the Book of Order W-4.9001*)

The Session of Brookdale Presbyterian Church, St. Joseph, Missouri meeting on January 31, 2010, respectfully requests Heartland Presbytery to overture the 219th General Assembly (2010) of the Presbyterian Church (USA) in Minneapolis, Minnesota, to issue the following authoritative interpretation of section W-4.9001 of the Directory for Worship of the Book of Order:

The church's constitutional definition of marriage is found not only in this section of the Directory for Worship (W-4.9001) but also in the Book of Confessions (6.131 and 6.133-134). This understanding of marriage is also expressed or assumed in at least two other passages in the Book of Confessions (5.246, 9.47) and at least one other passage in the Book of Order (G-6.0106b). If the church were to discern a need to change its constitutional definition of marriage, good church order and constitutional consistency would require that appropriate amendments be made to both parts of the Presbyterian Church (USA) constitution. Amendments to the Book of Order definition of marriage shall not become effective unless corresponding amendments to the Book of Confessions have also been approved.

RATIONALE

- The church's teaching on marriage is a common theme that runs through multiple passages in both parts of the Presbyterian Church (USA) constitution. It is based upon the church's understanding of key scriptural texts such as the creation accounts in Genesis 1-2, the seventh commandment (Exodus 20:14, Deuteronomy 5:18), Jesus' answer to the question about divorce (Matthew 19:1-12, Mark 10:1-12), the apostle Paul's advice in I Corinthians 7, and the teaching on Christian households in Ephesians 5-6.
- Marriage is defined in the Directory for Worship: "Marriage is a gift God has given to all humankind for the well-being of the entire human family. Marriage is a civil contract between a woman and a man. For Christians marriage is a covenant through which a man and a woman are called to live out together before God their lives of discipleship. In a service of Christian marriage a lifelong commitment is made by a woman and a man to each other, publicly witnessed and acknowledged by the community of faith.) (W-4.9001)
- This Book of Order definition is grounded in the faith expounded in the Book of Confessions. For example, the Westminster Confession defines marriage thus: "Christian marriage is an institution ordained of God, blessed by our Lord Jesus Christ, established and sanctified for the happiness and welfare of mankind, into which spiritual and physical union one man and one woman enter, cherishing a mutual esteem and love bearing with each other's infirmities and weaknesses, comforting each other in trouble, providing in honesty and industry for each other and for their household, praying for each other, and living together the length of their days as heirs of the grace of life." (6.131) This passage is not the original 1647 Westminster text but rather an extensively amended version adopted by the former United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America in 1958.

- Marriage is defined in the Presbyterian Church in the United States version of this same chapter of the Westminster Confession, as amended extensively by the Presbyterian Church (USA) in 1982: “Marriage is a union between one man and one woman, designed of God to last so long as they both shall live. Marriage is designed for the mutual help of husband and wife; for the safeguarding, under girding, 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,” (6.133-134)
- The Second Helvetic Confession has a chapter on “Celibacy, Marriage and the Management of Domestic Affairs.” It affirms, “For marriage (which is the medicine of incontinency, and continency itself) was instituted by the Lord God himself, who blessed it most bountifully, and willed man and woman to cleave one to the other inseparably, and to live together in complete love and concord (Matt.19:4 ff).” (5.246)
- The Confession of 1967 has a paragraph on marriage and sexuality: “The relationship between man and woman exemplifies in a basic way God’s ordering of the interpersonal life for which he created mankind. Anarchy in sexual relationships is a symptom of man’s alienation from God, his neighbor, and availability of new means of birth control and the treatment of infection, by the pressures of urbanization, by the exploitation of sexual symbols in mass communication, and by world overpopulation. The church, as the household of God, is called to lead men out of this alienation into the responsible freedom of the new life in Christ. Reconciled to God, each person has joy in and respect for his own humanity and that of other persons; a man and a woman are enabled to marry, to commit themselves to a mutually shared life, and to respond to each other in sensitive and lifelong concern; parents receive the grace to care for children in love and to nurture their individuality. The church comes under the judgment of God and invites rejection by man when it fails to lead men and women into the full meaning of life together, or withholds the compassion of Christ from those caught in the moral confusion of our time.” (9.47).
- The Form of Government refers to marriage in a discussion of “historic confessional standards of the church” with which church officers are to be in conformity. “Among these standards,” it says, “is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman (W-4.9001), or chastity in singleness.” (G-6.0106b)
- These various passages in both parts of the Presbyterian Church (USA) constitution originate in different historical eras and address different cultural issues. Yet they bear witness together to a tradition that has given us a distinctive Christian and Reformed understanding of marriage. If the church today discerned a need to revise that understanding of marriage, it would need to address all of these passages. It would not be sufficient to amend only one passage in one part of the constitution.
- These passages—particularly those in the Westminster Confession and the Book of Order—are not historical artifacts left unchanged for long centuries. They have been amended previously. They may be amended again if the church today believes that God is calling it to change its definition of marriage.
- Marriage is a subject of great importance for both the church and society. Marriage remains the most basic building block of society, the most common means by which new families are established. It involves our sense of God’s created order, the common grace given to all humankind. It touches upon at least one of the Ten Commandments. It was a topic to which

Jesus spoke forcefully. Concerns related to marriage arise several times in the New Testament epistles.

- The reformation brought significant change in the church's approach to marriage, and that change is reflected repeatedly in our Reformed confessions of faith. If the church today were once again to revise the teaching on marriage, that change should likewise be reflected in the church's Book of Confessions. A subject of this importance merits the careful process of study and discernment prescribed for amendments to the Book of Confessions.