

Discussion Paper on Marriage

The theology of marriage in the Uniting Church in Australia:
a commentary on the marriage service in Uniting in Worship 2

Introduction

1. This discussion paper aims to present a clear account of the theology of marriage in the Uniting Church in Australia. The paper aims to explain the church's shared doctrinal and scriptural convictions about marriage, while also drawing attention (in the text boxes) to areas of disagreement among Christians today. The paper does not attempt to resolve all these contemporary questions. Its aim is to promote informed and faithful discussion of such questions, and to show how such disagreements can arise within the context of shared convictions about marriage.

2. The paper is organised as a theological commentary on the marriage service in *Uniting in Worship*. This is the church's doctrine as inscribed in the patterns of the liturgy. The clearest guide to finding out what Christians believe is to observe the way they pray and worship. So this paper aims to identify the Uniting Church's core convictions about marriage through a close reading of the marriage service.

1. The Gathering

Marriage in God's presence

3. The first and most obvious thing to say about the marriage service is that it is a service of worship. At the start of the service the minister tells the community that they are gathered in the presence of God. The two partners are going to begin their marriage in an environment of worship. Marriage is one of the ways in which human beings are able to respond communally to God's love, God's presence, and God's promise.

4. At the start of the service the community is also reminded that they are gathered to "witness" something. Two people have come together to make promises to one another, and their union in marriage will be effected through those promises. In a Christian marriage service, this promise is understood to take place publicly in the presence of a human community, as well as liturgically in the presence of God.

The doctrinal pattern: creation, fall, redemption

5. In the opening prayer, the community recognises that marriage is a gift from God. The community acknowledges God as the world's loving creator, the one who gives humanity all the gifts that we enjoy in our lives together. This faith in God as a good creator undergirds the whole marriage service, and forms the real basis of a Christian view of marriage. Married love is acknowledged as a potential reflection of God's love for all humankind.

6. Yet human relationships are not only a gift and blessing. In a fallen world, even the best human relationships are damaged and incomplete. In many cases, marriage is an occasion not of joy and wholeness but of grief and destruction. Very properly, therefore, the opening prayer invokes God not only as the creator of human relationships but also as the healer of human brokenness. The marriage service begins with a confession of sin: that is, the confession that our relationships with God and with one another have often failed.

In the declaration of forgiveness (as in any service of worship), the community is reassured of God's love and forgiveness in Jesus Christ, and of the sanctifying resource of the Holy Spirit. This part of the service has special pastoral significance for contemporary marriage services, where so many people in attendance (including the couple who are to be wed) may have been affected by past histories of failed marriages and divorce. By recognising the fallenness of all human relationships, the church demonstrates sympathetic solidarity with those who have suffered in failed marriages, and reassures the community that divorce does not exclude a person from the possibility of divine grace in subsequent relationships.

Divorce and remarriage?

Here, the confession of brokenness and the promise of restoration reflect the United Church's stance that remarriage after divorce is to be permitted, even though divorce itself is viewed as a remedy and not as an inherent good. How does this pastoral and theological response to divorce differ from that of other Christian traditions? On what basis have some churches prohibited remarriage after divorce?

7. From the outset, therefore, the marriage service is undergirded by the basic doctrinal pattern of the Christian faith: creation (human relationships as the good gift of God), fall (human relationships as damaged and incomplete), and redemption (the forgiveness of human relationships through Christ, and the restoration of human relationships through the Holy Spirit).

8. In the Christian church all pastoral, practical, and theological considerations concerning marriage are responsible to that basic doctrinal pattern of creation, fall, and redemption. A view of marriage that loses any of those dimensions would no longer be a Christian view of marriage. Three possible approaches to marriage should therefore be considered incompatible with Christian faith:

(1) Any view that assumes a basic hostility towards sex or marriage cannot be regarded as a Christian view. Such a view has lost sight of the doctrine of creation.

(2) Any optimistic view concerning the total innocence and perfection of sex and marriage cannot be regarded as a Christian view. Such a view has lost sight of the doctrine of fallenness.

(3) Any pessimistic view concerning the total failure and hopelessness of the institution of marriage cannot be regarded as a Christian view. Such a view has lost sight of the doctrine of redemption.

9. If we are guided by this faithful doctrinal pattern, we will be in a position to meet new questions and challenges regarding marriage in our own time.

Same-gender relationships?

Differences among Christians regarding same-gender relationships are often made more complex by differing assumptions about these three aspects of the doctrinal pattern.

Arguments from creation. Some Christians believe that God created human beings exclusively for male-female union. Other Christians respond that same-gender desire seems to be 'hardwired' into the nature of some people. Christians with a same-gender orientation seldom feel that they chose this orientation; rather they feel that they were created like this. In opposing ways, both these views assumed that sexual relationships are grounded in and legitimated by creation.

Arguments from fallenness. Some Christians believe that same-gender orientation is a consequence of the fallenness of human nature and therefore such sexual relationships are not permissible. Other Christians believe that all human (and sexual) relationships suffer from fallenness to some extent and no relationships perfectly reflect God's intentions for creation. Nor is the church community necessarily a reflection of God's perfect intentions for the world; it is more a reflection of the way God's grace operates within the painful vulnerabilities of life in a fallen world. In both these opposing views, arguments concerning the legitimacy of same-gender partnerships are based on the doctrine of the fall.

Arguments from redemption. Some Christians emphasise the nature of the church as a redeemed community, a community marked by repentance, discipline, sanctification, and transformed living. On this basis, it is sometimes argued that the church provides an environment in which a person's fallen sexual orientation can be healed or transformed. On the other hand are Christians who emphasise the need for disciplined, faithful same-gender partnerships within the church as a witness to the sanctification of all human sexuality. In this view it is argued that same-gender partnerships should be recognised and blessed by the church in order to bring such partnerships into the same orbit of discipline and public accountability as relationships of marriage and celibacy. Both these views appeal, in opposing ways, to the doctrine of redemption.

It is important to remember, though, that the whole doctrinal pattern of creation, fall, and redemption is necessary for Christian belief. How might Christians think about sexual relationships in an integrated way, drawing on all three aspects of the doctrinal pattern? What difference, if any, might this make for the way Christians discuss differences concerning same-gender relationships?

2. The Declaration of Purpose

The Nature of Marriage

10. In the Declaration of Purpose, the community is given a concise summary of the church's teaching on marriage. Again marriage is affirmed to be a good gift of God. With an ecumenical nod to the Roman Catholic tradition (which defines marriage as a sacrament), the Uniting Church affirms that marriage is also a "means of grace," one of the ways in which God's personal presence is communicated to human beings. Marriage is defined as a life-long union. Again, although the Uniting Church allows for remarriage after divorce, divorce is never viewed as part of God's intention for human relationships. But nor is it regarded as a sin or a moral failing; it is a tragic consequence of the fallenness of human relationships. In affirming that God's intention for marriage is "life-long union," the church thus affirms a normative pattern of marriage even while recognising that not all relationships will conform to this pattern.

11. The Declaration goes on to state, using the words of Genesis 1, that human beings are created in God's image as male and female. Throughout the church's history, the story of creation in Genesis 1 has been one of the most important sources of the Christian teaching on marriage. It is especially on the basis of this passage that the church believes marriage to be more than a cultural phenomenon or a social construct. Life-long covenantal union reflects God's loving nature in a unique and irreplaceable way.

12. Genesis 1 emphasises the equal status of male and female as God's image. The man and woman are not defined by their roles but by the divine image that they share. The Declaration refers to this passage as a reminder that marriage is a union between equals.

Giving away the bride?

In many cultures, daughters have been regarded as the property of their fathers. On the wedding day the father would transfer ownership of this valuable commodity to the new husband. The dowry would also be transferred from the father to the husband. Thus the wedding was understood, in part, as a contract between two men; and the bride was understood as property to be exchanged between men. This is where the custom of "giving away the bride" comes from.

The Uniting Church marriage service excludes this custom, since it contradicts the male-female equality described in Genesis 1. The notes to the marriage service advise: "The traditional custom of 'giving away' the bride is unhelpful today. It keeps alive the view that a woman is the property of her father until in marriage she becomes the property of her husband." Every detail of the marriage service should reflect the full equality, freedom, and mutual respect of the two partners.

13. The interpretation of the creation story is deepened by the way Genesis 1 is handled in the New Testament. The letter to the Ephesians teaches that the marriage relationship, grounded in creation, can be modelled on the love between Christ and the church. The Declaration of Purpose thus rightly links Genesis 1 and Ephesians 5, and affirms that in marriage we can glimpse certain truths about creation (because the union between man and woman reflects something of God's nature) and of redemption (because faithful covenant reflects something of Christ's love).

Scriptural language

The Christian understanding of marriage has always been shaped by these scriptural passages (Genesis 1, Ephesians 5) with their profound articulation of the mysterious role of male-female duality in God's creative and redemptive work. While some Christians today advocate for same-gender marriage, the foundational importance of these scriptural passages cannot be dismissed.

If ever the Uniting Church was to re-define marriage to include same-gender partnerships, it would remain theologically impossible to bypass this deep scriptural tradition in which male-female duality and male-female union are located right near the heart of the divine purpose.

It is interesting to note that in periods when the church adopted forms of blessing for same-gender partnerships, such blessings were never seen as competing with the normative pattern of male-female marriage. In the well-attested adelphopoiesis (literally "brother-making") services of the Byzantine church, two friends of the same gender were consecrated using a broad range of scriptural language.

One such liturgy, for example, includes the prayer: "Forasmuch as Thou, O Lord and Ruler, art merciful and loving, who didst establish humankind after thine image and likeness, who didst deem it meet that thy holy apostles Philip and Bartholomew be united, bound one unto the other not by nature but by faith and the spirit. As Thou didst find thy holy martyrs Serge and Bacchus worthy to be united together, bless also these thy servants, N. and N., joined together not by the bond of nature but by faith and in the mode of the spirit, granting unto them peace and love and oneness of mind."

The Purpose of Marriage

14. The Declaration of Purpose continues by outlining the church's teaching on the purposes of marriage. Christian marriage services have long included a statement of this kind. Marriage provides an environment of mutual faithfulness, respectful love, tenderness, and delight. Such a nurturing life-long relationship "enables the full expression of physical love between husband and wife," meaning that the sexual life of the married partners is to unfold over time within the boundaries of this exclusive relationship.

Sexual faithfulness

Does this statement about the full expression of sexual love imply that all other forms of sexual relationship are imperfect or prohibited? The church has always answered "no" to that question. In fact, in the earliest centuries it was almost universally believed that celibacy was preferable to marriage. This does not mean that the church disparaged the married relationship. Marriage was seen as inherently good and as blessed by God; but celibacy was seen as an even more blessed form of sexual life (see 1 Corinthians 7). Each Christian was believed to have a particular sexual vocation, either as a married person or as a celibate. So when the Declaration of Purpose speaks of the "full expression of physical love" between the married partners, it should not be taken as a condemnation of all other forms of sexual life. Today, this raises questions about the status of non-married sexual relationships. Uniting Church ministers are well aware that a significant majority of couples presenting for marriage are already sexually intimate. Should Christians say that marriage and celibacy are the only two possible sexual vocations?

De facto and same-gender partnerships

Can the church recognise the goodness of other forms of non-married sexual union, such as faithful de facto partnerships which may well reflect commitment and faithfulness between the partners? And what about same-gender partnerships that exhibit all the qualities of faithful companionship as commended in the Declaration of Purpose? Would the teaching that marriage provides a unique environment for the "full expression of physical love" be compromised by a recognition of the good of other forms of sexual faithfulness?

15. The Declaration adds a second purpose for marriage: the married relationship creates a domestic environment for “the gift and care of children.” Christian teaching has always recognised the unique connection between marriage and childrearing. In earlier Christian teaching, this was often singled out as the highest priority for marriage. The Anglican Church’s Book of Common Prayer reflects a traditional Christian approach, listing three purposes of marriage:

- (1) the birth and nurture of children;
- (2) providing a safe outlet to lust so that fornication is avoided;
- (3) mutual comfort and support.

The Uniting Church’s marriage service deliberately reverses this order, listing mutual companionship and comfort as the first priority. In part, this change in the order of priorities reflects the church’s adaption to the changing nature of married life in the past half century. The widespread availability of contraception means that childrearing is no longer an inevitable result of most marriages. Instead it is a matter over which each couple is able to exercise a great degree of discretion and control. The marriage service reflects the church’s recognition of this enormous change in the shape of married life.

The main purpose of marriage?

The fourth-century preacher John Chrysostom explained that Old Testament believers had children to carry on their family legacy. Children were like living monuments that would outlast the lives of their parents. But since Christ’s resurrection has now defeated death, it is no longer necessary to create such monuments. Thus while Chrysostom believed in the importance of children and families, he concluded that companionship, rather than child-bearing, is the true purpose of Christian marriage. The Uniting Church’s marriage service reflects this very early Christian view of the priority of companionship in marriage.

Changes in marriage?

The institution of marriage has varied in form in different times and cultures. Sometimes churches have led these changes; sometimes they have followed wider social changes. What has remained constant has been the church's affirmation of the blessedness of marriage, whatever form marriage has taken. Changes in marriage can be seen in the Bible.

For Jews marriage was foundational to society, especially because God's covenant was tied to the ethnic community. For early Christians, on the other hand, marriage was good but not essential. For one thing, child-bearing was not necessary to create new Christians, who joined the kingdom not by birth but through baptism. For early Christians there was no doubt, as Augustine put it, "that the chastity of celibacy is better than the chastity of marriage."

This changed with the Reformation. Priests began to marry, and Martin Luther declared that marriage was "a hundred times more spiritual than the monastic estate." At the same time Catholics placed a new emphasis on marriage to sustain its status as a sacrament. This new importance given to marriage by the churches was reflected in society, and states accepted the demands of churches that marriage be regulated.

For the first time in history weddings that occurred without parental consent, the pastor's blessing, and a public ceremony were not considered to be weddings at all. Another major change occurred in the nineteenth century. As societies moved from agricultural to industrial, marriage was no longer an economic institution. In a related development, women began to be recognised as legal persons.

These two changes in society led to the rise of companionate marriage in which couples could freely choose their marriage partners out of love rather than economic necessity. This model for marriage, taken for granted today, is a relatively recent development. A fourth change, and one with which we are still coming to terms, was the development of types of contraception that are relatively reliable and available. The contraceptive pill means that for the first time sexual intercourse can be separated from procreation.

One of the roles of marriage has always been to ensure that child-bearing women and their children are cared for and protected. When sex could lead to pregnancy, it made sense for that activity to be limited to marriage. What does it mean for the church's understanding of marriage that this is no longer the case? What are some other recent social changes that you think have affected marriage the most? How has the church responded to them?

16. Next, the Declaration adds a public purpose for marriage: the married relationship is to contribute to the wider flourishing of society. As this recognition shows, the church does not see marriage in an exclusively religious way. The married relationship, especially where it is combined with childrearing, contributes to the shaping of the common good. This wider social dimension of marriage is also symbolised by the presence of the community at the marriage service. Marriage is not just a private act between two people; it involves dimensions of public responsibility. To make a promise of lifelong love and faithfulness to another human being is one way of accepting responsibility for the wider community of which one is a part.

Same-gender marriage?

It is clear that same-gender marriage is not simply about making marriage more inclusive, but about altering the definition of marriage. Marriage has been understood to be between a man and a woman. As with other changes that have happened in the Church's understanding of marriage, is this aspect open to change? What should the church's response be if a society makes such a significant change to the institution of marriage? Should the church proclaim God's blessing on same-gender marriage?

Would Christian ministers in conscience need to withdraw from acting as celebrants at such marriages if they did not believe them to be legitimate marriages? Should the Church, if it decides it cannot change the definition of marriage, consider developing services of blessing of same-gender covenantal relationships? This example of same-gender marriage illustrates the complex relationship between church and state; and it illustrates the difficulties that can emerge for ministers who are, in fact, performing a dual role, acting both as Christians and as legal agents of the state.

3. The Word

17. The Declaration of Purpose is followed by the reading of scripture and the preaching of the Word. The community is invited to participate in the marriage service as a response to the Word that God has given. The notes in *Uniting in Worship 2* provide numerous examples of scriptural texts that may be read during the service. Many of these texts are not specifically about marriage. They speak of the great love of God and the way human beings are invited to respond to that love in their ordinary lives together.

The proclamation of the Word gives ministers a unique opportunity to present the gospel to people who may have very little connection to the Christian faith. This is not the time for sentimental platitudes! The minister should aim for a clear, generous, and inviting proclamation of the love of God revealed in Christ, and the way that love calls forth a response in human relationships. Within the context of the marriage service, everything else that happens should form a response to the good Word that God has given.

4. The Marriage

18. Next comes the marriage proper. Here the minister invites the couple to declare their intentions of mutual love, comfort, honour, protection, and lifelong exclusive faithfulness. The church teaches that the intention of lifelong exclusive faithfulness is essential to marriage, even though it is understood that not every married couple will be able to fulfil this intention. In some cases the families and the gathered community might be invited to promise that they will support the couple in their marriage – another symbolic reminder of the public dimensions of marriage, and of the commitment of the Christian community to fostering strong, stable marriage relationships.

19. Then the two people make their promises to one another. Strictly speaking, this is all that is required for the validity of a Christian marriage. In some periods it was not uncommon for a couple to perform the marriage vows in secret without any human witnesses. This was admittedly a risky prospect (for the bride at any rate), and it has always been viewed as a misfortune when the marriage vows are deprived of public witness. Still, the church accepted the validity of such marriages. It is the act of promising – not the minister or a government register or anything else – that creates the married relationship in the sight of God.

20. This belief in the power of verbal promise has deep roots in Christian and Jewish tradition. God's covenant with Israel is enacted with nothing more than a spoken word. The word of promise, for ancient Israel, is the most sacred thing that exists. It has a power that is permanent, binding, and irreversible. Christians likewise believe that Christ is God's word or promise enfleshed in a human life. Jesus is God's covenantal vow to humanity.

21. Against this theological background, one can appreciate the extent to which the entire marriage service revolves around a simple, unadorned act of spoken promise. Even the exchange of the rings must be left until after promises have been spoken; otherwise it could create the misleading impression that the marriage was enacted by the rings. The ring is merely a visible symbol of what occurs invisibly when two human beings speak words of promise to one another. The real centre of the marriage service is a mysticism of promise.

22. Because of the immense importance of this part of the service, the notes to the UiW2 marriage service issue a solemn warning about couples who wish to write their own vows: “Ministers should exercise extreme caution in admitting to the order of service any alternative form of vow suggested by the couple.... It is questionable whether some vows used by couples in recent years have been either legally or theologically acceptable. For example, the use of the phrase ‘as long as love shall last’ falls short of the Christian understanding of marriage.”

Properly speaking, the phrase “as long as love shall last” is not a marriage promise at all, since the intention of lifelong commitment belongs to the Christian definition of marriage. A wedding involving vows of this kind could later raise delicate pastoral questions about a marriage had in fact occurred at all: a situation easily avoided by sticking to the prescribed vows.

Polygamy?

Polygamy has existed in some cultures that place a high value on child-bearing. Since wives came with dowries, the number of wives was also associated with material prosperity. Polygamy could provide security for women in cultures where women cannot survive without a husband or a son. Polygamy was common in ancient Israel, but by Jesus' time there were very few polygamous marriages in Jewish culture. Polygamy still exists in some cultures today, particularly in some parts of Africa where polygamous marriage may act as a form of social security for women. The Anglican Communion decided in 1988 that men in polygamous marriages could be baptised and confirmed, but cannot serve in leadership positions.

This inclusive stance was adopted partly to protect women. The Lambeth Conference resolved that "a polygamist shall not be compelled to put away any of his wives, on account of the social deprivation they would suffer." The church prohibits polygamy because at least one partner in the marriage is not able to promise exclusive fidelity. Culturally, polygamy is unnecessary in Australia, since social welfare allows Australian women to survive without the kind of family support that polygamy provides. But some Christians have immigrated to Australia from countries that recognise polygamous marriages. Do you think this is an issue for the Uniting Church? Can the Uniting Church learn from the way the Anglican Communion has dealt with polygamy?

23. The marriage vows are simple and direct. Each one takes the other as their lifelong partner; they solemnly promise, before God, that they will stay together for as long as they both live. Once they have made the promise, they are married. At this point of the service, some ministers prefer to step away to one side so that the couple stands alone in the centre. This can be an effective way of drawing attention to the absolute centrality of promise: at the crucial point in the service, even the minister is only a silent observer and witness to the mystery of marriage.

24. In Western weddings, the rings are often presented next as symbols of the marriage that has now been enacted. The couple exchange rings and the minister publicly proclaims that they are married. In other cultural traditions within our Church other symbolic items are presented and exchanged. God has recognised the mutual promises, and has mysteriously joined the two people together. For the rest of their lives, they are to be living symbols of God's good creation (Genesis 1) and of Christ's redemptive love for the church (Ephesians 5).

5. Prayers

25. Next, the community joins in prayer for the married couple. Here the wider social purpose of marriage is brought clearly into view. Prayer is offered for the married couple: that their life together will be marked by patience, gentleness, trust, and forgiveness. But the prayer extends also to the wider community:

May your peace dwell in their home, and be a sign of hope for peace in the world.

May their home be a place of peace and love, warm and welcoming to others.

Through loving one another in Christ, may they be strengthened to love Christ in their neighbour.

May they be creative in their daily work, and find fulfilment in the life of their community.

26. This prayer from the marriage service describes the distinctiveness of Christian marriage. Among Christians, marriage should not be only about the couple and their love for one another. It should not be inward looking. The married relationship – like every other part of the Christian's life – should bear witness to the coming kingdom of God.

The purpose of Christian marriage is fulfilled only when the married couple become a living signpost to God's peace; when the home becomes a venue of God's hospitality; and when the love between the couple becomes an avenue for loving Christ in the neighbour.

6. The blessing

27. A blessing is now spoken over the married couple. Strictly speaking, this is the Christian minister's only distinctive contribution to a service of marriage. Everything else that is necessary for marriage can be done by somebody else. The marriage itself, as we have seen, is done by the two partners. Only here, at the end of the service, does the minister find that he or she has something unique and special and indispensable to contribute.

28. Once more, a mysticism of words is at the heart of it all: the name of the triune God is invoked over the married couple. A blessing is pronounced upon them. All the minister can do is speak: but these words, the words that name God, are believed to communicate grace and life and truth.

29. One of the blessings given in UiW2 is as follows:

God the Father make you holy in his love;

God the Son enrich you with his grace;

God the Holy Spirit strengthen you with joy.

The Lord bless you and keep you in eternal life. Amen.

“The Lord bless you”: that is the church’s doctrine of marriage in a nutshell. It is the belief that the light of God’s face is turned towards marriage in a peculiar way; that there is an intimate and mysterious bond between the human speech-act of promise and the divine speech-act of blessing; that as two human partners speak words of love to one another, God bestows a word on both of them and makes them one.

Weddings?

In light of this account of the church’s teaching on marriage, it is worth considering how the church might best witness today to the sacredness of marriage and the divine blessing on the marriage relationship. Traditionally the most visible way of doing so has been by performing weddings. In the Western world, however, the wedding ceremony itself has recently undergone dramatic changes. We are faced today with the transformation of weddings into enormously expensive productions.

The instruction of UiW2 is: “The couple should be encouraged to prepare for and plan their marriage in the spirit of simplicity” focusing on the “joy of a bridegroom and bride pledging their love and fidelity to each other, before God and in the presence of their families and close friends.”

Note

1. This paper provides a theology of marriage from a Uniting Church perspective. When the words doctrinal or doctrine are used they refer to agreed Christian teaching in relation to marriage.

