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Towards a Methodist theology of marriage in the 21st century

Introduction

In March 2012 the British Government, stating that it, ‘...recognised that the personal commitment made by same-sex couples when they enter into a civil partnership is no different to the commitment made by opposite-sex couples when they enter into a marriage,’¹ decided to progress a commitment to equal civil marriage, and set up a public consultation process on how best this could be done. The Methodist Church in Britain responded to this consultation in a considered and careful way, and summarised part of its response as follows,

The Methodist Church, in line with scripture and traditional teaching, believes that “marriage is a gift of God and that it is God’s intention that a marriage should be a life-long union in body, mind and spirit of one man and one woman”.²

The Methodist Church characteristically identifies four sources of theological authority: scripture, tradition, experience, and reason. However, the response to the consultation cites only scripture and tradition as providing the theological underpinning to the Church’s view. This paper, endeavouring to incorporate experience and reason as well, will seek to consider what a Methodist theology of marriage in the 21st Century might look like and how it might

¹ Ministerial foreword to the document *Equal civil marriage: a consultation*, <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/about-us/consultations/equal-civil-marriage/consultation-document?view=Binary> (12.11.12.)

² Response from the Methodist Church in Britain to the consultation on “*Equal Civil Marriage*”

accommodate the differing theological, cultural and secular understandings of the notion of marriage.

The language of the Methodist Church in Britain's response to the consultation was not surprising. It was merely quoting Standing Order 011A of The Constitutional Practice and Discipline (CPD)³ of the Methodist Church, a policy that was adopted by the Conference in 1998. Superficially, this is a straightforward statement of what the Church believes.

However, as a theological account of marriage, it is less than satisfactory. Because of the public debate about equal civil marriage, much attention has been paid to the Church's assertion that, *'it is God's intention that a marriage should be a life-long union in body, mind and spirit of one man and one woman.'* However, the use of the word *'should'* here is interesting, for it implies that a marriage can be something other than God intends; that is, the attributes of, *'life-long union in body, mind and spirit of one man and one woman,'* are not the essential, necessary characteristics that define a marriage. This being the case then, how is the meaning of marriage denoted?

Of course, the Methodist church is not alone in its assertions. In 2005, the House of Bishops of the Church of England stated its position in these words:

*'...marriage is a creation ordinance, a gift of God in creation and a means of his grace. Marriage, (is) defined as a faithful, committed, permanent and legally sanctioned relationship between a man and a woman...'*⁴

³ CPD is published annually, by order of the Methodist Conference, by Methodist Publishing and copyright Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes.

⁴ *Civil Partnerships: A Pastoral Statement from the House of Bishops*, 2005, para 2 <http://www.churchofengland.org/media-centre/news/2005/07/pr5605.aspx>.

Because these statements have been reiterated in response to a consultation about equal civil marriage, the discourse has focussed on the latter part of the sentence, specifically *one man and one woman*, and has left the earlier part of the assertion unchallenged. However, the statement, *'marriage is a gift of God'* is not unproblematic, for it raises a number of questions:

1. In what way is marriage a gift of God?
2. How is the gift given?
3. What, precisely, is the nature of the gift?
4. What exactly constitutes marriage?

Moreover, that this statement is justified by the Methodist Church on the grounds of scripture and traditional teaching is worthy of some deeper exploration. So let us begin there.

Scripture

The scriptural basis for the Church's assertions about marriage, the Methodist statement included, seems to begin with the book of Genesis. Here there are two accounts of creation, specifically the creation of the human. In the first account, God creates humanity, male and female, in God's image, and blesses them. God commands them to, 'Be fruitful and multiply.' (Gen.1:28) However, it is the second account, Genesis 2:18-24, which is widely seen as the scriptural foundation for marriage: notably verse 24, *'Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.'* The traditional argument for God creating marriage derives from this verse. On this account, marriage

belongs to the order of creation, and is the one-flesh, life-long covenantal relationship of a man and woman in an exclusive commitment, as the foundation of a new kinship unit.

It is from these two accounts of creation that Jesus himself quotes when he responds to questions from the Pharisees about divorce.

(Jesus) answered, ‘Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning “made them male and female”, and said, “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh”? (*Matt 19:4-5 NRSV*)

Interestingly, Jesus moves directly from Genesis 1:27 to Genesis 2:24, avoiding the intervening text. Of course, Jesus was specifically responding to a question about the legality of divorce, so to use this as an example of his teaching about marriage is questionable. What Jesus emphasises is that the two become one, and human bonding at this level is understood as something blessed by God, which cannot be undone merely by dismantling a legal contract. Jesus seems to be arguing that a wife is not piece of property and as such cannot be disowned. Derrick Bailey⁵ in his book, ‘The Mystery of Love and Marriage’, suggests that becoming ‘one flesh,’ involves the couple becoming a new and distinct unity, a holistic conception uniting personal identity and sexuality at the deepest level, in a way which reflects the identity of the triune God.

Certainly, the text of Genesis 1:28 may be read in a way that suggests it is in the fruitful partnership of men and women that the image of God can be seen. However, it is important to note that this is not addressed to individuals but to humanity as a whole. Furthermore, the explanation in Genesis 2:24 that this is why a man leaves his family and joins with his

⁵ Bailey, Derrick, *The Mystery of Love and Marriage*, (London: SCM, 1952) p44

wife, is not a description of custom or practice amongst early Israelites. On the contrary, the scriptural evidence seems to suggest that it was the woman who left her family of origin and was incorporated into her husband's family. Thus, in the context of the second creation story, the text can be read more as means of conveying the notion that the desire to separate from one's parents and form one's own mutual pair bond, is a natural part of human maturation. Dormor⁶ goes so far as to suggest that this bond is not primarily about reproduction. Although sexual consummation lies at the heart of the notion of 'one flesh,' he argues that,

[The couple] coming together is not primarily for procreation, but for companionship, for the enhancement of interpersonal love. The oldest foundational account of the purpose of sexual intercourse focuses therefore upon the relational rather than the procreative aspect of the sexual act.⁷

Even if Dormor is right, there is no suggestion in Genesis that this is a unique or exclusive relationship. In fact, examples of monogamous marriage are hard to find in the Hebrew Scriptures. Based on the Old Testament, at least, it is hard to defend the proposition that, 'marriage is a life-long union in body, mind and spirit of one man and one woman.'

Genesis 2:7 explains that God forms the earthling (ha'a dam) from the earth (ha'a damah). The text should not be taken to mean that God makes one male human, but God makes humanity as a whole. In 2:18 God declares that it is not good for humanity to be solitary, and decides to make a helper who is suitable - a companion, a counterpart, a partner (ke neg dov). God then proceeds to make out of the ground all other living creatures, every animal and bird, and offers them in turn to humankind, who names them, but who does not identify

⁶ Dormor, Duncan, *Just Cohabiting?* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2004)

⁷ Op. cit. p26

any of them as companions. It is humanity, not God, which decides what constitutes a suitable helper. Eventually, God resorts to diversification and a separate, modified human being is produced from the 'tzela' (rib or side) of ha'a dam. The result is spectacular, for humanity perceives its own identity in the variant of itself.

'This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh;'

Furthermore, it is through identifying the variation that humanity is able to recognise and identify itself.

...this one shall be called Woman (*ishshah*), for out of Man (*ish*) this one was taken.

(*Gen 2:23*)

Notice again, it is humanity, not God, which decides this is the suitable helper. Human beings choose their counterpart. Adam could have chosen sheep!

Nowhere, in either of the creation stories, is there mention of a wedding rite, there is no legal contract or agreement made between the couple, and yet there is a shift in the text as the translators now begin to refer to the woman as Adam's 'wife.' This rendering of the word *ishshah*, is an interpretation, not an ontological phenomenon. So, if the earthling identifies and choose the suitable helper, and the name for the relationship between them is determined by a translation decision, how does 'marriage' become something ordained by God in creation and given as a gift?

Thus, the argument from scripture that God builds marriage into the order of creation (as a gift), is not entirely proven.

The account in the New Testament of Jesus' view of marriage emerges from a particular reading of the experiences and challenges that he encounters in the Gospels. Much is made of the fact that, in John's Gospel, Jesus' first 'sign' is performed at a wedding feast,

'...to join together this Man and this Woman in holy matrimony; [...] which holy estate Christ adorned and beautified with his presence, and first miracle that he wrought in Cana of Galilee...'⁸

As already noted, Jesus offered teaching about marriage only in response to devious questions (see also Mark 12:18-25, for example). Similarly, Paul's teaching on marriage arose from questions raised in the churches. For example, Paul begins the seventh chapter of his first Letter to the Church in Corinth,

Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: 'It is well for a man not to touch a woman.' (1 Cor 7:1 NRSV)

Within the Christian tradition, this statement has been understood to sum up Paul's fundamental view on the matter. Marriage is permissible but not encouraged. Its purpose is primarily to enable sexual control, although it is better to abstain altogether if possible. However, contemporary scholarship believes that Paul is quoting a Corinthian axiom back to the receivers of his letter, hence the quotation marks in the New Revised Standard Version. That is, Paul is addressing a group of Christians who were enthusiastic exponents of celibacy, both within and without marriage. Consequently, it can be argued that, contrary to the classical view, Paul's reasons for preferring the single state are practical, and stem from his overwhelming concern, the eschatological imperative. For Paul, time is too short to take on the additional duties, responsibilities and concerns of marriage.

⁸ *The Book of Common Prayer* (1662), The Form of Solemnization of MATRIMONY, (Everyman Library Classics, 1999).

Paul writes,

I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind. (*1 Cor. 7:7 NRSV*)

This is another of the verses from scripture used to support the notion of marriage as a gift from God; although it seems here that the gift to which Paul is referring is about individual need for intimacy rather than the condition of being either married or single.

In fact, due to Augustine, 1 Corinthians 7 lies at the heart of much of Western Christian understanding about marriage, and we will return to this later. In the meantime, having raised sufficient concerns about the interpretation of scripture, let us now consider traditional teaching.

Traditional teaching

Part of the challenge for the Church is the fact that marriage is a human relationship that predates the Christian faith, Christian history, and Christian worship. Consequently, it is difficult to argue for anything distinctly called 'Christian marriage'. Edward Schillebeeckx proposes that the best we can do is to affirm that marriage is,

'...a reality secular in origin which has acquired a deeper meaning.'⁹

However, some would suggest that, because of its prevalence over time and space, marriage is a 'natural institution.' Aristotle states;

The love between husband and wife is evidently a natural feeling, for Nature has made man even more a pairing than a political animal in so far as the family is an older and even more fundamental thing than the state.¹⁰

⁹ Schillebeeckx, Edward, *Marriage: Human Reality and Sacred Mystery*, (London: Sheen and Ward, 1976), p.xxviii.

Nonetheless, the proposition that marriage is a 'natural' state raises a number of questions. When we use the term 'married' to describe a relationship, are we referring to the same phenomenon irrespective of culture or history? Is the lived reality of marriage the same thing for men and women of the fourth century BC as it is for the Greco-Roman civilisation into which Christianity was born? Is marriage in the eighteenth century, at the time of Wesley and early Methodism, the same as for twenty-first century couples? I would suggest not. Marriages are not created in isolation. The notion of marrying for love is a modern construct. Many marriages, across cultures and through history, have been arranged. They are entered upon not for love, but for reasons of policy, economics and pragmatism. Even in recent years, one study of newly-weds in Britain in the 1980s demonstrated, that:

The desire to be recognised as a normal independent adult and to secure the future, appears to be the most common motive for marriage.¹¹

Moreover, the first Christians did not invent their marriage laws, customs and practices. To become married, individuals simply did whatever was locally required; behaviours that have to be understood in the context of the first century, developed agrarian society of the Mediterranean world. According to Dormor, marriage was deeply rooted in and shaped by the structures of kinship and politics. Marriage was a family affair arranged by parents, typically preceded by betrothal, and celebrated in a domestic context presided over by the head of the household, usually the groom's father. This pattern was true for both Jewish and Roman cultural traditions, and influenced the subsequent development and consolidation of theological ideas about marriage in the Middle Ages.

¹⁰ Aristotle, *The Nichomachean Ethics*, trans J.A.K. Thomson, (London: Penguin, 1953), p251

¹¹ Mansfield, Penny, and Collard, Jean, *The Beginning of the Rest of your Life?* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), p59

From the Jewish background (and the scriptures) medieval Christians elaborated ideas about the significance of betrothal and inherited the notion that consummation initiated marriage, whereas the principle of mutual consent was a bequest of Roman law.¹²

Thus, according to Jewish tradition, betrothal initiated the process of 'getting married,' and the actuality of marriage was established through custom and practice. Whereas for Romans, marriage is something that requires legislation by the state, for it involves issues of inheritance and status. Again, as Dormor points out,

The overwhelming significance of marriage lay with the fact that only children born of such a union were considered legitimate heirs. In Roman eyes so long as a couple regarded each other as man and wife and others perceived that to be the case, then they were considered to be married.¹³

The other factor was that marriage was not available to everyone. In Roman society, it was a highly exclusive institution restricted to certain social classes. Consequently, the requirements for marriage were; *conubium*, it is legally possible for the couple to marry (that is, they were not members of proscribed groups) and, *consensus*, do they agree to be married. Providing these two conditions were met, then the marriage was considered legal. From the first century, it became usual, to draw up a document that was signed and witnessed, as evidence for this.

As previously noted, early Christians throughout the Roman Empire were inclined to follow local marriage customs. Therefore, when the Church speaks in terms of traditional teaching, to whose traditional teaching is it referring? Furthermore, although it became customary in

¹² Dormor, *ibidem*. p45

¹³ *Op.cit* p48

some parts of the Empire, from the fourth century, for the priest to bless Christian couples, there is no unequivocal evidence of an overt and distinctive Christian wedding ceremony until well into the medieval period.¹⁴ Over time, as its influence spread, the Church became more involved in the marriage process and found itself caught up in the practical and legal need to determine when a marriage existed and when it did not. The tension between the Jewish convention – there is a period of betrothal, but the marriage is made at the consummation – and the Roman convention – a marriage is made when the parties give their consent to it, caused the Church some difficulty. Marriage was seen as a process rather than a single act. Stevenson¹⁵ argues that, throughout the first millennium, betrothal (an in-between stage) was an essential part of the process of getting married as a Christian. This intermediate period of ‘not quite married’, served an important community and psychological function, allowing the couple to make the transition from the single state to the married state. However, the inherent uncertainty in this practice created confusion for the lawyers. Thomas Cooper cites the following example,

William married Aubrey privately but, before they came to live together, his eye chanced on Alice’s plumper inheritance. He ditched Aubrey and solemnized his marriage to Alice at the church door. Children were born. Tiring of Alice, he sought an annulment on account of his marriage to Aubrey. The case turned on whether he and Aubrey had been merely betrothed, promising to marry at some future date, or had actually contracted matrimony so that his later marriage was bigamous. Was mutual consent alone sufficient to make an indissoluble union or was something else required? William won his case. Alice appealed to Rome. In a momentous decision,

¹⁴ See Stevenson, Kenneth, *Nuptial Blessing*, (London: Alcuin Club/SPCK, 1982)

¹⁵ Stevenson, Kenneth, ‘Van Gennep and Marriage – Strange Bedfellows: A Fresh Look at the Rites of Marriage’, p110-133 in Stevenson, K., *Wonderful and Sacred Mystery*, (Washington: The Pastoral Press, 1992) p129

Innocent II held for William on the grounds that his marriage to Aubrey had not been 'a promise for the future, but a present arrangement.'¹⁶

This is the first known court judgement setting out the principle that mutual consent spoken in the present tense was binding and sufficient to bring about the state of matrimony. Solemnization was not required to establish the marriage bond.

Over time, the principle of consent was enshrined in canon law and the significance of betrothal as part of the Christian understanding of marriage was reduced. With this development, there was a greater focus on the marriage service as the occasion where the couple gave their consent, rather than one when they were blessed. Eventually, at the Council of Trent in 1563, the Roman Catholic Church decreed that a marriage was only legitimate in the eyes of the Church if it took place before a priest in a wedding ceremony. The Church was attempting to put an end to the practice of clandestine marriages. However, in England the Roman Catholic Church no longer had any power, so clandestine marriages continued to be legally binding well into the first half of the eighteenth century. Furthermore, from the sixteenth to the early nineteenth century in Britain there existed both an understanding that mutual consent made a marriage and that this could be entered into via a range of informal marriage customs and practices; principal among them being betrothal.¹⁷

The Council of Trent devised a number of strategies to combat clandestine marriages, among them requiring that the banns be read three times before a church wedding could be

¹⁶ Cooper, Thomas, 'Wilt thou have this woman?' *Anglican marriage rites: a symposium*, Joint Liturgical Studies no. 71, (Norwich: The Alcuin Club: Hymns Ancient and Modern, 2011)

¹⁷ See for example, Gillis, John R, *For Better, For Worse: British Marriages, 1600 to the Present*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980)

performed, this requirement was incorporated into the 1662 Book of Common Prayer.

However, bishops had authority to issue licences permitting marriage without the reading of banns. By the seventeenth century, all the well-to-do were evading banns by obtaining licences. One early eighteenth-century observer described the situation in this way:

To proclaim Banns is a Thing no Body now dares to have done; very few are willing to have their Affairs declar'd to all the World in a Publick Place, when for a Guinea they may do it snug and without Noise; and my good friends the Clergy, who find their accounts in it, are not very Zealous to prevent it. Thus then, they by what they call License are marry'd in their Closets, in the Presence of a couple of Friends that serve as Witnesses.¹⁸

Dormor suggests that the modern concept of marriage did not become established until the Hardwicke Act of 1753, which made the public registration of marriages compulsory. This Act established what Dormor terms as the 'ceremonial theory of marriage.' That is, marriages are made (rather than solemnised) by the religious ceremony – what Dormor refers to as the 'half hour religious service on a Saturday afternoon¹⁹.' At the time, the legislation was seen as a gross infringement of personal liberties as it criminalised private marriage making. Nevertheless, informal marriage practices continued well into the nineteenth century. British couples could live together and have sex after their betrothal or "the spousals". Until the mid-1700s, it was normal and acceptable for the bride to be pregnant at the nuptials, the later church public ceremony for the marriage. With the Act in force, for the first time in British history, all marriages in England and Wales had to take place in their parish church. (The law also applied to Catholics, but Jews and Quakers were

¹⁸ Misson, Henri, *Memoirs and Observations in His Travels over England (1697)*, (London, 1719), 183, quoted in Gillis, op.cit.p137

¹⁹ Dormor, *ibid*, p59

exempt.) The Act conflated the spousals and the nuptials and, by the start of the 19th century, social convention and the Church prescribed that brides be virgins at marriage. Following the Civil Marriage Act of 1836 and greater bureaucratic efficiency, there developed a moralistic hostility to the continuing pluralistic and informal marriage practices of the working classes. The status of 'married respectability' emerged as a powerful mechanism for public virtue and orderliness.

Thus, it can be seen that the institution of marriage has developed and changed over time. Christian notions about marriage and its formation began in a largely agrarian society, ruled by a semi-divine Emperor, maintained by a brutal military regime, economically supported by slavery and characterised by high death rates. That these ideas have had to adapt to a post-industrial democracy, with equal rights legislation, effective contraception, highly developed technology and high levels of life expectancy, is to be expected. Consequently, it can be argued that the traditional teaching of the Church is more fluid than it is usually understood to be.

Therefore, the Church's view that, '...marriage is a gift of God and that it is God's intention that a marriage should be a life-long union in body, mind and spirit of one man and one woman,' is founded on scripture and traditional teaching, is disputable. Continuing to defend the classical justification for marriage, in the face of a changed world, does not help the Church to engage with a society for whom the concept of marriage in the modern world has moved from that of an institution to that of a relationship. Can the Church draw on the other resources for theological authority, reason and experience, to help it in this regard?

Reason

One of the difficulties with the Church's reliance on scripture and tradition alone is that, in the Christian West at least, this has led to the development of a contractual model of marriage. In a very interesting article in the *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Daryl Ellis²⁰ argues that Paul canonically enshrines this approach in 1 Corinthians 7:3 when he,

...admonishes Corinthian husbands and wives to literally 'pay the debt [τὴν ὀφειλὴν ἀποδιδότω]' to one another sexually.²¹

Certainly, as Ellis points out, Augustine compared the exchange of spousal sexual favours with 'transactions' involving the trade of straw or gold²², and Luther identified marriage as little more than, 'any other worldly undertaking.'²³ This contractual model creates a situation where marriage takes on an *a priori*, theoretical meaning, separated from the actual lived experience of married people. Ellis then goes on to explain how, in the 'Excellence of Marriage', Augustine applies 1 Corinthians 7 as an argument that the only justification for Christian marriage is the formation of a contractual relationship in which each party agrees to be a transactional outlet for the other's sexual lust.

Augustine identifies three particular goods in marriage: procreation, sexual fidelity and the spousal sacramental bond. However, for Augustine procreation is not a good that validates getting married and engaging in sexual activity. The only reason, in Augustine's view, is to form a contract for the marital outlet of concupiscence. Augustine grounds his argument in

²⁰ Ellis, Daryl, 'The Ambivalence and Lust of Marriage' *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol 66, No 1, (Cambridge University Press: 2013) pp 30-49

²¹ Op.cit. p31

²² Augustine, 'The Excellence of Marriage,' in *Marriage and Virginity, The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, trans. Ray Kearney (Hyde Park: New York: New City Press, 1999,) 4.4, quoted by Ellis, *ibid.* p31

²³ Luther, Martin, 'The Estate of Marriage, 1922', in *Luther's Works*, vol 45 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1962), p25, quoted by Ellis op.cit

the notion that Christ's advent brought about a change in the status of marriage: prior to Christ the purpose of marriage and sexual union was to 'continue the race'²⁴, subsequent to Christ biological procreation is no longer a Christian 'duty to society'²⁵.

Thus, having relativised the procreative 'duty', Augustine is left with a problem. On what grounds can Christians marry and engage in sex at all? If there is no longer a requirement for Christians to have children, then the only real reason to marry or have sex is that 'it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion' (1 Corinthians 7:9). From this position, Augustine constructs two requirements that form the terms of the marriage contract: firstly, the 'duty of fidelity'²⁶ and secondly, the duty of 'mutual service to relieve each other's weakness and thereby avoid illicit unions'²⁷. In this crucial move, Augustine establishes the fundamental premise by which marriage can be theologically portrayed in terms extrinsic to the lived experience of any couple. That is, marriage is largely understood to be necessarily determined as a forgivable outlet for mutual sexual desire, coupled with no adultery.

Interestingly, Augustine makes no reference to Ephesians 5:21-33, which Ellis accounts for by explaining that,

...if marriage is *inherently* formed for the sake of providing an outlet for sinful lust, the last thing Augustine wants to do is to associate this lustful union with the virginal union of Christ and the church.²⁸

²⁴ Augustine, 'The Excellence of Marriage,' in *Marriage and Virginitly, The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, trans. Ray Kearney (Hyde Park: New York: New City Press, 1999,) (13.15)

²⁵ Op.cit. (13.15)

²⁶ Op.cit. (4.4)

²⁷ Op.cit. (6.6)

²⁸ Ellis, *ibid.* p36

Furthermore, as Ellis points out, even when Augustine does finally refer to Paul's analogy in Ephesians 5, he does so only to identify the *fact* and *indissolubility* of the union (Ellis' emphasis)²⁹. Thus, Augustine's thinking on the notion of the sacramental bond created through marriage is expressed as a fact. He does not attempt to offer an account of how the union and life together of the couple (which is what Ephesians 5:21-33 is all about) might actually engage with the purpose for which Christ 'loved the church and gave himself up for her', that is 'to make her holy' (Ephesians 5:25-27). It is as though Augustine can only read Ephesians 5 through the lens of his assertions on 1 Corinthians 7, creating a theology that views marriage essentially as a contract, and an unbreakable contract at that. In the West, this view has become the dominant Christian account of marriage, even in those protestant traditions (like the Methodist Church in Britain)³⁰ that, recognising human frailty, permit remarriage after divorce.

This state of affairs presents us with a problem. The notion that 'marriage is a gift of God' does not sit comfortably with the notion that 'marriage is an indissoluble contractual arrangement, provided as an outlet for sinful lust.' Those protestant churches, like the Methodist Church, which has a more reasoned policy with regard to the indissolubility of

²⁹ Augustine, 'Marriage and Desire', in *Answers to the Pelagians II*, (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press. 1998), 1.10.11,

³⁰ In 1998, the Methodist Conference adopted a Report on Christian Preparation for Marriage. The Report reviewed the marriage practice of the Methodist Church and introduced a number of changes, particularly in relation to the Church's response to requests for marriage by people who have been divorced. The new policy (Section 6 of the 1998 Report), in brief, was

- to welcome everyone who enquires about an intended marriage service in a Methodist church
- if one or both parties have been married before, to ensure that a couple is directed to a minister who is not prevented by conscience from considering their request
- to establish a good relationship with the couple and explore the appropriateness of their marriage taking place in an act of worship in a Methodist church
- to involve each couple seeking marriage in a process of preparation
- to reach with each couple a clear decision relating to their request for marriage in a Methodist church (cont'd...)

marriage, nevertheless need to find a theology of marriage that takes better account of the reality of pair-bonded relationships in the twenty-first century. So let us now briefly look at the contemporary experience.

Experience

In 2004 a young Ghanaian woman, whose family were committed members of the Methodist Church in South East London where I was the minister, told me that she intended to marry her boyfriend, with whom she had been living for some time. The situation was complicated because he was not a British citizen, and therefore, for immigration purposes, it was important that they married before his permission to stay in the country expired. We agreed that the only way this could be achieved in the timescale was for them to marry in a register office, although this was not what the couple really wanted. This duly took place. The next stage in the marriage process was for the parents of the young woman to meet with the parents of the young man and for a customary Ghanaian marriage ceremony to take place. This involved formal ceremonials by which the two families concerned met in Ghana and agreed that the match was suitable, the groom's family then made appropriate gifts to the bride's family and offered alcoholic and soft drinks. The couple themselves did not need to be present for this, although the process itself involved the couple giving their assent also through the exchange of gifts. Had the couple been in Ghana, this would have sufficed in Ghanaian law, although couples are encouraged formally to register their marriages, to ensure the state knows about the marriage and in case of subsequent dispute. Thus, once this was completed, the couple, who were still in Britain, were considered to be married, both by British and Ghanaian law. After this, the husband had to leave the country and apply to re-enter as the husband of a British citizen. This took many weeks to achieve.

Eventually, when he returned, the couple were able to have their marriage blessed in the Church, the ceremony that both wanted, and which was an occasion of much celebration. The twenty-first century, pluralistic, multi-cultural question is, at what instance did the couple become married?

For the Ghanaian families, it was clearly once the traditional family and cultural formalities had been properly observed. For the UK Border Agency and the British legal system, it was only once the civil ceremony had been performed and duly registered that the couple were married in the eyes of the law. It is harder to make that judgement for God and the Church. The difficulty with marriage as an 'indissoluble contractual arrangement' initiated through a public ceremony, (the 'ceremonial theory of marriage,') is that it focuses almost all the attention on the wedding service and very little attention on the nature of the relationship and how it can be supported, sustained and developed over time. So let us explore the meaning of marriage from the experience of the married relationship, which brings us back to the Ephesians 5, particularly verses 25&26.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy. (NRSV)

Perhaps, if we could give a better account of the gift of himself that Christ makes to the *ἐκκλησία* (those called out, the church), and how that 'makes her holy,' we might begin to grasp the concept that Paul is using here as his analogy for marriage. To do this, we have to turn our attention to the fundamental nature of the relationship between God and humanity.

As the South African theologian, Vincent Brümmer³¹, suggests, in Christian theology the relationship humanity has with God has usually been understood in terms of the various ways in which people relate to each other. In theory, there are three basic types of relationship between people: manipulative relations, contractual relations and fellowship. In practice, human relations are usually a mixture of all three, for it is unusual for a human being to sustain any one of them indefinitely. Humans are inconsistent in their transactions with each other. God, however, always remains faithful to God's own character and therefore is always consistent in transactions with us. As a conceptual model for God's relationship with us, we therefore need to choose one of these types, rather than adopt the inconsistent mix of all three, as is typical of our transactions with each other. In the history of theology, all three of these types have from time to time been used as models for the relationship between God and human beings, so it is worth exploring them in turn before examining their implications as conceptual models of the relationship between Christ and the church.

Manipulative relations occur when human beings try to gain control over each other. To the extent that A manages to take control over B, the relation between them becomes manipulative. Such relations are asymmetrical: only A has agency, whereas B has become an object of A's manipulative power. The causal agency of A is both necessary and sufficient for bringing about, changing or terminating the relationship, whereas B has no ability to either bring about or prevent the relationship being established. In a significant sense, the

³¹ Brümmer, Vincent, *Speaking of a Personal God*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) chapters 3 and 6.

relationship becomes impersonal because only one of the participants in the relationship is a personal agent. The other has become an object.

Contractual relationships pertain when two people accept certain rights and duties toward each other. For example, an employee agrees to undertake certain tasks in exchange for payment from the employer, who agrees to pay the employee a wage in exchange for the right to the work that the employee has agreed to carry out. People enter into such agreements because of the advantage each party can gain for him or herself. Furthermore, in a contractual agreement, B is of value to A as a means of furthering A's own interests. As such, B can be replaced in the relationship by any other means that might achieve the same ends.

However, in relations of fellowship, A identifies with B and B's interests. The value of B and the value of the relationship are intrinsic to A. As such, nothing can replace B, nor the relationship with B. Although relations of fellowship with other people could also be rewarding and satisfying, they cannot be the same relationship, since the person *who is the reason for having the relationship* would be missing. It is clear that relations of fellowship play an essential role in human existence, since we owe our value and identity as persons to such relations. Personal value and identity are *given* to me by the fact that others consider me irreplaceable to them. For Christians this applies especially to fellowship with God. The ultimate value of my very existence is bestowed on it by the fact that God loves *me* and not just my services apart from me.

Brümmer suggests³² that all kinds of personal relations presuppose not only that both parties are personal agents, but also that each acknowledges the freedom and responsibility of the other as well as his or her own dependence on the other for establishing and maintaining the relationship. Contractual relations build in checks and balances to protect the parties in this regard. Thus, on Augustine's account of marriage as a forgivable outlet for mutual sexual desire, it is essential to include no adultery and indissolubility into the contract, for the mutual protection of the parties. However, if we are seeking fellowship with other persons we become vulnerable in relation to them.

Thus, a relationship of fellowship is one in which two personal agents mutually identify with each other. Each partner in the relationship freely identifies with the other by making the interests of the other his or her own, and by pursuing these as his or her own interests. Surely, this exactly describes the relationship between Christ and the church that Paul is using as an analogy for marriage the relationship.

Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy. (Eph. 5:25-26)

God, through Christ, identifies God's self with us by making our salvation and eternal happiness God's own concern, regardless of the consequences, in order that we can identify with God and make God's will our own.

Similarly, Ellis³³ eloquently argues for a theology of marriage as consecrated sacrifice by suggesting that,

³² Brümmer, Vincent, *Atonement and Reconciliation*, in *Religious Studies*, vol. 28 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1992) pp435-452.

³³ Ellis, *ibid.* p38

...every moment of marital life – mundane and ecstatic – is marked by the ambivalence of vulnerability and ‘deathly surrendering to one another, which is embodied in the surrender of Christ himself upon the cross.’³⁴

The key word here, for Ellis’ purposes, is surrender. He demonstrates that the attitude of surrender contains within it both the possibility of intimate loving embrace, at the same time as that of inhuman abuse, rejection, subjection and manipulation. He further suggests that marriage embodies this ambivalence in a particularly luminous way because of the exceptional vulnerability of the sexual surrender itself.

The benefit of this interpretation for our present age is that it takes proper account of the lived experience of married life, and enables the meaning of marriage to be defined by the nature of the relationship, rather than by any extrinsic characteristics, such as the terms of contract or the nature of those who make it. Thus, on this account of marriage, it becomes possible to consider some answers to the questions outlined in the introduction.

A possible way forward

In many respects, to define marriage as a contract is by far the easiest solution. Contracts are much clearer, have a definite start date, and can incorporate specific, predetermined terms and conditions - marriage should be a life-long union in body, mind and spirit of one man and one woman. However, as has been argued, in the light of Ephesians 5:25-26 it is difficult to reconcile Paul’s analogy for marriage (Christ’s sacrificial relationship to the church), to the notion of an indissoluble contract. Consequently, we need to consider a constructive alternative.

³⁴ Op.cit. p39

In what other way then might marriage be a gift from God? Perhaps that God provides for companionship – human beings are not meant to be solitary – and that when that companionship (a relation of fellowship) involves the risk of sexual surrender over a sustained period, there is the possibility for holiness. This description might reflect more accurately the day-to-day, lived experience of people in faithful, committed relationships, who perceive themselves to be married; and who continually choose to stay married, whether or not there is any legal contract in place requiring them to do so. On this account, marriage becomes the gift couples choose for themselves, and then ask the church to bless.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to explore the Methodist Church's current statement on marriage and has attempted to demonstrate that scripture and the traditional teaching of the church offer an unsatisfactory theology of marriage for the twenty-first century. The paper has then considered reason and experience as further sources of theological authority and sought to establish that marriage is better understood in terms of a relationship than an indissoluble contract. The paper further suggests that an account of marriage as a relation of fellowship, sustained over time, that incorporates the risk of sexual surrender, is a more meaningful reflection of the day-to-day lived experience of those who identify themselves as married.

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