

# **SUBMISSION TO THE COMMISSION ON THE MARRIAGE CANON**

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*This submission represents my personal perspective and does not necessarily reflect that of my parish.*

General Synod 2013 took the next step in the inclusion of same-sex couples in the full life of the church by passing a motion “to change Canon XXI to allow the marriage of same-sex couples in the same way as opposite-sex couples...”. I’m relieved that Synod understood that same-sex marriage is a matter of doctrine and is therefore on a different theological plane from the blessing of same-sex partnerships, which is a pastoral consideration.

Most of us have felt for a long time that the blessing of same-sex partnerships was just marking time while waiting for the various levels of government to remove male/female as a prerequisite for marriage in the civil code. We should also understand that amending our rite to include same-sex marriage simultaneously eliminates the blessing of same-sex partnerships.

The present discussion will be the final one, or will it?

Laying aside the issues of gender identification and fluidity, social justice, inclusion, and human rights—all important considerations in themselves—I will focus on just one reason why the church cannot revise Canon XXI, and that is the transcendent Biblical symbolism of marriage. This powerful marital figuration is being lost or ignored in the debate, which has been dominated, by social justice, inclusion, and human rights.

## **The transcendent Biblical symbolism of the Christian doctrine of marriage.**

I will examine a recent definition of marriage with the Preface of Canon XXI and the Opening Exhortations of the marriage rites in the Book of Common Prayer and the Book of Alternative Services.

The most comprehensive paper on the theology of same-sex marriage that I’ve found is written by Robert Williams.<sup>1</sup> His paper, *Toward a Theology for Lesbian and Gay Marriage*, seeks to present a rational approach to a difficult topic.<sup>2</sup> His style is sensitive and respectful and he offers a definition of marriage, which may well end up being the model for revision in the Canadian Church.

Writing for The Episcopal Church in the United States, Williams offers the following:

### ***A Working Definition***

*Beginning with the definition of marriage in the canons of the Episcopal Church, and expanding its inclusivity so that it can describe same-sex as well as opposite-sex unions, I propose the following working definition of Christian marriage:*

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<sup>1</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert\\_Williams\\_\(gay\\_priest\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Williams_(gay_priest)) accessed Sept. 10, 2014 for a brief bio

<sup>2</sup> *Toward a Theology for Lesbian and Gay Marriage* - Robert Williams, found at [www.ualberta.ca/~cbidwell/CH RTP316/Williams.doc](http://www.ualberta.ca/~cbidwell/CH RTP316/Williams.doc).

*Marriage is a lifelong union of two persons in heart, body, and mind, as set forth in liturgical forms authorized by this Church, for the purpose of mutual joy, for the help and comfort given one another in prosperity and adversity; sometimes also for the procreation and/or rearing of children, and their physical and spiritual nurture.*

Note the features of his working definition:

- It is gender neutral
- It is set out in liturgical forms rather than rooted in scripture. Scripture is immutable while liturgy is malleable.
- The procreation and care of children is optional.

Compare this with Article 2 of the Preface to our existing Canon XXI

### **Canon XXI – On Marriage in the Church**

#### **Preface – Article 2**

*The Church affirms in like manner the goodness of the union between man and woman in marriage, this being of God's creation (cf Genesis. 1:27-31). Marriage is also exalted as a sign (Ephesians 5:31f), of the redeeming purpose of God to unite all things in Christ (Eph.1:9), the purpose made known in the reunion of divided humanity in the Church (Eph. 2:11-16)<sup>3</sup>*

The rest of the Preface further lays a foundation for marriage rooted in the scriptures and should be read. See Footnote 3 below. The preface is clear and I don't see how it can co-exist with a revised definition of Christian marriage. The authors of Canon XXI took great care to ground their work in the whole countenance of scripture.

The Preface sets the tone for the entire text of the marriage rites in the Book of Common Prayer and The Book of Alternative Services, beginning with the Opening Address or Exhortation. I will focus on the first part.

The Book of Common Prayer – Page 564

*Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this Congregation, to join together this man and this woman in holy Matrimony; which is an honourable estate, instituted of God in the time of man's innocency, signifying unto us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Church...*

It is still present in the Book of Alternative Services – Pages 528 & 541

*Dear friends, we have come together in the presence of God to witness the marriage of N and N, and to rejoice with them. Marriage is a gift of God and a means of his grace, in which man and woman become one flesh.*

*It is God's purpose that, as husband and wife give themselves to each other in love, they shall grow together and be united in that love, as Christ is united with his Church."*

Marriage was God's idea, instituted in Genesis 1:27-31 and 2:18-24 – *in the time of man's innocency*— i.e. before the fall.

The joining of a man and a woman is such a core point that Jesus quotes it in Mark 10:7.

It is then taken to a higher dimension with this: *signifying unto us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Church...*

This significant statement is based directly on Ephesians 5:31-33 & Revelation 19:6-9.

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<sup>3</sup> The Handbook of General Synod found at [http://images.anglican.ca/pdf/handbook/221\\_canon\\_XXI.pdf](http://images.anglican.ca/pdf/handbook/221_canon_XXI.pdf)

## EPHESIANS 5:31-33

<sup>31</sup> For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. <sup>32</sup> This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. <sup>33</sup> However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

## REVELATION 19:6-9

<sup>6</sup> Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: "Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. <sup>7</sup> Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. <sup>8</sup> Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear.

<sup>9</sup> Then the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!" And he added, "These are the true words of God."

I am well aware that the first part of Ephesians 5 has been abused to subjugate women to men. But that is a misreading of the radical relationship Paul was actually speaking about. It was revolutionary in the first century for a man to give himself to the care of his wife as Christ gave himself for the Church. To seize on the error of such misreading blinds one to the significance of verse 32. The marriage of a man and woman heralds the profound mystery of the Church as the Bride of Christ anticipated now, and fully realized at the second coming.

George Talbert & Andre van Ameyde develop the relationship between Christ and the church in their article – *Two Shall Become One Flesh: The Biblical Doctrine of Marriage*

*The OT prophets saw the marriage covenant between the LORD and Israel as the Law of Moses. This covenant brought Israel into a sacred relationship with the LORD without changing the heart of the people, and so it failed.*

*The relationship between Christ and the church is different. Christ removed the barrier of sin by his blood and gave the Holy Spirit. When it comes to the conduct of believers, the gift of the Spirit means that we are not left to walk in the flesh. Believers now can walk by the Spirit and not carry out the desires of the flesh. In marriage, believers by the Spirit can carry out God's original design. They are not left to adapt the standard of marriage to the hardness of the heart. The gift of the Spirit is also significant for the church as the bride of Christ. YHWH of the OT tied Israel to himself by the law, but the law left the nation in its sinful state. Christ, in contrast, imparts his life, power and eventually glory to the church.*

*The relationship is not external. It is one that fulfills the idea of marriage. Christ imparts his life and all to the church.*

*There is a significant shift in the direction of thought between the OT and NT. In the OT, the prophets used marriage as a metaphor for Israel's relationship with God.*

*In Ephesians 5 the line of thought is reversed.*

*Christ's relationship with the church is not seen in light of the human marriage relationship. Rather, the human relationship is seen in light of Christ's relationship with the church. When Paul speaks of the two becoming one flesh, he says, "This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church" (Eph 5.32).*

*The mystery of Christ and the church is the eternal purpose of God. Now we see that the true prototype is not the human marriage but the marriage between Christ and the church, which God purposed from eternity.*

*The Spirit's work in the believer is to make the reality in Christ real in our walk and experience. In this work he carries out his role in the trinity. He will only apply to us what is from the Father through the Son.*

*When it comes to God's grace for married Christians, he will work to make the husband and wife reflect the relationship between Christ and the church. In this work he builds on the*

*foundation of creation, but he does not simply work to realize what is stated in Genesis 2. Rather he causes the dynamics of the relationship between Christ and the church to be worked out in the Christian marriage.*<sup>4</sup>

*If we redefine and reconfigure marriage, we give up the only grasp we have of the ultimate union between God and humankind. What is even worse is that as we redefine the marriage relationship we will inevitably read ideas into the relationship between Christ and the church that are not true.*

*Apart from the marriage relationship, we have no way of seeing the nature of the love relationship of Christ and his church.*

*Since the identity of husband and wife are interrelated, a change in the identity of the church must involve a change in the identity of Christ and redefine Christ and even God in the divine-human relationship.*

*In this change, the human side determines the relationship, and this is a total reversal of the relationship. In fact, it is idolatry for human beings to shape the identity of God. But, how we understand Christ in relation to the church is inseparable from how we understand marriage, for marriage is our access to this understanding.*<sup>5</sup>

The church may dispute the interpretation of individual scriptures addressing the practice of homosexuality but altering the definition of marriage is not possible. Robert Williams' working definition of marriage can never be more than that – a working definition. It may be workable but he commits the error of beginning with his conclusion and working backward, revising each phrase to suit his well-meaning purpose. The result is an essentially secular definition. The Anglican Church of Canada is in danger of making the same mistake.

The Commission on the Marriage Canon has been given a weighty assignment. As much as its members may seek a win-win outcome, it may not be possible. I join with countless others in praying that the commissioners may glorify the Father, know the mind of Christ, and be guided by the Holy Spirit.

Respectfully submitted,

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<sup>4</sup> **TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH: THE BIBLICAL DOCTRINE OF MARRIAGE -**  
George Talbert & Andre van Ameyde , Page 8 <http://www.intothebible.com/docs/WCG14.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, P.9