

The Church of England's Doctrine of Marriage

Since the publication of the Bishops' LLF Proposal for the consideration of General Synod, a range of lay and ordained people from across the church have asked for some guidance in understanding why many Christians in the Church of England and the Anglican Communion, together with Christians from across the churches of world Christianity, continue to believe that marriage is given by God for the union of a man and woman and that it cannot be extended to those who are of the same sex.

We felt, therefore, that it would be constructive to make available a relatively short theological summary of the doctrine of marriage as the Church of England has received it, and how it relates particularly to changes in society around same-sex partnerships. This paper does not seek to repeat what is set out more comprehensively in chapter 3 of the LLF Book but rather to build upon it.

This paper emerged from study and conversations in recent months among a number of bishops, evangelical and catholic. It was helpful not only to us but also to other bishops of the same mind, in clarifying some of our own thinking and prayerful discernment on these important matters as we contributed to the LLF deliberations in the College of Bishops. We now offer the paper below to clergy and congregations at this important time in the life of the Church to inform their understanding, recognising that for some it will be welcome support while for others it may clarify points of disagreement. In offering this paper we are committed to continue to listen and learn from those with whom we disagree.

Few readers of this paper will feel neutral about it. Some will be instinctively grateful for it, while for others it may compound their sense of disappointment. Without seeking to diminish the value of many committed same-sex relationships, for which there is much to give thanks, we find ourselves constrained by what we sincerely believe the Scriptures teach which cannot be set aside. We pray this will be a constructive contribution to the life and ministry of the Church while the work of discernment continues in General Synod and elsewhere.

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CHRISTIAN AND SECULAR UNDERSTANDINGS OF MARRIAGE

The Preface to the marriage service in the Book of Common Prayer accords marriage a sacramental significance. That is to say, it tells us that marriage is a *sign*. It signifies *the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Church*, an image drawn explicitly from the Letter to the Ephesians, chapter 5, but also hinted at in the words of John the Baptist in John 3:29 and brought more explicitly to the fore in the symbolism of the heavenly wedding banquet in Revelation 19 and 21. The Prayer Book marriage rite references Ephesians 5 in two further and significant ways. First, in the last of three prayers to be said after the suffrages and the Lord's Prayer, marriage is described as 'an excellent mystery, that in it is signified and represented the spiritual marriage and unity betwixt Christ and his Church,' and the man – the husband – is charged to love his wife 'as Christ did love his spouse the Church.' Secondly, the text provided by way of a homily to be read by the Minister if there is to be no sermon, begins with a further reading of Ephesians 5. The whole Prayer Book marriage service, therefore, connects together and turns on this analogy of bridegroom and bride with Christ and the Church.

The BCP goes on describe the goods of Christian marriage in Anglican teaching as threefold:

- *First, It was ordained for the procreation of children, to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord, and to the praise of his holy Name.*
- *Secondly, It was ordained for a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication; that such persons as have not the gift of continency might marry, and keep themselves undefiled members of Christ's body.*
- *Thirdly, It was ordained for the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity.*

Common Worship re-orders (and re-words) these into a) companionship, b) the gift of sex, and c) the bearing of children.

Over recent decades, the gift of sex and the bearing of children have largely become severed from marriage in secular understanding. Many no longer assume that sex needs to be limited to marriage, whilst children are frequently born and brought up outside of any marriage bond between their biological parents. The meaning of marriage has become for many (and now enshrined in UK law) the union of two people who desire lifelong companionship and commitment to each other - on which basis it may seem hard to understand how anyone could justly deny such an ordinance to couples of the same sex.

There are, of course, significant overlaps between a secular and Christian understanding of marriage (especially located around the theme of companionship), and some would argue that the similarities outweigh the distinctives. However the two understandings rest on very different foundations.

Over the past 300 years or so, western culture has been deeply shaped by trends in thought and social life that have their roots in what Charles Taylor calls the 'subjective turn in modern culture', or the emergence of 'expressive individualism'. We no longer see ourselves as embedded in a cosmic structure of being, created and ordered by God, but live in a world 'disenchanted', understanding ourselves primarily as individuals free to construct our own selves and pathways in life. We also tend

to assume that we have evolved without any particular design or purpose behind the process of biological evolution. Rather than fitting into a given order, we are therefore free to remake and define nature and ourselves as we choose.

Taylor's 'expressive individualism', however, has not developed within a moral vacuum. Three prominent values emerged during the French Revolution, in particular, which have continued to shape Western culture and which each have a bearing on our current discussions: *Liberté* (the freedom of the individual from state or institutional control), *Egalité* (justice for, and the rights of, the individual) and *Fraternité* (the coming together of individuals in solidarity to form communal life).

In this context, the argument from *Liberté* claims that people should be free to choose their marriage partner regardless of sex; the argument from *Egalité* that a homosexual couple should have as equal a right to marry as a heterosexual couple; the argument from *Fraternité* that as marriage helps to build a strong society, we should extend it to as many people as possible. This is why the movement towards same-sex marriage could be regarded as inevitable in our culture, because of deeply-rooted values we have taken for granted since the eighteenth century.

Of course, those values grew out of Christian soil, yet as scholars such as Alistair McIntyre and Stanley Hauerwas have shown, they are significantly different in shape and form from Christian understandings of freedom, justice and community, given their increasing detachment from the biblical narrative from which they first emerged.

Christians see the world differently, believing that Creation, while fallen, still retains a sense of order and structure, a 'givenness' in every sense of the word. Christians have generally understood the male-female relationship not as incidental, but as part of a vast interconnected metaphysics - a world where humanity is deeply rooted in and connected to God, to the rhythms of the natural created order, a measureless system both visible and invisible, and yet profoundly real. In this scheme, biological difference is not accidental but deliberate and good. As a result, Christians have generally believed that something sacramental happens when the two constituent parts of our species are joined as one, when male and female are joined together in a lifelong exclusive union. It is for that reason, grounded firmly in the Judeo-Christian scriptures, that marriage between a man and a woman has met the classic criteria of catholic (universal) doctrine up until the most recent times.

THE MEANING OF CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE

As Anglicans we give assent to "the faith uniquely revealed in the Scriptures" – and the scriptural foundations of this doctrine are well set out in chapter three of LLF, which reminds us of how 'Jesus, quoting the Book of Genesis, traced the roots of marriage to 'the beginning' (Matthew 19:4-6) – that is, 'before God's people Israel were formed, before the law arrived and even before sin came'. It is in that context that we read that 'the joining of a man and woman in marriage is a gift given together with the gift of humanity itself'.

A number of vital aspects of Christian witness emerge from such a 'Joining'.

First, **the Goodness of Creation is affirmed**. The book of Genesis recounts how God has created humanity in two forms, male and female with distinct anatomies, and, while recognising that this is not straightforward for some due to gender dysphoria or intersex conditions, that embodied creation is not accidental or inconsequential, but is given in the goodness of God. Gnosticism was that early semi-Christian idea that denied the value of our human bodies, stressing that the spiritual is all that matters and that salvation means the hope of escaping from these demeaning bodies with which we are all encumbered. Modern anthropologies may suggest that sexual difference and biology are unimportant or irrelevant. Yet Christian faith has always insisted that Creation, even though fallen, retains goodness at its essence. In the Genesis account, sexual difference is part of Creation not the Fall, and so we relate to God and each other in these two forms as male and female. Marriage therefore, as the union of man and woman bears witness not to the accidental or arbitrary nature of God's creation of male and female, but to its goodness.

Second, **the Interdependence of Humanity is celebrated**. Christian theology has usually assumed the radical interdependence of male and female. That has not always been enacted in Christian history, especially in the frequent failure to recognise the equality of women, but many strands of scriptural teaching suggest that men need women and women need men. For example, St Paul recognises that no man can come into the world without a woman and no woman can give birth without the assistance of a man: *"in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God."* (1 Cor 11.11-12). We also need each other's wisdom and experience, the mysterious difference that exists between us. The coming together of a man and woman in marriage proclaims such interdependence, reminds us of it and celebrates it. It says that this interdependence is not unfortunate or inconvenient, but part of what it means to be human. We cannot fully express our humanity alone – we each need relations with the opposite sex, whether in marriage or in other forms of social relating. Long-term celibacy expresses the Christian life in a vital and different way, enabling a single-minded devotion to God and testifying to a future where there will be no more marriage; and celibacy does not deny the essential point of interdependence. As in the life and ministry of Jesus, celibate single people also need the deep intimacy of friendships with those of the other sex.

Third, **the Story of Salvation is depicted**. The goal of Creation is intimate union between God and his Creation. It is the ultimate reconciliation, though not the eradication, of difference. We taste something of that now in faith, worship and in our experience of the Holy Spirit. Marriage, as the coming together of difference in unity is a deep sign and picture of this, which is why in Ephesians 5, St Paul depicts the relationship between husband and wife as an image of Christ and the Church. Holy Matrimony depicts the salvation story through its emphasis on three things. The first is *difference*. God and humanity, Christ and the church are different, not identical. The second is its *lifelong* character. The lifelong covenant between a couple pictures the idea of God's faithful long-term love and commitment to us and our faithful, long-term love and commitment to him, with no unfaithfulness or idolatry, but a single-minded love and devotion of the other. The third is *intimacy*. This means the sharing of everything - not only sharing in sexual union - but the sharing of life, money, emotions, home, everything. This is a picture of the intimacy into which we are invited with God, representing the coming together of difference in an intimate unity.

Fourth, **Life is generated**. As a visible, tangible confirmation and culmination of all this, the sense of creative fruitfulness in the coming together of difference is expressed in a very real and physical way, in that it is only by the joining together of male and female that new life is born and the human race is perpetuated. Hence the divine blessing pronounced precisely on the uniting of male and female to bring forth life in Genesis 1.28. New life could have come from eggs simply laid by the female, or the multiplication of cells within the body of the male, but in divine providence, it is generated through the normatively procreative union of male and female, expressing again that same interdependence and coming together of difference. Our bodies are generally designed in that way and our differences from each other enable this. This is what Ephraim Radner has called “*the fruitfulness that flows from the risk of reconciled distinction.*”

In other words, Holy Matrimony, in Christian understanding, is more than a contract, a private arrangement between two individuals that helps build social cohesion. It is theologically much more significant. Every time a man and woman are joined together in the promise of lifelong fidelity, the goodness of creation is affirmed, the interdependence of humanity is celebrated, the story of salvation is depicted, and life is (potentially) generated. Marriage is thus a sacramental sign of something bigger than itself and that signification depends to a significant degree on sexual difference. Every marriage is thus a proclamation of the gospel. It bears witness to God our Creator and Redeemer; to God's nature, purposes and love. This is a picture of reality that matters for Christians, and the framework within which the Christian doctrine of marriage sits and from which the Church's sexual ethics properly flow. For here is an icon of what salvation looks like, in contrast to the more abstract concepts of community, freedom or justice developed by the philosophers of the Enlightenment.

MARRIAGE AND THE STORY OF SCRIPTURE

There are broader, eschatological themes here too, which require further exploration: because Scripture as a whole, from beginning to end, is about *creation and new creation*: the goodness of the first and the glorious, even greater goodness, of the second. The path from the one to the other is *covenant and new covenant*: the marriage of Israel's God with his people, later focused dramatically on the marriage between the Lamb and the Bride. The male/female covenantal imagery belongs closely with the male/female pair in the original creation, together bearing God's image and commanded to be fruitful, so as to take forward the purposes of the Creator. As Paul says, this is a great mystery (Ephesians 5) – the word ‘mystery’ in this sense denoting not a teasing puzzle but rather a pointer to a deeper reality.

From Genesis to Revelation, and in the proclamation of Jesus, the biblical story is about the coming together of heaven and earth (Eph 1.10; Rev 21.1, etc.), of the true God and his bride. The marriage of a man and a woman symbolises and proclaims this story. It is no accident, as the Book of Common Prayer recognises, that the first ‘sign’ Jesus performed in John's gospel was to rescue a wedding party.

Meanwhile in the eschatological vision depicted in the very last chapter of the book of Revelation, we read, 'And the Spirit and the bride say, Come.' (Rev 22.17) - words that remind us about the purposes of God in creation and its perfection. The marital reference here is also embedded in the Church of England's doctrine of the Church, as the ordinal of the Book of Common Prayer indicates. Candidates for ordination as priests are told that 'The Church and Congregation whom you serve, is his spouse and his body.'

There is a wider ecumenical perspective here too. In the Orthodox tradition, emphasis is placed on marriage as a mystery which, like the mystery of the Church, draws from the life of the Trinity to express unity in diversity, signifying the vocation of the human person to live in some form of community. Here marriage is for the procreation of children who are born into 'a new family or domestic church', its governance symbolised by the crowns that husband and wife receive in the marriage rite.

Although these themes appear to be more clearly articulated in the liturgical life and teaching of the East, they are certainly not absent from the Church in the West; and even in those churches that have ruled in favour of contraception, the context of their doing so has never undermined this normatively procreative premise.

The joining of two people of the same sex in a covenanted union that seeks to deepen Christian faith and life can exemplify a range of virtuous qualities that invite recognition. But it must necessarily lack the capacity for procreation without external agency. The focus on fruitfulness that comes from the agency of marriage is, as far as we can see, central to its character as an estate that points to the fruitfulness of the coming together of God and humanity at the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev 19). It is also a symbolic statement that is intrinsic to the nature of the Church and its fruitfulness in bringing forth new children through rebirth by water and the Holy Spirit. In marriage, it is precisely the gendered distinction and difference that a man and a woman brings to the symbolic enactment of the Church's destiny as the eschatological sign of consummation when God is all in all.

Of course, this vision of marriage as a gift from God has also been terribly misused as an instrument of abuse. It has nurtured destructive forms of patriarchy. It has been idealised as the 'gold standard' of Christian relationships, in ways that have diminished those who cannot embrace it. But irrespective of how it is sometimes misused or misunderstood, marriage is also a Scriptural narrative that enables us to speak about the nature of the Church, about the end time and the perfection by God of all things. In this way it forms a discourse that enables Christians to understand and recognise something in each other that unites us across time and place in an eschatological future.

These ancient, complex, symbolic expressions of an unseen reality belong to the fundamental canons of Christian faith. Derived from Scripture, they demand that we do not lose sight of that sacred character that must attach to the Church as something other than a human institution. Any change to the doctrine of marriage as a union between a man and a woman would therefore not only unravel the Scriptural story of salvation, but risk undermining our understanding of the nature of the Church as it is derived from Scripture and given to us as a revelatory sign. Marriage is essentially an ecclesial, as well as a human, instrument of unity.

CIVIL MARRIAGE AND SAME-SEX RELATIONS

Same-sex relationships can, of course, be lifelong, loving, committed, faithful, and provide deep and enduring companionship. As such the church needs to find ways to recognise and welcome such relationships, without explicitly or implicitly changing her teaching by doing so.¹

We acknowledge again that there is much for the Church to repent of in attitudes and behaviours towards LGBTQI+ people who have often been victims of homophobia, and shunned or ignored in ways that have made it hard, sometimes impossible, to find a home in the church. Meanwhile the Church has frequently idolised and idealised marriage as the pinnacle of human relations and the state to which to aspire above all else, thereby amplifying the call for same-sex *marriage* as a means to the same end.

That is far from the whole picture within the Christian tradition. Christians have frequently celebrated other forms of relationship, such as the gift of deep friendship and the family of the Church at its best. St Paul suggests that the highest form of witness to the gospel is not marriage but celibacy, his own calling, in that it enables a single-minded devotion to the Lord and to his people (1 Cor. 7.7, 32 etc.). We have too often implied that marriage is the ideal for everyone, the only place to find close relationship and belonging, with the result that we have loaded too high expectations onto marriage, and woefully sidelined single people and the value of devoted friendship within and beyond the life of the Christian community.

There is still work to be done on how the church can best provide a better welcome and radical inclusion for LGBTQI+ Christians and others, and to find appropriate ways to affirm the goods of same-sex relationships. Yet the theological framework outlined above explains why, for many, a move towards same-sex *marriage* in church is not the way to do this, and why the witness of Holy Matrimony to the gospel in the ways outlined above needs to be preserved.

¹ The test of liturgical means of doing so is set out in the Pastoral Introduction and the Notes to Prayers of Love and Faith: they are required to be “neither contrary to, nor indicative of any departure from, the doctrine of the Church of England in any essential matter” (including, but not limited to, the definition of Holy Matrimony in Canon B30). The question is whether the draft prayers of Love and Faith, with their sample service, meet that requirement and we recognise there is proper concern from many that they do not.