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What are we/they saying about marriage?

(Part One of Four – Rev. Faan Myburgh for DEWCOM)

Introduction

In Part one a brief overview of the background of the conversation on the theology of marriage is given by postulating a problem regarding marriage. Parts two to four will be available in the NEW DIMENSION in the August, September and October editions respectively. Perhaps a deeper appreciation of the theological, ethical, moral, cultural and historical complexities regarding marriage will help the church in its work to strengthen marriage as institution or long-standing custom. It may also help us to consider how 'far our attitudes to marriage, human sexuality and family and intimate relationships reflect culture, economy, social, religious and other views.' The article as a whole, or all four parts together, seek to respond positively to an invitation to more regularly share the on-going work of DEWCOM with a wider audience by exploring some basic ideas around a theology of marriage.

What is the problem?

The assumption is that there is a problem – marriage as institution is somehow 'under threat.' The problem is, perhaps, best captured by a 'disjunction' regarding marriage. There is, on the one hand, the marriage liturgy and, on the other hand, couples/families' experiences and expressions of marriage: 'The 'ideal' that is portrayed in or envisaged by the liturgy is 'seldom the reality couples/families encounter in their daily lives.' In the Methodist Service Book (1975) it is stated that 'the minister shall ensure that the Christian understanding of marriage and its obligations is explained to the couple. The text of the Marriage Service is designed to be used for this purpose.' The liturgy is thus so design to capture the theology – of the meaning, purpose and constitution – of marriage. A problem with regard to the liturgy is thus directly related to the theology, ethics and morality supporting such a liturgy or ritual commitment.

There are challenges facing a (the) current theology of marriage: Co-habitation, changing gender roles and related issues, single parenting, couples/families caught up in 'love-less' marriages, the separation between sexuality and marriage and changing views on human sexuality, people getting married for the first time later on in life, intimate/sexual relationships becoming more 'democratic,' the high rate of divorce, the importance of emotional satisfaction in intimate relationships, traditional African concepts of marriage, children born outside of marriage, single parenting, same-sex unions and marriages, contemporary understandings of commitment and love and various other economic, moral and social issues, for instance, people having to work away from home.

The results of biblical scholarship suggests that the Bible does not have a (one) distinct view on marriage excluding all or any other views. It is also becoming clearer that within the Church itself or theological circles, over time, 'the views on human sexuality and marriage have been subject to fundamental changes.' The results of other areas of scholarship, outside

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the church, are suggesting that the meaning, purpose and constitution of marriage are, like family-life in general, developing or historical situated phenomena. For instance, the 'nuclear family,' is a nineteenth-century Western-world phenomenon. Marriage is not just a Christian phenomenon but a universal social feature of humankind with legal, economic, religious and other significant implications. It is said that marriage is, in fact, secular in origin – predating Christianity – acquiring a deeper meaning.'

Christians, however, do have something distinctly to say about marriage and this should, and rightly so, be our focus. And what they have to say is a result of, as has been suggested, a 'lively dialectic between church – particularly the Churches' sources for theological and moral and thus liturgical authority – and culture.' Is it not the case that the current view of marriage has a lot to do with Scripture (and even here the biblical view is being questioned) and Tradition but neglecting Experience and Reason as sources of theological authority? In this dialectic what is often at stake is the moral integrity of those who are directly and unconditionally affected by it: Christian couples/families whose real-life or day-to-day experiences and expressions of marriage are far removed from the ideal of marriage as promoted by the marriage liturgy. The problem is thus one 'cropping up from the context of life and history.' This, however, stands in tension with the view that the problem derives from the 'rejection of fundamental or principled convictions. Convictions which are protected in the traditional way: That is, that our liturgies are based on inherent truths valid for all times and under all circumstances and obedience is the issue.

Throughout its history the Church has placed its theology of marriage within a 'concern for moral living.' We must note too that nowhere is it suggested that the Church changes its view on marriage to suit a contemporary culture, or morality. It has been pointed out that the church rather needs to set an example within the will of God. It has also been noted that some of the current-day experiences and expressions of marriage, which may be far removed from the ideal captured by the liturgy, are not always without (their own) theological and moral integrity or outside the will of God. This statement, however, is part of a 'felt tension' regarding a plurality of views within the Church with regards to the theology of marriage and family-life in general. However, we always have to keep in mind that, taking from the Methodist Book of Order: 'We believe that there is far more that binds us together than what divides us, and that not even our different convictions on this issue need compromise the essential unity that is ours in Christ.'

Conclusion to Part One

It is clear that in dealing with a theology of marriage one has to deal with a variety of issues. In Part two the article will deal with the understanding of marriage informing the current liturgy for the marriage service.

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