



# CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES ON MARRIAGE: A DISCUSSION DOCUMENT

MAY 2014



Presbyterian Church  
of Aotearoa New Zealand

# INTRODUCTION:

**A Resource for the Presbyterian Church  
on Marriage**

AUTHORIZED TO SOLEMNIZE THE

Matrimony



In 2013, the Doctrine Core Group was asked by the Council of Assembly to provide the Church with a discussion paper on marriage. A similar request had been received a little earlier from the Presbyterian Youth Ministries office. These requests seemed to indicate a high level of interest in the subject of marriage from a Christian perspective, and how it relates to current debates and legislative trends in New Zealand society.

The Doctrine Core Group considered a variety of approaches. Rather than taking on the task of writing a paper ourselves, we decided to ask a small number of people to write a statement of 750-1000 words on the question: "What do you believe lies at the heart of a Christian doctrine of Marriage, and what are the key biblical and theological considerations that inform your position?"

In order to provoke discussion across the diversity of the Presbyterian Church we selected contributors that represent a range of theological and cultural perspectives. This does not mean that all possible viewpoints or cultural perspective are included – that would be an impossible task. Nor did everybody we approach respond to our invitation, so there are fewer statements than we would have liked. However, we hope that those statements which are included will provoke all of us to engage more deeply with the issues as we read them alongside one another.

You will see that the author of each of the statements has not been

named, even though in some cases the authorship might be able to be inferred. The reason for not naming the authors is so that, as far as possible, each argument might be considered on its merits rather than on the basis of who wrote it.

Although this is not a resource about same-sex marriage, the contributors are aware of the topical nature of that particular issue, and each of them in their own way has sought to engage constructively with the question of how their understanding of marriage might relate to it.

Each of the contributors has written from a Christian perspective, demonstrating in their statements their reliance on, and use of, the Bible, engaging with relevant theological and cultural considerations, and drawing on certain aspects of Christian history and tradition. At the heart of this debate are the different ways that people seek to understand the mind of Christ through their reading and interpretation of Scripture. We will leave readers to judge for themselves the adequacy of these various readings and conclusions. Our hope is that readers will not only be prompted to return again to the Scriptures to think about marriage, but also to think more deeply about how they have approached this question to date.

To assist you in thinking through the various issues raised in the following accounts of marriage, the Doctrine Core Group has formulated a number of questions for your consideration.

# Questions:

1. One of the key challenges in developing a Christian understanding of marriage is how we interpret Scripture. This is not always a straight forward exercise, as the Church's teaching on divorce and many other ethical and moral issues has indicated from time to time. What does each of the following statements on marriage either state or imply to be the key factors in the interpretation of Scripture and the teaching of Jesus? Which do you find to be most persuasive, and why?
2. What implications for Church policy arise in light of Jesus' very stringent ethical demands on the one hand, and, on the other, the forgiveness and grace he shows to all of us when we fall short of those demands?
3. Some of the contributions refer to the manner in which marriage is used as a metaphor in Scripture to describe the relationship between Christ and his 'bride' the Church, and between God and his people? What can be learned from these relationships about the nature of marriage between two human beings?
4. What do you consider to be the essential characteristics of marriage as it is portrayed in the Bible?
5. The Church's life and its reading of Scripture has always been deeply intertwined with cultural factors. Sometimes the Church has led cultural change; sometimes it has resisted it and at other times it has followed the lead of culture and has learned to read Scripture in different ways. How do we decide in any particular case how the Church should interact with the surrounding culture? And what about marriage specifically?

6. The Church must always take seriously the tradition of faith that is found in its confessional heritage, but it must also be free to change its mind under God's leading. Some of the following contributors argue that this is a time to hold fast to what has been determined about marriage in the past. Others are less sure about that. What authority should be attributed to past confessions and standards of the Church in formulating our understanding of marriage?
7. Some of the contributions that follow regard the complementary nature of male and female as fundamental to our understanding of marriage. Other contributions do not. What do you think of their respective arguments?
8. Some of the following writers base their understanding of marriage on what is given in creation, while others formulate their understanding on the basis of what is promised in the new creation. What weight should be given to these two aspects of the biblical witness?

Related to the doctrinal considerations about marriage is the question of whether or not marriage should be regarded as a fundamental doctrine of the Reformed Faith. This question is to do with Church polity. The Doctrine Core Group was asked precisely this question by the Assembly Executive Secretary in 2013. We offered the following opinion:

*“For something to be regarded as a fundamental doctrine of the Reformed and/or Christian faith, it must belong to the essence of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This essence is usually held to be that which is confessed or declared in the ecumenical creeds of the one, holy catholic and apostolic Church and in those Confessions that comprise the Reformed tradition. Such declarations tend to focus on the doctrine of God and the nature of salvation. This is for good reason. The fundamental or substantial reality that determines the existence of the Church and of faith (according to the Reformed perspective) is the saving work of the Triune God creating a new humanity and a foretaste of the world to come (a world in which, Jesus suggests, marriage will no longer play a part). Thus whatever role marriage (or any other contender as a fundamental doctrinal issue) might play in our lives in the time-between-the-times, it is not foundational for the faith that anticipates the coming kingdom. It is important to note that the priority given to the unity we have in Christ over the many creaturely (and sometimes fallen) ways that humanity is unified does not presuppose a dualism or separation between our creaturely existence and our new creation in Christ, but it does presuppose transformation. The Church (and thus the reformed faith) is first of all a community with its ‘foundation’ and ‘substance’ in the new creation.*

It is also worth noting:

- (a) That none of the ecumenical creeds refer to the doctrine of marriage;*
- (b) That although marriage is talked about in the Westminster Confession (Chapter 26), it was not deemed to be of sufficient importance to the Westminster divines as to be included in the Shorter and Longer Catechisms;*
- (c) That the context for emphasising the union of one man and one woman in the Westminster Confession appears to be that of addressing the issue of polygamy;*

- (d) That the section on marriage in the Westminster Confession also covers divorce, but the Presbyterian Church has long since fallen away from the Confession's teaching on divorce;*
- (e) The treatment of marriage in the Second Helvetic Confession is very like that of the Westminster Confession, its principal concerns being the prohibition of polygamy, marrying in the Lord, and teaching on divorce.*
- (f) That the doctrine of marriage was not deemed to be of sufficient importance by the Presbyterian Church as to be included in its most recent formulation of a subordinate standard, namely Kupu Whakapono;*
- (g) That the doctrine of marriage does not feature in the Scots Confession and receives only a passing mention in the Heidelberg Catechism.*

*If marriage had been regarded as a fundamental doctrine by the Reformers, surely it would have received more substantial treatment in these documents. One of the dangers of declaring the Church's position on marriage to be a fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith is that the fundamental doctrines are then determined in a very piecemeal and partial manner, reflecting the politics and concerns of a particular generation and moving beyond the principal purpose of articulating the core doctrines of God and salvation."*

## **A Final Question:**

What do you think? Do you think that marriage is the kind of thing that should be regarded as a fundamental doctrine of the Reformed Faith or as belonging to the heart of the gospel?  
If so, why? If not, why not?

### **For the Doctrine Core Group (May 2014)**

*Bruce Hamill (Convenor)*

*Wayne Te Kaawa*

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# Contribution 1

We believe the Presbyterian Church’s approach to marriage must faithfully reflect the teachings of Jesus and the Scriptures, regardless of whatever society or the State may do. The Church is not at liberty to put aside the teachings of its Head. As a denomination derived from the Reformation, we are meant to be subject not to human ideas but to Scripture. Constitutionally, the Presbyterian Church recognises the Word of God in the Scriptures as the ‘supreme rule of faith and life’.<sup>1</sup> We need to take that seriously. We shouldn’t try to reinterpret the teachings of Jesus and Scripture to make them mean something else.

The 2012 General Assembly of our Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand strongly declared “that it upholds the historic Christian understanding of marriage as the loving, faithful union of a man and a woman (reflecting the complementarity of male and female created in God’s image), which is grounded in nature and in Scripture, is supremely revealed in Jesus’ teaching about marriage, and is given by God for the well-being of human society...”. General Assembly also resolved that it “does not support same-sex ‘marriage’”.

We believe the 2012 General Assembly got it right. Christian understanding of marriage reflects the profound truth that God made us both male and female in God’s own image (Genesis 1:27) – with both genders necessary to reflect the image of God. Marriage is grounded in God-given nature, in basic male-female physiology. Marriage is the good and purposeful gift of God (Genesis 2:18, 24). In marriage, God intends that male and female come together in love and mutuality, trust and faithfulness, and the two became one – physically, emotionally, and spiritually. No other type of contractual, covenantal or legal sexual relationship – no matter how loving, stable or sincere – can ever be regarded by the Christian Church as marriage in the true biblical sense.

Out of that unique male-female union, God brings new life (Genesis 1:28). We are to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth”.

Male-female complementarity is therefore foundational – not only to bearing the image of God, but to human flourishing. It is at the heart of what it means to be human. Right across the biblical narrative, marriage is endorsed – and is central to human life.

Jesus’ teaching on marriage reinforces the indispensable core of the Bible’s understanding of marriage: “Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘For this reason a

man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh" (Matthew 19:4-5).<sup>2</sup> Jesus also rejects sexual immorality (Mark 7:21-22) and lust (Matthew 5:28).

Some claim there is no one model of marriage in the Scriptures. In the Old Testament, for instance, we see many examples of polygamy, a defective form of marriage which was common in Ancient Near Eastern culture. But while polygamy is *tolerated* in the Old Testament, it is never *endorsed* by God or by Scripture, and it plays no part in the teaching of Jesus or the New Testament.<sup>3</sup>

The reality of marriage, in Scripture and in human experience generally, includes not only blessing but also an inevitable falling short of what God intended – sometimes in major ways such as cruelty, adultery, neglect or divorce. In our sinfulness, we all need God's forgiveness and grace.

Some argue that marriage is just a human arrangement, a largely secular matter. Certainly, marriage is a "civil contract", but it is also much *more* than that. For followers of Christ, prayerfully entering into a marital covenant and making solemn promises before God, marriage is also sacred. The sexual union of a husband and wife in marriage is more than just physical, and can also have something of a "sacramental" character.

The idea of recognising homosexual relationships as "marriage" is completely foreign to Scripture. While some disagree with what the Bible teaches, there can be no question that the Bible consistently forbids the practice of homosexuality (eg Romans 1:22-28, 1 Corinthians 6:9, 1 Timothy 1:10, Jude 7). Like all other sexual immorality, homosexuality reflects humanity's fallenness.

Same-sex "marriage" finds no place in the historic Christian doctrine of marriage, or in the teaching of our Subordinate Standards. The Church's classic Reformed standard, the *Westminster Confession*, devotes a whole chapter to marriage. This begins: "Marriage is to be between one man and one woman ...for the mutual help of husband and wife [and] for the increase of mankind."<sup>4</sup> The Presbyterian Church's Directory of Worship

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2 The Apostle Paul also cites this text twice.

3 See further: Mark Keown, What About Polygamy? '<http://drmarkk.blogspot.co.nz/2013/09/what-about-polygamy.html>' (20/12/2013).

4 Westminster Confession of Faith, XXIV: i-ii. The Kupu Wakapono (2010), just forty lines long, has a trinitarian focus, and had no scope to address marriage or most other ethical issues.

(1995) states that Christian marriage is “a commitment for life made by a woman and a man to each other, publicly witnessed before God and acknowledged by the community of faith”.<sup>5</sup>

We must be guided by the resolutions of General Assembly that “God’s intention for sexual relationships, as affirmed by Jesus Christ, is loving, mutual and faithful marriage between a man and a woman, and that intimate sexual expressions outside of that context fall short of God’s standard” (1991), and that marriage is “the loving, faithful union of a man and a woman” (2012).

The Bible’s teaching on marriage is not the absolute core of the Gospel, like the Cross and Resurrection, but it is still very important. It is not optional. Three of the Ten Commandments, for instance, are related to marriage. The Word of God is the “supreme rule” of both “faith and life”. Some argue that the Church should just proclaim salvation in Christ, and allow freedom (diversity) in all other matters of belief and life – including matters relating to marriage and morality. But such a view is a distortion of New Testament teaching. Christ is both Saviour and Lord. The gospel is not just about salvation. It is also about following Christ, and about transformation. Having received salvation by grace, we should then honour God in how we live (eg Matthew 7:17-23, Romans 6:13, 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, Ephesians 4:1, Colossians 1:10). Grace does not abrogate truth, or the call to holiness.

The Church is not able to dictate the beliefs and laws of society at large. But we must also insist that the Church cannot be dictated to by society. In all matters, including marriage, we believe the Holy Spirit calls the Church to remain authentically faithful to the teachings of Jesus and Scripture.

## Contribution 2

Whatever else marriage may be, it is at its most fundamental level a relationship between two parties. It is a relationship established in virtue of God’s pronouncement that it is not good that man should be alone (Genesis 2:18). We human beings have need of companionship. According to the Genesis account (Genesis 2:18-25), marriage is a divinely instituted provision for that need. While the Genesis text indicates a complementarity in the companionship of male and female, it becomes clear as the biblical story unfolds that the need for companionship may also be met by

other means, above all in the fellowship of the Body of Christ. The Church, in fact, is set forth in the New Testament as the paramount form of community in which all should expect to find, whether married or not, the unconditional love, forgiveness, and companionship to which the marriage relationship also aspires.

A secondary feature of marriage occurring between a man and a woman is the procreation of children. Genesis 1:28 and 3:16 are commonly taken as biblical warrant for this procreative function of marriage. The Old Testament, however, records numerous instances in which the fathering of children is thought to be more important than the maintenance of a monogamous relationship (eg Genesis 16:1-2, Deuteronomy 25:5-6). A husband may take additional wives or engage the childbearing services of a slave in the household in order to secure progeny. Adultery, however, is condemned (Exodus 20:14, Deuteronomy 22:22). Whether or not the arrangements seen in the Old Testament for the procreation of children outside of marriage should be approved of, they do suggest that procreation is a secondary good associated with marriage rather than its primary purpose. In accordance with the view that procreation does not belong to the essence of marriage, the absence of offspring does not undermine the good of marriage and so provides no justification for divorce (Matthew 5:32, Mark 10:6-9).

What then does constitute the good of marriage? In formulating a response to this question, it is helpful to attend to the fact that the language of marital relationships is often used in the Bible to speak of the relationship that God has established, first with Israel (eg Ezekiel 16: 8-14, Jeremiah 2:2, 31:32, Isaiah 54:5), and then with the Church (eg John 3:29, Matthew 9:15, 2 Corinthians 11:2, Revelation 19:7-9). Although it is commonly supposed that the term “marriage” applies primarily to the covenant commitment made between a man and a woman and only secondarily, by way of analogy, to the relationship God establishes with Israel and the Church, we may learn better about the essence of marriage by attending first to the marriage God establishes with his people, before then considering what this may imply for our understanding of human marriage.

The first thing to notice about the relationship between God and Israel, and between Christ and the Church is that it is a covenant not a contract. Talk of marriage as a covenant rather than a contract is derived from this divine precedent. A covenant is “a promise binding two people or two parties to



love one another unconditionally.”<sup>6</sup> This accounts for the steadfastness of God’s commitment to Israel in spite of Israel’s unfaithfulness (Leviticus 26:44). We observe, secondly, that the covenant God makes is grounded in love. Again, we learn best what love is by attending to the divine love, especially as it is revealed to us in and through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Because the true nature of love is revealed in Christ, Paul enjoins husbands to love their wives “just as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her” (Ephesians 5:25). It is in this context too, that Paul speaks of a man and his wife becoming one flesh just as Christ unites the Church in his body and tenderly nourishes and cares for it (Ephesians 5:28-32).

Further explanation of what love consists of is found 1 Corinthians 13. A third characteristic of the divine covenant is that it operates according to grace rather on the basis of deserts. God loves Israel and Christ loves the Church, not because they deserve to be loved, but simply because it is love’s way to embrace the other in spite of the other’s weakness and imperfection — even in spite of the other’s sin. Marriage is an act of gracious hospitality, of unconditional openness to the other, and of self-giving. The operations of divine grace in the marriage God establishes with his people should discourage us, I think, from conceiving the marriage relationship in terms of rights. Marriage is established in virtue of the unconditional gift of oneself to the other, not on the basis of rights held over against one another.

These theological observations suggest that marriage is a covenant relationship that is motivated by love and operates according to grace. It is, furthermore, a form of human relationship that mirrors, however imperfectly, the relationship that God desires to have with us.

We should take note, however, that spousal relationships are listed in Luke 14:26 among various forms of kinship that take second place to the disciples’ relationships with Christ. Marriage between one human being and another is good, but it is not the ultimate good. The ultimate good is the fellowship with God and neighbour that is being perfected by the Spirit in the Body of Christ. Marriage, and, by extension, the life of the family, is an important and divinely instituted means by which people may be formed for the kind of relationship that is ultimately to be perfected in the communion that Christ establishes with his people. Despite their many failings, and despite the tragic dysfunction that sometimes afflicts them, marriage and family relationships remain the

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6 James B. Torrance (1970), ‘Covenant or Contract?: A Study of the Theological Background of Worship in Seventeenth-Century Scotland’, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 23, pp 51-76, 54.

place, subordinate only to the Church, where we are most likely to learn the gestures of unconditional love, of forgiveness, and of grace that, under divine command and enabling, are to be extended to all.

With respect to the question of whether marriage may be entered into by partners of the same gender, it seems to me that the precedent of God's relationship to Israel and of Christ to the Church yields insight into the nature of marriage that does not preclude such a relationship being established between partners of the same gender. It remains an open question however, whether the complementarity of male and female indicated in Genesis, should be taken as normative for the marriage relationship between two human partners. That is the question that is now before the Church.

### Contribution 3

In the following paper I offer my reflections on what I believe lies at the heart of a doctrine of Christian marriage. As a woman in her mid-fifties who recently married for the first time, I have found myself engaging with this question on a very personal level. Marriage, as revealed in both Scripture and Jesus' teaching, is initiated by God as an expression of love in community. Sacred and permanent, it offers protection and exclusivity for the expression of fidelity and conjugal love between a man and a woman. It is fundamental to my understanding of Christian marriage that it be a union between a man and a woman, as both are made in God's image, therefore it is their complementary, but different natures, that reflect most authentically the mystery of the divine nature.

The divine nature is presented in the Scriptures as both feminine and masculine. God speaks of her conception, nurture, and birth in the continuing story of Israel. Yet God is also warrior, king, and father. God's nature transcends gender, but by creating both male and female and joining them together as one God's nature is "captured", so to speak. Therefore when man and woman become one, it is their union (their becoming one) that reflects the complete/divine nature. The physical/biological differences of men and women are obvious, but there is also a spiritual/emotional difference between them that is well attested in our churches, marriages, and relationships in general.<sup>7</sup>

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7 My point here is that men and women are apt to think and act differently given the same situation. I'm only a novice in marriage, but already I see that we are different in the way we approach problems, our communication and expression of emotions. Whether this is divinely programmed or merely the result of gender roles over the centuries, I'm not sure. But that goes beyond the paper's parameters.

The “complete” nature of God, as expressed by both man and woman becoming one, finds its roots in the Genesis account of creation: Man (Adam) was created in the image of God, but finding him incomplete in/by himself, God created a specific helper/companion (ezer; Eve). Out of the one species, but creating a separate, distinctive and complementary being, God created the ideal reflection of the divine nature. Creativity, procreation, and abiding companionship all find their expression on the two beings becoming one. My reading of the creation account is that humanity was the pinnacle of creation. When the two complementary beings become one, their unity creates and perpetuates the image of the divine. I believe that it was God’s desire for the creative, spiritual and physical cycle of creation to continue through the mystery and sanctity of marriage.

Jesus also affirmed marriage as a divine institution laid down by God at the very beginning of creation. United by God two (man and woman) become one, and remain so until death (Mark 10.6-7, 9; Genesis 1.27; 2.24). The mystery of this sacred union between man and woman is that it offers a reflection of the image of God in community; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. By this I mean that God is more than one, yet the same essence. The three persons of the trinity are separate, yet one. Each person of the trinity has a different expression, but they are the same! For me that means that in the Genesis account of creation the trinity was already present, and reflected in the creation of man and woman. Therefore marriage, at its heart, is an expression of God’s love/nature lived out in action for creation to be witness to, and benefit from.

The starting point for my position on a Christian doctrine of marriage is the concept of covenant. Biblically the marriage relationship was used as a distinctive metaphor for the covenantal relationship God had with Israel (Ezekiel 16.8). Permanence, faithfulness and self-sacrificing love are the pillars of God’s covenant relationship. Marriage, as a covenant relationship between two complementary natures made in God’s image, reflects the ideal of God’s relationship of love and fidelity with his/her people.

Pauline material develops this tradition by proclaiming that the sacred and permanent status of marriage is an analogy for the relationship between Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5.32). Marriage, in New Testament terms, is portrayed as the perfect example of covenantal oneness; a union created between a man and a woman by the unifying power of love.

The commitment to love unconditionally, as Christ loved the Church, implies self-sacrifice. Christ's love led him to the cross, so biblically marriage becomes a vehicle for living out Christ's self-sacrificing love. For me the concepts of obedience and discipleship are fundamental to my understanding of Christian marriage. God's covenant love and Christ's self-sacrificing love fit within a context of relationship. Marriage cannot be removed from this setting; it finds its expression only in relationship with God's revelation (Jesus and Scripture).

The biblical vision for marriage, as a reflection of God's love and unbreakable faithfulness, lies at the heart of my understanding of Christian marriage. Creator God created two complementary beings in his/her image to become one flesh. The purpose for such a union is, I believe, not only to offer human companionship, or produce children, but also to reveal the divine nature and character of an unseen God. Love by its very nature can only be authentically expressed in community, therefore marriage becomes the most complete expression of divine love.

## Contribution 4

Being both Māori and Christian my starting point on any subject is always my beloved wharenuī, Te Maungarongo. On the taraiti<sup>8</sup> side of the whare is our cultural side that captures our histories, genealogies, stories, songs, proverbs and everything that constitutes being Māori. On the opposite tarawhanui<sup>9</sup> side of the whare are the biblical equivalents of those same stories. The backbone of the whare is the tahuhu<sup>10</sup> where both culture and Scripture come together under watchful eye of God. Neither side of the whare can be separated as they interpret and inform each other. To separate the two would divide the whare and result in cultural and biblical amnesia.

The second pair of poupou<sup>11</sup> in Te Maungarongo depict Rangī and Papatuanuku the primordial parents. Opposite is the biblical equivalent of Adam and Eve. This theme of cultural and biblical equivalents facing each other is consistent throughout the whare. The tenth poupou depicts the celebrated love story of Tutanekai and Hinemoa. The Biblical equivalent opposite is the Book of Psalms as the story focuses at this level upon the sweet music of the Putourino that encouraged Hinemoa to swim Lake Rotorua to Tutanekai upon Mokoia Island. At other levels the story deals with issues of politically

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8 Taraiti, left side of the Wharenuī known as the tangata whenua side of the House.

9 Tarawhanui, right side of the Wharenuī known as the Manuhiri side of the House.

10 Tahuhu, commonly understood as the backbone of the house where both side of the house met.

11 Poupou, carved pillars



arranged marriage, social status, tribal responsibility of procreation and of male affection and relationship towards another male. These are real stories that we still encounter today and are not simple fables or myths.

The back and front walls of the whare tell the story of the early church. At the apex of the exterior of the whare is the ancestor, in this case Jesus, holding the cross inviting you to take up the cross. On the interior of the inside back wall is the cross of Calvary. Both crosses challenge us to view those same stories through the cross of Christ and gain a new understanding of how things are done consistent with how they are lived in the Kingdom of God.

*The hermeneutical question is not which side of the whare we start from, but how do both sides of Te Maungarongo come together in us, the living embodiment of those stories. The hermeneutical starting point is me, the mokopuna<sup>12</sup>. Whakapapa works backwards. It starts with me and what I bring to this story.*

Marriage was a stumbling block to Māori being baptised by the early Presbyterian Māori missions with their doctrine of one man and one woman in marriage. Iwi practised polygamy and this was non-negotiable to the missionaries. The pressures of government and Church eventually saw the demise of polygamy. Today polygamy has been replaced with defacto relationships and solo-parenting that has led to a fatherless generation of children. These people are unfairly stereotyped as beneficiaries who spend their benefit on alcohol, smokes and drugs and substitute their income with illegal activities. Yet for the majority this is totally untrue. The Bible gives the imperative to look after the least in society and names them as the widow, the orphan and the unemployed. In my context that is about 80 percent of my whanau.

The context above is the taraiti side of the whare which is brought into conversation with the biblical that has many similar stories of political arranged marriages, marriage and social status, affairs, liasons, incest, rape, unemployment, poverty, adoption and single parenting. This conversation gives me a further reference point, and what new insights I may have are lifted up to be viewed through the cross of Jesus at Calvary. Jesus dealt with similar issues of human existence and gives new understandings and insights into how things are lived in the Kingdom of God. This is Te Maungarongo that moves me in the direction of the cross where I am given a new

blueprint for the future.

No story is complete without the architects of my Presbyterian whare: Rua Kenana, prophet of Maungapohatu; Tu Rakuraku of Waimana; the Rt Rev Eru Tumutara; Bishop of the Ringatu Church; and the Presbyterian missionary the Very Rev J G Laughton CMG or Hoani. These architects of Te Maungarongo provide the overarching hermeneutical principle with their covenanted relationships with Hoani providing a safe and sound Christian future for their children and grandchildren.

Rua Kenana said to Hoani: “There is your Church, the children. You have the children, leave the old people to me.”<sup>13</sup>:

In a similar fashion, Tu Rakuraku said to Hoani: “Leave the old world to us, you have the children so they may have a better life than what we have experienced”.<sup>14</sup>

The Rt Rev Eru Tumutara said to Hoani: “Teach my children the wisdom of the world but most importantly teach them the wisdom of God.”<sup>15</sup>

These covenants are translated as Ōhākī, a gift that arises from within you and is binding on all future generations and can never be broken. All three gentlemen had experienced at a personal level the poverty of the New Zealand Wars, but they saw in the Presbyterian Church an opportunity for their children to have a better life, safe from what they witnessed.

In conclusion, the hermeutical process begins with me, the mokopuna, the blueprint of the future. The hermeneutical reference points are a conversation between the pillars of Te Maungarongo, cultural, context, Scripture and Christian tradition. These are held up to the apex of the whare where I view them through the cross of Jesus Christ. The overarching principle in the hermeneutical process is Te Ōhākī, the gift that is my salvation in the new world free from anything that separates me from the love of God.

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13 1918 at Maungapohatu

14 1921 at Tanatana marae, Waimana

15 1928 at Hahuru marae, Kawerau



Chapel

# Contribution 5

## Theological Method

The question of marriage, as with any theological reflection, does not come to the Church in a vacuum. Society now understands marriage as a relationship between two people, committed to each other, irrespective of sex, sexual orientation or gender identity. Marriage is seen as an intimate and yet public commitment between two adults that is recognised in law. The theological issue has arisen because on the one hand we have Assembly decisions that restrict marriage to opposite-sex couples and, on the other hand, ministers and congregations who wish to be able to celebrate marriage in the full, inclusive sense in which it is now understood.

From an ethical perspective, an evolving theology of marriage must include the voices of same-sex couples and transgendered people who wish to marry, because it is the lives of these people who will be directly affected by the Church's decision-making. Christian same-sex couples speak about their desire to express their love and commitment to one another in the context of their faith community. They want to belong to each other in love and to their congregations in ministry. Like couples who access civil marriage, they value the social recognition and support that comes with marriage. They also acknowledge the spiritual aspect of marriage to which law and secular society pay little attention. They are "claiming the blessing" that the Church has come to understand that marriage can be, a blessing of communion and community.<sup>16</sup> And they wish to teach their children about the social and spiritual value of deep commitment to a life partner in a loving and just relationship.

Children of gay and lesbian parents are expressing the hope that their parents could marry. Approximately 24 percent of same-sex couples are raising children. Social research has overwhelmingly established that these children have outcomes that are as good or better than children raised by opposite-sex couples.<sup>17</sup> The one thing that makes their lives difficult is discrimination against their families. In changing the marriage law, society has removed one source of discrimination, but the Church continues to perpetuate it.

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16 See for example, Chris Glaser, *As My Own Soul: The Blessing of Same-Gender Marriage*. New York, NY: Seabury Books, 2009 and Gene Robinson, *God Believes in Love: Straight Talk about Gay Marriage*, New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2012.

17 Deborah Dempsey, *Same-sex parented families in Australia*, CFCA (Child Family Community Australia) Paper 18 2013. © Commonwealth of Australia.

<http://www.aifs.gov.au/cfca/pubs/papers/a145197/cfca18.pdf> Accessed 19 May 2014.



## The Bible

The Bible on its own cannot provide the answers to the question of whether the Church should allow ministers to marry same sex couples because it is simply not a question that the Bible addresses. The Biblical writers had no knowledge of the continuum of human sexual orientation. Throughout the biblical record, different kinds of unions are accepted in different places and times, evolving and changing with culture and circumstance.

New Testament teachings about marriage are included with other teachings which are generally accepted as being time and culture bound. For example prohibitions against women teaching, or braiding their hair, are found alongside the imperative that a church leader should be “the husband of one wife”. (1 Timothy 2:9 – 3:2).

Biblical marriage includes polygamy, marriage within the family, reproduction with a deceased husband’s closest relative and prohibitions against marriage with people of other faiths or ethnicities. At times these patterns were normative and at other times they were considered less relevant.

The Genesis story of Adam and Eve is often cited as evidence that marriage can only be heterosexual because Jesus cited it in Mark 10:1-12. Context is crucial. Jesus was asked a question about the lawfulness of divorce. He responded by referencing the Genesis story and saying that “what God has joined together, let no one separate”. He concluded unequivocally that remarriage after divorce is adultery. It is disingenuous to extrapolate this teaching addressed to heterosexual couples to exclude same-sex marriage. Especially when the Church has significantly reinterpreted Jesus’s clear teaching on divorce.

## The History of Marriage

It is impossible to give adequate consideration here to the way marriage has evolved over the past two millennia except to note that it has changed dramatically.<sup>18</sup> Until the modern period, marriage was primarily based on political alliances for the elite and economic survival for the masses. Women were regarded as property transferred from father to husband, thus connecting families for political or economic benefits.

The diverse forms of familial relationships that many people think are unprecedented changes in family life, are mostly not new at all. Human beings have been creatively constructing families for a very long time. There have been

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For a scholarly but readable account of the way marriage has changed throughout history see Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage*. London: Penguin Books, 2005.

times in the past when it was more common for children to be born out of wedlock than it is now. Step-families were very common in the past because of the high rates of death and remarriage. And even same-sex marriage, though relatively rare, has been sanctioned in some cultures.

Similarly, arrangements that are presented as “traditional marriage” in popular culture have a relatively recent history. The involvement of Church or state in marriage is a more recent “tradition” in human history. For centuries of Christian tradition, a couple were considered married when privately they said to each other the words of intent: “I take you to be my husband or wife”. Neither judge nor clergy were involved.

Marriage, shaped by political or economic considerations, began to change in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, five thousand years after it first took shape in the ancient tribes and kingdoms of the Middle East. Only then did love begin to dominate marriage discourse. Marriage began to be seen as a private relationship between two people rather than as part of a system of political or economic alliances. While there have always been loving marriages, the purpose of marriage for much of human history was more mundane.

## **Relational Ethics**

What marks us as humans is our capacity for intelligent moral judgement. We cannot base our decisions about marriage solely on appeals to Scripture, tradition/history or on an unexamined understanding of biological or psychological complementarity of the sexes. The idea of male and female duality is frequently an unexamined assumption in theological conversation about marriage. It must be considered in light of contemporary science and social theory.

The freedom given to us in Christ includes the freedom to discern God’s will and the ways that God continues to speak to us through the Spirit. In limiting human sexual expression to heterosexual marriage, the Church has lost its place in the human community of ethical discernment. The public has heard us say that heterosexual intercourse within marriage is the requirement for God’s blessing. They have not heard us say that relationships that are mutual, equal, loving, committed and grounded, are relationships that reflect God’s faithfulness and grace. Moving beyond requiring humans to choose between heterosexual marriage and celibacy would create a space for the Church to talk about what makes a relationship good and therefore to invite people into the spiritual depth and commitment that good marriage can provide.

## Contribution 6

It has taken some time to canvas the views of members of the Pacific community that I am involved with, however I present a view that is shared in common by every person that has contributed to the question: “What is the Pacific Christian’s perspective of the doctrine of marriage?”

Primarily, we strongly believe that marriage is the bond between a man and a woman as blessed by Jesus Christ the head of the Church. The general belief is a call for the Presbyterian Church to hold strictly to biblical teachings about Christian marriage as a necessary step to the formation and beginning of a family.

I would like to also include extracts from the Vatican’s International Theological Commission entitled *Statements on the Doctrine of Marriage*<sup>19</sup> which reflect the thinking of the Pacific community I am representing in this statement.

### ***Marriage in Christ***

*As is easily shown in the New Testament, Jesus confirmed this institution which existed “from the very beginning”, and cured it of its previous defects (Mark 10:2-9, 10-12) by restoring all its dignity and its original requirements. He sanctified this state of life (Gaudium et Spes 48, 2) by including it within the mystery of love, which unites him as Redeemer to his Church. This is the reason why the task of regulating Christian marriage (1 Corinthians 7:10) has been entrusted to the Church.*

### ***The Apostles***

*The Epistles of the New Testament say that marriage should be honoured in every way (Hebrews 13:4) and, in response to certain attacks, they present it as a good work of the Creator (1 Timothy 4:1-5). Rather, they exalt matrimony among the faithful because it is included in the mystery of Covenant and love that unites Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5:22-23 Gaudium et Spes 48, 2).*

*They ask, therefore, that marriage be contracted “in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 7:39) and that matrimonial life be lived in accordance with the dignity of a new creature (2 Corinthians 5:17), “in Christ” (Ephesians 5:21-33), putting Christians on guard against the pagans’ habits (1 Corinthians 6:12-20; 6:9-10).*

*On the basis of a “right deriving from faith” and in their desire to assure its permanence, the Churches of apostolic times formulated certain moral orientations (Colossians 3:18; Titus 2:3-5; 1 Peter 3:1-7) and juridical dispositions that would help people live matrimony “according to the faith” in different human situations and conditions.*

### ***Real Symbol and Sacramental Sign***

*Jesus Christ disclosed in a prophetic way the reality of matrimony as it was intended by God at man’s beginnings (Genesis 1:27; 2:24; Mark 10:6, 7-8; Matthew 19:4, 5) and restored it through his death and Resurrection. For this reason Christian marriage is lived “in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 7:39) and is also determined by elements of the saving action performed by Christ.*

*Already in the Old Testament the matrimonial union was a figure of the Covenant between God and the people of Israel (Hosea 2; Jeremiah 3:6-13; Ezekiel 16 and 23; Isaiah 54). In the New Testament, Christian marriage rises to a new dignity as a representation of the mystery that unites Christ and the Church ( Ephesians 5:21-33). Theological interpretation illuminates this analogy more profoundly: the supreme love and gift of the Lord who shed his blood and the faithful and irrevocable attachment of his Spouse the Church, become models and examples for Christian matrimony.*

*This resemblance is a relationship of real sharing in the Covenant of love between Christ and the Church. From its own standpoint, Christian marriage, as a real symbol and sacramental sign, represents the Church of Christ concretely in the world and, especially under its family aspect, it is called rightly the “domestic Church” (Lumen Gentium 11).*

### ***Sacrament in a Real Sense***

*In such a way matrimony takes on the likeness of the mystery of the union between Jesus Christ and his Church. This inclusion of Christian marriage in the economy of salvation is enough to justify the title “sacrament” in a broad sense.*

*But it is also at once the concrete condensation and the real actualization of this primordial sacrament. It follows from this that Christian marriage is in itself a real and true sign of salvation, which confers the grace of God. For this reason the Catholic Church numbers it among the seven sacraments (Denzinger-A Schönmetzer, 1327, 1801).*



*A unique bond exists between the indissolubility of marriage and its sacramentality, that is, a reciprocal, constitutive relationship. Indissolubility makes one's grasp of the sacramental nature of Christian matrimony easier, and from the theological point of view, its sacramental nature constitutes the final grounds, although not the only grounds, for its indissolubility.*

## Conclusion

It is fair to say that all of the above points of view resonate with the thinking of Pacific Christians in the Presbyterian Church. However the question that is in the news items lately has been the same-sex marriage question. There is a strong “No” from the Pacific community that have responded to me on this point.

I pass on the blessings from those I represent to the doctrine committee for this important task you are charged with.

## Contribution 7

**I. Foundation.** “For... all things have been created through him and for him” (Colossians 1.16). Jesus Christ is the one Word of God in, by and for whom humanity is constituted. He alone reveals God’s will for human life and flourishing. Consequently, marriage ought primarily to be understood christologically. The Church therefore rejects as false all efforts to ground its doctrine and ethics in sources apart from and besides this one Word of God. Such efforts threaten to turn an institution or relationship into an idol, an anti-Christ.

**II. Eschatology.** “ ‘... and the two will become one flesh’. This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church” (Ephesians 5.31–32). Like every gift from God, marriage is good and fitting – not only for individual persons and families, but also for the flourishing of human society. But its goodness is closely associated with its provisionality – with its being bound to the creation which is passing away (eg. Luke 18.29; Matthew 19.12; 22.30) – and with it, as with celibacy, bearing prophetic witness to the coming new creation. Its ultimate meaning is eschatological and so it is called to be characterised by the transforming of old markers and the reconstituting of human relationality in the light of God’s coming. The Church therefore rejects

efforts to explain the mystery of marriage solely in terms of the old creation. Furthermore, because Holy Scripture speaks of marriage in terms of Christ's relation to the Church unbound by gender, we reject the claim that marriage's signalling of Christ's relationship with his bride must be gender specific.

**III. Discipleship.** "Then he said to them all, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me'" (Luke 9.23). Jesus Christ calls and the Holy Spirit empowers persons to leave behind all that has the appearance of certainty, and to become his disciples. This call precedes and exists uncompetitively with all other claims that may be made. God's provision (marriage is a "gift" rather than a "right") of marriage during this time-between-the-times is a particular vocation given to some so that they might be trained in the way of discipleship; learn how to recognise the otherness of the other (ie. as a being not under their power); be taught love of neighbour; celebrate the mystery of friendship; be schooled in embodied witness, repentance and virtue; practice the meaning of sacrifice, the risk of hospitality and the formation of community and be ready to accept the challenges of new life which love creates – the disciplines of denial and restraint that liberate human persons for sanctification. The Church therefore rejects as false all efforts to understand marriage (and all other human relationships) independently of the call to discipleship.

**IV. Desire.** "This is my body, which is given for you" (Luke 22.19). Marriage occasions a social context to commit oneself to being where one's body is, to make one's body available for the other – for better, for worse... for as long as you live" (Book of Common Order) – and for desire to mean more than meeting emotional and physical needs. While it is beyond the creature's power to make sex spiritually or sacramentally significant (indeed, all such attempts are idolatrous), it is entirely commensurate with God's character to do so; ie. to make good on the promise that human beings are more than material. "The moral question, at this point, ought to be how much we want our sexual activity to communicate, how much we want it to display a breadth of human possibility and a sense of the body's capacity to heal and enlarge the life of other subjects," says Rowan Williams. The Church therefore rejects as illegitimate all expressions of desire for other persons unbridled and undirected by commitment to the relationship in which the blessing of the other is not a foremost concern.

**V. Election and covenant.** "How can I give you up, Ephraim?" (Hosea 11.8). Marriage serves as an analogue to, and a reflection of the electing

love of God (however imperfect). Marriage exists because God loves Israel, in whom God also makes space for gentiles. This is God's counter word to the fear many couples experience; namely, the threat to the security of their own marriages from the "other". The Word of God brings persons into covenant communion with God and with each other, the character of which is holy, loving, and unbreakable. The Church therefore rejects all theological justification for divorce. That said, lest we turn God's gracious provision into an ideology, the Church equally rejects all notions of indissolubility which smuggle in a metaphysic whereby divorce and remarriage are made authentic impossibilities. "Indeed, if one purpose of marriage is to serve as a sign of God's love in the world... how can we reject the possibility that a second marriage after a divorce could serve as a sign of grace and redemption from the sin and brokenness of the past?" (Richard Hays).

**VI. Responsible freedom.** "You were called to freedom; do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another" (Galatians 5.13). Marriage is an expression of the freedom granted to God's human creatures and to the societies they form. So, "It is lawful for all sorts of people to marry, who are able with judgement to give their consent". (The Westminster Confession of Faith) Marriage, in other words, is created not by a ceremony per se but by an act of responsible freedom. Where possible, a public ceremony – wherein the "I do" confessed by the couple and heard by a public serves as both creative and performative utterance – might also represent such an act and so ought to be the norm. Still, "there are many marriages, true though incomplete, which the Church has never blessed or the State ratified" (James K. Baxter). If a couple "cannot or will not have one another in this freedom, it is far better for them not to want to have one another at all" (Karl Barth). The Church therefore rejects all pre-determined images (whether understood in terms of roles, or contractual obligations, or any other matters decided in advance) of what any particular marriage might look like as being fundamentally at odds with the loving promise of covenant freedom in God. "Gratuitous, beyond our fathom, both binding and freeing, this love re-invades us, shifts the boundaries of our being." (Micheal O'Siadhail)



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