

To Have and To Hold – The Theology of Marriage

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It has been said: 'we cannot move on marriage because the theology hasn't been done.'

Is it possible to have a theology of marriage which embraces marriage between two people of the same sex?

Charlotte Methuen

How has marriage been dealt with in Christian history and tradition?

- It is very difficult to say for sure what is meant by 'Christian marriage.'
- The church is struggling with marriage between two people of the same sex and is actively trying to avoid doing the theology of marriage.
- Marriage and sexuality are controversial because they are fundamental to who we are.
- Upbringing shapes our attitude towards marriage, how we read Scripture, and the authority of the Church; we all have our own lived experience of marriage, which informs our attitudes just as much as our intellectual beliefs.
- Our modern world has a complex attitude towards authority, and we are asking questions about it on the issue of marriage because we believe that God cares.
- Changed in past 100 years - marriage now seen as a relationship of **equality**, and even if we believe it only applies between one male and one female, we still may have different understandings of what marriage means.
- How does the church respond to what we the people say and think?

Marriage in the OT

- Genesis 1:26-28 interpreted as male and female reflective of the creative order of God. Relationships are how we try to ensure that creation is well looked after. However, this is not to say that the OT consistently supports 'complementarity.'
- The Pentateuch does not give us a view of marriage as involving one man and one woman, though, as it is presented as a contract between two men (the father and the husband)! Deut. 22:28-29 gives an example of this legal aspect.
- Women are very much regarded as chattel: a man who rapes an unmarried woman must marry her, and an older man who seduces a young woman must either marry her or compensate her father financially.
- OT marriage is *about* the regulation of inheritance and ensuring that men know who their children are (since it was easy to be certain who gave birth to a child, but very difficult to know who fathered it.)
- OT is not only about one male and one female – polygyny (several wives) is very common indeed. Marriage about regulation and control, *not* love or relationship; marriage as part of the structure of society.

Marriage in the NT

- Marriage becomes seen as monogamous
- Household codes found in the Hellenic world are explicitly hierarchical c.f. Ephesians 5. Therefore the early Church assimilated the same hierarchical model – man head of woman as Christ is head of the Church, drawing on the cultural norms of the society in which they found themselves.
- There were plenty of other understandings of marriage around at the time; presumably the early Church were aware of these and had some choice as to which to adapt.

- 1 Peter 3:1-7 and 1 Peter 2:18-21 indicate that a household was bigger than husband and wife – included servants etc. (These were often used by church organisations arguing pro-slavery; they are not used so much today!)
- Christianity drew on the way in which society was ordered at the time, with rules on sex and gender, including purity laws, taken from the OT into the NT, and this is what has been passed down to us.
- Therefore, although the early church knew marriage as one woman and one man, it had absorbed the culture of the time. Paul grapples with it as a pagan institution in 1 Corinthians 7 – made holy by the presence of at least one Christian believer.
- Paul only reluctantly supports marriage; he regards celibacy as an holy estate and marriage as a remedy against fornication which is only for those who haven't the strength to remain celibate.
- At the same time, however, Paul's exhortations regarding the responsibilities and duties which a husband bears his wife was a peculiarly Christian ideal.

Medieval Period

- Augustine saw marriage as the sexual expression of friendship. Procreation a very important purpose, although never *necessary* to marriage – rather it is consent which is necessary.
- Marriage came to be defined as insoluble except through death based on Matthew 5:31-32 and 19:7-9. Restrictions placed on whom you could marry, e.g. blood-relations, in-laws and those with whom there was a spiritual affinity such as godparents. (These restrictions could, of course, be waived if one had sufficient resources.)
- Shift towards both partners having to consent; though arranged marriages did persist somewhat.
- Is marriage a sacrament? Included in the list of sacraments in 1215 but off the list by the Reformation.
- Marriage as a sacrament is enacted by the couple – not the priest – and secret marriages by mutual consent were perfectly legal.
- Seen as an inferior way of life for the Christian.
- Real tension between valuing celibacy and valuing marriage.
- Danger of dying in childbirth vs nunnery as only chance for education.

Reformation

- Assumptions about partners' roles drawn from Aristotlean understanding of physiology – of man as active, intellectual, rational and public and of woman as passive, nurturing, emotional and private.
- Luther and others critical of celibacy being seen as privileged, but in a hypocritical way: priest only **fined** if found to have fathered a child.
- However, subordination of women to men seen as part of the natural order by Luther.
- Luther encouraged the idea of partners taking an equal share in raising children, and drew parallels between death in childbirth and Christ's crucifixion.
- Although 1549 Prayer Book identifies marriage as ordained for procreation and the bringing up of children, a remedy against sin, and for the mutual benefit of society, the rest of the Prayer Book (esp. the supplied homilies) indicates that marriage should be seen in the context of Ephesians 5 and 1 Peter 3 – as a matter of subordination.
- The general view in English society of marriage began to shift from viewing marriage as essentially private in nature to viewing it as a public act.
- It is clear in the letter to Ephesus that the early Church are thinking about how to speak about marriage, being a social and societal institution rather than ecclesial.

Industrialisation onwards

- 'Civilising influence' of women upon husbands – suffrage etc.

- Advances in legal status of married women (Married Women's Property Act 1882, before which married women did not generally even have a legal identity.)
- Introduction of questions of distinctions between civil and canon law regarding marriage.

Today

- The majority of married couples' understanding of marriage isn't informed by church doctrine.
- Contraception, divorce and remarriage of divorced persons with surviving former spouses have significantly changed how we understand marriage.
- Each step of progress has been heralded as The End of Marriage.
- Has Marriage Ended?
- But we've not really been doing the theology of marriage while these changes have occurred.
- Contraception and modern fertility technology have hugely affected procreation and family life, and therefore marriage.
- 95% of couples coming to us for weddings now give the same address. Do any of us pretend that pre-marital sex isn't happening between the vast majority of marrying couples?
- Adoptive and step-children have long been integrated into family structures, and recognised by society: we need to talk about the variety of procreation and parenting, including the blessings and challenges of each.
- In recent memory the increase of the language of 'partners' is noticeable in all kinds of couples.

Hannah Cleugh – How can we hold the tradition of the Church alongside the way we see society today?

- 19th century saw changes to the legal status of women. No longer did married women have to surrender their property – more egalitarian view of marriage. Introduced differences between civic and church marriages.
- 20th century saw big shift around divorce, which has changed how we perceive marriage itself. Also modern contraception and methods of fertility have changed the connection we make between sexual pleasure and marriage.
- Both ASB and CW tries to be more focussed on **equality** in marriage.
- Church needs to talk about the variety of ways in which procreation happens today.

Conclusion

We must accept that Christian marriage has **always** been rooted in the current social context. Early church dealt with these issues by trying to make holy what was part of the natural society around it.

Adrian Thatcher

Answering the charge of 'changing the definition.' No single definition of marriage – and who defines it anyway? Marriage has always been changing – perhaps the most enduring thing about it is the way it has changed to respond to society across the generations!

People suggest that equal marriage compromises the "intrinsic nature" of marriage. Marriage has no "intrinsic nature!" If neither monogyny nor permanence belongs to the *nature* of marriage, why would heterosexuality? Most NT scholarship has sought to unify the variety of views on marriage presented, but this is not possible.

Three 4th century positions: Jerome, Jovinian, Augustine.

Marriage became an official sacrament following the Council of Verona in 1184 – sacrament changes the desire for sex into the desire for babies! 13th century asked if marriage was about **love** or affection – *maritalis affectio*. Difficult to agree, so marriage became an exchange of consent between individuals in the presence of witnesses. How could the marriage of Mary and Joseph be a real marriage if Mary was “ever virgin,” as had been declared in the 3rd century? It was agreed that consent **makes** the marriage and sex **consummates** the marriage.

Is “gay marriage” therefore a real marriage? Since 13th century, the criteria for a “straight” marriage has been **consent**... *consensus facit matrimonium*

Church has forgotten that marriage was not a single sacramental act but something into which a couple **grows**. It begins with the betrothal, is followed by the nuptials and is concluded by the first sexual intercourse.

Recent changes in marriage:

- From the institutional to the personal – now about love and less about social approval
- From the formal to the optional
- From the public to the private – increasingly, couples want to marry quietly, often abroad
- From the hierarchical to the egalitarian – full partnership of equals.

Eight Pictures of Marriage

1. A union of heart, body and mind – but “one flesh” has dangers and relegates women to the second class (cf pre-Married Women’s Property Act)
2. A covenant – Calvin’s idea: opposite of contract
3. An image of the New Covenant – couples find their way to God through the love they have for each other
4. A Gift of Bodies – *mimesis*; parallels the Eucharist
5. A Sacrament of Mutuality – couple administer the sacrament of marriage to each other. The blessing of a priest is **not** what makes the marriage!
6. A Sign of the Coming Kingdom – a time is coming when love will conquer all
7. A Communion of Persons – in the Trinity, the Persons are not sexed, are co-equal, make each other what they are, and makes discrimination impossible.
8. An Aesthetic Discipline – the “requirement” of chastity for all Christians, including married ones!

Can these pictures be applied to same-sex marriage? Yes! This is our theology of marriage.