

The History and Theology of Marriage
in the Anglican Church
by Ronald Kydd

Deerely beloved frendes, we are gathered together here in the syght of God, and in the face of his congregacion, to joyne together this man and this woman in holy matrimonie, . . .ⁱ

Those words, and revisions of them, have started countless wedding ceremonies since they first appeared in the *Book of Common Prayer*, 1549. I am using them as a point of entry to the topic which Archbishop Findlay asked me to address, namely, “The History and Theology of Marriage in the Anglican Church.”ⁱⁱ

The thesis I will be developing in this presentation is as follows: **the consideration by the Diocese of Toronto of the authorization of a rite extending the main components of the marriage ceremony to persons of the same sex constitutes a major departure from the traditional understanding of that ceremony, viewed historically and theologically, and appears to rest primarily on the equation of progress with societal change.** I will take two steps in developing this thesis with the first tracing the history and theology of marriage as practised in the Anglican Church from 1549 to 2004, and the second reflecting on the societal context of this practice.

History and Theology

In approaching this study, I must point out that the focus will change as we proceed through the 450 year period. I will start with the Church of England, whose marriage rite sailed around the world on the UK's imperial prowess,ⁱⁱⁱ and I will end in Toronto. My comments will not attempt to address what may be happening among Anglicans in most other parts of the Communion.

Turning to the historical dimension, we note that following the severing of the English Church from the Roman Catholic Church, first in 1534, the Church of England took over the claim established in the eleventh century that the Church had exclusive jurisdiction over matrimony,^{iv} and when the *BCP* appeared in 1549 it contained "The Forme of Solemnizacion of Matrimonie." Bishop Kenneth Stevenson, an internationally recognized expert on marriage rites, argues that while Cranmer drew fundamental material for his marriage ceremony from the medieval Sarum rite from the south of England, his rite was thoroughly committed to the theology of the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation.^v

The *Prayer Book* approach to marriage which emerged in 1549 remained essentially untouched throughout several editions and revisions with no official modifications occurring until 1965.^{vi}

The British legislative record shows that governments' interest in marriage frequently ran beyond authorizing a text for the rite. In 1548 "An Acte for the repeale of a Statute touchinge precontracts" was passed. On one hand, it attempted to deal with a situation prior to that date in which it was alleged that marriages were being dissolved on inadequate grounds, and on the other, it affirmed marriages solemnised and consummated prior to that date.^{vii} The most radical step

occurred in 1653 under the “Assembly of the Saints”. Marriage was taken completely out of the Church. The woman and man held hands before a Justice of the Peace, exchanged identical vows, and were declared husband and wife.^{viii} In 1660 during the Restoration one act of parliament recognized marriages solemnized during the Interregnum,^{ix} and a century later another required all marriages in England and Wales be solemnised in the parish church of one of the parties after the reading of banns. Marriage was again in the hands of the Church of England.^x These ideas regarding marriage came to Canada with General Wolfe and those to whom he handed the frontier.

A brief establishment of the Church of England in Nova Scotia^{xi} and the failed struggle for control of the Clergy Reserves^{xii} provided the background for an attempt to secure a monopoly on marriage in the new world—which also failed.^{xiii} The most significant modification to date in Canada to the matrimonial practices we received from England has been the decision by the Anglican Church in Canada to solemnize marriages of divorced persons upon approval from Ecclesiastical Matrimonial Commissions and appropriate diocesan officials.^{xiv}

Theologically, a number of points should be made. First, the Anglican understanding of marriage has maintained a strong biblical base. Fewer allusions to scripture appear in the BAS than in the BCP, but Canon XXI presents a view of marriage grounded in scripture. Second, there are two foci, or main components in the Anglican rite—the consent, embodied in the vows, and the blessing. Stevenson finds them both in the Old Testament and later Judaism.^{xv} Third, the causes, or purposes of marriage are important to note. The BCP, 1549, lists them as procreation, a safeguard against sin, and companionship.^{xvi} The Canadian BCP, 1962, drops the idea of a protection from sin, but retains the other two and in the same order.^{xvii} The BAS lists

companionship first and procreation second, making it optional to mention it.^{xviii}

Fourth, the sacramental status of marriage requires attention. The Roman Catholic Church affirmed marriage as a sacrament in 1439 and repeated the affirmation at Trent in 1563.^{xix}

However, Cranmer denied marriage sacramental status. It was not until 1975 in a draft of a Church of England revision of the ceremony that it is referred to as a “means of grace,”^{xx} and so it appears in the BAS.^{xxi} However, marriage was certainly being spoken of as a sacrament well before that.^{xxii}

The historical and theological details we have been examining are significant and interesting. However, they must not be allowed to mask basic realities. From the sixteenth century to the present, through all of the tweaking and recalibrating of the rite, within Anglicanism it has been assumed that marriage is the union of a woman and a man. To consider extending the main components of the marriage ceremony—consent and blessing—to couples of the same sex is to contemplate a major disconnect from what has been assumed to be true.

Societal Context

So how did it come about that we are contemplating the kind of action that we are? Let me say immediately that discussion of what causes what in history is very difficult. Etiology is always complex. Let me also say that I respect the sincerity of the explanations I have heard: the Holy Spirit is leading us; more accurate biblical interpretation requires it; basic human rights support it; we have to catch up with the progress being made in Canadian society.

I think the last of the explanations to which I have alluded is particularly important. There was a clue in the resolutions that the library of General Synod sent to me regarding the remarriage of divorced persons. They were arranged chronologically, and as one moves through them, one

detects a change in tone. In the late 1960s and early 70s, the explicit biblical language of earlier decades^{xxiii} gives way to more therapeutic terminology.

The Church has had a convoluted, ambivalent relationship with the societies and cultures that have surrounded it. In Mt.10.34, Jesus said, “Do not think I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword,” and in Jn.15.18—“If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you.” There have been varying degrees of tension between the followers of Christ and their cultures ever since.^{xxiv} It is most certainly not the case that the Church has always, at all times, and in all places been the subject of hostility from culture. The relationship has been much more complex than that. At any given time and place various sectors of the Church exhibit divergent attitudes *vis-à-vis* the surrounding society, and of course, that diversity exists even within sectors. Nonetheless, as the reality that Christ’s kingdom is not of this world has been played out tension has frequently surfaced. The list of historical examples is practically endless.^{xxv}

However, something has happened. The Church lost its nerve, perhaps. It began in the late nineteenth century, spanned the twentieth, and continues to now. This phenomenon has been noted by many. The late French social philosopher, Jacques Ellul sketched it starkly: “The church has simply adopted whole sale the ideas and manners of modern society.”^{xxvi} John L. McKenzie, noted Catholic Old Testament scholar, said “The thesis [of a book he had written on the subject] is that there is a deadly and irreconcilable opposition between western civilization and Christianity and one of them must destroy the other.”^{xxvii} The edge on Pierre Berton’s comments in *The*

Comfortable Pew is not nearly so sharp, but he thought that, in the second half of the twentieth century, “. . . the Church stands in danger of forgetting exactly what [its] message is”^{xxviii} as it accommodated itself to Canadian society. Robert N. Bellah, professor emeritus at the University of California, Berkeley, and his associates, reflecting on the 50s and 60s, noted that the mainline churches in American and their intellectuals had been marginalised. He explained this in part by saying “. . . the religious intellectuals themselves have lost confidence and become vulnerable to short-lived fads.”^{xxix} An aphorism from Reginald Bibby’s first book encapsulates the results of his research on Canadian religiosity extending before and after the book for 30 years—“Culture leads; religion follows.”^{xxx}

I have been particularly struck by a recent essay from Douglas John Hall, professor emeritus at McGill. Looking at the state of religion east of the Atlantic at the dawn of the twentieth century, he says, “With the breakdown of the purely ‘legal’ forms of Christian establishment, Christian institutions found it increasingly necessary to accommodate themselves to the dominant spirit of their host culture in order to retain their hold upon the latter.”^{xxxi} So, the mainstream adapted to culture in order to maintain market share. Hall goes on,

. . . with the possible exception of the Social Gospel, Christian liberalism wished to make itself amenable to what was, after all, an exceptionally expectant image of human being and society; therefore it tended to soften, if not altogether dispense with, all aspects of traditional Christian doctrine that came into conflict with such a conception of human nature and destiny.^{xxxii}

Drawing on D. H. Lawrence, who had said that the First World War “cancelled out” all our

civilization's high-sounding words, Hall argues that “. . . Christianity itself intentionally had dispensed with other and different ‘great words’ . . .,” and he meant words like sin, the demonic, spiritual death and divine wrath, which left the theologians with empty tool boxes when trying to respond to the devastation and horror of the “Great War.” I would suggest that we still suffer from the same impediment as we try to reflect on the century of blood we have just left and, apparently, the one we have just entered.

I want to refocus Hall. It is not only the “mainstream” of the Church or the “liberal” side of the Church which has experienced the bewitching power of culture; it is the whole Church.^{xxxiii} The evidence would suggest that Christians from across the social and theological spectrum have been confused by culture, captured by what Canadian philosopher George Grant called “the religion of progress.”^{xxxiv} Simply because worship styles, or life styles, or market styles are new it does not follow that they represent progress when evaluated either by broader social experience or by historic, traditional Christian values. Cases in point would be, first, free-market neo-capitalism criticized roundly by Bellah^{xxxv} and John Kenneth Galbraith,^{xxxvi} as creating permanent underclasses and thrusting the homeless onto the streets and, secondly, the surge of sexual promiscuity applauded by the *Toronto Star* in its coverage of “Sex in the City.”

On the other hand, society has brought us feminism, with roots in nineteenth century Christianity, but requiring the devotion of thousands of women in the 60s and 70s to raise it in our awareness, and of course the battle is not over. Society has also brought us the struggle against racism and prejudice, which traditional Christians as well as the historically literate must endorse.

My point here is that all culture must be critiqued and not naively embraced by virtue of its

novelty. To be free from “the religion of progress” we as Christians must constantly return to our sources, the Scriptures and the wisdom of the saints, tradition, as well as the corporate experience of humanity in order to evaluate life as it comes to us.

However, we must not underestimate the difficulty of doing this. There is a social theory which helps us to understand the dynamics. It was articulated by Antonio Gramsci, and it has to do with how dominant classes establish hegemony in a society. One scholar, commenting on Gramsci, defined his idea of hegemony as “. . . political leadership based on the consent of the led, a consent which is secured by the diffusion and popularization of the world view of the ruling class,”^{xxxvii} and another said it was “. . . the ‘spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental [ie., controlling] group; . . .”^{xxxviii}

Of course, in any society there are many dominant groups vying for control in order to achieve their own ends, which may be some mixture of altruism and narcissism. They may be visible in political parties or they may stand invisibly behind them. Their struggle for dominance, according to Gramsci, is carried out through the media, which is, largely unwittingly, recruited to propagate their conflicting views of reality. This explains the efforts of lobby groups from the left and the right to gain the attention of the media in order to secure a following. The values of the group which succeeds in rising to dominance in a society can be read out of the *TV Guide*, the newspaper boxes, and the magazine racks. In a democratic society particular sets of values rise to the surface with the rise of those who hold them and remain as long as they remain influential. Compliance is achieved through those values being made as attractive and as ‘normal’ as possible.

This is all very Marxist, but it is a useful concept, particularly in the light of the degree of social homogeneity that is being reached primarily through television.

I would suggest that the pressure to conform is especially strong for the heirs of the Church of England and the Church of Scotland. Lodged in our psyche is the memory of establishment in the home land. We fought to repeat that establishment when we came to Canada in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. We lost, but the memory remains and, in fact, we have been obvious and comfortable in the halls of power throughout our nation's history. The sense that that influence is withering makes us shudder.

I come from a religious group which has always survived on the margins of society. Society's values are seductive for them because, as the marginalised, they are desperately trying to move into the centre. As Anglicans, we intuitively grasp the influence we have enjoyed. That may lead us uncritically to catch and ride whatever wave is surging through society. We need to reflect on Doug Hall's description of the Church in Europe and Britain at the turn of the twentieth century—"With the breakdown of the purely 'legal' forms of Christian establishment, Christian institutions found it increasingly necessary to accommodate themselves to the dominant spirit of their host culture in order to retain their hold on the latter."^{xxxix} Of course they failed, but the impulse fades slowly, if at all.

Conclusion

This has been a discussion of the history and theology of marriage in the Anglican Church. I have argued that the consideration by the Diocese of Toronto of the authorization of a rite extending the main components of the marriage ceremony to persons of the same sex constitutes

a major departure from the traditional understanding of that ceremony, viewed historically and theologically. I would suggest that that consideration rests primarily on an uncritical acceptance of societal change. However, there is a different response that can be made to this and other social issues. They can be critiqued and if found to be inconsistent with Scripture and tradition, they can be rejected. Doug Hall again: “Christianity may no longer pretend to dominate the course of our secularized and pluralistic planet, but from a position outside the realms of worldly power and prestige it *may* have a greater influence for worldly good than it ever possessed as Christendom.”^{x1} Hall is correct. It happened 2000 years ago, and it has happened at many times and places since. Conformity means absorption; independence means influence.

End Notes

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- i. “The Forme of Solemnizacion of Matrimonie,” *The Book of Common Prayer - 1549*, http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/1549/Marriage_1549.htm p. 1f.
- ii. I point out that this topic is narrower than the one specified on the Same Gender Consultations: Agenda. I am confining myself to the one requested by the Archbishop. The broader topic would be entirely beyond my competence.
- iii. It could be said that “The sun never sets on the C of E marriage rite.”
- iv. “Matrimony,” *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, edited by E. A. Livingstone (3rd Ed; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 1055.
- v. See his *Nuptial Blessing: a Study of Christian Marriage Rites* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 83. He goes on to say that Cranmer’s rite “. . . is at root a service which is thoroughly Reformed in theology, but in post-medieval dressing with a dash of Luther and Hermann [Von Wied, Cologne, 1530s-40s] here and there,” p. 139, and further that the ‘gathering’ is before “God’s congregation;” God, not the priest, joins the couple; the premass blessings of Sarum are dropped; “God’s holy ordinance” replaces “if the holy church it will ordain” in the vows; the ring is given, not blessed, in fact, it is to be placed upon the book; the focus is upon the couple, not the priest. (p. 136-139.)
- vi. Stevenson, pp. 146 and 150. Significant changes were made in the 1928 book produced in England, but that revision failed to make it through the British parliament.
- vii. “An Acte for the repeale of a Statute towching precontracts,” 2 & 3 Edw VI, c. 23, A. D. 1548 in *The Statutes of the Realm*, vol. 4, pt. 1, p. 68f.
8. “An Act touching Marriages and the Registring therof, and also touching Births and Burials,” in C. H. Firth and R. S. Rait, editors and collectors, *Acts and Ordinances of the Interregnum, 1642-1660* (London: Wyman and Sons), 2, 715f.
- ix. “An Act for the Confirmation of Marriages,” 12 Car.II, c. 33, A. D. 1660 in *The Statutes of the Realm*, vol. 5, p. 296.

x. “An Act for the Better Preventing of Clandestine Marriages,” (“Lord Harkwicke’s Marriage Act”) 26 King George II c. 33, 1753 in *The Statutes at Large* by Danby Pickering, vol. 21, p. 124ff. These requirements could be waived only by the granting of a special licence by the Archbishop of Canterbury, and they did not apply to the Royal Family, Jews, or Quakers.

xi. See Nancy Christie, “‘In These Times of Democratic Rage and Delusion:’ Popular Religion and the Challenge to the Established Order 1760-1815,” *The Canadian Protestant Experience 1760 to 1990* Ed., George Rawlyk (Burlington: Welch, 1990), p. 15 and H. H. Walsh, *The Christian Church in Canada* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1956), p. 94.

xii. See W. C. MacVean. *The Clergy Reserves: An Attempted Establishment* (Unpublished D. D. dissertation, Bishop’s University, 1964), *passim* and especially p. 466.

xiii. See Walsh, p. 94f. and R. Douglas Francis, Richard Jones, and Donald B. Smith, *Origins: Canadian History to Confederation* (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1988), p. 200f.

xiv. See Section VI, “Ecclesiastical Matrimonial Commission,” of Canon XXI, “On Marriage in the Church,” Anglican Church of Canada. The issue was raised as long ago as 1927 (General Synod Minutes), and then opened for careful discussion in 1943 (General Synod Minutes). The Commissions were functional by the early 1970s.

xv. Stevenson, pp. 5 - 9. He argues that in the ninth century the Greek East came to see the latter as constituting marriage while in the sixteenth century the West opted for the former. (p. 210)

xvi. BCP, 1549, p. 1f.

xvii. BCP, 1962, p. 564.

xviii. BAS, p. 541. Interestingly, the shuffling of causes occurred as early as 1563 when the Elizabethan homily on matrimony listed them as companionship, procreation, and protection. (“Homily on the State of Matrimony,” no. XVIII in *the Elizabethan Homilies* (1623) from Short-Title Catalogue 13675, Renaissance electronic Texts 1.2, Ed. Ian Lancashire, University of Toronto, 1994, 1997. Two volumes of homilies were published by the English government to give ungifted priests something to say in the pulpit. The second volume appeared on August 1, 1563. Matthew Parker, Archbishop of Canterbury, may have been the author of the homily on marriage.)

xix. “Sacrament,” *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, p. 1435.

xx. Stevenson, p. 190.

xxi. BAS, p. 541.

xxii. See General Synod resolution, August/September, 1965, “Commission on Marriage and Related Matters.” Of course, if one sees marriage as sacramental, then the discussion regarding what condition must be met for a sacrament to be valid and effective becomes important. (See “Sacrament,” *Oxford Dictionary*, p. 1435 and Raphael Schulte, “Sacraments,” *Encyclopedia of Theology* [The concise *Sacramentum Mundi*.], p. 1479. The absence of the proper intention on the part of the celebrant and of repentance and faith on the parts of the recipients may place an impediment (*obex*) in the way of grace and cause the sacrament to be “bound.”

xxiii. See, for example, GS, resolution, September 1927, “Report of the Council for Social Service;” GS, resolution, September, 1934, “Marriage Annulments,” and GS, resolution, September, 1952, “Memorial of the Diocese of Newfoundland regarding Divorce as compared to GS, resolution, August/September, 1965, “Commission on Marriage and Related Matters;” GS, resolution, August, 1967, “Marriage Counselling,” and GS, Act 74, June, 1986, “On Marriage in the Church.

xxiv. John Milbank makes some perceptive comments which are relevant. See *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 387f. and p. 433.

xxv. Perpetua and Felicitas (third century martyrs), John Chrysostom, Catherine of Sienna, Thomas Cranmer, the non-Jurors, John Henry Newman, and Oscar Romero represent countless instances of greater or lesser tension and hostility.

xxvi. *The Subversion of Christianity*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), p. 8.

xxvii. *The Civilization of Christianity* (Chicago: the Thomas More Press, 1986), p. 19.

xxviii. (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1965), p. 98. Of course, Berton had not foreseen where the Canadian Church was going. It is likely that he is applauding many developments.

xxix. Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life. Updated Edition with a New Introduction* (Beckley: U. of California Press, 1996), p. 238.

xxx. *Fragmented God* (Toronto: Irwin, 1987), p. 233.

xxxi. “‘The Great War’ and the Theologians,” *The Twentieth Century: A Theological Overview*, Ed. Gregory Baum (Ottawa: Novalis, 1999), p. 7.

xxxii. Hall, p. 8.

xxxiii. As a representative of many who would support my claim, see Robert Bellah, “Fresh Thinking: Whose Family? Whose Values?”

http://www.cdsp.edu/freshthinging/sawp_callforum_rbellah.html, p. 7.

xxxiv. *Technology and Empire: Perspectives on North America* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1969), p. 77.

xxxv. *Habits*, p. xiiff.

xxxvi. *The Culture of Contentment* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992), *passim*.

xxxvii. T. R. Bates, "Gramsci and the Theory of Hegemony," *Journal of the History of Ideas*. 30 (1975): 352.

xxxviii. T. J. Jackson Lears, "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problem and Possibilities," *American Historical Review*, 90 (1985): 568

xxxix. Hall, p. 7.

xl. Hall, p. 12.