



## **FAMILY AS COMMON WEALTH: A RESPONSE TO *MEN AND WOMEN IN MARRIAGE***

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**Summary:** Love of God and neighbour are inextricably intertwined, and committed loving partnerships can nurture spiritual growth as well as bringing joy. Couples and their children (where present) are also called to care for others outside their own households. In Jesus Christ, men and women are invited to be part of a wider family whose love overflows to the needy and even enemies, Christians recognise. Barriers of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and status are overcome in this divine commonwealth of justice and mercy which is the new family created by Christ.

Little of this vision comes across in *Men and women in marriage*,<sup>1</sup> issued by the Church of England's Faith and Order Commission with the House of Bishops' approval in 2013 and commended for study. This document attempts to justify senior clergy's opposition to marriage equality while allowing pastoral "accommodations" for same-sex couples. Its approach to the Bible, tradition, reason and experience is inadequate, and it fails to do justice to many heterosexual as well as same-sex couples, with damaging consequences for the wider church's mission and ministry.

## 1. Introduction: a changing understanding of marriage

Through the ages, and in different cultures, heterosexual marriage has taken various forms and been entered into for different purposes. It has often been affected by gender inequality and other destructive social patterns; nevertheless many couples have enjoyed love, mutual delight and support and been fruitful in varying ways.

A minority of people have entered same-sex relationships, but in many societies – including England up to a few decades ago – these tended to be secret to avoid discrimination, indeed persecution.

Yet attitudes have gradually changed. Among theologians and other Christians, including Church of England members, as well as in wider society, the value of same-sex partnerships has been increasingly recognised. There have been calls for greater justice for, and inclusion of, lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) people.

Equality more generally has long been a difficult issue for churches and other faith communities, especially when social and economic inequalities have taken on a veneer of piety that disguises the harm they cause. Sometimes it has been claimed that spiritual equality is what matters while, in practice, some are expected to be obey and serve others, but this has largely been discredited. Many now view marriage as an equal partnership.

The Church of England leadership's long association with privilege has not helped; but, over the years, it has come to embrace racial equality (at least in theory) and, to some extent, concern for the rights of those affected by poverty. Most members disagree with women's subordination, though a small but vocal minority are in favour and have delayed a measure to allow women to be bishops. Nevertheless few in England today would embrace an ideal of marriage in which masterful husbands managed the lives of submissive wives.

As for LGBT people, officially the Church of England encourages people to embrace heterosexual marriage or stay celibate. In reality, discreetly partnered LGBT people can be found at all levels of the church, and it is publicly recognised that sexuality is a topic on which different views are held. In some churches prayers are already said for couples (indeed this has been happening even before same-sex partnerships were legally recognised), though formal services of blessing resembling marriage are not supposed to happen, while in other parishes attitudes are less positive. By early 2012, a review of church teaching on sexuality by a working group chaired by Sir Joseph Pilling was underway.

Against this background, the Faith and Order Commission was tasked by the House of Bishops Standing Committee with producing a short document summarising the Church's doctrine of marriage and taking account of further theological work that had appeared since a 1999 publication on the issue. So it might have been unrealistic to anticipate any proposal for radical change to the currently-held position that the term 'marriage' should be used only for heterosexual couples.

However it could reasonably have been expected to build on the advances in theological, scientific and historical understanding of gender and sexuality over the past couple of centuries (including scholarship on the Bible and tradition), and avoiding conclusions on celebration of same-sex partnerships while other working groups were focusing on this issue.

The Commission's work could have included reviewing in-depth work undertaken by sister churches such as the Scottish Episcopal Church<sup>2</sup> and in an ecumenical context, in particular the 2011 Porvoo Communion consultation on marriage.<sup>3</sup> Work on marriage by Anglican and other theologians since 1999 should have been rigorously examined.

Its work took place against a background of cultural change that led many to re-evaluate their views. Moves towards marriage equality prompted further debate on LGBT inclusion in Britain and, more broadly, the essence and value of marriage.

YouGov polls in 2012 and 2013<sup>4</sup> indicated that, by early 2013, a majority of Anglicans in Britain, especially in younger age-groups, regarded same-sex and opposite-sex relationships as equally valid. About the same proportion believed that same-sex couples should and should not be allowed to get married, though 38% thought same-sex marriage right and 43% thought it wrong. Among churchgoers (or those in a religious group or community), 40% of Anglicans reportedly thought that same-sex couples should be allowed to marry, 47% that they should not and 14% did not know.

*Men and women in marriage* was produced by the Faith and Order Commission in April 2013, ostensibly with the House of Bishops' agreement, and commended for study.

The accompanying news release<sup>5</sup> quotes the Bishop of Coventry, Dr Christopher Cocksworth, chair of the Faith and Order Commission, as saying that the report "seeks to celebrate all that is good about marriage" while it also "underlines the role of the Church in seeking to provide care, prayer and compassion for those who for whatever reason are unable to receive the gift of marriage in the form that the Church has understood it and continues to uphold." However "the document is clear that public forms of blessing belong to marriage alone."

Unsurprisingly the document has been, for the most part, poorly received. It is a disappointing and sometimes confusing work, which makes some valid points about married life and tries to be compassionate towards LGBT people, but sidesteps key issues regarding sexuality, family and community. Even developments in Anglican theological thinking over the past century on gender and contraception are not recognised.

## 2. Defining marriage

The document sets out to make the case for a 2005 House of Bishops statement of the “Church of England’s position” that “marriage is a creation ordinance, a gift of God in creation and a means of his grace. Marriage, defined as a faithful, committed, permanent and legally sanctioned relationship between a man and a woman, is central to the stability and health of human society. It continues to provide the best context for the raising of children.”

In reality the definition of marriage has varied across cultures and throughout history, including in the Bible, a fact which is downplayed. Supposedly “Certain basic structural features make marriage the flexible and supportive social institution it is. It is an alliance outside the close family circle (technically called ‘exogamy’), so that a partnership of natural kinship-groups is formed in transmitting human life to new generations. It is undertaken for the full length of a couple’s life. And it is an exclusive commitment of one man and one woman... This understanding of marriage, common to Christians and Jews, is distinctive but not idiosyncratic. Most developed traditions give these three structural elements a central place in their practices of marriage.”

*Men and women in marriage* seeks to explain away discrepancies: “There have been cultures (the patriarchal period of the Old Testament among them) in which compromises have been accepted especially over exogamy and monogamy, but these compromises have tended to be of limited scope. It is possible to exaggerate the cultural relativity of marriage-forms.”

This set of criteria does not even fit today’s world, where it is well-known that Jewish and Islamic tradition generally allow divorce and some Muslims practice polygamy.

While exogamy is emphasised in some traditions, endogamous marriage (between close relatives) is common in other cultures, and has been the subject of some concern related to health.<sup>6</sup>

In sub-Saharan Africa alone, marriage has long taken diverse forms, including in some instances between partners of the same sex (sometimes for social and economic rather than romantic reasons).<sup>7</sup> In modern multi-ethnic England, people have relatives across the world whose marriage patterns vary widely.

An historical perspective makes this claim about the “three structural elements” look still shakier.<sup>8</sup>

Even if the definition of marriage as a faithful, committed, permanent and legally sanctioned relationship between a man and a woman” is meant to represent a Christian ideal, this is problematic in various ways, including for heterosexuals. For instance, if “legally sanctioned” means “legally recognised” not just “lawful”, in traditional theological approaches to marriage the consent of, and sex between, a couple has sometimes been given greater weight than legal recognition.<sup>9</sup>

Even lawfulness is a controversial criterion: the fact that black and white people were officially forbidden to marry in apartheid South Africa does not necessarily mean that such unions were invalid in God's sight.

Again, it cannot be guaranteed that a marriage is "permanent" – which presumably means "lifelong" in this context – until one partner dies, though there is a strong argument that marriage should only be entered into with the intention of permanence. In addition, while divorce may rightly be regarded as a last resort, few in the Church of England would dispute that a second marriage is valid. If, say, a man married a woman who divorced the ex-husband who abandoned her, few would say that her second husband had the moral right to marry someone else on the grounds that he was actually single.

So, even if heterosexual marriage represented an ideal, this would not necessarily rule out other forms of marriage.

One element which is surprisingly missing from the document's definition, and which many would argue is essential and not just desirable, is that of informed consent: surely a marriage is only morally valid if both partners are adults who are not coerced or tricked into agreeing to marry? Consent has played an important part in the understanding of marriage for much of church history.<sup>10</sup>

Even if the issue of whether same-sex couples can and should marry is set aside, the report's definition of marriage is inadequate.

### **3. Bypassing complexity and avoiding challenging questions**

The report tends to bypass facts that do not fit its simplistic view of the universe and is sometimes misleading. For instance, near the beginning it declares that "Lack of clear understanding of marriage can only multiply disappointments and frustrations. Public discussion at this juncture needs a clear view of why Christians believe and act in relation to marriage as they do, and this statement is offered as a resource for that."

But different Christians believe and act in different ways in relations to marriage (unless one believes that anyone who disagrees with the report is not truly Christian). It would have been helpful to examine some of these differences, at least to advance mutual understanding and dialogue even if agreement could not be reached.

This report fails to do so, and will leave readers no clearer about the beliefs and actions of millions of Christians, including those in other parts of the world who have entered into, or celebrated, legally-recognised marriages between partners of the same sex because they felt that this was in keeping with their faith-based values. In Britain there are some who believe that LGBT relatives, godchildren or friends of theirs are already married in all but name. Their perspective, too, is not examined.

This tendency to ignore uncomfortable facts is apparent in the treatment of creation. Many might agree that, "although marriage may fall short of God's purposes in many

ways and be the scene of many human weaknesses, it receives the blessing of God and is included in his judgment that creation is 'very good' (Genesis 1.31)."<sup>11</sup> Yet nature is more complex, and wonderful, than the document recognises.

Christians "have spoken of God's 'faithfulness' to his creation, as they have found in it a structure of intelligibility capable of being appreciated by all, a 'natural law'." While much can certainly be learnt from studying the workings of the universe, there is little recognition here that what people perceive, and how they evaluate this, may be coloured by their existing views and interests and those of the influential in their communities.

Nor, in Christian teaching, is what is against nature necessarily wrong. For instance, in the Epistle to the Romans, Paul tells Gentile believers that "you have been cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree" (Romans 11.24).

However, in this account, biology supposedly rules. The booklet claims, "We share with many animal species the sexual differentiation of male and female, serving the tasks of reproduction and the nurture of children" and "build on it to enhance the bond between the sexes culturally." Indeed "Biological differences do not simply cease to matter at the level of personal relationship; persons are not asexual, but are either male or female." This appears to confuse being asexual – not attracted much to either sex – with being born intersex, or finding it near-impossible to fit the gender norms connected with one's biological sex, and deny the existence of these minorities. Humans cannot always be conveniently categorised.

The document also seems to be in denial about the many other animals which do not neatly fit a male-female binary, for instance corals, many of which carry both sperm and eggs, and whose beautiful reefs sustain an estimated three hundred million people and numerous other creatures. Are they and earthworms, which also play a vital ecological role, not part of God's good creation?

Likewise the booklet says nothing of the numerous species in which homosexual behaviour occurs. Ethical norms for humans cannot be derived directly from other species but surely it is relevant, if nature is so important, to observe the ways in which non-reproductive sex and pair-bonding benefit even simpler creatures?

Those whose views are reflected in the report may believe that the existence of same-sex attraction and gender fluidity is a result of the Fall, a sign that creation is not completely as it should be. If so, it would be interesting to know the reasoning behind such a view. Having proclaimed lyrically that, "The marvellous ordering of the created world has not lost its force for a generation made more aware than before by discoveries in physics and biology of the dynamic unfolding of the universe," the document shies away from examining the implications of such discoveries, or indeed those made by previous generations.

## 4. The centrality of bearing children

It is not explicitly claimed that the ability and intention to have children are essential to a valid marriage, and the Church of England often marries couples who evidently cannot because of age. However the document does come close to implying that procreation should be a core component of all marriages, thus marginalising childless married couples along with LGBT and intersex people. While this would have been understandable (though regrettable) a few centuries ago, the rationale in today's world is unclear.

For much of human history, human life has been precarious: diseases such as the plague could wipe out much of the population in a short time. Unsurprisingly procreation was emphasised, since having lots of babies (even if this increased the risk that a woman might die in childbirth) meant that there was a greater chance that at least a few would survive to adulthood, benefiting their families and communities. For those owning land, or with a trade to pass on, having children also ensured that assets, skills and knowledge (in the days before universal education) could be passed on to future generations.

In addition certain ancient philosophers such as Seneca regarded the desire for sexual pleasure as a destructive force, believing that “All love of another's wife is shameful; so too, too much love of your own. A wise man ought to love his wife with judgment, not affection. Let him control his impulses and not be borne headlong into copulation.” In his view sex could only be justified for the purpose of procreation within marriage.

Influential ‘Church fathers’ such as Augustine of Hippo, took on this approach. The document states that “The support marriage offers to spiritual growth is expressed in an ancient account, derived from St Augustine and adopted by the Church of England as well as by other churches, of ‘three ends’ of marriage: offspring, faithfulness and sacramental union. These ‘ends’ are not envisaged as particular goals or objects in marrying, but as ‘blessings that belong to marriage’.”

But many today would have a more positive attitude to desire and mutual pleasure than Augustine is usually thought to have had. According to a translation of ‘On Marriage and Concupiscence’, he believed that it was “one thing for married persons to have intercourse only for the wish to beget children, which is not sinful: it is another thing for them to desire carnal pleasure in cohabitation, but with the spouse only, which involves venial sin,” though not so grave as having sex while trying not to conceive.<sup>12</sup>

The document quotes a resolution of the 1930 Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops on the duty of parenthood without mentioning the radical change which took place there, in that a major denomination indicated that using contraception was legitimate. By the 1958 and 1968 conferences, the value of family planning was being more clearly recognised. Responsible parenthood “requires a wise stewardship of the resources and abilities of the family as well as a thoughtful consideration of the varying population needs and problems of society and the claims of future generations.”<sup>13</sup>

The world population has more than quadrupled since the beginning of the twentieth century. While children can be a blessing and should be valued and nurtured, and most heterosexual married couples and some same-sex partners are biological parents, it is by no means evident that it would benefit humankind if all married couples had babies. Indeed some cannot conceive.

But procreation remains central to what the document values in marriage, to the extent that it claims bafflingly that “When we marry, we commit the procreative power of our own sex to an exclusive relation with a life-partner of the opposite sex. We open ourselves to parenthood in and through the partnership we enjoy as a couple, and that may be true even of a couple who, for whatever reasons, have no prospect of actually having children.”

The document does state, rather patronisingly, “This does not mean, of course, that only an ideal family unit of two biological parents can provide a home for children. Society has good reason to be grateful to adoptive parents and step-parents, as also to single parents who must sometimes undertake heroic struggles. But the struggles underline the point: they would be less, other things being equal, and the child more securely placed, had it grown up within the marriage-bond of its mother and father.”

This seems to conflate a notion of the “typical child” with actual children, some of whom have had very painful experiences within their birth-families and need the support of adults with unusual skills (whatever their sexual orientation) to heal.

Other activities that couples without children of their own may undertake jointly – such as fostering, respite care for children and adults with high needs, care of adult relatives, other types of hospitality, and human rights, peace and environmental activism to increase the chances of survival for children worldwide – are apparently too unimportant to mention.

In contrast, *Rites Relating to Marriage: A Statement and Resources from the International Anglican Liturgical Consultation*<sup>14</sup> suggests that “For Christians, a fruitful marriage will be one in which the partners share in the loving creativity of God. This may include the gift of children – procreativity (Ps 128.3). A fruitful marriage will also include many forms of generativity: creativity, companionship, hospitality, service, as the grace of God bears fruit as the couple abides in Christ, the true vine (John 15.4). Like the communion of the Trinity itself, the love of Christ in the couple overflows inevitably into the world around them.”

In keeping with *Men and women in marriage*'s excessive emphasis on procreation, erotic love, prominent for instance in the Song of Songs, is underplayed. Yet surely this is important to many couples, heterosexual and otherwise. Various eminent theologians have thoughtfully explored this aspect, including Rowan Williams,<sup>15</sup> and it is regrettable that it does not receive more attention.

In recent years, there has been considerable theological reflection on sexuality and marriage in certain churches with which the Church of England is in communion, for instance the Anglican Church of Canada. Engagement with some of the insights which have emerged<sup>16</sup> might have enriched this document.



Ongoing debate in other denominations continues to give rise to thought-provoking observations on the ways in which marriage can be fruitful. Jim Hale, a Roman Catholic, has pointed out<sup>17</sup> that it is a “false dilemma to suggest that same-sex marriage in any way compromises or detracts from the beautiful fecundity of God’s universe or that same-sex marriage ‘removes the basis’ of traditional marriage and somehow inhibits marriage between a man and a woman and the concomitant procreation. It does not. A gay man will not go cruising for a woman to marry and impregnate simply because he can’t marry the man he loves; unable to marry the woman she loves, a lesbian will not be out there hunting down a man.’

He suggests that “The God that I believe in cares all about love — all love, the fecundity of the spirit as much as that of the body”.

## 5. Gender inequality, love and friendship

The booklet’s insistence that men and women are “equally and differently human” is even more controversial. Gender roles are emphasised, and heterosexual married couples are expected to be representatives of their sex rather than persons who love each other and wish to share their lives: “The relationship of marriage is more personal, not less, as the partners come to it in receptiveness of what only the opposite sex can bring to their own.”

The document makes no criticism of the gender inequality that has so long blighted marriage and society in many eras and cultures, and stereotyping that has trapped both women and men. Churches have played their part in perpetuating these but, in recent centuries, have to some extent repented and sought instead to promote justice.

The notion that women might be spiritually men’s equals but should be socially and economically subordinate has rightly been questioned, though there is still some way to go. Older Church of England members may remember a time when women could not vote and were effectively barred from many occupations while men who were not keen on fighting were humiliated with white feathers to pressure them into being more ‘manly’. Even today, marital rape takes place, while boys thought not to be masculine enough are routinely bullied by their peers.

However there is no recognition of the problems of gender inequality and stereotyping in the document. Indeed a footnote commends the “Elizabethan *Homily on Marriage*” as a “sensitive piece of instruction”. Though it has merits, the *Homily on the State of Matrimony*<sup>18</sup> is clear that men should lead, while “the woman is a weaker creature, not indued with like strength and constancy of mind” who should “obey” and “perform subjection”.

Of course many who believe that men have a leadership role in the family believe that this should be exercised benevolently. Nevertheless attempts to justify women’s subjection on religious grounds can create an environment in which domestic violence goes unchallenged, according to *Responding to domestic abuse: Guidelines for those with pastoral responsibilities*.<sup>19</sup> Produced by the Archbishops’

Council in 2006, in response to a call by General Synod, this might have merited at least a mention in *Men and women in marriage*.

The guidelines, based on “Recognition that domestic abuse is prevalent among Christians, as among other groups”, warn that “Over the centuries questionable assumptions about the relation between men and women, which were supposed to reflect the will of God, have influenced the Church’s interpretation of the Bible, its moral teaching and pastoral practice.”

They point out that, “While theologies of domination have had a pernicious effect in encouraging abusive behaviour by men, the corrective, a theology of humility, has often been misapplied to women, increasing the imbalance between the expectations of each sex held by churches and societies. It has been forgotten that Jesus’ teaching and ministry not only humbled the exalted but exalted the humble.”

The 2013 document’s approach also risks undermining the good news that in Christ there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female (Galatians 3.28).

In the Gospels, Jesus acclaims Mary of Bethany’s choice to sit at his feet as a disciple rather than serving him in line with the conventions of the day (Luke 10.38-42), and chooses women as witnesses to his resurrection. In Acts, the Holy Spirit is outpoured on men and women on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2.1-18). Yet the report seems wary of the freedom offered to Christians, which enables people of different sexes and gender identities to move beyond old patterns of domination and subservience, make use of their God-given gifts and pursue their callings.

The importance of friendship in marriage and beyond is overlooked. Seventeenth-century theologian Jeremy Taylor is mentioned in the document, but not his view that God gave man “a wife, that is, a friend and a wife too; for a good woman is in her soul the same that a man is, and she is a woman only in her body”.

Twelfth-century English saint Aelred of Rievaulx believed that both marriage and same-sex friendship stemmed from the same roots:<sup>20</sup>

*Finally, when God created [the human person], in order to commend more highly the good of society, he said: "It is not good for the man to be alone: let us make him a helper like unto himself." It was from no similar, nor even from the same, material that divine Might formed this helpmate, but as a clearer inspiration to charity and friendship he produced the woman from the very substance of the man. How beautiful it is that the second human being was taken from the side of the first, so that nature might teach that human beings are equal and, as it were, collateral, and that there is in human affairs neither a superior nor an inferior, a characteristic of true friendship. Hence, nature from the very beginning implanted the desire for friendship and charity in the human heart, a desire which an inner sense of affection soon increased with a taste of sweetness. But after the fall of the first man, when with the cooling of charity concupiscence made secret inroads and caused private good to take precedence over the common weal, it corrupted the splendour of friendship and charity through avarice and envy, introducing contentions, emulations, hates and suspicions because human morals had been corrupted.*

Tradition contains important insights that might be helpful in the context of questions about marriage in today's world but are not adequately explored in this document.

## 6. The family and beyond

*Men and women in marriage* also appears to take a somewhat idealised version of the modern (post-Reformation) Western family as the norm for humankind.

It is true to some extent that “The good of offspring, the service of marriage to the transmission of the human race, goes far beyond simple biological reproduction. Parents initiate the care, education and equipment of their children for the moral and spiritual tasks of life... Marriage thus plays a central role in the transmission of human culture and the life of the church itself.”

Yet the document fails to point out that the good news of Christ is not simply about maintaining existing social and family relationships and promoting piety: it is disturbing and disruptive, summoning men and women, girls and boys to love beyond the bounds of kinship and social group.

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword,” Jesus warns in the Gospels. “For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me” (Matthew 10.34-38).

When Jesus is told that his mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to him, he responds that, “whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Matthew 12.46-50).

When Peter mentions that “we have left our homes and followed you,” Jesus responds, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come eternal life” (Luke 18.28-30). Christians are invited into a far larger and more diverse family, bound together by love which overflows to the needy and even enemies (Matthew 5.42-48).

There are echoes of this in one of the prayers provided by the Church of England for use in marriage services.<sup>21</sup>

*May the hospitality of their home  
bring refreshment and joy to all around them;  
may their love overflow to neighbours in need  
and embrace those in distress.*

Jesus, as depicted in the Gospels, while almost certainly celibate, shows a remarkable freedom in his friendships with women and men and compassion for the poor and marginalised. He also cautioned against accumulating excessive wealth

(Matthew 6.19-21, Luke 12.13-34) and privilege (Mark 9.33-37), often influential factors in marriage in ancient times and even today.

In him, the New Testament suggests, barriers of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and status are broken down as a community of faith seeks to create a divine commonwealth of justice, mercy and peace (Matthew 5.1-16, Acts 4.32-35, 1 Corinthians 1.26-28): “if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Corinthians 5.17)

Though biblical writers sometimes reflected the patriarchal assumptions of their time, and the church has often compromised its mission, traces of this radical quest remain in its teaching and actions through the ages. The Holy Spirit is powerful enough to break through into, and help reshape, fallible institutions and communities.

Love within family units, whether based on opposite-sex or same-sex partnership, should be a stepping-stone to something greater. It is not enough to replace the selfishness or avarice of an individual with that of a nuclear or extended family. In God’s strength, Christians can aspire to more.

## 7. Marriage as sacrament and covenant

The document states that “The Epistle to the Ephesians (5.32) describes marriage as a ‘mystery’ applied to Christ and the Church, and this word, translated into Latin as *sacramentum*, was generally understood to mean a concrete sign of God’s saving work for humanity. In expressing the third good in the marriage service as ‘the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity’, *The Book of Common Prayer* also referred to this biblical passage... The encounter of man and woman in marriage affords an image, then, of the knowledge and love of God, to which all humans are summoned, and of the self-giving of the Son of God which makes it possible.”

Ephesians was written in a world very different from today’s, and many Christians would regard it as wrong, even idolatrous, for a woman to treat her husband as if he were God. Yet even now, the mutual tenderness and self-giving of marital love can enable spouses to deepen their understanding of, and response to, Divine love. It is not clear however that gender difference is essential for marriage to be a sacrament; and the document provides no convincing reason why the love between same-sex couples providing help and comfort to each other in prosperity and adversity should not be sacramental in character.

Another, associated, concept included both in the seventeenth-century *Book of Common Prayer* celebration of holy matrimony and current *Common Worship* marriage liturgy is that of covenant. The minister prays that the rings may be:

*a symbol of unending love and faithfulness,  
to remind them of the vow and covenant  
which they have made this day  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

The divine covenant embracing God's people is a key theme in the Hebrew Bible (e.g. Exodus 34.10, Isaiah 55.3-5, 56.4-8) which is further developed in the New Testament.

The prophet Jeremiah links the concept of covenant with that of marriage (Jeremiah 31.31-33), as does Ezekiel (16.8). Malachi presents God's covenantal faithfulness as a model for human relationships, in particular marriage, contrasting it with callous indifference (2.10, 13-15). The most noteworthy example of a human covenant of lifelong self-giving love and trust is set by David and Jonathan (1 Samuel 18.1-4), and they are willing to risk humiliation and even death (1 Samuel 20).

For LGBT as well as heterosexual people, the discipline of partnered life can at times be tough, especially when it is bound up with a quest to remake self and society to help usher in the realm of God. All kinds of obstacles can get in the way, from money worries and housing pressures to consumerism, pride and low self-esteem. The church has a role to play in encouraging and supporting people to rise to the challenge. The document is a sad disappointment in this respect.

However it does state that, as with divorce and polygamy, the church can show pastoral flexibility and "devise accommodations for specific conditions" which "proclaim the form of life given by God's creative goodness and bring those in difficult positions into closer approximation to it." While better than nothing, this is sadly inadequate.

## 8. Moving forward

The document hints that its concern not to be too positive about same-sex partnerships might in part be because this might encourage heterosexual couples to step outside their expected gender roles, though this has anyway been happening for some time and is unlikely to stop.

The final paragraph states: "It has seemed to some that the disagreement over same-sex marriage is a disagreement over mere names. But names govern how we think, and how we think governs what we learn to appreciate. When marriage is spoken of unclearly or misleadingly, it distorts the way couples try to conduct their relationship and makes for frustration and disappointment. The reality of marriage between one man and one woman will not disappear as the result of any legislative change, for God has given this gift, and it will remain part of our created human endowment. But the disciplines of living in it may become more difficult to acquire, and the path to fulfilment, in marriage and in other relationships, more difficult to find."

Yet, despite containing some useful insights, this document is unlikely to convince supporters of equal marriage that they are wrong, or even modern heterosexual couples to revert to hierarchical and restrictive gender roles.

Having apparently commended this document for study, the House of Bishops might wish to acknowledge and reflect on the responses and subsequent developments, including the *Report of the House of Bishops Working Group on human sexuality*

issued in late November 2013; and make sure that greater care is taken with future publications that touch on the deepest needs and most profound experiences of sizeable numbers of church members and their neighbours.

## References

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## Further reading and research from Ekklesia

***Church views on sexuality: recovering the middle ground***, Ekklesia,  
<http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/19512> (25 November 2013)

It is clear that Christians hold a spectrum of views on sexuality and marriage. However, the popular idea that there are two warring blocks that may be labelled 'traditionalists' and 'revisionists' is simplistic and can be misleading as well as unhelpful. Current tensions could be reduced and reframed significantly if more church leaders acknowledged the extent of common ground in the middle of this continuum, allowed limited flexibility of practice, and enabled their communities to develop practices of discernment oriented towards the "grace and truth" (John 1.13-15) that lies at the heart of the Christian message. In this paper, Ekklesia associate Savitri Hensman identifies seven widely held positions on sexuality. She suggests that those with supposedly diametrically opposing views often have more in common than they may at first think. Equally, she argues, in Christian terms, coexistence among those sharing a 'middle ground' is not about weak compromise, but instead reflects an approach both deeply rooted in Bible and tradition and open to change as a living community led by the Spirit.

***Journey towards acceptance: theologians and same-sex love -***  
<http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/17246> (Ekklesia, 27 October 2012)

There are too many Christians today – both for and against full inclusion of partnered LGBT people – who have little awareness of the debates that have taken place in theological circles over the past sixty years, and the process by which so many theologians today have come to support greater inclusion. Some seem to believe that calls for acceptance in the church are based on embracing society's values (at least in parts of the world where same-sex relationships are by and large accepted) and ignoring those aspects of the Bible and church tradition that do not fit. This is regarded as a mark of either faithlessness or progress, depending on people's own views on the subject.

However this does not in any way do justice to the considered work of most theologians who have argued the case for greater inclusion, drawing deeply on the witness of the Bible and the church through the ages, to discern how God has been and is at work in a complex and constantly changing world. Moreover it makes it harder to find common ground to enable fellowship and dialogue among those with different views, and promote mutual understanding even if disagreement persists.

This paper gives a detailed overview of some of the most significant affirmative theological work on same-sex love and the Christian tradition. The author demonstrates the unhelpful and simplistic positing of a straightforward 'conservative versus liberal' divide on these issues, and draws on Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Methodist, Reformed, Quaker and Anabaptist/Mennonite thinkers.

***Wedding blessings: friendship across the boundaries –***  
<http://ekklesia.co.uk/node/16399> (Ekklesia, 16 March 2012)

Families and communities may be made up of single people, couples and smaller sub-groups or networks, differing in sexual orientation, gender identity and many other ways, says Savitri Hensman. In the Christian vision, and especially in the community of Christ, all may make a unique contribution, and also grow in distinctive ways while drawing closer to the One whose love sustains the universe, brings abundant blessing and satisfies the deepest thirst.

***Should equal marriage be rejected or celebrated by Christians? -***  
<http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/17245> (Ekklesia, 27 October 2012)

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The possibility of opening up marriage in Britain by law to same-sex couples has been criticised by some Christians but welcomed by others. One of the more thoughtful critics is theologian John Milbank, who has eloquently expressed some common arguments against change. This response suggests that, while he raises important issues, his analysis is ultimately flawed. Taking into account such topics as tradition, sexual 'complementarity', childbearing and sacrament, there is a strong case for equal marriage.

***Using and misusing St Paul: wisdom, gender and sexuality*** - <http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/17247> (Ekklesia, 27 October 2012)

This essay focuses primarily on the use and misuses of St Paul in fractious contemporary church debates about sexuality and gender. It can also be read in parallel with the growing body of theological and historical work on re-understanding one of the key figures in the history of Christianity, suggesting that Paul's project was to create a new community and dynamic which was capable of re-energising the suppressed radicalism of Torah religion in a dangerously imperialistic setting.

***What future for marriage?*** (Simon Barrow and Jonathan Bartley, Ekklesia, June-July 2006) - <http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/research/papers/rethinkmarriage>

In recent years the Christian churches have set great stall by 'family values' and the institution of marriage. Yet the form of marriage we know as such today is a relatively late invention out of something that once had much more to do with solidifying dynastic power. And most commentators agree that it is going through a tough time – with more people choosing not to marry, opting to forge different (often informal) partnerships, and getting divorced in increasing numbers. This paper sets out a fresh approach, which proposes changing the law on marriage in its current form to distinguish between civic and religious unions.

***Fruitful love: beyond the civil and legal in partnerships*** (Ekklesia, December 2011) - <http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/15884>

An emotionally and sexually intimate partnership is, for many people, a school of love, writes Savitri Hensman. This is not as romantic as it might sound: fearfulness, selfishness, rivalry and other negative traits may surface, and hard work may be needed to overcome these. Yet this can be a path to spiritual growth, which may manifest itself in small ways or through acts of heroic altruism. Such relationships, whether between opposite-sex or same-sex partners, can help to bring forth good fruit.

***Sex, orientation and theological debate*** (Noel Moules, Ekklesia, March 2010) - <http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/11195>

This is a paper written by Noel Moules for the 'Body & Soul' weekend which took place in London on 27-28 March 2010, run by Ekklesia partner Workshop (<http://www.workshop.org.uk>). The document explores Christian approaches to sexuality and sexual orientation, as well as looking at how appropriately to handle the theological tradition and biblical texts which relate to the debate. The author spent his formative years in India and has studied (and taught) theology and education. Through Workshop, which is open and evangelical in its grounding, with a particular concern for Anabaptist and peace church perspectives, "learners and teachers work to discover God amid uncertainty, mystery and paradox. We are sensitive to the differences between the various traditions of the church, and aim to increase understanding about the reasons behind the sincerely held opposing views."

***Wrestling biblically with the changing shape of family*** (Deirdre Good, Ekklesia, March 2007) - <http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/4844>

In an excerpt from her groundbreaking book *Jesus' Family Values*, a New Testament scholar explains



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why simplistic appeals to scripture distort its meaning, and why for the Gospel family is built on magnanimity not exclusion.

***Listening and learning in the sexuality debate -***

<http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/6971> (Ekklesia, March 2008).

As part of the 'listening process' in the Anglican Communion over the extensive disagreements about human sexuality, Ekklesia associate Savitri Hensman prepared a paper on *Learning, Listening, Scripture and Sexuality* which seeks both to take the conversation forward and to affirm the role of lesbian and gay Christians as active and baptised members in the church, in accordance with a faithful and interpretatively sensitive reading of its the texts and tradition.

***Binding the church and constraining God -*** <http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/6737>  
(Ekklesia, February 2008)

In a paper carefully analysing the popular use and misuse of biblical and doctrinal language about God and Church, Savitri Hensman shows that inflexible, one-sided, naïve or ideological conceptions of God in sections of the Christian tradition can reinforce domineering models and practices in the Church – which is in fact supposed to be a creative vehicle of Jesus' broken body in the world, not a defensive fortress. God is not confined by rules set by humans and our institutions, she argues, however powerful they may be by earthly standards. In the biblical tradition, God is at work outside as well as within institutions, including those that claim to be about God's business. Liberation, reformation and healing will continue to happen even if, at first, they are not acknowledged by the authorities (ecclesial and otherwise); and in time truth will break through our illusions. This paper is highly relevant to issues being discussed in and beyond Anglicanism, concerning its disputed future, and in other sections of the worldwide Church. It makes specific reference to the debate about an Anglican Covenant in the run-up to the Lambeth Conference 2008. It may also give those outside the Church a better understanding of how language and tradition is being applied and misapplied within very diverse Christian communities during a time of considerable upheaval and anxiety, both inside and outside the Church

***Ekklesia submission to the Consultation on the Marriage and Civil Partnership (Scotland) Bill -*** <http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/18209>

The Scottish Government's consultation on the Marriage and Civil Partnership (Scotland) Bill ended on 20 March 2013. In its submission, Ekklesia backed the proposal to introduce same sex marriage and religious and belief registration of civil partnership - while emphasising that our overall preference would be to distinguish legal marriage as a civil provision from religious or belief blessings and recognition.

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Savitri Hensman was born in Sri Lanka and lives in London. She works in the voluntary sector in community care and equalities and is a respected writer on Christianity and social justice. She provides expert commentary on sexuality and LGBT issues, Anglican matters, welfare, family policy, politics and religion. Her work is widely published in the Guardian newspaper and elsewhere. She contributed several chapters to *Fear or Freedom? Why a warring church must change* (Shoving Leopard / Ekklesia, 2008). Her columns appear here:

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<http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/blog/13>

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