

Submission to the Marriage Commission

I hope the Commission (and various readers) will indulge me in a somewhat circuitous approach to the topic at hand. I want to draw attention to some important aspects of the Church's theology and practice of marriage, and from that, to propose that the covenant which is constitutive of marriage is a normative feature of relationships in the Judaeo-Christian economy, and ought to be preached, upheld and practised by Church wherever possible.

Scripture & Marriage

As more than one correspondent to the Commission has pointed out, Scripture sets before us a panoply of marriage practices, some of which were abandoned or changed within the witness of Scripture itself. For example, the monogamy intended for Adam and Eve led soon enough (for economic and socio-political reasons) to the practice of polygamy. The practice of polygamy (for *pastoral* reasons – namely, compassion for Hagar and Hannah and all the other “#2 wives”) led eventually to a return to monogamy, a change which was still underway in New Testament times. (The writer of 1 Timothy would hardly have had to say, “Let a bishop be the husband of one wife,”¹ if there weren't a few candidates around with *more* than one wife!)

Similarly, Scripture sets out very clear directives for the practice of *divorce* (you can divorce your wife for speaking too loudly,² and all you have to do is write her a “get” and say, “I divorce thee, I divorce thee, I divorce thee.”) But along comes Jesus, who sees the underlying *pastoral* issue – which he identifies as “hardness of heart” – and goes on to set out a more demanding marital ethic: “What God has joined together, let no one put asunder.” And in our own lifetimes, the Anglican Church has used the very same *pastoral principle* to propose that notwithstanding the corrective provided by Jesus, there may be some situations in which divorce is the more compassionate option.

The point is this. We have *intra-biblical* warrant and example for changing our views and practice of marriage, and often enough, what has precipitated such a change is a response to the human pain caused by “the rules.” It is quite simply disingenuous for us to suggest that our current marriage practices have followed a steady and unchanging trajectory since the Day Aught. I believe that new knowledge, coupled with the evident spiritual longing of same-sex couples, is calling us to rethink our current practice. Men and women “to whom God has given the Holy Spirit, just as he has to us”³ are asking for admission to the sacrament of marriage. What is the most loving and pastoral response?

¹ 1 Tm 3.2

² See Dt 24.1; The School of Hillel laid out several grounds for divorce, including a woman “whose voice could be heard next door.”

³ Acts 15.8ff., in which the Apostle Peter makes the case for admitting Gentiles to the company of the believers without having to undergo circumcision. He goes on, “and in cleansing [the Gentiles'] hearts by faith [God] has made no distinction between them and us. Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by

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It is the teaching of the Church in the West that the couple themselves are the “ministers of their own marriage.” The Officiant, by contrast, functions primarily as a Master of Ceremonies, ensuring that vows are exchanged, rings given and received, and hands joined. We should note, in fact, that the couple is declared to be “husband and wife” *before* the officiating priest pronounces the nuptial blessing.⁴ In other words, the blessing of the marriage *does not make the marriage*: rather it calls down (according to its words) the benevolence and grace of God to empower the couple to keep the binding covenant they have made. It is on these grounds that the Church’s blessing of a marriage previously undertaken civilly is considered to be a fully valid marriage, and is thus *not* to include the exchange of vows and rings, and so on.

All by itself this begs the question why the Anglican Church is so concerned about making a distinction between marriage and the blessing of a marriage or same-sex union. *We’re* not marrying people anyway: they are marrying *each other*; and we are being asked to do nothing more (even in a marriage rite!) than to invoke the grace of God upon their friendship and generativity.

In Defence of Marriage & the Availability of Marriage

It has often been suggested that the Church should “get out of the marrying business.” Thirty or more years ago, Saturday weddings could eat up every weekend of a priest’s summer, not to mention countless hours of marriage preparation with couples who had a tenuous connection to the Church at best. Many felt used and compromised by this state of affairs. Some thought that if we followed the European model, we could “weed out” the “social marriages,” since all couples would be required to be married civilly, and would only apply to the Church to have their marriage blessed if this really meant something to them.

That was *then*. Some have taken up the same call in recent years, perhaps as a means of allowing us to sidestep the current debate about same-sex marriages. After all, no marriages: no debate!

But what about *now*? One correspondent to the Commission, a wedding photographer, has noted that in his experience only about 1 marriage in 50 takes places in a church. I have been testing this assertion with wedding photographers all summer, and they concur. In other words, we are *already* out of the marrying business! And I believe that rather than roll over and die, the Church lives under a *gospel imperative to revive the practice of marriage*.

placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they well.”

⁴ BAS pp. 532 & 534, 545 & 548

Let me state for the record that this is not because I object in any way to co-habitation – in other words, this is not a moral argument, so much as a pastoral and theological one.

Here is why. In Scripture, and in the historic practice and teaching of both Jews and Christians, relationships are governed normatively by Covenant. God makes a covenant with Noah. God makes a covenant with Abraham and Sarah. God makes a covenant with the Israelites through Moses. God makes a covenant with David – a covenant which extends its reach right to the Church’s identification of Jesus as the promised Son of David.

Similarly, one is grafted into the Body of Christ by entering in the Covenant of Baptism, a covenant which we think to renew regularly, both through the practice of confession, and the regular reaffirmation of baptismal vows. Similarly, ordination involves a covenant. The induction of clergy into pastoral charges is framed as a covenant between priest and people.

And *marriage* is the covenanting of two people to support and uphold each other “in good times and bad.”⁵

Why does this practice of covenanting matter? Because, unlike a *contract* where any imperfection in the execution of its terms is sufficient to terminate the underlying relationship (or at least to invoke penalties upon the offender), a *covenant* is a pledge of *hesed* – the biblical word connoting steadfast or abiding love. In other words, it is the *covenant* between two parties which makes it possible to fail without fear of instant reprisal or rejection. God has given us this practice of covenanting, of mutual promises, to safeguard the stability of our relationships. As Abraham Maslow has pointed out, such security is absolutely foundational to human well-being – and, I would infer, is denied to human beings at our peril.

Further, it is the practice of the Church that covenants be undertaken publicly. This has two important implications:

First, as the marriage rite in the BAS underscores, the covenanting process extends to the gathered community, who are asked to pledge their support for the newlyweds.⁶ In other words, Christian marriage places a couple squarely in the midst of a community who now bear some responsibility for upholding them, and taking care for the health of their relationship. (In this regard, it is salutary to note that in some parts of the Orthodox tradition, divorce is permitted precisely on the grounds that it is the *community* which has failed the *couple*.)

Second, the public nature of Christian covenanting means that marriage is never just about the happy couple, but also about those for whom they are pledging to become “a

⁵ BAS, pp 528, 541

⁶ BAS, pp. 531, 544

sacrament of God's love for this broken world.”⁷ Christian marriage represents the willingness of two people to make of their life together a sign of the power of love – God's unitive love – to “overcome estrangement, to heal guilt, and to overcome despair.”⁸ Do we not desperately need such willing signs among us?

Therefore, so far from sending people off to “contract with each other” in some fusty room at city hall, or even in Aunt Maisie's back yard, the Church should be robustly encouraging people to enter into the fullness and blessing of a public covenanting to live together in faithful love. There is none us – old or young, male or female, heterosexual or homosexual – who does not need the support such public covenanting and blessing provide. Indeed, I would argue that the more the vulnerable any population (including the LGBT community) is to misunderstanding or negative bias, the more urgently that population needs the grace and love of a supportive community. And further, there is none of us – old or young, male or female, heterosexual or homosexual – whom God has made incapable of revealing the power of his love to a broken world.

All of which is to say, our current withholding of marriage from same-sex couples is a deprivation not only to those who seek to enter more deeply into the Christian practice of covenant, but to the Church itself. We need a full recovery of our preaching and practice of *covenant* – and thus, of *marriage*. In these days, when Christian marriage seems to have fallen out of favour, I say, Bless God for those same-sex couples who are reminding us that what the Church holds in this earthen vessel called the marriage rite, is a treasure to be valued and coveted! I look forward to the day when it will be available to all who intend a lasting, stable and faithful life together.

Respectfully submitted,

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⁷ BAS, pp. 533, 546

⁸ *Ibid.*