

Marriage in history and tradition

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<http://liverpool.metapress.com/content/p555k1143473/?v=editorial> (paywall).

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<https://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/charlotte-methuen/marriage-one-man-and-one-woman>.

Podcasts of the papers from the Affirming Catholic Conference, “Thinking about Marriage?” can be found here:

<http://affirmingcatholicism.org.uk/pages/default.asp?id=6&slD=126>.

Marriage has been much in the news recently. Not just discussion about marriage between two people of the same gender, but marriage in general. Short marriages, broken marriages. The British press seems to find them fascinating. Marriage and sexuality are emotive topics because they are so fundamental to who we are. That is as true for Christians as for anyone else. What we bring to this debate is rooted not only what we think and what we believe, but in our own lived experience. How each of us experiences our own relationships with other people, and, if we are married, our own marriage; how we did (or did not) experience the marriage of our parents as small (and indeed not so small) children; what ideals and mores of marriage and relationships we grew up with: all of that, as well as our reading of scripture, our reading of history, and our understandings of authority and its remit – that is, our faith – all of that comes together to shape our responses to the proposals to extend the definition of marriage to include people in same sex relationships. We mind about this question because it matters to us. And it matters because we believe that how we live and how society is structured matters to God. Recognising that this is true of all of us who seek to be Christ’s disciples is perhaps a good place to start. We care because we believe that God cares.

But in this debate, as so often, that fundamental belief leads Christians in different directions. Some Christians are adamant that the Christian ideal of marriage is and can only be between one man and one woman, providing the proper context in which children are conceived and raised. Others understand deep

committed relationships to be God-given and marriage-like, regardless of whether they are between a man and a woman, two women, or two men. And within those general categories, people have very varied opinions. I may argue that marriage is properly between one man and one woman whilst holding that Christian marriage is fundamentally a relationship between two people who are equal in the sight of God, or I may argue that that marriage is properly between one man and one woman whilst holding that the proper understanding of Christian marriage is that the woman, whilst equally beloved to God, is by the created ordinance subordinate to the man. Even here there are different views. Does subordination mean obedience, or does it mean submission? A colleague who is a university chaplain has encountered young women who want to change the words of the marriage vows (which is illegal, by the way) to allow them to promise to submit to their future husband rather than to obey him. That is another debate. What is important to recognise from the outset is that, even if they agree that it is between one man and one woman, people have hold, very different views of what kind of relationship is meant by marriage.

So what does Scripture say about marriage? We might begin with Genesis, which is where the Church of England's latest report *men and women in marriage* would like us to begin. Drawing on Genesis 1:26-28, the report suggests that marriage

is an expression of the human nature which God has willed for us and which we share. And although marriage may fall short of God's purposes in many ways and be the scene of many human weaknesses, it receives the blessing of God and is included in his judgment that creation is 'very good' (Gen. 1:31).

(§6)

This passage can also be read, as *men and women in marriage* does, to present the complementarity of male and female as a fundamental aspect of the created order. A theological commentator, Martha Myre, has argued this position succinctly:

I think a part of the sense of this is that both men and women are necessary to encompass the full image of God. We see that affirmed in the New Testament as well: both men and women are necessary for the body of Christ to be complete. I would argue that the text suggests that we take this even further: that man and woman in relationship are reflective of the creative, generative, and governing aspects of God. We can only bring life into existence together; we can only be fruitful together; we can only appropriately care for the creation together. (<http://martha-myre.blogspot.de/2013/07/on-biblical-marriage-toward-theology-of.html>)

Read in this way, Genesis offers us a vision of marriage as the means by which male and female human beings are drawn into and share in God's creative purposes.

Importantly, as *men and women in marriage* affirms:

We share with many animal species the sexual differentiation of male and female, serving the tasks of reproduction and the nurture of children, but we do more than share it; we build on it to enhance the bond between the sexes culturally. ... To flourish as individuals we need a society in which men and women relate well to each other. (§§11-12)

The creation stories can thus offer us a vision of the complementarity of men and women not only in the increase of humankind, but in ensuring the well-being and the flourishing of creation.

It is tempting to read this vision as the blueprint for a biblical view of marriage rooted in complementarity and perhaps even mutuality, focussed on the procreation and nurture of children. However, in reality the Old Testament's depiction of marriage is more complex. In much of the Old Testament – and particularly the legal codes in the Pentateuch – marriage is seen as a contract involving a man and a woman. Here a marriageable woman is viewed largely as the property of her father to be passed to her husband. Deuteronomy 22:28-29 instructs that a man who rapes a young woman who is not engaged to another man shall marry her. Exodus 22.16-17

covers the case when a young woman has been seduced by an older man: he must either marry her or pay her father her bride price.

Family honour is important here, as is the regulation of inheritance and the care of (possibly as yet unborn) children, but it is also clear that the marriage of a young woman involves a financial negotiation between the husband and the father. Exodus 21:7-11 lays out a husband's responsibilities to his first wife if he wishes to take a second wife. What is being depicted in these codes is certainly a relationship between men and women, but it is not obviously monogamous. It tends to be between one man and possibly more women. Neither is it anything like a modern Western understanding of marriage as a relationship between two equals. It is, however, part of the biblical understanding of marriage and has to some extent shaped Christian understanding of marriage.

In contrast, Christianity seems to have inherited an understanding of marriage as monogamous. The gospels, the letters of Paul, and the New Testament household codes all present a monogamous understanding of marriage. The household codes (Ephesians 5:22-25, Colossians 3:18-4:1, Titus 2:1-10, and 1 Peter 2:18-3:7) offer a view of marriage which is explicitly hierarchical, in that the wife is said to be rightly subordinate to her husband, although it is also a relationship with mutual responsibilities, in that a husband is reminded of his duty to love his wife. The understanding that the submission of women to men forms part of a correct understanding of marriage persists through much of Christian history. Much of the contemporary discussion of headship is based on precisely these texts. They have been a strong influence on Christian understandings both of marriage and of the role of women, and the two have frequently been intertwined.

It is worth noting that the household codes concern the whole household. They sought to define the relationship between husband and wife, but also, and for centuries as importantly, the relationship between slaves and their masters and mistresses. The biblical teaching that slaves should obey their masters (found for instance in 1 Peter 2:18-21) played an important role in the arguments of those who

worked to oppose the emancipation of slaves in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Where do we stand on those sections of the household codes now?

And what is this genre of texts? The household codes were not originally Christian texts, but are drawn from the teachings of Stoic philosophers, who in turn had the underlying principles from Aristotle. In many ways, these scriptural texts represent the assimilation of the cultural norms of the time into Christianity: they illustrate early Christianity's adjusting to society's expectations about relationships between men and women. New Testament Christians needed to show that they were acceptable, that they did not pose a threat to society.

Reflecting on marriage in the New Testament at an Affirming Catholicism conference in January, New Testament scholar Jorunn Økland, reflected on which aspects of Old Testament law were taken into the New Testament: rules about sex and gender, including purity laws, tended to be retained, whilst other laws, such as those relating to clothing, were not. She highlighted the importance of the language of sibling relationships – as opposed to marital relationships – in defining the community of the early church. “The New Testament is about being part of the kingdom of God, and everything else is measured against that standard.” The New Testament texts, she concluded, do not fit easily with modern understandings of marriage and nuclear family. She asked: “Can you mention to me one NT family that is presented in such a way that the father would not have any difficulty in getting a position in a conservative congregation?”

The early Church knew marriage, but marriage was not a Christian institution: Greek, Roman and Jewish marriage practices all influenced developing Christian approaches to and understandings of marriage. In 1 Corinthians 7 we see Paul grappling with the Christianising of a pagan institution, and one that he is not entirely sure about, for he thinks it distracts attention from following Christ. If Christians really must marry, he concedes that they should, but he would much prefer that they did not. Also instructive are his thoughts on those married to non-

Christian partners. If the spouse consents, they should stay together, “For the unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through her husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy” (1 Cor 7:14). Note that none of these marriages had been made through Christian ceremonies: these were marriages conducted under Greek or Roman law, made holy by the presence of a Christian partner.

Also at the Affirming Catholicism conference, Cally Hammond explored the way in which Roman law about marriage served to stabilise the inheritance of property through ensuring legitimate children and thus stabilised society. Affection, procreation and sacrament were for Augustine the purposes of marriage: for Augustine too, marriage served to stabilise society. For the couple, he saw it as ideally the sexual expression of friendship. Cally pointed out that today’s model that marriage is about “stable, faithful, and loving relationships”. It is a long way from Augustine’s “affection, procreation and sacrament.” She suggested that the two paradigms are so far apart that we have to make a case for how we get from one to another.

The legal aspect of marriage longed remain a civil affair. In the tenth century, and perhaps even afterwards, marriages were entered into not in church but outside the church door. Priests seem to have become involved in these ceremonies during the eleventh or twelfth centuries, but it was not until the thirteenth century that a priest was held to preside over the ceremony and thus in some sense to “solemnize” matrimony (to use a later term), although it was still recognised that it was the couple who made the marriage before God. Couples might still marry through mutual agreement without the involvement of a priest, and their marriage would be recognised by the church.

The early Church developed a theology of marriage, often based on exegesis of Ephesians 5:32 and other passages presenting marriage as a model for the relationship between the church and God, or Christ, but doubtless also because marriage was such an important social and societal institution. Christian

understandings of marriage saw it as an expression of God's love, as the context in which sexuality was properly lived out, procreation took place, and children nurtured and reared. However (and perhaps despite Augustine's best efforts), procreation and children were never seen as essential to marriage: there was no suggestion that women beyond child-bearing age might not marry, and even before the introduction of clerical celibacy, married priests were expected to remain childless. There is a whole discussion about celibate marriage in the early church which indicates a real ambiguity about attitudes towards sex, and these would continue.

Christians increasingly emphasised the need for both partners to consent freely to the marriage, although some arranged marriages continued, especially amongst the elite. The Church came to define marriage as insoluble except by death (based on Matthew 5:31-32; Matthew 19:7-9), and the Western Church introduced restrictions on marriage on the basis of consanguinity (blood relations), affinity (in-laws), and spiritual affinity (godparents). These rules later became a money-spinner for popes and bishops, who charged large sums of money to those who wished to break them (such as, much later, Henry VIII when he married Catherine of Aragon). By the turn of the millennium, marriage was coming to be seen as having a profound religious significance, and even to be understood as a means by which God might offer grace. It was included in the definitive list of seven sacraments articulated by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215.

However, marriage was not the only form of life recognised for Christians. Paul's letters, and especially 1 Corinthians 7, witness to a real ambiguity in the assessment of marriage: was it not wiser to remain celibate? The tension between the valuing of marriage and the valuing of celibacy, heightened from the fourth century by the popularity of asceticism, forms the background for much of Christian writing about marriage in late antiquity and in the medieval period. Augustine believed that marriage would have existed in paradise, but that sexual intercourse would have been a rational process, governed and controlled by reason. For

Augustine, the lack of control in sex since the Fall was the means by which sin was transmitted. Marriage was necessary in the fallen world, and the proper place for sexual intercourse, but it was also the means of passing on original sin. Jerome wrote to the young Christian virgin Eustochius about “the drawbacks of marriage, such as pregnancy, the crying of infants, the torture caused by a rival, the cares of household management, and all those fancied blessings which death at last cuts short.” Virginity, he thought, as had Paul before him, was to be preferred.

The perception that marriage was second best, and in particular that sex was inherently sinful, coloured the Church’s attitudes towards marriage throughout the medieval period. This may have been difficult for both men and women, but it tended to be women who wrote about it. Birgid of Sweden and her husband, Ulf Gudmarsson, were an upper-class couple who were expected by their families to have children in order to safeguard their inheritance, but who believed strongly that their true vocation as Christians was to celibacy (“the marriage that is honourable and the bed undefiled” as Jerome had put it). They had eight children, but still preferred to live a celibate marriage when they could. The prospect of dying in childbirth – probably the most common cause of death for adult women until the modern period – was probably one reason why celibacy proved attractive to significant numbers of Christian women in the early church and the medieval period.

The fundamental assumption that marriage was a relationship of inequality between men and women persisted: even Thomas Aquinas’s argument for equality was for “an unequal relationship between equals”. Assumptions about the respective place of men and women in marriage as expressed in the household codes were related to Aristotelian-Galenic biological understandings of sexual differentiation which persisted well into the early-modern period. The rational, warm male was opposed to the emotional, cold female (for Aristotle, truly masculine men could be identified by the fact that their intellect heat had burned the hair off their heads, causing baldness). In procreation, the active principle was contributed by the male; the female’s role was passive: she provided a nurturing body in which

the baby could grow. This biological understanding of procreation underlay definitions of the proper social role for men and women: men were active, engaged in public life; women were passive, nurturing, with a focus on the private. (This has implications for the formation of the doctrine of the Trinity, but that is another question.)

The Protestant Reformation accorded marriage a new importance. Luther and the other reformers were deeply critical of the privileging of celibacy, and particularly of the hypocrisy of a church which required clerical celibacy but turned a blind eye to the living arrangements of priests (except to fine them when a child was born). Although he affirmed that the tasks of caring for the children should be shared by both parents, even if men who shared in this task were accused of being effeminate, Luther taught that a woman's true vocation lay in marriage, in her companionship with and obedience to her husband, and the bearing and bringing up of children. Women who died in childbirth, Luther thought, were truly following Christ. The obedience of a wife to her husband, the subordination of women to men, were in his eyes part of the natural order given under the law, to which marriage belonged. The gospel transcended this order and in questions of salvation, men and women stood equal before God.

In England, from 1549, the Book of Common Prayer listed three "causes for which Matrimony was ordained":

First, It was ordained for the procreation of children, to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord, and to the praise of his holy Name.

Secondly, It was ordained for a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication; that such persons as have not the gift of continency might marry, and keep themselves undefiled members of Christ's body.

Thirdly, It was ordained for the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity. Into which holy estate these two persons present come now to be joined.

Procreation, the managing of lust, and companionship. These three aspects shaped early-modern understandings of marriage and they continue to shape our understanding today (compare, for instance, the ASB and Common Worship prefaces). The wife as helpmeet, as director of the household and teacher of the children – as *materfamilias* alongside, but subordinate to, the *paterfamilias*, as the BCP's homily on marriage makes quite clear – became the model for the Protestant household. It is striking that the reading suggested for the BCP marriage service (included in the model homily) consists of extracts from the household codes in Ephesians. Consequently, we need to be very careful of apparently innocuous motions to General Synod to reaffirm the BCP's doctrine of marriage. This is not only about the preface. As Hannah Cleugh observed at the Affirming Catholicism conference, the doctrine of marriage in the English Reformation is presented not only in the Book of Common Prayer but also on the Thirty-Nine Articles and the two Books of Homilies. It makes assumptions about the proper ordering of households and about relationships between men and women which are very far from a modern western understanding. Hannah asked: "How can we express a theology of marriage that is true both to the liturgical traditions of the Church of England and to modern perspectives on what marriage is and should be?" In this debate, she commented: "It's not that we don't know what we think about gay marriage, it's that we don't know what we think about marriage at all. We don't know what we think the purpose of Christian marriage in contemporary society is."

As industrialisation took hold, the difference between the lives of the working poor, in which men and women – and often also children – had to work to survive, and those of the middle and upper classes in which women could remain at home, became more pronounced. The Protestant ideal of women doubtless helped to define the image of the "Angel in the House" which became widely established during the nineteenth century. Women tended to be identified as more nurturing and caring, and more religious; in general a civilising influence on men. This rhetoric

underpinned the ideal of women in the nineteenth century, but also underlay many of the arguments for women's suffrage. Should not the civilising influence of women be able to make itself felt in the running of society? It is a rhetoric which continues to find its way into discussions of marriage today.

Marriage as an institution changed in this period. The nineteenth century saw significant changes in the legal status of married women, for instance the "Married women's property act" of 1870 and its successors, which granted to married women the right to hold property. As Jeremy Morris pointed out at our conference January, these changes to legislation made marriage more equal and also introduced distinctions between civil and canon law in questions of marriage in English and Scottish law. He concluded: "we must be wary of absolutising any particular historical model of marriage and saying 'This is how it must be'. ... It has long ceased to be true for the majority British citizens that the Church's doctrine of marriage – I mean in its fullest and most complete sense – is what constrains their understanding of what they are entering into when they get married."

During the twentieth century debates about contraception and about divorce were held to herald the end of marriage as an institution. Access to contraception radically changed the experience of marriage, by making it possible to separate sexual fulfilment from procreation. Indeed, modern fertility methods have meant that for some parents procreation has become entirely detached from sexual intercourse (although not – yet – from the need to have contributions from both one man and [at least] one woman).

Of course, throughout history, families have existed in which for one reason or another the children are not biologically or genetically the off-spring of their nurturing parent(s). Adoptive children, step-families and single-parented families have long been integrated into society. Amongst the parents in my own generation a significant proportion have children born after sperm donation, whether anonymous or not, or with the help of techniques including IVF, artificial insemination, and

surrogacy. Some of the parents of these families are heterosexual couples, or sometimes multiple couples after divorce or separation; others are gay couples, sometimes parenting as two mothers in one relationship and two fathers in another; some are single parents. All these constellations seem to have proved themselves capable of nurturing their children.

Iain MacLean argued at the Affirming Catholicism conference in January that the Pilling Report is already behind the times, and he concurred with the Archbishop of Canterbury: “The vast majority of people under 35 think not only that what [the CofE is] saying is incomprehensible but also think that [it is] plain wrong and wicked and equate it to racism and other forms of gross and atrocious injustice” (AbC: Speech to Evangelical Alliance, 27 August 2013). For Iain, this confronts the Church of England with a stark choice: “establishment versus the right to discriminate.” He suggests: “It is for the church to decide what constitutes Holy Matrimony and it is for the state to decide what constitutes marriage.”

So where does that leave us? Certainly with an understanding of marriage which in the last century has become increasingly focused on the relationship between the partners: a relationship through which the love of God is made known in a manner we can't fully explain. These days 1 Corinthians 13 is a popular reading at weddings; a reading which the Reformers did not see as at all suitable for weddings, and a reading which is not about marital love at all. Also with a recognition that marriage as an institution has changed down the centuries. From its earliest beginnings Christian marriage has always been rooted in the social context in which it is lived out, and subject to the norms and expectations of that context. In an era in which government is taking steps that the church does not always find easy to accept, we may find it helpful to reflect on that history. Maybe we should think again about the way the early church dealt with these questions, and affirm the way in which Christians in marriage have contributed to – and continue to contribute to – the hallowing of what is in many way a fundamentally un-Christian institution.