

MARRIAGE IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

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(1) THEOLOGY

In these two lectures I shall be commending marriage. In this first lecture I admit some of the difficulties within the Tradition itself (section 1); then outline the case for a whole-hearted, theological approach to marriage (section 2); then I make the case (section 3). In our second session we will be putting our theology of marriage in practice. Given that marriage is what Christians can plausibly say it is, what are the implications for young people made increasingly aware of their sexuality? For couples living together informally? For lesbian and gay couples? For people in "further marriages"? For people for whom marriage is a really bad idea? And not least, for married couples themselves.

1. WHY COMMEND MARRIAGE AT ALL?

1.1 The New Testament is Ambivalent about Marriage

Christians should admit that even the New Testament is ambivalent about marriage. While Jesus accepted contemporary Jewish marital practice, we learn this only in the context of his teaching about divorce. (Mk.10:1-12; Mt.19:1-12) (His disapproval of it was based on his *defence of wives* who, in one faction of Jewish practice, could be divorced on a husband's whim. Jesus was no defender of an institution that trapped people in appalling relationships. He was a proto-feminist objecting to powerful men who dumped their wives when they got tired of them, and cited Moses for their authority.) Elsewhere in the New Testament there is caution. Jesus in Luke's gospel warns that "The men and women *of this world* marry;

but those who have been judged worthy of a place *in the other world*, and of the resurrection from the dead *do not marry*, for they are no longer subject to death." (Lk.20:34-6) You won't hear that text read in a Protestant Church! It rightly lies at the root of the Roman Catholic Church's elevation of celibacy over marriage down to the present time. It isn't the only one. Matthew's Jesus teaches that some have renounced marriage (the less polite translation is "made themselves eunuchs") because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it." (Mt.19:10-12)

Jesus is clear: *God's Kingdom is more important than kin*. (Thatcher, 2007: 52-57) Defenders of so-called traditional "family values" will have a hard time making the Gospels say different! More familiar are the warnings of St. Paul that marriage is a "worldly affair," and that Christian spouses find themselves "pulled in two directions", (1 Cor.7:34) finding it impossible to please each other and please the Lord. Marriage is permitted as a defence against lust, (1 Cor.7:1) but discouraged. Marriage is endorsed by the Letter to the Ephesians (5:21-33), but the version of it which is approved is heavily patriarchal. There are, as we shall see, life-giving ways of reading this text, but there is no point in denying the view of gender that is lodged there. Three times husbands are told to love their wives and three times wives are told they must submit to their husbands. The writer assumes what everyone thought they knew in the first century, and in every century up to the 18th: that the man was the active partner; the woman was passive. He was in authority over her, and her role, along with children, slaves and animals was to be subject to male authority. That view of gender is unacceptable today, and no amount of fiddling with biblical texts can conceal either that the Bible teaches it or that we don't want it!

The New Testament has a variety of views about marriage, not a single unified view, and they are linked to an ancient understanding of gender. The Gospel and

the Letter writers, and the communities that received them, represent a variety of responses to what God had done for them in Christ. We should be encouraged by the plurality of views in the NT when dealing with plurality today, both within the Faith and beyond it. The Old Testament (or "Hebrew Bible" as I prefer to call it) is similarly diverse. It is sex-positive. Virginity is not a virtue for the Hebrew people, but a waste of God's gift of sexual pleasure. Marriage might be summed up under the three headings of property, patriarchy, polygamy, none of which can we accommodate in the third millennium after Christ. Yet the Hebrew Bible contains some of the most erotic and beautiful love poetry ever written. At 8:6, passion is said to be "hard as the grave. Its sparks will spark a fire, an all-consuming blaze." The last syllable of the Hebrew word for "blaze" or "flame," -yah, is "a shortened form of Israel's personal name for God, Yahweh. (Kearney, 2006: 308) It is explained that "...the all-consuming flame is also the flame of Yah: divinity is the measure of the intensity of eros."

1.2 Christian Traditions are Equally Ambivalent about Marriage

From the 2nd century until the Reformation, Christians taught that celibacy was superior to marriage: that marriage was the sole context for sexual experience; and that the desire for children was the sole reason for sexual intercourse. When marriage became a sacrament early in the second millennium, the sacramental grace believed to be conferred was a *medicinum*, a medicine supposed to convert the desire for sex into the desire for children. (Thatcher, 1999: 41. Mackin, 1982: 32) Augustine defined the difference between Christian and pagan marriage around the term *sacramentum* (the oath of loyalty an enlisting Roman soldier pledged to the Emperor), and the hope that a marriage might last "till death us do part" became a legal requirement: marriage *will* last "till death us do part." All the means of exit were removed.

Anglicans, Presbyterians and Lutherans all developed different theologies of marriage. They all denied that marriage was a sacrament on the ground that it was not instituted by Christ or found in Scripture, but they had little idea about what else to call it (an "ordinance," an "estate," a "covenant," "holy matrimony," were all tried.) But Anglicans were still calling marriage a sacrament in 1930. (Lambeth Conference Archives, 1930, Resolution 13.) They also called it a *common weal*, or *common wealth*, rightly believing marriage to be good for society, for children, and for parents. (Witte, 1997: 130-193) Calvin was the first Christian theologian to call marriage a *covenant* (Witte, 1997: 74-129) (and he would have been very surprised to find that in 1983 that definition was enshrined in Roman Catholic Canon Law!) Luther gleefully abandoned his vow of celibacy, declaring that marriage was God's way of discharging lust. He was certainly a realist about sexual desire, but he and all the Reformers retained the patriarchal framework for marriage, regarding it as essential to the maintenance of social and religious order.

Two particular factors from history must be taken forward to a contemporary commendation of marriage. The first is that marriage is an elastic, changing concept, and it continues to change. The argument whether same-sex couples may be married in the eyes of the state and of the Church is the latest example of it. The second point is that there has always been a gap between theological or idealistic accounts of marriage, and the lived real experience of it. Both of these points are well-illustrated in American historian Stephanie Coontz' fine book, *Marriage: A History*. The sub-title is revealing - "From Obedience to Intimacy: or, How Love Conquered Marriage." It shows that, while something called "courtly love" flourished in the 11th century, marriage was not formerly associated with love until the modern period. The idea that marriage is about love is the greatest change of all. And she takes as her example of the "fateful gap" her comment on the husband's vow in the Marriage Service of the 1549 Book of Common

Prayer - "With this ring I thee wed: with my body I thee worship; and with all my worldly goods, I thee endow." Her comment? In practice

The wife was legally required to worship her husband with her body. He could force sex upon her, beat her, and imprison her in the family home, while it was she who endowed him with all her worldly goods. The minute he placed that ring upon her finger he controlled any land she brought to the marriage and he owned outright all her movable property as well as any income she later earned. Prior to the late eighteenth century, few voices challenged these inequities. (Coontz, 2005: 142)

1.3 Some Conclusions from Scripture and Tradition

I want to draw some conclusions from the study of marriage in Scripture and Tradition.

First, there is no single view of marriage, but several. The biblical record, and the post-Reformation Tradition is one of diversity, not uniformity.

Second, the Church's understanding of marriage changes over time. Only in the second millennium was marriage made a sacrament, or understood to be the exchange of consent between two individuals, instead of two families. Only in the modern period was it associated with love, due in part to the appearance of married clergy and theologians who genuinely loved their wives and allowed their experience into their writings.

Third, there are some versions of marriage and of gender in Scripture and Tradition that to us are morally unacceptable. Women may be different from men, but they are not inferior, or passive, or in need of male surveillance and control. "Companionate" or "egalitarian" has all but replaced "patriarchal" marriage. Advocates of so-called "traditional marriage" may have little idea of how awful it sometimes was.

Fourth, Christians must be critical of the 1st century world-view, just as we must be critical of our own. Both were, or are, in need of transformation.

Fifth, the theological task is one of developing the tradition, not simply repeating it. Tradition is like a living organism - if it does not grow, it dies.

Sixth, a theology of marriage has to be intelligible to our contemporaries. It has to speak of *God* (otherwise it wouldn't be *Theology*), but it has to illuminate contemporary relationships in such a way that people will gladly receive it.

2. THE CHURCHES AND MARRIAGE TODAY

I make these six assumptions in offering a contemporary theology of marriage. How do they fit in with the churches' official teaching? Roman Catholics and the Orthodox retain their emphasis on marriage as a sacrament, while Catholics continue officially to add indissolubility (no divorce) and absolute open-ness to procreation (no contraception). To Anglicans these appear to be mistakes. Evangelical Protestants regard the Bible, and not Tradition, as the sole source of inspired, or even infallible knowledge of *God's Truth*, so they impose upon Scripture a unity it cannot bear (and they disagree markedly with each other about nearly everything). They struggle, sometimes commendably, with the awful things some biblical writers say about women.

But there is a strong case for criticism of Liberal or Mainline Protestants too. Too often a secular language of justice, equality and rights has been used in the sphere of sexual relations which seems either to ignore or even to squander the diverse resources that Scripture and Tradition hand down. Seeking commendably to be inclusive, supportive and tolerant of any and every kinship arrangement (however unorthodox and untried) the opportunity to commend marriage (albeit inclusively) has been lost. A prime example of this was the Presbyterian Church of

the USA's 1991 Report, *Keeping Body and Soul Together*, in which marriage was virtually ignored and the word "marriage" was difficult to locate (even in the index).

I also suggest we note two converging developments: first, a loss of understanding of the theological meanings associated with marriage among the post-Christian or nominally Christian population. This loss is co-extensive with the slow demise of Christendom. However our common traditions all point to deeper theological roots for marriage (as we shall see, at the heart of the Christian doctrine of God). It is important that these are better known and commended. But secondly, there is an ambivalence about marriage within our shared Christian traditions. While there was a ubiquitous expectation within Christendom that non-celibate persons would marry, there was no need to *commend* marriage. It was what people were expected to do. In the UK 50% of adults are single. After Christendom, when the churches need to commend marriage more positively than before, the traditional ambivalences become serious obstacles. The links between the institution of marriage and core Christian doctrine need to be made more overt in the present century in order to dispel lingering doubts about marriage *within the tradition itself*. These are the twin prompts—the loss of marital meanings and the need to recover their theological roots—that compel a greater integration of the Churches' commendation of marriage with its doctrine, and especially its doctrine of God. My plea is for a hands-on Christian *theological* approach to marriage which is primarily doctrinal, and only secondarily traditional, ecclesiastical, biblical or philosophical. It will of course draw heavily on each of these, but it won't recycle Tradition, or pretend there is a single, divine view of marriage; but it won't abandon the language or practices of our forefathers and -mothers either. The rest of this lecture is devoted to that task.

3. SOME FEATURES OF A CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY OF MARRIAGE

3.1 Marriage is a Covenant

There are several positive resonances from contemporary colloquial English that support the use of "covenant" in connexion with marriage. The term is often contrasted with "contract." "Covenant" eventually replaced "contract" in Catholic Canon Law but not until 1983, when it was termed a *matrimoniale foedus* or "matrimonial covenant." (*Codex iuris canonici*: 1983 1055.1) Covenant has a rich theological heritage, whereas contract remains a legal term. In some parts of the United States, a "covenant marriage" is a legally distinct kind of marriage, in which the marrying couple agree to obtain pre-marital counselling and accept more limited grounds for divorce. As Lawler notes,

Covenant encompasses all that is legally and institutionally encompassed by *contract*, but it also insinuates more. It insinuates that the free, loving, mutual gifting and accepting that creates the community of marriage is not temporary and revocable, as it could be under contract, but permanent, irrevocable... (Lawler: 2005 85)

Another good reason for calling marriage a covenant lies in what marriage requires. We know Jesus expected marriage to last for a life time because we know he was against divorce. A life-long relationship requires much commitment, faithfulness and mutual devotion if it is to be achieved by non-coercive means. What would be an appropriate name for such an arrangement? Can you think of a better name than "covenant"?

While covenant might be an appropriate name for an arrangement which requires the making of solemn vows to one another in the presence of God and of witnesses, and which is intentionally life-long, there is another, very theological, reason why the term "covenant" expresses the essence of marriage. Ultimately

Christians think that God established a new covenant with the world through Jesus Christ. Christianity just *is* this new covenant, nothing more nor less. They proclaim this whenever they celebrate the Eucharist. The wine symbolizes the blood of Christ, shed on the Cross, and Christ Himself when he instituted the Eucharist said "This is my blood *of the covenant*, which is poured out for many..." (Mk.14:24) Jews naturally thought the biological basis of life lay in blood (Lev.17:11) and Christians see the shedding of Christ's blood and His laying down of His life as the supreme act of divine love. Through His blood "the eternal covenant" is established. (Heb. 13:20) Marriage vows require the unconditional love of the spouses for one another. The vows offer the opportunity for spouses to say to one another that *they will love one another as God in Christ loves them both*. Their covenant is an *icon* or symbol of God's covenant with all that God has made. It is an imitation, a *mimesis*, of the divine covenant, but also a *participation*, a mingling of the divine love with the mutual love of each partner for the other.

3.2 Marriage is a Reciprocal Covenant of Co-equal Partners

Even so there are still problems with "covenant." Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and most notoriously Hosea, all speak of the relationship between God and the People of God in terms of a marital covenant. But in all cases God is the perfect, long-suffering, forgiving husband who puts up with (or not!) his imperfect, faithless, adulterous, whoring wife. The problems with these metaphors are obvious enough. Not only is God gendered masculine, but "His" faithless people are feminine. The relationship is *asymmetrical*, for there is a lack of balance between the two parties; and *gendered*, for the assumption that women are feckless and in need of patriarchal control, is confirmed and intensified. (Moughtin-Mumby, 2008) For "covenant" to convey some spiritual meaning in a contemporary context, the partners must be *equal*. God is not some ghostly third partner in their marriage

either, but the divine love in which they both share when they love each other mutually and reciprocally.

3.3 Marriage is a Paradigm of *Kenotic* Love

In theology, *kenosis* means "self-emptying" and is based on the Greek of Philippians 2:7 - ..."he emptied himself." What Christ does in revealing God is to give Himself away: to abandon or empty Himself; to become a self-enacted parable of unconditional love and devotion. That is why I think Ephesians 5 can be rescued. On the one hand it confirms the passivity of wives and the superiority of husbands: as the author explains "for the man is the head of the woman, just as Christ is the head of the church." On the other hand, behind the argument lies a more primordial, methodological, procedure. Everything to do with relations within households has to be sorted out by prior reference to Christ and his kenotic love for the Church. Yes, it is "a stunning idea" (Browning, et.al., 1997: 46) that the author of Ephesians tells husbands to love their wives: and yes, this injunction opens up visceral difficulties (generally evaded by all the warring factions) regarding the asymmetry of the love between partners, and (for us) the author's incipient sexism; but who has noticed what is going on in the text methodologically?

The re-thinking of household, marital, and family relations that Christian communities were undertaking in the second half of the first century was determined by meditation upon Christ's sacrificial death, understood as the kenotic revelation of divine love. The mutual subjection of spouses to each other (required in Eph.5:21) is actually grounded in a "reverence for Christ" that remains unexplicated, even though it starts to change everything. The injunctions governing the conduct of fathers, masters and slaves are similarly imprinted on their recipients by these relations being somehow "in the Lord." It is surely not too

difficult to imagine husbands and wives being jointly subject to one another, and to Christ, and to each loving the other as Christ loved the Church?

3.4 Marriage is Good for Children, for Partners, and for Society

Serious practical theology has to engage with the empirical world. That means participating in the arguments of empirical disciplines, respecting data, and following arguments where you don't want them to go! For the sake of brevity I will refer to a reliable summary of the available evidence regarding the advantages to children of being brought up by their biological parents, published in 2002 by thirteen renowned family scholars in the USA, *Why Marriage Matters: Twenty-One Conclusions from the Social Sciences*. (Institute for American Values). The report deals with four areas. With regard, first, to family relationships it concludes that Marriage increases the likelihood that fathers have good relationships with their children; that "Cohabitation is not the functional equivalent of marriage;" and that "Growing up outside an intact marriage increases the likelihood that children will themselves divorce or become unwed-parents;" furthermore, "Divorce is twice as likely among children whose parents have divorced." Secondly, the team concludes that "Divorce and unmarried childbearing increase poverty for both children and mothers." They warn that "Parental divorce (or failure to marry) appears to increase children's risk of school failure", and has "a significant, long-term negative impact" on children's "educational" and "socioeconomic attainment."

Thirdly, with regard to physical health, the team concludes that "Children who live with their own two married parents enjoy better physical health, on average, than do children in other family forms," and that "Parental marriage is associated with a sharply lower risk of infant mortality"—around 50% in the case of children of unmarried mothers. Marriage is associated with "reduced rates of

alcohol and substance abuse for both adults and teens," and with "better health and lower rates of injury, illness, and disability for both men and women." Married people live longer than single people. Fourth, there are, according to the team, similar benefits with regard to the mental health and emotional well being of members of intact families. Children of divorce have higher rates of psychological distress, mental illness and suicide. "Boys raised in single-parent homes are about twice as likely (and boys raised in stepfamilies are three times as likely) to have committed a crime that leads to incarceration by the time they reach their early thirties." "Married women appear to have a lower risk of experiencing domestic violence than do cohabiting or dating women." "A child who is not living with his or her own two married parents is at greater risk of child abuse."

Despite much sand in the engine of political correctness, I am unaware of any successful attempt to refute these conclusions. There are appropriate caveats about the data. They are not predictions. They do not establish causal relations between non-intact or blended families and the failure of children to thrive. They do not make moral judgments. The conclusions are provisional. Since societies don't stop changing, future conclusions will be different. They are statistical probabilities and controls for class, poverty and ethnic origin are built into the results. There will continue to be bad intact families and good alternative ones. The statistics are seized on by the moral majority (even though their record on family breakdown is no better) as evidence for the need to return to "family values" (by which they mean the patriarchal nuclear family and the condemnation of homosexuality which is represented as a "threat").

I claim there is a new argument in favour of marriage, based on the teaching of *Jesus about children*. The teaching of Jesus puts children first, and reverses all power structures around children which compromise the priority that is to be afforded to them. The teaching of Jesus supports whatever arrangements best

assist the thriving of children, and that is treated in the social research as a largely empirical matter. If lifelong marriage best serves the interests of children, then the promotion of lifelong marriage is the promotion of the teaching of Jesus about the blessing and flourishing of children.

A very simple theological argument is available which consists of two uncluttered premises and a simple conclusion. It goes like this:

Premise 1: Jesus Christ wills the flourishing of all children.

Premise 2: Children are more likely to flourish within marriage.

Therefore: Jesus Christ wills marriage for bringing up children.

I think this argument is sound. There will always be exceptions. The conclusion does not pretend to be a direct intuition of the mind of Christ. It does however follow inductively from the premises. Premise 1 is derived from the teaching of Jesus about children. Premise 2, long believed by the Church, is now given further (and massive) empirical support. The conclusion is highly congruent with the better known teaching of Jesus about marriage and divorce, and supports the traditional interpretation of it.

3.5 Marriage remains a Sacrament - a Sacrament of Love...

If the term "sacrament" is understood loosely as a special means through God communicates divine grace, Protestants should have no trouble of speaking of marriage as a sacrament. It is incidentally the only one of the seven sacraments of the Catholic and Orthodox faith that requires the presence of a woman for it to become operative. But I want to revel in some of the medieval details of the sacrament of marriage. First, it does not require the ministrations of a priest. The priest or minister does not, and cannot, marry anyone. The couple marry themselves. They don't "get married" by someone else. They marry each other! It

is *their sacrament*. They administer it to each other, and they do this *throughout their lives*.

This detail from the marital sacrament reveals another. There is mutual administration of the sacrament. The couple are co-equal partners in their life-course. Here is a detail that supports and confirms the growing egalitarian understanding of marriage in the 21st century. It is very new, yet also very old! In the 12th century a beautiful Latin phrase was used to describe marriage: *consortium totius vitae*, a partnership for the whole of life, understood as a complete sharing, not just a comment about duration.

3.6 ...in which the Bond is *Existential*, not *Ontological*...

In Anglican thought it does not follow that even if marriage is a sacrament, then it must be indissoluble. The sacramental character of the marriage can be found in the *quality of the relationship*, rather than in some mysterious, unanalysable structure that infuses it vertically and apparently does nothing to prevent marital breakdown. A more Protestant way of understanding the sacramental bond of marriage is not to give up on its permanence, but to suggest that it is *existential*, dependent on the mutual work, patience, devotion and love of each for the other, and not that it is a mysterious superglue that holds a despairing couple together, even if they hate one another, and are living apart.

3.7 ...and a sharing in the divine Communion of Persons

Protestants have not begun to catch up with the advance in marital theology that began in official Roman Catholic thought with the Vatican II decree, *Gaudium et spes*, and has continued to advance through *Familiaris consortio* (1981), Pope John Paul II's reflections on 'the nuptial meaning of the body', and his *Letter to Families* (1994). Central to it is the idea that God is a *communio personarum*, or

Communion of Persons. Here, the basic statement that God is Love is explained by means of the Trinitarian understanding of the nature of God. God is a communion of persons, a *communio personarum*. Men and women are made in the image of the triune God: they too are made for communion, and they share this communion with any children they have. Communion is essential for the fulfilment of men and women. Marriage, of course, is inessential for communion, but because it is the approved *locus* for sexual intercourse, it provides for the most intense form and experience of it. The *unio* or "one flesh" of marriage symbolizes and enacts the union of the Persons within God, one in being yet distinct from each other, each an individual expression of the infinite love that God perfectly is.

When I teach these ideas, students sometimes express bland bewilderment and occasional hostility. Upon further interrogation, the hostility appears largely due to an over-literal apprehension of an unfamiliar doctrine: to compare marriage to the Trinity is to risk imagining three persons in one bed! The bewilderment appears due to unfamiliarity with any attempt to integrate human love between persons with the divine Love between the divine Persons. After all, scripture doesn't exactly do this! But scripture, I reply (not without exasperation) leads directly to the Church's doctrine, and the Church teaches that God is *communio personarum*; that we are made in God's image, and so on. Once our being made "in the image of God" is understood to have a *social* and *relational* dimension, we can see how human relations can represent the divine relations of the Persons within God. Our retrieval of the Trinity is doctrinally essential, for in the Trinity there is neither greater nor less, dominant and submissive, male and female. Hierarchical or patriarchal relations are transformed by the reciprocal Love between Persons who are entirely co-equal.

The theological account of marriage sketched out here develops the classical tradition, and is relevant to the situation of marriage today. It is Christian, given

to us, not invented by us. How we might apply it to our social situation is the subject of the second session.

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