



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Christian Marriage and Public Policy
(*Marriage*, pp. 19-28)

Suggested Article:

📖 The Promise of Marriage
(*Marriage*, pp. 46-47)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu

Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361
Phone 1-866-298-2325
www.ChristianEthics.ws

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Christian Marriage and Public Policy

The language of confessional faith often is ignored or misunderstood in the public square. So, how should Christians contribute to debates about the likely future of marriage, society's responsibilities for marriage, and the nagging question of who should or should not be permitted to marry?

Prayer

God of covenant, God of unfailing love, your love is hard, yet full of grace and mercy. Draw us to love and serve you, and, through your power, love and serve humanity. May we live in a way that draws all people to your Kingdom. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Hebrews 13:1-6

Reflection

"What truth does Christianity possess about public policy on marriage in a democratic and pluralistic society?" Don Browning asks, rather than "What should Christians believe within the confessing church?" He divides the topic this way because he thinks we should speak a different language in public debates than we use in church. Browning urges us to use a "twofold language" – a philosophical language enriched with scriptural narratives and metaphors – in the public square. "It should be both a language of faith and a philosophical language that contains naturalistic, contextual, and justice-oriented arguments."

Christians can make a significant contribution by critiquing the current trend toward separating "sex from marriage, marriage from childbirth, parenting from marriage, child rearing from marriage, and the workplace from family life," he writes. "Some of these separations we value, but others we rightly are beginning to question." This trend results from "modernization" – the idea that we no longer reason together about our common good, but only about the technical means for achieving individuals' short-term wants and needs. By contrast, the classic Christian texts on marriage over the centuries valued the common good and integrated "sexual desire, love, the birth of children, the raising of children, and the mutual assistance and enrichment of economic life into an integrated and mutually reinforcing whole known as the institution of marriage."

Browning illustrates with the twofold approach of Thomas Aquinas (1225/7-1274), "one of the chief synthesizers of Christian theology, Greek philosophy, and Roman law on marriage."

- ▶ *Following the guidance of Scripture*, Aquinas says that marriage is an institution created by God (see Matthew 29:4, quoting Genesis 1:27; compare Genesis 2:18, 21).
- ▶ *With scientific and philosophical arguments*, he shows that marriage and family serve the common good. A man joins the mother-infant family for four natural reasons: (1) the mother seeks his help to raise the infant, since the baby is dependent for so long; (2) a man wants to provide for his own offspring; (3) a man desires the continued assistance and affection of the infant's



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Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

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mother; and (4) a man seeks sexual intimacy with the mother. On the second point, which evolutionary psychologists today call “kin altruism,” Aquinas says, “in common with other animals and with plants, [men] have a natural desire to leave behind them an image of themselves.”

“Aquinas integrated these naturalistic insights about the motivational foundations of parenthood into his wider theological theories of marital fidelity, love, permanence, and mutual assistance,” Browning notes. “He was fully aware that humans have conflicting natural tendencies with no single fixed aim. But when human sexuality is guided by the needs of child rearing, then the inclinations toward kin altruism, reinforced by culture and religion, can and should have a commanding role in ordering our unstable natural tendencies.”

Study Questions

1. How is “market-style modernization” shaping the way many people think about marriage in our culture? Why should Christians resist this trend?
2. Explain what Browning means by using a “double language” in public debates about marriage. Why does he think Christians should use a double language, rather than confessional language, in the public square? Do you agree?
3. What do Aquinas and other theologians mean by “natural law”? What guidance does it give with regard to marriage?
4. “Many political and religious leaders are now saying that marriage should be delegalized, that it should not be a matter of state regulation,” Browning notes. “They argue that marriage should be a matter of personal choice and perhaps religious blessing but not legal accountability and enforcement.” Do you agree that marriage should not be a matter of law and public policy?
5. How does Jan van Eyck’s *The Arnolfini Wedding* depict marriage as both a legal agreement and a spiritual covenant?

Departing Hymn: “O Love Divine and Golden”

O Love divine and golden, mysterious depth and height,
to you the world beholden, looks up for life and light.

O Love divine and gentle, the blesser and the blest,
beneath your care parental the world lies down in rest.

O Love divine and tender, that through our homes can move,
veiled in the softened splendor O holy household love
A throne without your blessing were labor without rest,
yet cottages possessing your blessedness are blest.

God bless these hands united; God bless these hearts made one!
Unsevered and unblighted may they through life go on,
here in earth’s home preparing for the bright home above,
and there forever sharing its joy where “God is Love.”

John S. B. Monsell (1857), alt.

Suggested Tunes: AURELIA or ST. THEODULPH

Christian Marriage and Public Policy

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To consider how Christians should enter public debates about the institution of marriage.
2. To review how Christian theologians like Thomas Aquinas employed a “double language” of Scripture and natural law to talk about marriage.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Marriage (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “O Love Divine and Golden” locate the tunes AURELIA or ST. THEODULPH in your church’s hymnal or on the web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Comment

“The death of unconstrained patriarchy, the end of the status of wives and children as chattel, and the prohibition of child labor hardly signal that family life in the twenty-first-century America is now morally safe,” Sondra Wheeler writes. “American culture offers a full range of corruptions, shaped by its distinctive features of consumer capitalism and technological self-confidence. Marriage is now explicitly a life-style choice, and economic strategy, and courtship is more and more overtly conducted in a marketplace complete with advertising, both veiled and direct” (quoted in *Marriage*, p. 56).

How should Christians respond to the “deinstitutionalization” of marriage in our culture? Don Browning urges us to use a “double language,” rather than a strictly confessional or theological language, in public debates. Does this approach amount to “selling out” to the culture’s view to marriage, or is it a way of joining the wider discussion in a responsible way?

Prayer

Invite members to share their celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each one to pray silently and then ask members to read aloud the unison prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Hebrews 13:1-6 from a modern translation.

Reflection

For Christians, marriage has two dimensions: within the body of Christ marriage is a calling to ministry for some (but not all) members; in society it is a matter of law and public policy. In a companion study, “Marriage in the Fellowship of the Faithful,” we explored the first dimension. In this study we explore how we should enter public debates about marriage policy. On this important and disputed issue, Christians have taken (at least) four approaches:

1. *Marriage should be delegalized.* Rather than being a state-defined relationship that is subject to legal accountability and enforcement, marriage may be defined by various religious communities and receive their blessing.

2. *Marriage should be a matter of law and public policy.* Christians should discuss marriage with
 - a. the same rich language of Scripture and theology that we would use in church.
 - b. only the languages of psychology, sociology, medicine, or other “secular” disciplines.
 - c. a “double language” layered with both scriptural and natural reasons.

Don Browning recommends the final approach, which is the tradition of Christian natural law.

Study Questions

1. “Modernization” refers a focus on technical, how-to problems and a neglect of ultimate purposes. “In the United States, this takes the form of our no longer reasoning together about the common good, but merely expecting the marketplace to satisfy short-term individual wants and needs,” Browning says. “The spread of technical rationality energizes a host of separations in the marital field—sex from marriage, marriage from childbirth, parenting from marriage, child rearing from marriage, and the workplace from family life. Some of these separations we value, but others we rightly are beginning to question.”
He urges us to resist this general trend, since Scripture and the common good (the shared reasons why we value and socially support marriage at all) point to the value of “the marital integration of sexual desire, affection, childbirth, child rearing, and mutual assistance.”
2. “Double language” refers to philosophical/scientific terms and reasons “qualified and enriched by narratives and metaphors” from Scripture. The advantage of using it in public debate is that our arguments may be understood by and appeal to non-Christians. This Christian “natural law” approach is one of four options outlined above. “Discovering and using this double language challenges those Christians who want to influence public discourse on the basis of strictly confessional language and arguments. Law today is rightly demanding that legal arguments pass a ‘rational standard’ test which confessional language has difficulties passing,” Browning says. “My view also contradicts both conservative and liberal Christians who try to influence law and public policy by dropping theological language and advancing their arguments entirely with appeals to the disciplines of psychology, sociology, medicine, and other so-called secular forms of reason. This strategy unwittingly agrees with secularists who believe that religious language has no place in the public square.”
3. An appeal to natural law doesn’t refer to a set of rules (despite its name!), but goes like this: human beings naturally have certain inclinations and desires, and these set limits on what is good for us or will allow us to flourish. Of course, we act freely and deliberately on these desires, and not by instinct in the way other animals do. Regarding marriage, we desire our children to grow and flourish, but this requires much time, support, and education by both parents; we especially want to support our *own* children; we desire assistance and affection from a spouse; and we want sexual relations with a spouse. These desires are “natural” in the sense that they are grounded in common human nature, not in specific religious convictions we may hold. Aquinas knew that our natural tendencies can be in conflict, but he believed that reasoned reflection and scriptural revelation can help us sort through and order these desires. In this way, natural law must always be interpreted from within a tradition.
4. Browning argues that marriage should be a matter of law and public policy because it is an institution that we need in order to achieve our natural desires for companionship, sex, love, and the nurturing of our children. One proper role of government is to preserve the *possibility* for its citizens to live a good life and educate their children for the common good.
Some argue that marriage should be delegalized because in our culture there is little or no consensus about what marriage should be. Others say that marriage is essentially a religious institution and they fear that the state will impose a “secular” view of marriage.
5. The context of *The Arnolfini Wedding* is thoroughly secular: standing with Cenami in her house, Arnolfini raises his right hand as if to take an oath for a legal and financial agreement to their engagement. Yet the artist inserts spiritual references throughout the image: the dog may be an emblem of fidelity; the removed shoes may indicate the couple is standing on holy ground; images from the Passion and Resurrection narratives surround the mirror; a single lit candle (in the middle of the day) may symbolize the ever-present light of God.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.