

# FROM THIS DAY FORWARD— RETHINKING THE CHRISTIAN WEDDING

KIMBERLY BRACKEN LONG

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## Chapter 1

# THE STATE OF THE UNION

WITH THIS RING I THEE WED,  
with my body I thee worship,  
and with all my worldly goods I thee endow.

Caught up in a heady mix of passion, faith, and hope, standing before my congregation on a Sunday morning, I repeated these age-old words to my beloved some two decades ago. I had just vowed to be loving and faithful through every circumstance for the rest of our lives. I had no idea what I was doing.

I daresay no one really knows what she or he is getting into when speaking such rash words of commitment. On one hand, taking wedding vows is an ordinary enough thing to do. Lots of people get married. And yet to marry is to enter into unknown territory; to speak vows is to take the first step into a commonplace mystery.

For Christians, the mystery of marriage is all tied up with the mystery of faith. Every earthly wedding feast, however sumptuous or simple, anticipates the wedding feast of the Lamb that

celebrates the marriage of heaven and earth. And some marriages, by the grace of God, give us a glimpse of the coming reign of God when the whole creation will be overwhelmed with love.

And yet . . . we are aware, whether we are married or not, that as beautiful and blessed as marriage can be, it is a fragile institution, because the human beings who take part in it are fickle and flawed. Whether we know it from our own lives, or from those of our friends, or from the news, we are aware of how complicated marriage is these days. Being Christian does not protect us from the complexities of the human heart or the realities of human sin, nor does it excuse us from taking part in responding to changes in attitudes and actions of the larger society.

This book is an attempt to speak to the American church in a time of extraordinary cultural change. The first years of the twenty-first century have brought seismic shifts to the institution of marriage, following dramatic changes in attitudes regarding marriage and family life over the last half century or so. To varying degrees, churches are asking questions about the meaning of marriage, the church's role in the weddings of Christians and non-Christians alike, and how to navigate faithfully through the swift currents and shifting tides of American life. In order to explore Christian understandings of marriage, we will consider the history of marriage in human society and in the church; the biblical texts that contribute to theologies of marriage; and the theology and practice of wedding services. We will begin by taking a look at the landscape of marriage in the United States.

## IS MARRIAGE OUT OF DATE?

Now that more than half of Americans are single, some may wonder whether marriage is becoming a thing of the past.<sup>1</sup> In 1950, ninety of every one thousand unmarried women tied

the knot. By contrast, only thirty-one of every thousand single women got married in 2011, representing a 66 percent decline in the marriage rate, indicating that marriage is becoming a thing of the past.<sup>2</sup>

For one thing, people are waiting longer to get married. Today the average age of women who marry (for the first time) is twenty-seven; the average age for men is twenty-nine. Almost a third of women and over 40 percent of men wait until they are at least thirty to get married.<sup>3</sup> Marriage has not gone out of style, as some social critics feared, but it is “no longer the central institution that organizes people’s lives.”<sup>4</sup> More and more people choose cohabitation over marriage—at least for a while—either as a way to test out life with a potential marriage partner or to enjoy love, sex, and companionship without making a legal, lifelong commitment.

Intimate relationships often take a different course than they used to. When author W. Hodding Carter’s girlfriend blurted, “Let’s get a dog,” as they were eating their morning pancakes, it caught him by surprise. Carter knew that getting a dog wasn’t just about acquiring a pet. Getting a dog meant taking their relationship to a new level. “Getting ‘the dog,’” he knows, “is a classic early step, falling soundly between the first kiss and ordering a copy of *What to Expect When You’re Expecting*.” They’d been a couple for about a year and had lived in the same apartment for a few months. He wasn’t opposed to taking the next step but thought that he needed a couple of weeks to think through the implications. Four hours later, he and Lisa had a dog.<sup>5</sup>

Only a generation has passed since the usual course of things looked something like this:

You start going out.  
 You become an item.  
 You get engaged.  
 You get married.

You move in together.  
You have sex.  
You have a baby.  
You have another baby.  
You buy a house.  
You get a dog.<sup>6</sup>

Now, it seems, the dog almost always comes first, right after moving in together.

In fact, two-thirds of couples who decide to get married are living together already. This used to mean that couples were more likely to divorce, but researchers find that is no longer the case for couples who have married since the mid-1990s.<sup>7</sup> More recent studies show that divorce rates fall dramatically when the age of either cohabitation or marriage is delayed. Sociologist Arielle Kuperburg found that people who moved in together or got married at age eighteen were twice as likely to divorce as those who waited until age twenty-three (60 percent versus 30 percent). Over the last fifty years, the rate of cohabitation has jumped by 900 percent. In 1996, 2.9 million couples lived together before marriage; in 2012, that number was 7.8 million. Furthermore, two-thirds of couples who married in 2012 had lived together for at least two years. Not surprisingly, then, a USA Today/Gallup poll in 2007 showed that only 27 percent of Americans disapprove of cohabitation.<sup>8</sup> Given such statistics, it is safe to say that some of those cohabitating couples are Christians; certainly many of the couples who come to pastors' offices to discuss their upcoming nuptials go home together that night.

Although there is plenty of evidence that many people still want to get married, some have decided that marriage is an outdated institution that puts unrealistic expectations on contemporary couples. Still others say that watching someone else go through a divorce is enough to swear them off marriage for

good. They are not avoiding marriage because they are afraid of commitment; they are afraid of divorce. Furthermore, people are living longer. Lifelong monogamy seems less and less realistic, and there is considerably less legal and financial mess when cohabiting couples split, especially if they've kept their bank accounts separate.

## EDUCATION, POVERTY, RACE, AND MARRIAGE

While some studies seem to indicate that marriage is in decline in this country, a recent study by the Pew Research Center shows that the number of marriages increased in the United States in 2012. One significant factor emerges, however; people with college degrees accounted for 87 percent of the increase in newly married adults between 2011 and 2012.<sup>9</sup>

For Jonathan Rauch, a fellow at the Brookings Institution, this is cause for concern. "Marriage is thriving among people with four-year college diplomas," he says, "but the further down you go on the educational and economic totem pole, the worse it's doing. There's a growing danger that marriage, with all its advantages for stability, income, and child well-being, will look like a gated community for the baccalaureate class, with ever-shrinking working-class participation."<sup>10</sup>

Education plays an important role in marriage among those in the middle class as well as those living in poverty. The number of women who earn a college degree is rising, and these women are looking for equally educated and employable marriage partners in a pool that is steadily shrinking. Women who graduated from high school used to be able to marry men with college degrees, but these days they are less likely to marry at all. These women, especially white women, are more likely than other women to cohabit, marry, divorce, and cohabit again. It is not yet clear whether marriage patterns in the middle class will turn

out to look like those of upper-class people or their lower-class counterparts.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, women who have attained a high level of education are now more likely to get married and stay married. Divorce rates are falling among well-educated couples but rising for everyone else.

Views on marriage and cohabitation, then, are not based solely on moral convictions or religious beliefs. Levels of education, social class, and economic realities have a great deal to do with whether people marry in the first place, as well as the success or failure of their marriages. Over the last twenty years or so, marriage has nearly disappeared in poorer communities. People whose incomes fall in the lower third of the population experience greater rates of unemployment, substance abuse, and imprisonment—particularly among men—which leads to an increasing disparity between men and women, making them less likely to marry.<sup>12</sup> As one commentator has put it, “The real trend is that marriage is for richer, not poorer.”<sup>13</sup>

Poverty is, in fact, a significant contributing factor to lower marriage rates in the United States. Potential mates for women who live in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods are likely to have lower levels of education and irregular employment opportunities. Lower-earning men marry less frequently and divorce more often than men who earn better wages. Over the last several decades, as job opportunities for less-educated men declined, marriage rates also fell.<sup>14</sup>

Sociologist Stephanie Coontz and economist Nancy Folbre found that mothers with few financial resources are apt to live in poor neighborhoods where possible marriage partners tend to be poorly educated and employed only sporadically. These men are less likely to marry and, if they do, divorce is more probable than for higher-earning men. Marriage rates fall as incomes decline. Furthermore, when men are convicted of nonviolent crimes and sentenced to prison, they are less likely to marry or to be able to secure stable employment after their release.<sup>15</sup>

It is impossible to overlook race when considering the effects of poverty on marriage. In his controversial book, provocatively titled *Is Marriage For White People?*, Ralph Richard Banks explains that African American women across social classes often do not marry because so many black men are incarcerated, lack education, or are unemployed or otherwise economically disadvantaged. Twice as many African American women as men earn a college degree, making them less likely to marry than women of other races. Of those college-educated black women who do marry, more than half are wed to men who are less educated. Furthermore, while African American women do marry across class lines, they are far less likely to marry across race lines.<sup>16</sup>

The connection between marriage and childbearing is also in flux in the United States. As one study by the Pew Research Center suggests, for adults born after 1980, “these social institutions are becoming delinked and differently valued.”<sup>17</sup> For these “millennials,” parenthood is more important than marriage. The rise in the average age of marriage is accompanied by a rise in out-of-wedlock births. In 2008, 51 percent of children born to millennials were born to parents who were not married, in contrast to only 39 percent to parents of the same age in 1997. At the same time, however, fewer young adults are becoming parents; in 2010, only 36 percent of women between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine had borne children.<sup>18</sup> Still, most young adults look forward to being parents—even if they don’t necessarily anticipate getting married.<sup>19</sup>

Yet another phenomenon contributes to the complex picture of marriage in America. One in five divorces among people married for the first time happens within the first five years.<sup>20</sup> Often dubbed “starter marriages,” these unions last five years or less and produce no children. These couples do not marry with the intention of divorcing; more often than not, they think they are marrying for life. “A starter marriage isn’t a whim or a fantasy or a misbegotten affair,” explains Pamela Paul, author

of *The Starter Marriage and the Future of Matrimony*, “it’s a real marriage . . . bound together by love, personal belief, state law, and, often, religious oath. A starter marriage doesn’t *feel* like one when you’re engaged or when you’re inside it. It is charged with all the hope, expectations, and dreams that inspire almost all marriages.”<sup>21</sup> While the idea of a starter marriage is shocking to some, others argue that the starter marriage is useful in teaching people what not to do so that they can eventually enjoy a successful second marriage.<sup>22</sup>

Still other social realities raise new questions for society at large as well as the church. According to the Pew Research Center, marriage is on the rise between people of different religions, as well as different races and ethnic groups. Nearly four in ten people who wed in 2010 married a spouse from a different religious group, roughly twice the number of those who did so before 1960. Of all adults married in the United States between 2010 and 2014, 18 percent are in marriages between a Christian and a person with no religious affiliation. Furthermore, almost half of cohabiting couples are partners of different faiths.<sup>23</sup>

Pew studies also show that record numbers are marrying people of a different race. Roughly 15 percent of people who wed in 2010 married someone of a different race or ethnic group. Statistics vary depending on race, gender, levels of education, and economic stability, so the picture is multivalent, and states where the intermarriage rate is above 20 percent are all west of the Mississippi.<sup>24</sup>

## DIVORCE IN AMERICA

We have heard for a long time that one out of every two marriages in America ends in divorce, leading pundits and pulpiteers to bemoan the loss of family values. Although not all researchers agree on that figure, we can certainly say that divorce has become more commonplace—and less stigmatized—in recent

decades. One reason for this, as sociologist Andrew Cherlin observes, is that Americans are as committed to the idea of individual freedom as they are to marriage:

The United States is unique among nations in its strong support for marriage, on one hand, and its postmodern penchant for self-expression and personal growth, on the other hand. You can find other Western countries where marriage is strong, such as Italy, where few children are born outside of marriage and relatively few people live together without marrying, and you can find Western countries with highly individualistic values, such as Sweden, where marriage and cohabitation are virtually indistinguishable. But only in the United States can you find both.<sup>25</sup>

The United States, then, has one of the highest levels of marriage among Western countries—and one of the highest divorce rates, too. Of course, the statistics on divorce tell different stories, depending on who is doing the analyzing and the methods used. It seems, however, that because so many are delaying marriage, divorce is less common among younger people. At the same time, it is becoming more common for long-term marriages to break up when the partners reach middle age.<sup>26</sup>

Given these patterns of less frequent marriage, more frequent divorce, the prevalence of cohabitation, and the rising number of children born to unmarried parents, it would seem that the state of marriage is worse than ever. Yet the *quality* of marriage is, for some, better than ever. Marriage is less confining for women, who are more autonomous than they were fifty years ago. Psychological researcher Eli Finkel makes the case that marriages on average are weaker than they used to be, but that “the *best* marriages today are much stronger, in terms of both satisfaction and personal well-being.”<sup>27</sup> As we shall see in chapter 3, Americans today have expectations of marriage that would have been inconceivable at any other time in history.

Those expectations are so high that experts like Finkel claim that people can “achieve an unprecedentedly high level of marital quality—but only if they are able to invest a great deal of time and energy in their partnership.” And yet, he argues, economic trends that have led to greater inequality over the last several decades, resulting in unemployment or people managing more than one job, make it even more difficult for middle- and lower-class Americans to devote the time and energy required to maintain a strong marriage.<sup>28</sup> Clearly the picture of marriage in this country is a complex mixture of changing social attitudes, economic realities, and class issues.

## SAME-GENDER MARRIAGE AND THE PUBLIC DEBATE

Meanwhile, changes regarding same-sex marriage have swept the United States far more quickly than either its proponents or its detractors could have predicted. The repeal of the Defense of Marriage Act, or DOMA, in 2013 led to the legalization of same-sex marriage in a number of states, and the country watched the wave of change that culminated in the June 26, 2015, decision of the Supreme Court that affirmed that the U.S. Constitution guarantees a right to same-sex marriage. Across the theological spectrum, churches are considering how to respond. In some cases, denominational polity is changing; in others, churches continue to prohibit clergy to preside at such weddings, putting ministers in an awkward spot as they seek to be faithful to their ordination vows while tending to the pastoral needs of their flocks.

As laws change and conversations become more open, we hear moving stories of same-gender couples who are marrying after years of sharing life together. Forty-six years after they fell in love, Lewis Duckett and Billy Jones got married. Dr. Jones, a psychiatrist, was deployed to Vietnam not long after they met,

and the two wrote letters almost every day, using code and changing gender pronouns so that no one would know they were gay. Eventually they moved in together and adopted a child, a son, when he was just three weeks old. That son is now grown, and they are the proud grandparents of a little girl. In October 2013, Mr. Duckett and Dr. Jones were married in Riverside Church in New York, solemnifying—and making legal—the life they have shared for four and a half decades.<sup>29</sup> The following year, Vivian Boyack and Alice “Nonie” Dubes, both nonagenarians, were married in their church in Davenport, Iowa, celebrating a relationship they have shared for over seventy years.<sup>30</sup>

The public debate surrounding same-sex marriage has surfaced long-held assumptions about marriage. When, for example, the U.S. Supreme Court heard arguments regarding California’s Proposition 8 (a statewide referendum that would eliminate same-sex marriage), it became clear that even when it comes to public policy, traditional Judeo-Christian ideas influence the discussion. The attorney defending Proposition 8 argued that marriage should be defined as being between a man and a woman because society is interested in responsible procreation. Justices Elena Kagan and Stephen Breyer challenged this notion, pointing out that not all heterosexual couples are able to procreate, and therefore this should not be an obstacle to the marriage of people of the same sex. The attorney responded that redefining marriage as a “genderless institution will sever its abiding connection to its historic traditional procreative purposes,” shifting the purpose and definition “away from the raising of children and to the emotional needs and desires of adults, of adult couples.”<sup>31</sup> Although Kagan countered that the attorney’s line of reasoning would lead to the banning of marriage for anyone over fifty-five—since they would be highly unlikely to bear any children—the attorney insisted that there is a “marital norm” that is based on the procreation and raising of children. Reflecting on the exchange, sociologist Rosemary

Joyce expressed her astonishment that a legal argument would assert that marriage has a consistent, stable history; there is no “age-old definition of marriage,” no matter what the counsel claimed. “To an anthropologist,” she remarks, “that sounds remarkably quaint. Whose age-old definition?”<sup>32</sup>

Whose definition, indeed? One of the gifts of the public conversation around same-sex marriage is that it has spurred churches to ask deeper questions about the nature of marriage in general. We are beginning to explore the history of marriage (both in and out of the church), to consider what constitutes a faithful theology of marriage, and to engage the biblical witness while taking seriously contemporary life as well as pastoral concerns.

### A GOLDEN AGE OF MARRIAGE?

Although there is a considerable amount of hand-wringing these days about the state of marriage in the United States, there is a sense in which none of this is new. Social critics in ancient Greece decried the moral failures of wives, and the Romans complained about high divorce rates.<sup>33</sup> In sixteenth-century Geneva, John Calvin and other pastors complained that upper-class couples were divorcing and remarrying at alarming rates.<sup>34</sup> Genevans were enjoying casual sex, living together without being married, and keeping concubines,<sup>35</sup> all of which drove Calvin to insist on firmer laws and a more fulsome theology of marriage. Early settlers in America started bemoaning the loss of family values as soon as they stepped onto shore. It seems that there never really has been a “golden age of marriage.”<sup>36</sup>

Yet whatever the time and place, Christians are called to respond to the challenges of the day. How shall contemporary Christians speak to the current social context while honoring the lives of real Christians living in the real world? In order to do that, we need to take a step back and consider what marriage

is, how Scripture informs our understanding of marriage, what theological affirmations we can make about the nature of marriage, how our marriage liturgies express those convictions, and what role the clergy and the entire church community play in the marriage of Christians.

## HOW THIS BOOK CAME ABOUT

When I began in ordained ministry, I quickly discovered how woefully unprepared I was to talk to anyone about getting married, or being married, or whether to keep being married. After gamely subjecting couples to the requisite premarital counseling, I would wonder what in the world I was doing and who decided that this should be part of my job. Although I could not have articulated it at the time, I realize now that I had plenty of therapeutic resources at my disposal, but few theological ones, for talking about the meaning of marriage. Often I found myself smiling congenially through wedding ceremonies for people I barely knew—despite the sessions we endured together—and the receptions that followed where I would inevitably be seated with an assortment of grandmothers, next-door neighbors, and all of the other people the couple didn't know what to do with. There were, of course, those rare occasions when I was privileged to preside at the wedding of parishioners or family members I knew and loved. But most of the time, I found the duties surrounding nuptials to be demoralizing and exhausting.

When I began teaching seminary students about weddings, I realized how little material I had to draw on. I could find histories of marriage and sociological studies; there were works of Roman Catholic and Orthodox sacramental theology. Here and there I found a helpful article or essay, as well as collections of historic marriage liturgies. It occurred to me that many ministers are credentialed to preside at weddings, but few of us

receive much theological, liturgical, or practical training to do so. I decided to see what I could discover.

Over the past several years I have talked with groups of ministers across the country about their experiences with weddings and their insights into Christian marriage. My own students at Columbia Theological Seminary—single, married, divorced, engaged—have lent me their wisdom as well. Various theologians, historians, sociologists, and commentators have accompanied me on the journey. I have interviewed wedding entrepreneurs, listened to Elvis croon couples down the aisle, and learned from the experiences and wisdom of gay and lesbian friends and acquaintances. During the course of my research, I enjoyed the privilege of presiding at the weddings of both of my sons. This work is challenging, stimulating, personal, and public. What follows is my best effort at contributing to a conversation about marriage that might further the work of the contemporary church as we seek to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ.

While I would like to think I could write a book that would be helpful to all American Christian churches, I know that is impossible. I write as a white, well-educated, financially stable woman. I have been Presbyterian all my life, am ordained as a minister of the Word and Sacrament (or teaching elder) in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and teach at a Presbyterian seminary. While my work in the church has been ecumenically informed, and my teaching career has enabled me to be in conversation with students from a wide range of denominations and traditions, my approach is decidedly Reformed. I understand that the issues facing the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches are in some ways different from those facing the Protestant churches. While some of what I discuss in this book may be of help or interest to African American, Korean, or Latino/a churches, I cannot legitimately speak to questions that are particular to those contexts. Finally, I write as one who is convinced

that marriage is between two people, whoever they are and whomever they love. Others have made the case for same-sex marriage clearly and compellingly, and I will not rehearse their work here.<sup>37</sup> I will, however, approach the subject of marriage as a relationship and an institution that is legally available for all people and worthy of blessing in the church.

It takes a combination of hubris and humility to write a book about marriage. As Margaret Farley has said, “Rhetoric about marriage and family needs to be realistic and cautious—neither too high-flying nor too skeptical.”<sup>38</sup> It is a daunting subject and, in the end, a mystery. While this book is the result of several years of study and innumerable conversations, it is also borne of my own experience. I have been married twice and divorced once. I believe deeply in the gift of marriage and know something of both its challenges and its graces. Being married has taught me a great deal about the nature of self-giving love and the miracle of forgiveness; in marriage I have seen the love of Christ made present in ways I could never have imagined. In spite of my limitations—personal, pastoral, and academic—I hope that this book will offer insights for those contemplating marriage, provide theological perspective for those doing the hard work of staying married, and give a framework of redemption and hope for those whose marriages have ended. The body of Christ need not be a place of secrecy or shame when it comes to marriage but rather a place of abundant life.

## THE SHAPE OF THE BOOK

This book emerged as a result of trying to answer one essential question: Should the church get out of the wedding business? It is a question that I was once tempted to answer with a resounding yes. In chapter 2, I describe the source of the question and lay out the various ways people have answered it. In the end, I argue that the church needs to back away from the *wedding*

business but stay in the *marriage* business. The landscape has changed over the last twenty centuries, however, and today's church needs to consider what that means.

In order to rethink the church's views of marriage and its involvement in weddings, I offer a brief history of marriage in chapter 3. Drawing on the work of sociologists and historians, I trace the ways people got married, and their reasons for doing so, over several centuries. The story of the church's involvement in marriage, while certainly intersecting with the overall historical arc, is told separately. Furthermore, it must be said that the story of marriage as I tell it is primarily a Euro-American story. I describe patterns that Americans both inherited and formed and reflect on an institution that was largely unavailable to people who were enslaved. The history of marriage among African American slaves is largely undocumented, and there is little written evidence regarding their patterns of courtship. Furthermore, the policies of individual slave owners determined whether formal unions among enslaved people were encouraged or even tolerated. Spouses could belong to different owners, and unlike the stories we hear today, property played little role in the choice of a partner.<sup>39</sup>

Understanding something of the evolution of thought in both the civil and ecclesial realms leads us to ask what Scripture says about marriage. In chapter 4 I discuss the basic "canon" of texts on marriage—particularly those that appear in marriage liturgies—and suggest strategies for interpreting difficult texts, holding texts in conversation with one another, and expanding the range of biblical passages in order to enlarge our understanding of what it means to be Christian and be married. This discussion of Scripture leads to the central claim of the book: marriage between Christians is best understood within an eschatological framework that draws on biblical notions of right relationship and is nourished by particular Christian practices, such as forgiveness, mutual self-giving, and hospitality.

The work of the first four chapters comes to bear in chapter 5, where we discuss the wedding service itself. Here I offer theological commentary on each element of the service and insights into what makes a marriage liturgy deeply faithful, broadly inclusive, and sensitive to various pastoral concerns. Chapter 5 also focuses on such practical details as music in weddings and how to get along with wedding planners. The final chapter explores how marriage might be part of the church's mission—before, during, and after the wedding—and urges the church toward more faithful responses to those who are divorcing or divorced. Two appendixes offer suggested scriptural passages for reading and preaching at weddings and a list of especially appropriate hymns and songs.

There are several things I am not doing in this book. I am not questioning monogamy. I am not arguing that being married is better than being single. I do not discuss important pastoral issues such as working with blended families, divorced parents, or cross-cultural marriage. There is important work to be done there, but it is beyond the scope of this volume.

This work has convinced me that the church has something to say about marriage, both for those who profess Christ and for those who do not. We offer a vision of marriage that is life-giving—one in which couples practice forgiveness as a daily habit, value the interests of the other above one's own in an economy of mutuality, and seek to be agents of compassion and justice to those around them. I hope that this book will help us lean into that vision with energy and love.

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